

FICTION

Edward Sylvester Ellis

The Great Cattle Trail

A PUBLIC DOMAIN BOOK

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FICTION



A RACE FOR LIFE.

FOREST AND PRAIRIE SERIES--No. 1

THE GREAT CATTLE TRAIL

BY

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"DEERFOOT SERIES," ETC.

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THE GREAT CATTLE TRAIL

CHAPTER I.

AT THE RANCH.

Avon Burnet, at the age of eighteen, was one of the finest horsemen that ever scurried over the plains of Western Texas, on his matchless mustang Thunderbolt.

He was a native of the Lone Star State, where, until he was thirteen years old, he attended the common school, held in a log cabin within three miles of his home, after which he went to live with his uncle, Captain Dohm Shirril, with whom the orphan son of his sister had been a favorite from infancy.

Avon was bright, alert, unusually active, and exceedingly fond of horses from the time he was able to walk. His uncle had served through the Civil War in the Confederate army, returning to Texas at the close of hostilities, thoroughly "reconstructed," and only anxious to recover his fortunes, which had been scattered to the four winds of heaven during the long, bitter struggle.

The captain had no children of his own, and it was natural, therefore, that he and his wife should feel the strongest attachment for the boy who was placed in their care, and who, should his life be spared, would inherit whatever his new parents might be able to leave behind them when called to depart.

Avon had reached the age named, when to his delight he was told that he was to accompany the large herd of cattle which was to be driven northward, through upper Texas, the Indian Nation, and Kansas over the Great Cattle Trail, along which hundreds of thousands of hoofs have tramped during the years preceding and following the War for the Union.

Young as was our hero, he had served his apprenticeship at the cattle business, and was an expert at the round-up, in branding, in cutting out, in herding, and all the arduous requirements of a cowboy's life. It was understood, therefore, that he was to be rated as a full hand among the eight men who, under his uncle, were to have charge of two thousand cattle about to start on the long tramp northward.

"It's the hardest kind of work," said the captain to his nephew, as the two sat in the low, flat structure where the veteran made his home, with his wife and one colored servant, "but I haven't any fear that you will not pull through all right."

"If I am not able to do so *now*, I never shall be," replied Avon, with a smile, as he sat on the rough, home-made stool, slowly whittling a piece of wood, while his aunt, looking up from her sewing, remarked in her quiet way:

"It will be lonesome without Avon."

"But not so bad as when uncle was off to the war," ventured the youth, gazing affectionately at the lady.

The captain was sitting with his legs crossed, slowly smoking the old briarwood which he had carried through many a fierce campaign, and seemingly sunk in deep thought. Like his nephew, he was clad in the strong serviceable costume of the Texan cowboy, his broad sombrero resting with a number of blankets on pegs in the wall.

It was evening, with a cold, piercing wind almost like one of the cutting northers blowing around the homely structure. The herd were gathered at a point about five miles to the northward, whence the real start was to be made at an early hour on the morrow. This arrangement permitted the captain and his young friend to spend their last night at home.

"No," replied Mrs. Shirril, referring to the last remark of her nephew, "there never can be any worse days than those, when I did not know whether your uncle had not been dead for weeks or possibly months."

"You must have had pretty tough times, aunt."

"Well, they might have been improved, but Dinah and I managed to get along a great deal better than some of our neighbors. Here in Texas we were so far from the war that I may say I never heard a hostile shot fired, except by the Indians who came down this way now and then."

"They were the same, I suppose, that still trouble us."

"I believe so, mostly Comanches and sometimes Kioways, with perhaps others that we didn't know. They did much to prevent our life from becoming dull," added the brave little lady, with another smile.

"The women in those days had to know how to shoot the rifle, ride horses, and do the work of the absent men."

"I don't know how we could have got along if we hadn't learned all those things. For years I never knew the taste of coffee, and only rarely was able to obtain a pinch of coarse brown sugar; but we did not suffer for meat, and, with the help of Dinah, we could get a few things out of the earth, so that, on the whole, I think I had much easier times than my

husband."

"I am not so sure of that," remarked Captain Shirril, rousing himself; "we had rough days and nights, beyond all doubt, but after all, there was something about it which had its charm. There was an excitement in battle, a thrill in the desperate ride when on a scout, a glory in victory, and even a grim satisfaction in defeat, caused by the belief that we were not conquered, or that, if we were driven back, it was by *Americans*, and not by foreigners."

"That's an odd way of putting it," remarked the wife, "but was it not the high health, which you all felt because of your rough outdoor life? You know when a person is strong and rugged, he can stand almost anything, and find comfort in that which at any other time brings only wretchedness and suffering."

"I suppose that had a good deal to do with it, and that, too, may have had much to do with sustaining you and Dinah in your loneliness."

The captain raised his eyes and looked at two old-fashioned muzzle-loading rifles, suspended on a couple of deer's antlers over the fireplace, and smiling through his shaggy whiskers, said:

"You found them handy in those days, Edna?"

"We never could have got along without them. They served to bring down a maverick, or one of our own cattle, when we were nearly starving, and sometimes they helped drive off the Indians."

Captain Shirril shifted his position, as though uneasy over something. His wife, who was familiar with all his moods, looked inquiringly at him.

"What troubles you, Dohm?"

"If I hadn't promised Avon that he should go with me northward, I would make him stay at home."

Wife and nephew stared wonderingly at him.

"The Comanches have been edging down this way for more than a week past; I believe they mean to make trouble."

It would be supposed that such an announcement as this caused dismay, but it did not. Even Dinah, who was busy about her household duties, and who heard the remark, paused only a moment to turn up her nose and say scornfully:

"If dey've done forgot how we allers sarve de likes ob dem, jes' let 'em try it agin. Dat's all."

She was a tall, muscular negress, whom an ordinary man might hesitate to make angry. She passed to another part of the room, after muttering the words, and seemed to feel no further interest in a subject which ought to have made her blood tingle with excitement.

"If the Comanches are hovering anywhere in the neighborhood," said Mrs. Shirril in her gentle way, "it is in the hope of running off some of the cattle; you have them all herded and under such careful care that this cannot be done. When the Indians find you have started northward with them, they will follow or go westward to their hunting grounds; surely they will not stay *here*."

"I wish I could believe as you do."

"And why can't you, husband?"

"Because Indian nature is what it is; you understand that as well as I. Finding that they cannot steal any of our cattle, they will try to revenge themselves by burning my home and slaying my wife and servant."

"But they have tried that before."

"True, but their failures are no ground to believe they will fail again."

"It is the best ground we can have for such belief."

CHAPTER II.

AN ALARMING INTERRUPTION.

"If you think it best that I shall stay at home, I will do so," said the young man, striving hard to repress the disappointment the words caused him.

"No; you shall not," the wife hastened to interpose; "everything has been arranged for you to go with your uncle."

"Was there ever a wife like you?" asked the captain admiringly; "there is more pluck in that little frame of yours, Edna, than in any one of my men. Very well; Avon will go with us, but I can tell you, I shall be uneasy until I get back again."

"We have neighbors," she continued, still busy with her sewing, "and if we need help, can get it."

"I declare," observed the captain grimly, "I forgot that; Jim Kelton's cabin is only eight miles to the south, and Dick Halpine's is but ten miles to the east; if the redskins do molest you, you have only to slip in next door and get all the help you want."

As we have said, it was a chilly night in early spring. The moon was hidden by clouds, so that one could see but a short distance on the open prairie. A fitful wind was blowing, adding to the discomfort of outdoors, and causing the interior of the cabin to be the more comfortable by contrast.

But a few rods to the westward was a growth of mesquite bush, in which the two mustangs that the captain and his nephew expected to ride were wandering at will. The animals were so trained that either would come at the whistle of his master, who, therefore, felt sure of finding him at command when wanted--that is, provided no outsiders disturbed him. This mesquite growth, consisting of open bushes which attain a height of eight or ten feet, extended over an area of several acres, affording the best kind of hiding-place for man or animal.

The signs of their old enemies, the Comanches, to which Captain Shirril referred, had been noticed by his men, including young Avon Burnet. They had seen the smoke of camp-fires in the distance, had observed parties of horsemen galloping to and fro, and, in fact, had exchanged shots with the dusky marauders when they ventured too near in the darkness.

There could be no doubt that these fellows were on the watch for a chance to stampede the cattle, but the vigilance of the cowboys prevented that disaster. Most of the latter believed the Comanches would hover on their flank, probably until the beasts were well out of Texas and far over the line in the Indian Nation or Kansas. That they would stay behind to avenge themselves upon the wife and servant of the captain was not to be believed. The wife was equally certain on that point, so their leader suffered himself to be persuaded that his misgivings were groundless.

But this feeling of security, which was felt by all, suffered a startling interruption.

When Captain Shirril erected his humble cabin several years before, he did not forget the danger to which he was certain to be exposed from the Indians. The wooden walls were heavy and bullet-proof, and the door was capable of being barred so strongly at an instant's warning, that nothing less than a battering ram could drive it inward. The windows were too narrow to admit the passage of the most elongated redskin that ever wormed himself into the camp of an enemy. The structure was long and low, with an upper story, in which the cowboys slept whenever it was advisable to do so.

"You have had so much experience with this kind of business," said the captain, "that I suppose I ought not to feel uneasy, even if I knew you would be attacked, for there are two guns here ready for you and Dinah, and you have both proven that you understand how to use the weapons; there is plenty of ammunition, too, and since you have had full warning of what may possibly take place---"

At that instant the resounding report of a rifle broke the stillness on the outside, there was a jingle of glass, and the pipe which Captain Shirril had held in his mouth while talking was shattered as if from the explosion of a torpedo within the bowl.

Nothing could have shown the wonderful training of this little family in the perils of the frontier more strikingly than did their actions at this moment. Not a word was spoken, but almost at the instant the alarming occurrence took place, the captain, his wife, and his nephew leaped backward with lightning-like quickness. The movement took the three out of range of the two windows at the front of the house, with the door midway between, those being the only openings on the lower floor.

Dinah happened to be at the extreme rear, where she was safe for the time. She was about to advance, when checked by the crash of the window pane and the crack of the rifle.

"For de Lawd's sake," she exclaimed, "de warmints hab come!"

"So they have," replied the captain, rising upright from his crouching posture, "and see what they have done!"

He held up the stem of his pipe, which he had kept between his teeth during the exciting moments, with such a grim expression of woe that, despite the frightful incident, his wife and even Avon smiled.

"It is a pity indeed," she said, "you will have to use your new one, and I know how much *that* will pain you."

"They shall pay for this," he added with a shake of his head.

Fortunately the rifles of himself and nephew were leaning in the corner, where they could be readily seized without exposing themselves to another treacherous shot. The men laid hands on them at once.

The weapons were of the repeating kind, and among the best that money could buy in San Antonio.

The two guns belonging to Mrs. Shirril and their servant rested together on the deer's prongs over the mantel, and, to reach them, one must expose himself to another shot from the outside.

Following the rifle report, the sound of horses' hoofs were heard galloping rapidly around the cabin. The captain listened intently for a moment, holding one hand aloft as a signal for the others to keep silent.

"There's fully a dozen of them," he said a minute later in a low voice.

"But they know you and Avon are here," added his wife, who was standing motionless just behind him, without any evidence of excitement except that her face was a shade paler than usual.

"I should think so, judging from that," he replied, spitting the stem of his pipe upon the floor; "but I must get those guns for you."

"Don't think of it," she persisted, laying her hand on his shoulder; "you will surely be shot, and there's no need of them yet."

"You may as well begin at once; you haven't had any practice for months."

Gently removing the hand of his wife, whom he loved as he did his life, the captain, holding his own gun in hand, began moving stealthily across the floor toward the fireplace. Had he been on his feet, he must have been observed by anyone in the position of the savage that had fired the shot which was so well-nigh fatal, but, while so close to the floor, he would not be seen by any Comanche unless he was quite close to the window.

The redskin might and might not be there: *that* risk must be taken, or the guns would have to be left alone for the time.

Mrs. Shirril was more disturbed than ever, for she knew as well as did her husband the risk he ran, but she knew, too, that, when he once decided to do a thing, it was idle to seek to restrain him.

The burning wood threw an illumination through the room which rendered any other light unnecessary, and the captain could not have been in clearer view had the midday sun been shining. Nevertheless he crept slowly forward, until in front of the fireplace. Then he paused to consider which of two methods he had in mind was the better for obtaining the weapons.

The Comanches were still circling back and forth on the outside, uttering their whoops and firing their guns at intervals, though the latter consisted of blind shooting, and was meant to terrify the defenders, since none of the bullets found its way through either of the windows.

Captain Shirril took but a few seconds to decide upon his course of action.

CHAPTER III.

JUST IN TIME.

Bending as closely to the floor of the cabin as he could, the Texan advanced until directly in front of the crackling fire, when he reached up with his Winchester, which was grasped near the muzzle. By this means he placed the stock directly beneath the two weapons resting on the deer antlers.

With a deftness that would hardly have been expected, he raised both guns until their stocks were lifted clear off their support, when he began gently lowering them, so as to bring them within his reach. He might have flung them free by a single quick movement and let them fall upon the floor; but he wished to avoid this, since he ran the risk of injuring them.

None knew better than Avon Burnet the great danger of this apparently simple act on the part of his uncle. The chances were so immeasurably in favor of his discovery that he was certain it would take place. While the wife and servant held their breath in a torture of suspense, the youth, with his cocked rifle firmly grasped, stole softly along the side of the cabin until close to the door. In reaching the spot, he stooped so as to move beyond the first opening, the proceeding placing him between the windows, with his left elbow against the heavy door.

In this situation his nerves were at the highest tension. Everything was in plain sight, but he was listening intently to the movements of his enemies. He heard the sounds of the mustangs' hoofs, as they circled swiftly about the cabin, sometimes turning quickly upon themselves, and at varying distances from the structure. Now and then one or two of the horsemen would rein up abruptly, as if striving to peer through the openings, or about to apply for admission.

It may seem incredible, but there is no reason to doubt the fact that, at the moment Captain Shirril began cautiously reaching upward with his weapon, the youth heard one of the Comanches slip down from the back of his mustang and approach the door. His hand moved softly over the rough surface, as though searching for the latch string, which was generally hanging out; and, finding it not, he began stealing to the window just beyond.

This was the very thing Avon dreaded above all others, for it was inevitable that he should detect the figure of the Texan operating so guardedly in front of the fire.

Such proved to be the fact. Whether the youth actually observed the action of the Indian, or whether he fancied he heard him moving along the side of the house, cannot be said with certainty; but a faint rustle in front of the shattered glass made known that the dusky miscreant was there, and had detected the stratagem of the Texan, who at that moment was in the act of lowering the gun from the deer's prongs over the mantel.

His uncle was so clearly in his field of vision that, without looking at him, Avon did not miss the slightest movement, but his whole attention was fixed on the window, and it was well it was so.

"Look! look! Avon, do you see that?"

It was his aunt who uttered the terrified question with a gasp, as she pointed at the narrow opening.

The youth had observed the object which appalled the lady; the muzzle of a gun was slowly gliding through the window.

Captain Shirril had been discovered, and the Comanche was fixing his weapon in position to fire a fatal shot. He might have stood back a couple of paces and discharged it without revealing his presence, but a better aim could be secured by thrusting a few inches of the barrel into the room.

At the instant the dark muzzle showed itself and the gleam of the firelight was reflected from it, Avon leaned his own rifle against the door at his side, quickly drew his revolver from the holster at his hip, sprang forward like a cat, and seizing the muzzle of the gun threw it upward toward the ceiling.

It was done in the nick of time, for the Comanche pressed the trigger just then, and the bullet which, had Avon's action been delayed a single moment, would have killed Captain Shirril, was buried in the timbers overhead.

The daring act brought the youth directly in front of the window, where for the instant he was exposed to any shot from the outside.

As he made the leap he saw the face of the warrior, a gleam with paint and distorted with passion, but slightly flustered by the unaccountable occurrence. Before he could recover, and at the same instant, Avon darted his revolver through the shattered window pane and let fly with two chambers in quick succession. An ear-splitting screech and a heavy fall left little doubt of the success of the daring act. The Comanche had not only been hit, but hit hard.

Although startled by the noise and flurry, Captain Shirril was too much of a veteran to be taken at fault. His big right hand closed around the two weapons for which he had run all this risk, and partly straightening up, he bounded to the rear of the little room with three rifles secure in his grasp, and with not a hair of his head harmed.

Avon was as much on the alert as he, and reached the shelter at the same moment.

"It was confoundedly more risky than I supposed," remarked the captain, with a smile and a shake of his head, "but all's well that ends well; I guess you dropped him, my boy."

"I shouldn't wonder, for I couldn't have had a better chance," was the modest reply of the youth.

"It was one of the neatest things I ever saw, and I'm proud of you," exclaimed his relative, slapping him affectionately on the shoulder. "I said you would count as a full hand on the trip to Kansas, but at this rate you'll add up double."

Avon blushed as he used to do in school, when his teacher praised him for excellent lessons, and made no answer, but the eyes of his aunt kindled with love for the brave fellow who, by his readiness of resource, had saved her husband's life. Even Dinah, with whom he had always been a favorite, added an expression of affection for the boy who had done so well.

There were now two men and two women within the Texan's cabin, and each held a trusty weapon, while there was plenty of ammunition for all. It might well be asked, therefore, what cause they had for alarm.

Outside were a dozen or more savage Comanches, who are among the finest horsemen in the world, and who in fighting ability and bravery are surpassed by none, unless the Apaches of the Southwest.

It was a piece of daring on the part of these dusky raiders thus to attack the cabin, when they knew how well it was defended. Captain Shirril was probably right in supposing they believed that he and his nephew were with the rest of the cowboys, watching the herd five miles away. Finding the couple in the cabin, they could not resist the temptation to bring down the head of the household, after which they must have supposed the rest would be an easy task.

But having failed, probably they would have withdrawn but for the shot of Avon Burnet, that had brought down one of their best warriors, and their well-known desire for revenge urged them to the most desperate measures against the whites.

But a few minutes' whispered conference at the rear of the cabin brought to light the fact that every one of our friends, including even Dinah, understood that their peril was of the gravest nature conceivable.

The structure of the cabin was so thoroughly seasoned by its years of exposure that it would be an easy matter for their assailants to set fire to it, and that they would make the attempt was not to be doubted. They always prepared for such action, and none knew better than they its fearful effectiveness.

"We might reach the boys by means of the reports of our guns," said the captain, "if the wind were not the wrong way, but they won't catch the first sound, especially as they will have their hands full in looking after the cattle."

"But dey will obsarve de light ob de fiah," suggested Dinah.

"Undoubtedly, but when they do see it," said her master, "it will be too late to help us. They haven't a suspicion of anything of this kind; if they had, they would be down here like so many cyclones."

"There is one way of letting them know," said Avon.

"What's that?"

"By carrying word to them, and *I'm going to try it!*"

CHAPTER IV.

A DESPERATE VENTURE.

The family of Texans were not the ones to indulge in sentimentality or useless speculations when action was demanded. The first feeling of amazement following Avon's announcement of his resolution quickly passed, but his uncle deemed it his duty to impress upon him the desperate nature of his scheme.

"I don't see one chance in twenty of your succeeding," said he.

"And if I stay what are the chances for us all?"

"Possibly one in a hundred."

"Then I shall go," he quietly replied, compressing his lips as his fine eyes kindled.

"There is hope, if you can reach the bush, but the rub will be to do *that*."

"They grow close to the house, and the Comanches will not be looking for any attempt of that kind."

"Is it not best to wait until later?" asked Mrs. Shirril.

"No," was the sensible response of her nephew; "the prospect of success will decrease with every passing minute. They will think, and with reason, that we have repelled their first attack so sharply that we are confident of beating them off altogether. After a time, when things begin to look bad for us, they will look for something of that nature, and be so well prepared for it that it will be hopeless."

"He is right," assented the captain. "I don't ask you to try it, Avon, but, if you are determined to do so, now is the time."

"My sentiments exactly, and I'm going."

He dreaded anything in the nature of a scene, one reason for his moving so promptly being his desire to avert such a trial.

But now that the momentous step was decided upon, the all-important question remained as to the best means of making the start.

The whole interior of the lower story was so brightly illuminated by the blaze on the hearth that the moment the door was opened, even for only a few inches, it would show from the outside. Anxious as Avon was to be off, he knew better than to start under such conditions.

"The sooner that fire goes out, the better for all of us," said the captain; "it is too tempting to the scamps."

On the row of pegs near him hung several heavy blankets, such as are used by all plainsmen and cowboys. Those which the captain and his nephew meant to take on their journey northward were in camp five miles away.

Setting down his gun, he lifted one of the heavy pieces of cloth, whose texture, like the celebrated blankets of the Navajoe Indians, was almost close enough to be waterproof. He paused for a minute to adjust the folds, and then, forgetful of the danger he had run a short time before, he stepped hastily across the room, and stooping down flung the blanket over the blaze so as to enclose it entirely.

The effect was instantaneous. The room was wrapped in darkness as dense as that outside, though the consequences of the act promised to be anything but pleasant in the course of a few minutes.

"Now, Avon, is your time!" called the captain in an undertone.

"I'm off; good-by," came from the gloom near the door, where the sounds showed that he was engaged in raising the ponderous bar from its sockets.

Captain Shirril stepped hurriedly to the spot, and found the door closed but unfastened. Even in his haste the youth did not forget to shut it behind him, leaving to his friends the duty of securing it in place.

"He is gone; God be with him!" he whispered to his wife and servant, who with painfully throbbing hearts had stepped to his side.

While speaking, he refastened the structure, and in less time than it has taken to tell it everything inside was as before, with the exception that where there had been four persons, there were now only three.

All forgot their own danger for the moment in their anxiety for the youth, who had so eagerly risked his own life to save

them from death.

Bending his head, the captain held his ear against the tiny opening through which the latchkey had been drawn earlier in the evening, when the heavy bar was put in place. The Texan was listening with all the intentness possible.

"It seems impossible that he should get away," was his thought, "and yet the very boldness of his plan may give it success."

The shot from within the cabin, followed so soon by the complete darkening of the interior, must have caused some confusion among the Comanches, for otherwise Avon would have been shot or captured the moment he stepped outside of the cabin.

For the space of two or three seconds Captain Shirril absolutely heard nothing, except the soft sighing of the night wind among the mesquite bushes near at hand. The stillness could not have been more profound had every living thing been moved to a distance of a hundred miles.

He had listened only a minute or two, however, when he heard a warrior run rapidly around the building, coming to an abrupt stop directly in front of the door. Thus he and the Texan stood within a few inches of each other, separated only by the heavy structure, which, for the time, barred all entrance.

Captain Shirril even fancied that the eye of the redskin was pressed against the opening, in the vain effort to gain sight of the interior. Had the Comanche chosen to place his lips there, how readily he could have whispered into the ear of his enemy!

That the Texan was right in suspecting one of the warriors was so very near was proven a moment later, when a second Indian approached with his mustang on the walk, dropped lightly to the ground, and coming forward, halted so close to the door that he almost touched it.

The captain knew this because he heard the two talking in low tones. He understood the tongue of the dusky miscreants, but though he listened closely, could not catch the meaning of a word that passed between them. Their sentences were of the short, jerky character common to all American Indians, accompanied by a peculiar grunting, which helped to obscure their meaning.

The unspeakable relief of the listener was caused by the awakening of hope for his nephew. He was certainly some way from the cabin, for had he stayed near the door, discovery was inevitable by the two warriors now standing there. Indeed, they must almost have stumbled over him.

But he might be still within a few paces, unable to stir through fear of detection. Extended flat on the ground, on the alert for the first possible opening, he was liable to discovery at every moment.

In fact, so far as Avon was concerned, he had crossed the Rubicon; for, if seen, it was impossible to re-enter the cabin, the door of which had been shut and barred.

The warriors who had paused in front of Captain Shirril kept their places but a brief while, when they moved off so silently that he could not tell the direction they took. Everything remained still for several minutes, when the listener once more fancied he heard something unusual.

It was a stir among the mesquite bushes, such as might be caused by a puff or eddy in the wind, which blew quite steadily, though with moderate force.

He was listening with all his senses strung to the highest point, when the stillness was broken by the report of a rifle, accompanied by a ringing shriek, both coming from a point within a few rods of the cabin. The hearts of the inmates stood still, the wife alone finding voice to exclaim in horrified tones:

"Poor Avon! he has fallen! he has given his life for us!"

CHAPTER V.

UPSTAIRS AND DOWNSTAIRS.

Profound stillness followed the despairing exclamation of Mrs. Shirril, who believed that her nephew had gone to his death while trying to steal away from the cabin in which his friends were held at bay by the Comanches.

The quiet on the outside was as deep and oppressive as within. There was the sharp, resounding report of the rifle, followed on the instant by the wild cry of mortal pain, and then all became like the tomb itself.

It was singular that the first spark of hope was kindled by the words of the colored servant, Dinah.

"What makes you tink de boy am dead?" she asked, a moment after the woful words of her mistress.

"Didn't you hear him cry out just now?"

"No; I didn't hear him nor did you either; dat warn't de voice ob Avon."

"How can you know that?" asked Mrs. Shirril, beginning to feel anew hope within her.

"Lor' o' massy! habent I heerd de voice ob dat younker offen 'nough to know it 'mong ten fousand? Habent I heerd him yell, too? he neber does it in *dat* style; dat war an Injin, and de reason dat he screeched out in dat onmarciful way war 'cause he got in de path ob Avon and de boy plugged him."

"By gracious, Dinah! I believe you're right!" was the exclamation of Captain Shirril, so joyous over the rebound from despair that he was ready to dance a breakdown in the middle of the floor.

"Course I is right, 'cause I *allers* is right."

"I suppose there is some reason in that, but please keep quiet--both of you, for a few minutes, while I listen further."

The women were standing near the captain, who once more inclined his head, with his ear at the small orifice in the door.

The seconds seemed minutes in length, but as they wore away, nothing definite was heard. Once or twice the tramp of horses' feet was noticed, and other sounds left no doubt that most of the Comanches were still near the dwelling.

This listening would have lasted longer, but for an unpleasant though not dangerous interruption. Dinah, who seemed to be meeting with some trouble in her respiration, suddenly emitted a sneeze of such prodigious force that her friends were startled.

It was not necessary for them to enquire as to the cause. The blanket that had been thrown upon the flames, and which brought instant night, did its work well, but it was beginning to suffer therefrom. The fire was almost smothered, but enough air reached it around the edges of the thick cloth to cause it to burn with considerable vigor, and give out a slight illumination, but, worst of all, it filled the room with dense, overpowering smoke. Breathing was difficult and the odor dreadful.

"This will never do," said the captain, glancing at the fireplace, where the glowing edges of the blanket were growing fast; "we won't be able to breathe."

His first thought was to fling another blanket upon the embers, thereby extinguishing them altogether, but his wife anticipated him by scattering the contents of the water pail with such judgment over the young conflagration that it was extinguished utterly. Darkness reigned again, but the vapor, increased by the dousing of the liquid, rendered the room almost unbearable.

"You and Dinah had better go upstairs," said the captain to his wife; "close the door after you, and, by and by, the lower floor will clear; I can get enough fresh air at the little opening in the door and by the windows to answer for me; if there is any need of you, I can call, but perhaps you may find something to do up there yourselves."

The wife and servant obeyed, each taking her gun with her, together with enough ammunition to provide for fully a score of shots.

The cabin which Captain Dohm Shirril had erected on his ranch in upper Texas was long and low, as we have already intimated. There was but the single apartment on the first floor, which served as a kitchen, dining and sitting room, and parlor. When crowded his guests, to the number of a dozen, more or less, could spread their blankets on the floor, and sleep the sleep that waits on rugged health and bounding spirits.

The upper story was divided into three apartments. The one at the end served for the bedroom of the captain and his

wife; the next belonged to Dinah, while the one beyond, as large as the other two, was appropriated by Avon and such of the cattlemen as found it convenient to sleep under a roof, which is often less desirable to the Texan than the canopy of heaven.

Few of these dwellings are provided with cellars, and there was nothing of the kind attached to the residence of Captain Shirril. The house was made of logs and heavy timbers, the slightly sloping roof being of heavy roughly hewn planking. Stone was scarce in that section, but enough had been gathered to form a serviceable fireplace, the wooden flue of which ascended to the roof from within the building.

This brief description will give the reader an idea of the character of the structure, in which one man and two women found themselves besieged by a war party of fierce Comanches.

The ceiling of the lower floor was so low that, had the captain stood erect with an ordinary silk hat on his head, it would have touched it. The stairs consisted of a short, sloping ladder, over which a trap-door could be shut, so as to prevent anyone entering from below.

Inasmuch as smoke generally climbs upward, the second story would have proven a poor refuge had the women waited any time before resorting to it. As it was, considerable vapor accompanied them up the rounds of the ladder, but, when the trap-door was closed after them, the greater purity of the air afforded both relief.

It will be recalled that the lower story was furnished with two windows at the front, of such strait form that no man could force his way through them. The upper floor was more liberally provided in this respect, each apartment having a window at the front and rear, though the foresight of Captain Shirril made these as narrow as those below. Indeed they were so near the ground that otherwise they would have formed a continual invitation to hostile parties to enter through them.

So long as an attacking force kept off, three defenders like those now within the house might defy double the number of assailants that threatened them. No implement of warfare at the command of the red men was sufficient to batter down the walls, or drive the massive door from its hinges.

But the real source of danger has been indicated. The cabin was located so far toward Western Texas, that it was exposed to raids from the Comanches and Kioways, while occasionally a band of Apaches penetrated the section from their regular hunting grounds in Arizona or New Mexico.

Although the red men might find it impossible to force an entrance, yet the darkness allowed them to manoeuvre outside, and lay their plans with little danger of molestation. The roof of the building had been seasoned by its long exposure to the weather, until it was as dry as tinder. This was increased, if possible, by the drought that had now lasted for months in that portion of Texas. A slight fire would speedily fan itself into a flame that would reduce the building to ashes.

"And it only needs to be started," thought Captain Shirril, when he found himself alone below stairs, "and it will do the work; it was very thoughtful in Edna to dash that pailful of water on the smouldering blanket, and it quenched the embers, but, all the same, it required the last drop in the house."

However, there was nothing to be feared in the nature of thirst. The defenders could go without drink easily enough for twenty-four hours, and the issue of this serious matter would be settled one way or other long before that period passed. The cowboys would not wait long after sunrise for their leader, before setting out to learn the cause of his delay.

The question of life and death must be answered before the rising of the morrow's sun.

CHAPTER VI.

DINAH'S DISCOVERY.

When Captain Shirril told his wife that she and the servant were likely to find something to engage their attention above stairs, he spoke more in jest than earnest, but the remark served to prove the adage that many a truth is spoken at such times.

Of course, the upper part of the house was in as deep gloom as the lower portion, and the women took good care in passing the windows lest some stray shot should reach them. They needed no light, for every inch of space had long been familiar.

Mrs. Shirril walked quietly through the larger apartment, without coming upon anything to attract notice, after which she went to her own room, Dinah accompanying her all the way.

"I don't see that there is any need of our remaining here," said the mistress, "for there is no possible way of any of the Indians effecting an entrance."

"'Ceptin' frough de trap-door," ventured the servant.

"That is over your room, but the scuttle is fastened as securely as the one below stairs."

"Dunno 'bout dat; I's gwine to see," was the sturdy response of Dinah, as she walked rather heavily into her own boudoir; "any man dat comes foolin' round dar is gwine to get hisself in trouble."

Knowing precisely where the opening was located (an unusual feature of the houses in that section), she stopped directly under it, and reached upward with one of her powerful hands. The roof was still nearer the floor than was the latter to the floor below, so that it was easy for her to place her fingers against the iron hook which held it in place.

Of course she found the scuttle just as it had been for many a day; and Mrs. Shirril was right in saying it was as firmly secured as the ponderous door beneath them, for the impossibility of getting a purchase from the roof, made only a slight resistance necessary from beneath. A dozen bolts and bars could not have rendered it stronger.

"It 'pears to be all right," mused Dinah, "but folks can't be too keerful at sich times--sh! what dat?"

Her ears, which were as keen as those of her friends, heard a suspicious noise overhead. It was faint, but unmistakable. The startling truth could not be doubted: one of the Comanches, if not more, was on the roof!

"If dat isn't shameful," she muttered, failing to apprise her mistress of the alarming discovery; "I wander what he can be after up dar--de Lor' a massy!"

The last shock was caused by a scratching which showed that the intruder was trying to lift up the scuttle.

Evidently the Indians had made themselves as familiar with Captain Shirril's domicile as they could without entering it. They had noticed the scuttle, and the possibility that it might be unfastened led one of them to climb undetected to the roof to make sure about it.

"Dat onmannerly warmint knows dat dat door am right over *my* room," muttered the indignant Dinah; "and instead ob comin' in by de reg'lar way, as a gemman orter do, he's gwine to try to steal in frough de roof. When I get done wid him," she added, with rising wrath, "he'll know better nor dat."

Still Mrs. Shirril kept her place in her own apartment, where she was striving so hard to learn something, by peering through and listening at one of her windows, that she noticed nothing else, though, as yet, the noise was so slight that it would have escaped the ears of Dinah herself, had she not been quite near it.

The colored woman groped around in the dark until her hand rested upon the only chair in the apartment. This she noiselessly placed under the scuttle, and stepped upon it with the same extreme care.

Her position was now such that had the door been open and she standing upright, her head, shoulders, and a part of her waist would have been above the roof. She had leaned her gun against the side of the chair, so that, if needed, it was within quick reach. Then she assumed a stooping posture, with her head gently touching the underside of the door, and, steadying herself by grasping the iron hook, she stood motionless and listening.

"Yes, *he's dar!*" was her instant conclusion, "and de wiper is tryin' to onfasten de skylight ob my obpartment."

Dinah's many years spent in this wild region had given her a knowledge that she could not have gained otherwise. She knew that so long as the Comanche contented himself with trying to open the scuttle, nothing was to be feared; but, baffled in that, he was not likely to drop to the ground again without attempting more serious mischief, and that serious

mischief could take only the single dreaded form of setting fire to the building.

It seems almost beyond belief, but it is a fact that this colored woman determined on defeating the purpose of the redskin, by the most audacious means at the command of anyone. She resolved to climb out on the roof and assail the Comanche.

Since she knew her mistress would peremptorily forbid anything of the kind, she cunningly took all the means at her command to prevent her plan becoming known to Mrs. Shirril, until it should be too late for her to interfere.

Stepping gently down to the floor, she moved the few steps necessary to reach the door opening into the other room, and which had not been closed.

"Is you dar, Mrs. Shirril?" she asked in a whisper.

"Yes, Dinah," came the guarded response; "don't bother me for a few minutes; I want to watch and listen."

"All right; *dat* suits me," muttered the servant with a chuckle, as she closed the door with the utmost care.

Everything seemed to favor the astounding purpose of the brave African, who again stepped upon the chair, though in her first confusion she narrowly missed overturning it, and brought her head against the scuttle.

She was disappointed at first, because she heard nothing, but a moment's listening told her that her visitor was still on deck, or rather on the roof. The fact that, after finding he could not effect an entrance, he still stayed, made it look as if he was meditating mischief of the very nature so much feared.

In accordance with her daring scheme, Dinah now softly slipped the hook from its fastening, holding it between her fingers for a moment before doing anything more. Had the Comanche known how matters stood, a quick upward flirt on his part, even though the hold was slight, would have flung the door flat on the roof and opened the way to the interior of the Texan's cabin.

But not knowing nor suspecting anything of the kind, he did not make the attempt.

With no more tremor of the nerve than she would have felt in trying to kill a fly, Dinah softly pushed up the door for an inch at its outermost edge. This gave her a view of the roof on the side in front, with a shortened survey of the portion still nearer.

Her eyes were keen, but they detected nothing of the Comanche who was prowling about the scuttle only a few moments before. The darkness was not dense enough to prevent her seeing to the edge of the roof on all sides, had her view been unobstructed. Could she have dared to throw back the door, and raise her head above the peak of the roof, she could have traced the outlines of the eaves in every direction.

But she was too wise to try anything like that. The slightest noise on her part would be heard by the Indian, who, like all members of the American race, had his senses trained to a fineness that seems marvellous to the Caucasian. He would take the alarm on the instant, and leap to the ground, or, what was more likely, assail her with his knife, since his rifle had been left below.

"What's become ob dat villain?" Dinah asked herself, after peering about in the gloom for a full minute; "I wonder wheder he hasn't got 'shamed ob hisself, and hab slunk off and is gwine down to knock at my door and ax my pardon--Lor' a massy!"

There was good cause for this alarm on her part, for at that moment she made a discovery that fairly took away her breath.

CHAPTER VII.

DINAH'S EXPLOIT.

The revelation that broke upon the senses of the colored servant did not reach her through her power of vision. She still saw nothing but the all-encircling night, nor did she hear anything except the sighing of the wind through the mesquite bush, or the guarded movements of the red men below.

It was her power of smell that told her an appalling fact. She detected the odor of burning wood!

The Indian whom she had heard prowling like a hungry wolf over the roof, was there for a more sinister purpose, if possible, than that of gaining entrance through the scuttle into the building. He had managed to climb undetected to his perch for the purpose of setting fire to the building, and not only that, but he had succeeded in his design.



A STARTLING DISCOVERY.

The same delicacy of scent that had told the woman the frightful truth enabled her to locate the direction of the fire. It was over the peak of the roof, a little in front and to the left.

Gazing toward the point, she observed a dim glow in the darkness, such as might have been made by the reflection of a lucifer match. It was the illumination produced by the twist of flame the Comanche had kindled. If allowed to burn for a few minutes, the wind would fan it into an inextinguishable blaze.

How she managed to do what she did without discovery she never could have explained herself. But, holding the lid firmly grasped with one hand, she lifted it up until it stood perpendicular on its noiseless hinges.

As the door moved over to this position, her head and shoulders rose through the opening. Had her movements been quick, instead of deliberate, they would have suggested the action of the familiar Jack-in-the-box.

This straightening of her stature brought her head several inches above the peak or highest portion of the house, and, consequently, gave her a view of the entire roof.

And looking in the direction whence the odor came, and where she had caught the tiny illumination, the brave colored woman saw a sight indeed.

A brawny Indian warrior was stooped over and nursing a small flame with the utmost care. How he had managed the difficult business thus far without detection from below, was almost beyond explanation.

But it followed, from what has been told, that he had climbed upon the roof, taking with him some twigs and bits of

wood, without having been heard by Captain Shirril, who was listening intently at the lower door, and who heard more than one other noise that must have been slighter than that overhead.

It was probable that the warrior, having made his preparations, rode his horse close to the further corner of the cabin, where he stopped the animal, and rose to the upright position on his back. The roof was so low that it could be easily reached in this way, and he was so far removed from the inmates that his action escaped notice, his presence being finally discovered in the manner described.

Finding he could not open the scuttle, he had crept over the peak of the roof, stooped down, and, gathering his combustibles with care, set fire to them. In doing this, he must have used the common lucifer match of civilization, since no other means would have answered, and the American Indian of the border is as quick to appropriate the conveniences as he is to adopt the vices of the white man.

Be that as it may, he had succeeded in starting the tiny fire, and, at the moment the wrathful Dinah caught sight of him, was placing several larger sticks upon the growing flame, and, bending over, was striving to help the natural wind by blowing upon the blaze.

The picture was a striking one. The glow of the flame showed the countenance of the Comanche plainly. His features were repellent, the nose being Roman in form, while the cheek-bones were protuberant and the chin retreating. His long black hair dangled about his shoulders, and was parted, as is the custom among his people, in the middle. The face was rendered more repulsive by the stripes and splashes of yellow, white, and red paint, which not only covered it from the top of the forehead to the neck, but was mixed in the coarse hair, a portion of whose ends rested on the roof, as well as over his back.

As he blew, his cheeks expanded, his thin lips took the form of the letter O, fringed with radiating wrinkles around the edges, and the black eyes seemed to glow with a light like that of the fire itself, so great was his earnestness in his work.

No country boy accustomed to get up on cold mornings and build the family fires could have done his work better. He saw that while the sticks which were burning, and which he continued to feed and fan, were rapidly consuming and growing, they were eating into the dry roof on which they rested. They had already burned a considerable cavity, which gleamed like a living coal, and it would not take long before a hold would be secured that would throw the whole structure into a blaze.

Dinah stood for several seconds gazing on the picture, as though she doubted the evidence of her own eyes. It seemed impossible that such a cruel plot should have progressed thus far without being thwarted. But the next moment her chest heaved with indignation, as she reflected that the red man stretched out before her was the very one that had tried to enter her apartment, and being frustrated by her watchfulness in that design, he was now endeavoring to burn them all to death.

The fact that the Comanche never dreamed of interruption caused him to withdraw his attention from everything except the business before him, and he continued blowing and feeding the growing flames with all the care and skill at his command. His wicked heart was swelling with exultation when--

Suddenly an object descended upon the flames like the scuttle-door itself, which might be supposed to have been wrenched from its hinges and slammed down on the fire, quenching it as utterly and completely as if it were submerged in a mountain torrent.

That was the foot of Dinah.

Next, as the dumfounded warrior attempted to leap to his feet, something fastened itself like the claw of a panther in his long hair, with a grip that not only could not be shaken off, but which threatened to create a general loosening at the roots.

That was the left hand of Dinah.

At the same moment, when the dazed Comanche had half risen and was striving to get the hang of things, a vice closed immovably about his left ankle, and his moccasin was raised almost as high as his shoulder.

The agency in this business was the *right* hand of Dinah; and instantly she got in her work with the vigor of a hurricane. She possessed unusual power and activity, though it must not be supposed that the Comanche would not have given a good account of himself had he but possessed a second's warning of what was coming. He had a knife at his girdle, though his rifle, as has been said, was left behind with his companions, since his business did not make it likely that he would need anything of the kind, and it was an inconvenience to keep it by him.

"You onmannerly willian! I'll teach you how to try to sneak frough de roof into my room!" muttered Dinah, who was now thoroughly aroused, "yer orter have your neck wringed off and *I'll do it!*"

The Comanche was at vast disadvantage in being seized with such a fierce grip by the hair, which kept his face turned away from his assailant, while the vicelike grasp of his ankle compelled him to hop about on one foot, in a style that was as awkward as it was undignified. He realized, too, that despite all he could do to prevent it, his foe was forcing him remorselessly toward the edge of the roof.

But the warrior was sinewy and strong. He had been engaged in many a desperate hand-to-hand encounter, though never in anything resembling this. Finding the grip on his hair and ankle could not be shaken off, he snatched out his keen-pointed knife with the intention of striking one of his vicious back-handed blows, which had proved fatal more than once, but just then the eaves were reached and over he went!

CHAPTER VIII.

IN THE MESQUITE BUSH.

We must not forget our young friend, Avon Burnet, who volunteered so willingly to run every risk for the sake of helping his relatives out of the most imminent peril of their lives.

At the moment he saw Captain Shirril start forward to smother the fire, by throwing one of his heavy blankets over it, he lifted the heavy bolt from its place, and leaned it against the wall at the side of the door. Having decided on the step, he was wise in not permitting a minute's unnecessary delay.

He stepped outside in the manner hinted, drawing the door gently to after him. He did not do this until he saw that the interior was veiled in impenetrable gloom.

He felt that everything now depended upon his being prompt, unfaltering, and yet not rash. It may be said that the whole problem was to learn the right step to take, and then to take it, not an instant too soon nor too late. That, however, sums up the task of life itself, and the knowledge was no more attainable in one instance than in the other.

Finding himself in the outer air, Avon stood a few seconds, striving, as may be said, to get his bearings. He heard the trampling of horses' hoofs, several guarded signals passing between the Indians, and was quite sure he saw the shadowy outlines of a warrior moving within a few paces of him.

While all this was not calculated to add to his comfort of body and mind, it was pleasing to the extent that it proved his presence on the outside was as yet neither known nor suspected. As my friend Coomer would say, he was standing "With the World Before Him."

But he dare not think he was so much as on the edge of safety until he reached the mesquite bush, whose location he knew so well, and whose dark outlines were dimly discernible in front, and at the distance of only a few rods.

The youth was thinking rapidly and hard. It seemed to him that the Comanches would naturally keep the closest watch of the front of the cabin, and, therefore, he was less liable to discovery if he made a dash from another point.

This conclusion was confirmed by the sudden taking shape of not only the figure of a horseman, but of a warrior on foot, who approached at right angles, the two halting in such a manner just before him that he knew it was but momentary, and that they would come still nearer in a very brief while.

So long as he stood erect, with his back against the side of the dwelling, he was invisible to anyone who was not almost upon him. Retaining this posture, and with the rear of his clothing brushing against the building, he glided softly to the right until he reached the corner.

At the moment he arrived there, he saw that the horseman had slipped from his mustang, and he and the other warrior approached close to the door, where, as it will be remembered, Captain Shirril heard them talking together in low tones.

This was altogether too near for comfort, and Avon, with the same noiseless movement, slipped beyond the corner of the house.

As he did so, he felt for an instant that all was over. An Indian brushed so near that the youth could have touched him by extending his hand.

How he escaped discovery was more than he could understand. It must have been that the warrior's attention was so fixed upon the two figures at the front of the house that he did not glance to the right or left. Even such an explanation hardly makes clear the oversight on the part of one belonging to a race proverbial for its alertness and keen vision.

Before the young man recovered from his shock, he was astounded by another occurrence a hundred-fold more inexplicable. The profound stillness was suddenly broken by the ringing report of a rifle on the other side of the building, accompanied by the wild cry which caused the listening Captain Shirril and his wife to believe it meant the death of their devoted nephew.

While the captain committed a grave mistake, for which he was excusable, Avon was equally at fault, and with as good if not a better reason. Not dreaming it possible that he could have a friend near the cabin and on the outside, he supposed the shot was fired by the captain to create a diversion in his favor.

While such, as the reader knows, was not the case, yet it served that commendable purpose.

The death-shriek of the stricken Comanche was still in the air, when, assuming a crouching posture, the youth made a dash for cover. He expected every moment that other rifles would be fired and he would be headed off. He could hardly understand it, therefore, when he felt the bushes strike his face, and he knew that he was among the mesquite, without

suffering harm.

He would have continued his flight, had not the sounds in front shown that while he had been wonderfully fortunate up to this point, he had run almost into a group of his enemies.

The dense shadows of the bushes prevented him from seeing them, else they assuredly would have observed him, but, determined to go forward now at all hazards, and eager to seize the flimsiest thread of hope, he sank down on his hands and knees, anxious to continue his flight, but waiting to learn in what direction it should be made, if indeed it could be made at all.

There was one hope which he felt he must give up. The possibility of finding Thunderbolt, and using the matchless steed in his flight to the camp of the cowboys, had occurred to him more than once, though it would seem that it was altogether too much to look for any such good fortune as that.

"If I can only get clear of the parties, who seem to be everywhere," was his thought, "I will run all the way to camp and bring the boys back in a twinkling."

He could have drawn Thunderbolt to him by a single emission of the well-known signal, but such an attempt would have been the before the mustang, even if he was not already in their possession, and the act would secure the capture of rider and steed beyond peradventure.

"Can it be that my flight is unsuspected?" he asked himself, while he crouched on the ground, uncertain which way to move, and yet feeling that something of the kind must be done.

It was useless to speculate, and, since his foes appeared to be directly in his front, he turned to the right, and began gliding slowly forward, fearful that the beating of his heart would betray him at every inch.

But the marvellous good fortune which had attended him thus far was not quite ready to desert him. With a care and caution beyond description, he advanced foot by foot until he drew a deep sigh of relief at the knowledge that that particular group of red men was no longer in front, but to the left and somewhat to the rear.

"If there are no more," he thought, "it begins to look as if I might succeed after all."

But his rejoicing was premature. Not only did he catch the sound of a horse's hoofs, but they were directly before him, and coming as straight for the spot where he was crouching as if the animal were following a mathematical line.

One of the Comanches was riding through the mesquite bush, and if the youth stayed where he was he must be trampled by the mustang, unless the animal was frightened into leaping aside and thus betraying him to his master.

"Very well," muttered Avon, "if it comes to *that*, I know how to manage you."

As the thought passed through his mind, he reached to his holster and drew his revolver.

At this moment the steed halted, though he gave no sniff or sign that he had learned of the stranger so close in front. Believing a collision inevitable, Avon straightened up, with his weapon firmly grasped.

But before he could use it the rider slipped to the ground, and the next moment drew a match along the side of his leggings. As the tiny flame shone out in the gloom, he held it up in front of his face to light the cigarette between his lips.

CHAPTER IX.

AT FAULT.

As a rule the American Indian is not partial to cigarette smoking, that being a vice that he is willing to leave to his more civilized brother; but the Comanche in front of Avon Burnet, and so near him, left no doubt of his purpose.

As the tiny flame burned more brightly, he shaded it with his hands and puffed the twisted roll of tobacco, like one who knew how liable the blaze was to be blown out by the wind that rustled among the mesquite bushes. He was such an expert at the business, however, that he met with no difficulty.

The glow of the flame shone between the fingers, where they slightly touched each other, giving them a crimson hue, while the point of the nose, the eyes, and the front of the face were revealed almost as distinctly as was the countenance of the warrior whom Dinah discovered in the act of firing the roof of the cabin.

This Comanche was more ill-favored than the other and was in middle life. There was something in his appearance which gave the youth the suspicion that he was the chief or leader of the band of raiders, though there could be no certainty on that point.

Nothing would have been easier than for Avon, from where he stood, to shoot down the savage and appropriate his horse for himself. There was an instant when he meditated such a step, but though many a veteran of the frontier would have seized the chance with eagerness, he shrank from such a deliberate taking of human life.

The youth had already shown his pluck and readiness to use his weapon when necessary, but he could not justify himself in an act like the one named.

But he did not mean to stand idle when there was a call for instant and decisive action.

While the Comanche used his two hands in manipulating his match and cigarette, his rifle leaned against the limbs of one of the largest mesquite bushes, where he could snatch it up without stirring a foot.

It was not to be supposed that he had dismounted for the purpose of kindling his cigarette, for he could have done that on the back of his mustang, as well as when on the ground. He must have decided that he was nigh enough to the other warriors to light his tobacco before joining them on foot.

The youth was sure the steed before him was a fine one, for it is rare to see one of those people without an excellent horse, and he resolved to capture it.

At the instant the match was at its best, and the point of the cigarette was glowing red, Avon stepped toward the motionless steed, passing along the side which was furthest from his master. The beast saw him on the instant, and gave a slight whinny and recoiled.

His master spoke sharply, while the cigarette was between his teeth. Not suspecting the cause of his alarm, he supposed it was trifling and gave it no attention. But when his animal, with a loud snort, wheeled and started off on a gallop, the Indian threw down his match, called out angrily, and, grasping his gun, sprang forward to intercept him.

It will be remembered that the darkness was more dense in the mesquite bush than on the open prairie, and, although he caught a glimpse of the vanishing mustang, he saw nothing of the figure on his back, for the reason that, when the nimble youth vaulted thither, he threw himself forward on his neck.

The Indian must have been astonished by the action of his animal, but he probably concluded he would not wander far, and would be within reach in the morning when needed. So he refrained from attempting anything like pursuit, which would have been foolish under the circumstances.

It was a clever exploit on the part of Avon Burnet, and he could not repress a feeling of exultation over the success. Boldness, dash, and peculiarly favoring circumstances had taken him through the Comanche lines, when a repetition of the attempt would fail ninety-nine times out of a hundred.

But while he was justified in being grateful, there was enough serious business still before him. He could not forget that the friends in the cabin were in dire peril and no time ought to be wasted in bringing them relief.

The first indispensable act was to locate himself, so as to gain an idea of the points of the compass, without which it was beyond his power to reach the camp of his friends.

A brief walk brought the horse out of the bush and he stood on the open prairie. The mustang was without saddle or bridle, except a single buffalo thong, that was twisted over his nose and by which his master guided him. Avon had ridden the animals in the same way, and since this mustang became tractable the instant he felt anyone on his back,

such an equestrian as the young Texan met with no difficulty whatever.

But he realized that a serious difficulty confronted him when he attempted to locate himself. The flurry in the bush had so mixed up his ideas of direction, that he was all at sea.

Not a star twinkled in the cloudy sky, nor could he tell in what quarter of the heavens the moon was hidden. Looking in the supposed direction of the cabin, he saw only gloom, while it was equally dark when he gazed toward the spot where he believed the camp of the cowboys lay.

Between the home of Captain Shirril and the spot where his men awaited his coming were several elevations and depressions of land, so that had the Texans been burning a fire, as was likely, it would not show until more than half the intervening distance was passed. The cattle were herded to the northward, so that in the event of a stampede it was easier to head them on the right course over the Great Cattle Trail.

A person placed in the situation of young Burnet is apt to go astray, no matter how extended his experience in wandering abroad at night, unless he is able to start right. This was the difficulty with Avon, who was too wise to depend upon what impressions took possession of him, since it is almost the invariable rule that such impressions are wrong.

There was one faint hope: the Comanches in the vicinity of the cabin had been indulging in shouting and firing their guns. These sounds would prove of great help, but to his dismay, though he sat for several minutes motionless on his mustang and listening, he heard nothing of the kind.

He knew the wind was unfavorable, but he was compelled to believe that he had ridden much further than he first supposed, in order to be beyond reach of the reports. After mounting his mustang, he had sent him scurrying on a dead run through the bush, and kept it up for several minutes, before emerging into the open country: that was sufficient to take him a long way and, as he believed, excluded the one means of guidance which otherwise would have been his.

"Helloa! what does that mean?"

In peering around in the gloom, he saw, apparently a long way off to the left, a star-like point on the prairie, which shone out with an increasing gleam. Wondering what it could signify, he sat for a minute or two, attentively watching it, but unable to solve the interesting question.

"These Comanches are as fond of smoking as are our men, and I suppose one of them has some trouble in lighting his pipe or cigarette--helloa! there it goes!"

The light which was so interesting to him suddenly went out, and all was blank darkness again.

He waited and looked for several minutes, but it did not reappear. At the moment it vanished, he fancied he heard a slight sound, but it was too indefinite to identify.

Had the young man but known that the light which he had seen was burning on the roof of his own home, and that it was Dinah who extinguished it so abruptly, he would have shaped his course far differently.

CHAPTER X.

A SURPRISE.

Avon Burnet waited several minutes after the light went out, in the hope that it would reappear and give him an indication of its nature and cause; but darkness continued, and he concluded that his first suspicion was right: some warrior in riding over the prairie had halted to light his cigar or pipe, and then ridden on to join his comrades near the cabin.

The youth was in the situation of the mariner who finds himself adrift in mid-ocean, without compass or rudder. Neither the sky nor the ground gave him any help, and in order to reach the camp of his friends he must, under Heaven, rely upon his own skill.

"There's one thing certain," he concluded, "I shall never get there without making a break. I have secured a pretty good horse, and I may as well turn him to account."

Heading in the direction which seemed right, he tapped the ribs of the mustang with his heels, and he broke at once into a sweeping gallop, which, if rightly directed, was sure to carry him to his destination in a brief while.

Though it was too much for the young man to believe he was following the true course, he thought it was near enough for him to discover the variation before riding far. He ought to reach the crest of some elevation which would so extend his view that he would catch the gleam of the camp fire of the cattlemen.

As the pony galloped forward with that swinging gait which he was able to maintain for hours without fatigue, the rider glanced to the right and left, in front and rear, on guard lest he ran into unexpected danger, and guarding against the approach of one or more of his foes. His horse was tractable, but the rider was disturbed now and then by his actions.

While going with his swift gait, he occasionally checked his speed so abruptly that, had the young Texan been a less skilful equestrian, he would have pitched over his head. At such times he pricked his ears, and snuffed and threw up his head, as though frightened at something. But strive all he could, Avon failed to discover the cause of this peculiar behavior. He could neither hear nor see anything to explain it.

Our young friend was so keenly on the alert that he was quick to notice that they were ascending quite a swell in the plain. He drew the mustang down to a walk, and when at the highest point of the elevation, brought him to a stand-still.

No poor sailor, floating on a plank, ever strove harder to pierce the gloom in quest of a friendly light, than did Avon. His first glance in the direction which seemed to him to be right failed to show that which he longed to see. Then he slowly swept the horizon with the same searching scrutiny.

Not the first star-like glimmer rewarded him. Blank darkness enclosed him on every hand. It was right above, below, to the right and left and to the front and rear.

"Well, I'll be shot if this doesn't beat everything!" was his exclamation, when he came to understand his helplessness; "it looks as if I would have done the folks a great deal more good if I had stayed with them."

Slipping down from the back of his mustang, which he took care to hold by means of the halter, Avon pressed his ear to the earth, as is the practice of those in a similar situation.

At first he thought he detected the sounds of hoofs, but the next moment he knew it was only fancy. The better conductor in the form of the ground told him no more than did the gloom that surrounded him.

While thus engaged, the mustang tugged at the rope, as if wishing to free himself. He must have felt that he was controlled by a strange hand, but his efforts were easily restrained.

As nearly as Avon could judge, he had travelled more than two miles since leaving the cabin, so that, provided he had followed the proper course, he must have passed half the distance. But if that were the case, he ought to see signs of the camp. It is the custom of the cattlemen, when on the move, to keep a lantern suspended from the front of the provision wagon, to serve as a guide for the rest, and this ought to be visible for several miles to one in his elevated position.

Holding the thong in one hand, the youth now pointed his Winchester toward the sky and discharged several barrels, in the hope that the reports would reach the ears of the Texans and bring a response from them. The mustang did not stir a muscle; he was so accustomed to that sort of thing that his nerves were not disturbed.

This appeal was equally futile, and, as Avon flung himself again upon the back of his horse, a feeling akin to despair came over him.

"Perhaps it was quite an exploit to get through the Comanche lines without harm," he said to himself, "but of what avail? I shall wander round and round until daylight, with no more knowledge of where I am than if I were groping among the Rocky Mountains; and, long before the rise of sun, the fate of Uncle Dohm and the folks will be settled."

A feeling of exasperation succeeded his depression of spirits. It was beyond endurance that he should be so near help and yet be unable to secure it. If he could but gain an inkling of the right course, he would dart across the prairie with the speed of an arrow.

He had neglected no possible means of informing himself. Recalling the direction of the wind, he strove to make use of that; but as if even the elements had united against him, he was not long in discovering that the wind was fitful and changing, and his attempt to use it as a guide had much to do with his going so far astray.

The rifle was discharged again, but the listening ear caught no response, and the conviction forced itself upon him that, instead of journeying toward the camp, he was really further from it than when he started.

The mustang began to grow restless once more. Avon spoke sharply, and started him off without any attempt to guide him. To his surprise, the steed turned to the left almost at right angles, and without any urging on his part, broke into a canter.

"I don't understand that," said the rider; "he certainly knows more than I do, but it is too much to expect him to carry me to my destination without any direction from me. But he is as likely to be right as wrong, and so I'll let him do as he chooses. You're a mighty fine animal," continued the youth, as the steed broke into a gallop, "but I wouldn't give Thunderbolt for a hundred like you; he knows something, and when I'm caught in a fix like this, he is sure to help me out."

The youth feared that the mustang was trying to return to his master. He, therefore, brought him down to a walk, though he broke into a canter more than once, and leaning forward, peered through the gloom, on the alert for the first sign of danger.

"Uncle Dohm believed the Comanches meant to set fire to the house; if he hadn't thought so, I wouldn't have been in this plight; it strikes me that it is about time they made a start; if they do so, I will take a hand in that little game."

At the first glow anywhere in the sky, telling of the use of the torch, Avon would have driven his mustang thither like the whirlwind, and it is safe to believe that his Winchester would have done more effective service than ever before. But the bright eyes which continually scanned every portion of the murky heavens caught no glimmer of a single star.

The mustang gave a slight whinny and rose to a canter again, but was roughly checked by his new master.

"What the mischief is the matter with you?"

Just then, something took shape in the gloom ahead. Avon stopped his steed and leaned forward. Yes; it was unmistakable.

There it stood--a long, low cabin, whose familiar contour told the alarming fact that he had come back to his starting-point, and was among the Comanches in front of his own home!

CHAPTER XI.

CHANGING PLACES.

The triumph of the colored servant Dinah over the Comanche incendiary may be described as overwhelming in its way. The redskin was caught at so great disadvantage, that he was hurled from the roof before he could check himself or make use of the knife he had snatched from his girdle. Indeed, it was at the instant of striking his vicious blow that he went over the eaves. This preserved his awkwardness of posture, and prevented his making any preparation for the violent fall.

The miscreant would have struck the ground with a "dull thud," but for an unexpected buffer in the shape of one of his brother warriors, who happened to be standing directly under. As a consequence, the sprawling figure came down on the head and shoulders of the astounded Comanche, who collapsed with a feeling that must have made him suspect the house had fallen on him.

The mishap saved the victim of Dinah's wrath, but at a stunning cost to the under fellow, who lay for a minute or two as if dead, before he was able to regain his breath and climb to his feet.

In the meantime, the author of this catastrophe was wise enough to improve the moments.

"Dar!" she muttered, checking herself on the edge of the roof, "I reckons you know a blamed sight more dan you eber did afore, and arter dis, when you tries to steal into a 'spectable lady's room, you'll knock at de doah fust."

It was not to be supposed that in the darkness the Comanches below would grasp the situation offhand, and, before they could do so, Dinah scurried over the peak of the roof to the scuttle, which of course was still open, and descended. In her haste, she stepped upon the back of the chair, which tripped over, and she went down with a crash that shook the entire building.

Mrs. Shirril dashed into the room, in consternation.

"What in Heaven's name is the matter, Dinah?"

"Nuffin's de matter wid *me*, but I guess it am all day wid dat cheer, howsumeber."

The captain hurried up the ladder, flung back the covering, and leaped into the apartment.

"Who's killed? What's the trouble?" he gasped.

"Nuffin," replied the servant, impatient with the continued questioning; "I's been promenadin' a little on de roof and de cheer flopped ober when I sot my foot on it."

Everything being in darkness, the eyes of the party were useless. The captain groped around to help Dinah to her feet, but she was already there, sound in limb and body.

"If you wants sumfin to do, captin," said she, "jes' fasten dat doah above yer head."

"How came it open?" he asked, as he hastily complied, still unable to comprehend what had taken place.

"Habent I jes' tole yer dat I's been out on de roof?"

"I heard her there," said the wife, "and was on my way to learn what it meant, when the crash came."

In answer to the questions of the couple, Dinah soon made clear what had taken place. Her employers were filled with admiration of her pluck, and wonder at its brilliant success. That she had saved the dwelling from burning and averted a frightful death from them all was evident. They praised her highly, though the captain insisted that she ought to have told him of her intention before climbing through upon the roof.

"Cotch me doin' *dat*," she chuckled, "when I knowed dat you would hab stopped me. Dinah aint as big a fool as she looks."

"No one certainly could have managed it with the skill shown by you. I would have kept within the opening and shot the scamp."

"And what would you hab done wid de fiah, eh?"

"Put it out in some way."

"And got shot yourself! Your fut isn't as promisc'us as mine and it would hab tooken you longer; it wanted only one slap ob my shoe and de bus'ness war done."

"Perhaps you were right," said the captain with a laugh; "but I am afraid we are not through with those attempts; they came so near succeeding that they will soon try it again."

"I don't t'ink dat black rascal will try it wery soon, 'cause I gib him a shookin' up dat he wont git ober for a week."

"I have no doubt of that, but there are others just as venturesome as he, and they will try it."

"Is not that the only source of danger?" asked the wife.

"It can hardly be said to be so, but it's the chief source; I will stay here, and you, Edna, had better go below; the room is so well cleared of smoke that it will cause you little trouble."

"And what is I gwine to do?" asked Dinah.

"You may accompany your mistress; if I find myself in need of you I will call."

"It's afeard you won't t'ink yourself in need ob me, if some more ob dem scamps come pokin' round de doah up dere."

"Well, I will try to take care of them myself, but I give you my word if your help is needed it will be asked."

This was the most that the servant could get from her master, and she had no choice but to do as directed. Mrs. Shirril led the way down the ladder, followed by her servant, and they quickly found themselves on the lower floor.

Enough smoke remained in the room to cause Dinah another fit of sneezing, but the shattered window and the opening of the door at the head of the primitive stairs gave such good vent that a rapid improvement took place.

"I don't see that there is much for us to do," remarked the mistress, taking her place near the door, and out of range of either of the windows, "but they may try something of which we have no suspicion, and, if so, we shall have the chance to do better service here than above stairs."

"Poserbly, but it doesn't strike me dat way; seems to me dat fiah am 'ginning to flare up again."

The smothering blanket by this time was so far consumed that the embers showed beneath, though with less strength than at first. They diffused a slight illumination through the room, and enabled the two women to see each other's figures dimly, as they moved silently about, alert, listening, and watchful.

The embers could have been extinguished by making use of the same means as before, but the certainty of a denser volume of strangling smoke, to say nothing of the loss of the valuable article, prevented any use of the remedy.

"Bress my soul, if dar isn't anoder warmint!"

Dinah, rifle in hand, had stationed herself by the heavy door, against which she slightly leaned. As she did so, she felt an almost insensible yielding on its part, as though a powerful pressure on the outside was being exerted to force it inward.

"How can you know that?" asked her mistress, stepping to her side.

"Jes put your hand right here and feel for yourself."

The delicate hand of the lady was placed against the structure, and there could be no doubt that someone was pushing strongly against the other side.

"Yes," said she in a low voice, "they are there, but they can do no harm, as long as they confine themselves to that."

"S'pose dey butt dar heads agin it?"

"It will be worse for their heads than for the door, but I think your people are the only ones who work that way."

"Dat's 'cause we hab de hardest kind ob heads," was the truthful response; "but mebbe dey's usin' somethin' else to break in de door."

"It can do no injury if they do," replied Mrs. Shirril, who could not shake off a feeling of uneasiness because of the discovery.

While it was apparent that the door could not be forced by any conceivable means at the command of the Comanches, there was a doubt as to their precise intentions that troubled the good woman. She had the proof that their relentless enemies were busy, and their well-known cunning was likely to suggest ways of reaching their end, which, for a time at least, must remain unsuspected by the defenders of the cabin.

CHAPTER XII.

ON THE ROOF.

Captain Dohm Shirril was never more in earnest than when he declared that the Comanches meant to renew their attempt to fire his cabin.

Having come so near success, they would resort to the same means, taking care to provide against a second ignominious defeat at the hands of the defenders.

The darkness, on the whole, was far more helpful to the latter than to their assailants, for, if care was used, it was beyond the power of the Indians to discover the presence of any person on the roof. The Comanches, from the force of circumstances, would have to move back some rods from the building, to see the cover, and that distance was sufficient to shut out all sight of a figure, so long as it remained prone. If a man rose to his feet, as Dinah had done, his outlines would show, and he would become an instant target for the redskins.

It was with a full conviction of these important facts that the Texan, imitating the action of his servant, unfastened the scuttle, and noiselessly let it fall back behind him. Then he thrust his head and shoulders through and scanned the half of the roof in his field of vision.

Nothing to cause alarm was discerned, and rising still higher, he peered over the peak to the other side.

The air had the odor of burning wood, and the cavity burned in the roof showed signs of life, but they were so slight as to be harmless. They would soon die out, despite the strong wind still blowing.

It need not be said that the Texan had not the remotest intention of following the example of his servant. If he should discover the presence of an Indian on the roof, little fear of an attempt to steal upon him unaware and fling him to the earth below. The captain held his Winchester firmly grasped and most of its chambers were charged. That offered the true solution of his problem, in case of the appearance of danger, and he was not the man to hesitate in such an emergency.

He did not fail to notice that which was observed by his nephew: the Comanches had ceased their whooping and firing, though the tramping of their mustangs proved that most of the warriors were still mounted and circling back and forth in the aimless effort to detect some means of getting at the defiant inmates of the house.

"Avon has given them the slip," was his conclusion, "though he must have had a close call. There is one Indian less, at any rate, than when he stole out of the cabin."

Such was the fact, though, as we have shown, he did not fall by the rifle of the youth.

The Texan was standing on the chair in the upper room, with his head and shoulders through the opening, all his senses on the alert, when he caught the faint report of a rifle, repeated several times. The sounds came from a point a long way off, and he could only conjecture their cause.

"If it was over yonder," he added, referring to a point of the compass almost opposite, "I would believe the boy fired the gun and had come in collision with some more of the scamps that are so plenty to-night, but he can't be over there, because that would lead him further from the camp of the cattlemen."

And yet, as the reader suspects, the rifle was discharged by the young man, who, in obedience to the general law, had strayed in the wrong direction in his blind search for his friends.

It was not necessary to give any attention to matters below stairs. He could not believe that danger threatened there, but, should it appear in an unexpected form, the women would give quick notice, and he could hasten to their aid.

"Avon ought to reach camp in half an hour," continued the Texan, following his train of thought; "true, he is on foot, but he knows every step of the way, and won't allow the grass to grow under his feet; it will take the boys about half a minute to make ready; the cattle can be left to themselves, so they ought to be here within three-quarters of an hour, and won't they make fur fly when they do come!" added the Texan with a thrill; "they will welcome such a chance to even up matters with these cattle thieves, who have been hanging round the country for nearly a week; they will give them a lesson which will make it safe for the women until we get back, even if gone six months."

Despite his watchfulness against his foes, his gaze continually wandered to the northward, whence the expected aid was to come. His elevation was not sufficient to permit him to see beyond the ridge which his relative must pass to reach camp, but he listened for the assuring shouts which were sure to proclaim the arrival of the brave fellows who were always ready to risk their lives for a friend.

Although the captain relied chiefly upon the darkness to screen him from sight of the Comanches, he could not feel sure of entire safety in his situation. In order to hold all of the roof in his field of vision, he had to keep not only his head but his shoulders above the level of the scuttle. By doing this, he could look over the peak, but his danger lay in the evident fact that the Indians knew the location of the opening, and would use their eyes for all they were worth in striving to detect anyone venturing out of it.

The conviction, therefore, was that his conspicuous posture was likely to reveal his outlines to some watchful warrior, who might rise to his feet on the back of his steed so as to permit a closer view of the roof.

No more uncomfortable sensation can be imagined than that of one who continually invites the skill of a sharp-shooter, and the Texan met the difficulty not by shrinking, like a turtle, within his protection, but by climbing stealthily out upon the planking, where he remained extended at full length.

This rendered him less liable to be seen, but if his assailants should take a notion to sweep the deck, as may be said, with rifle bullets, he was far more likely to receive some of them in his person than he would be by retaining his former place.

But a greater or less degree of danger must attend any effort to frustrate the designs of the red men, who were inspired by a hatred intensified by the loss of two of their number.

With his face almost pressing the planking the Texan drew himself, inch by inch, along the roof, until he was some six feet distant. Then he paused and listened, slightly raising his head and peering around in the gloom.

Once he heard the hoofs of a galloping horse, which, however, quickly ceased. Then several whistle-like signals passed between the marauders, and he was able to catch the murmur of voices within the cabin. The wife and servant were talking together, and, though their words were low, the open doors allowed the slight noise to reach the ears of the Texan, without telling him what words were spoken.

Holding his position several minutes, he turned a little to the left and crept along, until able to look over the low peak of the roof. He did this by raising his head the few inches necessary to bring his eyes just above the level.

Everything, so far as he could judge, was the same as before. The smouldering in the cavity had died out, though the smoke was as pungent as ever.

"Dinah could not have done her work more effectively, and a reasonable person ought to be satisfied---"

His keen sense of hearing apprised him of a noise, slight but significant, near him. His first thought was that it was in front, but the next moment he knew it came from the rear. Turning his head in that direction, without moving his body, he caught the outlines of a Comanche's head at the lower corner of the roof behind him. It slowly rose until the shoulders appeared, and no doubt remained that the Indian was cautiously climbing upon the roof, to renew the attempt to set fire to it.

CHAPTER XIII.

A DEAD RACE.

Avon Burnet was thunderstruck. When he supposed he was several miles from the cabin of his uncle, he found himself directly in front of it, and the Indian horse, upon which he relied to take him to the camp of the cattlemen, had brought him to what might be called the mouth of the lion's den.

Not only had the precious minutes been thrown away, but his peril was of the most desperate nature.

Hardly had the pony halted, when a couple of figures loomed to view in the darkness on the left, and one of them called to him in Comanche. This told the youth that his identity was unsuspected by the red men, whose view was too indistinct to distinguish him from one of their own number. But they were coming toward him, and his broad sombrero must reveal the truth the next instant.

Not a second was to be lost. They were almost upon him, when he wheeled and urged his mustang to a dead run, throwing himself forward at the same moment, in the usual way, to avoid the bullets that would be whistling about him before he could pass beyond reach.

But the steed got the mischief in him at this moment. He must have understood the treachery demanded of him, for instead of dashing off, as was expected, he spitefully flung his head from side to side and reared, with his fore-legs high from the ground.

Had Avon been on the open prairie, with time at his command, he would have conquered the beast, as he had done many a time with others, but he could not do so now. There was not the twinkling of an eye at his disposal.

The mustang was still rearing and pawing the air, when Avon whisked over his shoulder, like a skilled equestrian, landing nimbly on his feet, and breaking into a dead run toward the cattle camp five miles away. His action, as well as that of his horse, made known the astonishing truth to the approaching Comanches.

Several warning whoops broke the stillness, and it seemed to the fugitive that half the Indians were in pursuit of him. He glanced back and was not a little surprised to observe that all were on foot. The pony which had just been freed must have concluded to enjoy his liberty while the chance was his, for, instead of going to his master, he galloped whinnying in another direction.

But all of these men had mustangs, which, as has been said, were among the finest of their species, and they were likely to take part in the singular contest.

If the chase should retain its present character the young man had hope, for he was one of the fleetest of Texans, who had never met his superior among the veterans of the plains. The Comanches are also wonderfully active on foot, and it remained to be decided whether they could overtake him in a fair contest.

Avon Burnet ran as never before. He was speeding now for his own life as well as for that of his friends, for they were in as urgent need of help as ever. He knew his face was toward camp, he remembered the nature of the ground, and had no fear, therefore, of stumbling into any pitfalls.

Accustomed as the Comanches were to running, they must have been surprised at the burst of speed shown by the young man, who seemed to be going over the plain like the wind.

As he ran Avon cast furtive glances over his shoulder, and his heart tingled when he saw that he was steadily drawing away from the four figures which seemed to have sprung from the ground itself.

"Keep it up, boys," he muttered, "and see where you land. If you can down me in *this style*, you are welcome."

But it was not to be expected that the pursuers would content themselves while the swift-footed youth left them out of sight. The moment they saw that such an issue was likely, they would resort to their rifles, and there could be no question of their skill with those weapons, which they had been accustomed to use from the hour they were strong enough to hold one of them.

There must have been some urgent wish on the part of the red men to capture the youth, else they would have appealed to their guns at first. The rearing mustang served as a partial shield to the fugitive, until he was fairly under way and had secured a start of several rods, in fact being almost invisible in the gloom at the moment the race fairly opened.

The third glance over his shoulder showed him only two of the Comanches in sight, and hardly half a minute elapsed, when, on looking back again, only one was visible.

But the fact became speedily apparent that this particular red man was as fleet as himself. He must have been the champion of his tribe, since he parted company with his companions so speedily.

"I don't know whether I can shake you off or not," thought the fugitive, "but it's a mighty sight better to be chased by a single enemy than by several."

The youth determined upon a piece of strategy, should it prove possible. He meant to keep up the flight, without escaping his pursuer, until he was drawn so far away from the rest that he could receive no help from them. This, at the same time, would encourage the miscreant in the belief that he would soon overhaul and make him prisoner.

The first part of the scheme was comparatively simple. It was easier to allow the scamp to gain upon him than it was to outrun him; it was somewhat more difficult to hold the rates of speed relatively equal, while it looked extremely doubtful whether, when the moment should arrive, he could leave him behind.

In support of this view, Avon did not fail to remember that he had put forth his utmost exertion from the first, and still was unable to shake off his enemy, who clung as persistently to him as does the wolf to the wounded bison.

What he feared, too, as much as anything else, was that the other Comanches, who had withdrawn from the race, would hasten to the vicinity of the cabin, and, mounting their mustangs, take part in the struggle. If a horseman should get but a single glimpse of him, it would not take him long to run the fugitive down.

It was this dread which caused him to swerve gradually to the left, though he kept such careful note of the change that there was no danger of his going astray as before.

None of the pursuers, from the moment of starting, gave vent to any outcry, as they are generally supposed to do under similar circumstances. Such a proceeding would have been as great a draught upon his strength as outright laughter, and the American Indian is too wise not to husband every resource.

It required little cessation of effort to permit the Comanche to come up with him at an alarming rate. A few minutes would have allowed the pursuer to overhaul the fugitive.

Only a few minutes had passed since the furious start, and Avon felt that the time had come to consider himself as dealing only with this single redskin. Still bearing to the left he put forth all his energies, resolved to run away from him, if the achievement was within the range of possibility.

It was not. Try as desperately as he might, the Comanche could not be shaken off.

An encounter being inevitable, Avon had to decide upon the manner in which it should take place.

Inasmuch as the warrior must have felt certain of coming up with him, he was not likely to appeal to his rifle, or that would have been his first act when the contest opened. He would continue to run until near enough either to seize the youth or to use his weapon against him.

Avon concluded that the only course which offered hope was to allow the warrior to approach slightly closer, and then to wheel and let him have several chambers from his Winchester.

He would have to act quickly, but he had already proven himself capable of that, and it might be that the Comanche would be looking for something of the kind, and was supple enough to secure the drop on him. His people were accustomed to border warfare and had graduated in all the subtlety of the fearful business.

Young Burnet had fixed his course of action in his mind when, to his consternation, he heard the sounds of approaching hoofs over the prairie!

CHAPTER XIV.

THE FRIEND IN NEED.

If horsemen were thundering toward the spot, the fugitive was doomed.

But, though seized with despair, he did not yield. On the contrary, he was nerved to such desperation that he put forth a tremendous effort, which quickly increased the space between him and the pursuer.

But instead of heading away from the coming animals, he turned directly toward them, at the same astonishing velocity. Why he did this, he himself did not fully understand. It may have been that, impressed with the utter uselessness of trying to escape by running, he had a blind hope of unhorsing one of his enemies and wrenching his steed from him.

He had taken only a few leaps, however, when he discovered that the beasts running forward, as if to meet him, were cattle.

Fully fifty animals, belonging to the herd several miles distant, had started out on a little stampede of their own, and fate brought them and him in collision.

It mattered not, for nothing could make the situation worse. The next instant Avon was among them, in imminent risk of being trampled to death. The beasts were terrified by the advent of the footman, and scattered in the wildest confusion.

While he was in such deadly peril, the animals served as a shield against the assault of the Comanche close behind him. Anxious as he was to secure the fugitive, he was not prepared to "cut him out" from a drove of stampeded cattle.

He turned to avoid the terrific rush, and catching fitful glimpses of the leaping form among the beasts, raised his gun and let fly.

His shot struck, but, instead of bringing down the youth, it tumbled one of the bullocks headlong on the plain. Avon would have turned at once to give attention to his enemy, had he not been fully occupied in saving himself from the animals themselves.

Fortunately he had not penetrated far among the drove, and, by a continuance of his inimitable dexterity, he dodged from among them, helped thereto by the efforts of the cattle themselves to flee from the terrifying object.

It was at this juncture, when the youth was striving to get sight of his enemy, who, he believed, was trying equally hard to secure another shot at him, that he saw the very thing he had been dreading from the first.

It was a single horseman, who almost rode him down ere he could check his steed. Avon was so flurried from his fierce exertions, that, before he could bring his rifle to his shoulder and discharge it, the other anticipated him.

But the man did not fire at *him*. He aimed at the Comanche, not a dozen yards distant, and hit him fairly and squarely.

"Helloa, Baby, what the mischief is up?"

"Thank Heaven, Ballyhoo, it's you!" exclaimed the panting youth, ready to drop from exhaustion.

"Ballyhoo," was the nickname of Oscar Gleeson, one of the cowboys in charge of the two thousand cattle that were to start northward on the morrow over the Great Cattle Trail.

"Baby" was the name by which Avon Burnet was known among the rest, because of his youth.

Leaning over his horse, the tall Texan reached down and grasped the hand of his young friend.

"It sort of looks, Baby, as though I had arrived in time to do you a little turn."

"There's no doubt of that, for I couldn't have run much further."

"But why did you run at all? I observed but one Injin, and he's of no further account now."

"When I started there were four after me, but I threw all out of sight except one. I was on the point of turning to fight him, when I heard the cattle, and thought they were other Comanches coming to the help of this fellow."

"But things seem to be in a queer shape at the house; tell me the trouble."

"Why, how did you know anything about it at all?" asked the surprised Avon.

"I've been down there and seen things for myself."

"Let me hear about that first, then I'll let you know what I have to tell, and it is important indeed."

The Texan, in obedience to his training, cast a look after the vanishing herd and sighed.

"It'll be a big job to round them up, but I guess we'll have to leave 'em alone for a time. Wal, you know we went into camp a few miles to the north, to wait for you and the captain that was to jine us in the morning. We were looking after things, when I remembered that I had left my package of tobacco at the house. Things were so quiet, and I was so afeared that you and the captain would forgit to bring it with you, that I concluded to ride over after it myself. I never dreamed of any of the varmints being there, and was going along at a swinging gait, when I heard the sound of a gun and I fetched up my horse to learn what it meant. I didn't see an Injin, but while I was looking somebody made a rush from the front of the house for the bush."

"It was myself," interrupted Avon excitedly, "and the captain fired to save me and did it."

"I reckon that was Ballyhoo Gleeson that let loose that partic'lar shot," said the cowboy with a chuckle; "I didn't know who it was running, but thought it was one of the varmints. Just afore that I was sure that I seed one of 'em and I let fly, shootin' on ginerel principles as you might say. I might have investigated things, but the Comanches were too numerous for comfort, and I wheeled about and made off."

"So it was you who fired the shot that really cleared the way for me," said the astonished youth; "I supposed, all the time, that it was my uncle. Where have you been since?"

"I started for camp to tell the boys, and was on my way when I met these confounded cattle. I didn't want them to get too fur off, as none of the fellows 'peared to be after them. I was trying to round them up, when this little affair took place."

"But, Ballyhoo, why didn't you let the cattle go and make all haste after help."

"Who wants help?"

"The folks in the house; do you suppose I would have ventured out as I did, if they were not in instant need of it?"

Evidently the Texan found it hard to understand the extremity of Captain Shirril and his family.

"There are three of 'em there and each has a gun; I don't see why you need worry, 'cause the varmints can't get at 'em and they'll clear out in the morning."

"That might be, but uncle says they will set fire to the cabin, unless they are driven off."

"I didn't think of *that*," replied Gleeson, who still could not feel the alarm of his young friend; "the cabin has been purty well dried up by the drought of the last few months. I thought the varmints were after the cattle, and," he added, again peering through the gloom after the herd, which had run so far that they were not only out of sight but beyond hearing, "they stand a show of making a good haul. But," he continued more savagely, "they will find a little trouble in getting off with them. There's too many for us to lose without a big fight."

"It doesn't make any difference if the whole herd is stampeded, we must hurry to the aid of the folks in the cabin."

"Being as them sentiments are the captain's," said Ballyhoo, "why, I'm agreeable to doing as him and you wish. So jump up here behind me, and we'll go to camp."

"I can walk."

"Up with you!" commanded the Texan. "I shouldn't wonder if some more of the varmints will be on hand afore long, to attend the obsequies of their champion runner."

Avon obeyed, and the laden mustang struck off to the northward, at an easy gait.

CHAPTER XV.

VANISHED.

It was a startling sight, when Captain Shirril, stretched at full length on the roof of his cabin, gazed in front of him and saw the head and shoulders of a Comanche Indian slowly rise to view at the corner of the eaves.

He could not doubt its meaning: the assailants were bent on burning the structure, and were willing to face the danger that was sure to meet them in making the attempt.

Even in this exciting moment, the Texan could not help asking himself the question which he had asked many times before: why did not the redskins set fire to the side of the house, where they were involved in no such peril as now? They might have gathered several armfuls of combustibles, and, heaping them against the wooden walls, fire them at their leisure, but, for some reason, they preferred to climb upon the roof, and run the risk of colliding with the courageous Dinah or her fearless master.

In doing as they did, the Comanches were shrewder than would be supposed. It is true that the narrow windows commanded only one side of the cabin, and that the attempt spoken of brought little if any danger to themselves. In fact, as afterward was learned, they did their best to set fire to the rear, and at the end, but the timber was so damp that the flames failed to communicate. The long continued drought affected the walls to a far less degree than the roof, where the sun had free play day after day. Had there been a driving storm, the top would have been less favorable than the walls, but from the causes named it lost its moisture much more readily.

Besides, the flames on the roof could not be reached as readily nor with so much safety by the defenders as at the sides. They naturally believed there was plenty of water at command. The moment the fire should begin to show through the crevices in the timbers, this could be dashed against the other side and brought into play.

It was different on the roof, which could not be reached so well. There may have been other motives influencing the Comanches in the first instance, such as supposing that the whites, having once repulsed the attempt, would not look for its repetition, since the Indians must expose themselves to the greatest possible peril.

However, without speculating as to their reasons, the fact remained that a second Indian was rising like an apparition above the eaves, with the evident intention of trying to repair the failure of his companion a short time before.

Captain Shirril felt that it would have been better had he stayed where he was; for, with his head just above the level of the scuttle, he could have picked off the wretch the very moment he became aware of his presence.

But now, while creeping so guardedly along the roof, he had held his rifle by the barrel, with most of the weapon behind him. Had it been discharged, in that position, it was he who would have received the bullet, instead of the Indian.

To make the gun effective, he must bring it around in front and sight it. While his own form pressed the planking so close that the savage apparently failed to identify him, though carefully scanning the surface, there was a strong probability that he would detect the meaning of the slight noise involved in the act.

The Texan dared not advance nor retreat, though he would have preferred to withdraw through the opening; but the moment he made sure of what confronted him, he began bringing his gun forward, with the resolve to fire the moment he could draw a bead on the miscreant.

The weapon advanced like the minute-hand over the face of a clock. Knowing the stake for which he was working, he did not neglect any precaution that could bring success.

"He can duck his head quickly enough," thought the captain, "but I'll pick him off the instant there is reason to believe he scents mischief."

His intention, in such an event, was to bring his Winchester to the right position and discharge it with the utmost celerity. His experience in the Civil War and in Texas rendered him an adept at this business, but, on the other hand, it will be seen that the precautions of the Comanche himself could be executed in a twinkling.

"Confound the luck!"

Captain Shirril had almost reached the decisive point, when the head of the redskin vanished!

Whether or not he saw his danger cannot be said, but it is probable that the slight noise of the arm and gun struck his ear and decided him to drop out of sight until an investigation should be made.

The Texan was exasperated, for he was eager to bring down this scamp, and, up to the moment of his disappearance,

was confident of doing so, but the opportunity was gone.

Instead of retreating to cover again, he decided to remain on the roof a brief while longer; but he stealthily shifted his position a little nearer the edge of the building. Now that he was at liberty for the moment, he laid aside his gun and drew his revolver. That was the weapon for such an emergency, and he kept it in position for instant use, without the fatal preliminaries that had just defeated his purpose.

The captain clung to the belief that, despite the second repulse of the Comanches, they would persist in their attempt until it should prove too costly to them.

But he was not shortsighted enough to believe the repetition would be in the precise fashion of the last: that is to say, he did not suspect the Indian, after ducking so promptly out of range, would pop up his head again to invite a shot.

"He will appear at some other corner," was his conclusion, "which they believe is unguarded."

His eyes had become so accustomed to the gloom that he could trace the outlines of the eaves around the cabin, and he felt little fear, therefore, of his enemies stealing upon him unawares. They might try it, but he was confident of defeating their purpose at the very onset.

Another fear troubled him: having learned that he was on the roof, they were likely to begin firing at it from a distance, raking the entire surface so effectively that some of the bullets were quite sure to find him. Prudence whispered to him to withdraw into the interior of the cabin while the chance was his, but there was a stubborn streak in the Texan's composition which caused him to hold his place. He had been under fire so often that it seemed as if nothing could disturb his coolness or ruffle his presence of mind, and he was so inured to personal peril that he felt something of the old thrill of which he had spoken earlier in the evening, when recalling his experience in the war that had closed only a few years before.

But none of the expected shots came. He heard the sound of more than one mustang's hoofs, and several signals between the warriors, but no one sent a bullet skimming along the slope on which he lay looking and listening, and on the alert for the first appearance of his assailants.

This led him to suspect that, after all, they were not certain of his presence. It was sound and not sight that had caused the sudden withdrawal of the warrior.

If this were the case, there was a greater probability of his showing up again.

It is at such times that the minutes seem to have ten-fold their real length. The Texan, after glancing closely along the rim of the roof, not forgetting to take a peep over the peak, turned his gaze to the northward, and listened for the sounds that were so long in coming. Not the glimmer of a light showed in that direction, nor could he catch the faintest sound of a galloping hoof, other than such as was made by the mustangs of the Comanches near the building.

"Avon ought to have arrived before this, and the boys would not throw away a second after learning the truth from him. He may have been hindered, but---"

CHAPTER XVI.

CLEVERLY DONE.

At this moment the Texan heard something.

The noise could not have been any more distinct than that which had apprised the Comanche of his peril just in time to save himself. It was so faint, indeed, that it was not until he had listened a few seconds longer that he could decide the precise point whence it came.

It was at the same end of the cabin, but on the corner opposite to that where he had detected the warrior. The captain, therefore, was forced to peep over the edge of the peak, in order to hold his gaze on the point. This was easy enough, and, as he stealthily peered through the gloom, he levelled his weapon, in whose use he was as skilful as that of the Winchester.

He had decided in his mind the precise point where the head of the Indian would rise to view, and he was resolved not to throw away his chance this time. The moment he could make sure of his target, he would perforate it with several bullets, in order to prevent any possible mistake.

But, though the sound was repeated, the object itself failed to materialize. It was there, but he could not see it clearly enough to risk a shot.

Strange that, with all the Texan's experience, this fact did not lead him to suspect the real cause of the warrior's continued absence!

But at the moment he began speculating, he became convinced that his enemy was moving. He was there and had betrayed himself.

Everyone knows the extreme difficulty of seeing an object distinctly when the light is poor, and we concentrate our gaze upon it. That which is clear at first grows dim and perhaps vanishes altogether from sight.

Something of the kind is noticeable when we try to count the seven stars of the Pleiades. It is easy enough to fix upon six, but if we gaze too intently, the seventh modestly withdraws from view.

This was the case for a minute or two with Captain Shirril. The first glance at the suspicious point showed him the outlines of a head, but while gazing at it, he began to doubt whether it was there at all. Aware of the peculiarity named, he turned his eyes toward a spot several feet removed, and then glanced back to the original point.

The Comanche was there!

The Texan sighted his pistol as best he could in the obscurity, but, while doing so with all care, the target began to grow dim, until he was afraid that, if he pressed the trigger, a miss would result, and surely he could not afford that.

"I'll wait," was his decision; "he can't know that I'm on the watch, and there will be more of him in sight before long."

It was remarkable indeed that the sagacious captain still failed to suspect the object of this strange proceeding.

There came the moment when there was no cause for longer delay. The shoulders were in sight, and the skilful marksman was certain of bringing the warrior down with his first bullet.

But at the moment of firing, he was restrained by a strange suspicion, or rather a strange occurrence.

The head of the Comanche made an abrupt flirt to one side--then straightened up, flopped still more in the other direction, and then became upright again.

This was not only extraordinary, but it was something which a genuine Indian would never do, whether he belonged to the Comanche or some other tribe.

"Ah, ha--that's your game, is it?" muttered the Texan, catching on to the truth.

The cunning red men were making use of a dummy instead of one of their own number, and, astounding as the statement may seem, this dummy was the very warrior that had fallen by the shot of Oscar Gleeson.

Instead of trusting the success of their scheme to an image made by mounting a blanket over the end of a stick, and which might well deceive where there was so little light, they had picked up the inanimate body, lifted it upon the back of one of their mustangs, and slowly elevated it above the eaves, imitating the natural action as closely as they could.

However, they ought to have practiced the trick before risking so much on its success. Everything was going right, until the head reached a point where it was not advisable to support it further, since the hands thus employed were

likely to receive some of the bullets they expected to be fired after it.

The withdrawal of the support caused it to tip to one side, and the too prompt effort to retrieve the mistake sent it in the opposite direction. This mishap was quickly repaired, but not until the deception had become manifest to the watchful Texan, who smiled grimly, without suspecting the deeper meaning of the performance.

"I don't think I will throw away any shots on *you*" he said to himself; "for there will be plenty of other chances where more good may be done."

A thoughtful man might have concluded that the Comanches were taking a good deal of unnecessary pains. Suppose the white man did send several bullets into the dummy, there was no hope of his exhausting his supply or of the Comanche finding him wholly unprepared.

They probably believed that, after such a discharge on his part, he would not expect an instant renewal of the attempt, and would, therefore, be off his guard for a few seconds, during which they could make their rush.

This was drawing it exceedingly fine, and the Texan did not attempt to explain that which must always remain a partial mystery.

"I wonder now whether that can be a little plan to hold my attention, while they try something in another direction," was his next thought, which proved that Captain Shirril was at last approaching the right trail.

The image, or rather body, having been raised far enough above the eaves to show the head and shoulders, remained as stationary as if carved in wood. It was unsafe for its projectors to trust it further without support. It was now ready to receive the fire of the gentleman, and the Comanches might well ask why it was he delayed opening business.

He kept it under scrutiny a few seconds longer, fearful that there might be some hidden design which he did not understand; and then, in obedience to his suspicion, he turned his head to look over the roof behind him.

At the moment of doing so, he heard a stealthy but rapid step. The first glance showed him a sinewy warrior, moving softly across the planking from the other end of the cabin and coming directly toward him.

The Comanche was in a crouching posture, with his rifle in his left hand, while his right rested on his hip, as if grasping the handle of his knife.

Supposing the dusky foe was coming for him, Captain Shirril rose to a half-sitting position, and held his revolver ready. He meant to wait until his enemy was so near that there could be no possibility of missing him.

Before that point was reached, the Comanche would have to pass directly by the open scuttle. The Texan awaited his coming with the same coolness he had shown from the first, when to his inexpressible amazement the Indian dropped directly through the open door and drew it shut after him, with a suddenness like that of the snapping of a knife-blade.

And then it was that Captain Shirril read the meaning of that strange manoeuvring at the corner of the roof, and awoke to the fact that he had been completely outwitted.

CHAPTER XVII.

AT FAULT.

Captain Shirril was never so outwitted in all his life. With never a suspicion that the Comanche, dashing over the roof, had any other purpose than to assail him, he was holding his revolver pointed, reflecting at the same time on the blind folly of the red man in rushing to his fate, when he dropped through the scuttle and closed it after him.

With a muttered exclamation of chagrin the Texan leaped to his feet, reaching the spot in a couple of bounds, and let fly with two chambers of his weapon. The bullets skimmed over the door, the inimitable dexterity of the Indian saving him as by a hair's breadth.

Thus the fellow had entered the cabin after all, by a piece of strategy as brilliant as it was daring, and the only man who was a defender of the place found himself shut out and a prisoner, as may be said, on the roof.

Unwilling to believe the astounding logic of facts, the captain stooped down and tried to lift the door; but it had been placed there with the view of being raised only from below. It was impossible to get anything but the slightest hold upon it, and when he tried to lift it upward, it could not be moved.

The Comanche was either holding it, or had fastened it in place by means of the iron hook.

Thinking only of the safety of his wife and servant, the Texan bent over, and, putting his mouth as close to the edge as he could, shouted:

"Look out down there, Edna! There's an Indian on the upper floor, and I am fastened on the roof."

Provided his wife heard the warning, this particular Comanche was liable, after all, to find that, in undertaking his contract, he would be unable to deliver the goods. But, if the warning reached the ears of the women, would they comprehend its significance? *That* was the question which must soon be answered.

The meaning of the peculiar strategy of the Comanches was now fully understood by the victim. With a humiliation beyond description, he comprehended how he had fallen into the trap that had been set so cunningly for his feet.

All this trifling at one corner of the roof was intended to hold his attention, while one of the warriors stealthily climbed over the eaves at another portion and reached the inside by dropping through the scuttle.

The plan, simple as it might seem, had worked to perfection.

The moment the captain comprehended that he was shut out as effectually as the miscreant was shut in, he glared around in quest of others who might be trying to work his own death by a continuation of their cunning. Aware, too, of his exposure to their shots, he quickly sank on his face, with his head nigh enough to the peak to hold the entire surface under his eye.

It was well he did so; for from the same corner that the successful Indian had come, he discerned a second climbing over the eaves. He was doing so with an eagerness that showed he was discounting his own chances.

"Whether you are bogus or not, here goes!"

The Texan did not rely upon his revolver to serve him in the crisis, but hastily aiming his Winchester, pulled the trigger.

The Comanche, whose body was half over the roof, threw up his arms with a wild screech and disappeared backward, as abruptly as his companion had gone down the scuttle. There could be no doubt of the success of *that* shot.

"I would like to have a few more of you try it," muttered the defender, compressing his lips and glancing right and left. His blood was up and he was in a desperate mood.

But his own situation was one of extreme peril. The Comanches must be aware of his singular dilemma, and were not likely to leave him undisputed master of the situation, at least as long as he remained on the outside.

That this supposition was right was proven the next minute, when, from a point several rods distant, a gun was fired and the bullet skipped over the surface within a few inches of where he was crouching. A second shot followed still closer, and the captain crept a little farther from the scuttle.

But for fear of alarming his friends below, he would have uttered a cry, as if of pain, with a view of convincing the Comanches that their shots had proven fatal. Then they would be tempted to send more of their number over the roof, where they would fall victims to his marksmanship.

It looked as if the assailants were in doubt on this point, for after the two shots they ceased firing, and everything

remained silent for several minutes.

Captain Shirril, even in his anxiety for himself, could not forget the inmates of his home. Two women and a fierce warrior were inside, and matters were sure to become lively there before long.

In the midst of this oppressive stillness, occurred Avon Burnet's adventure which has been told elsewhere. It was impossible for the captain to understand what the confusion on the prairie meant, but he saw that it was a diversion of some kind which, fortunately for himself, held the attention of his enemies for a while longer.

He felt a vague suspicion that the Indian in the room below would try to get a shot at him through the scuttle door. He could raise it for an inch or more, and, provided the white man was in his line of range, fire with quick and unerring accuracy. It is singular that he did not do this in the first place, after reaching the roof, and before the Texan discovered his presence so near him.

Lying extended as flat as before, Captain Shirril placed his ear close to the door and listened.

Within the first minute he caught a sound, but it was so faint and indefinite that he could not tell what it meant. It might have been caused by someone moving about in the room directly below, but he was inclined to believe that the Comanche was still near the scuttle and was trying to get his range.

All at once the heart of the Texan gave a start. He was sure the door was pushed upward the slightest possible distance. It looked as if the Comanche was endeavoring to do the very thing suspected--that is, he was seeking to gain sight of the white man in order to give him a stealthy shot.

"If he will but raise that door a single inch," was the exultant thought of the captain, "I will get my fingers under the edge and yank it back in spite of all he can do, and just about that time the band will begin to play."

But would the Indian be rash enough to do this? The first glimpse through the slightest crevice would tell him that his intended victim had shifted his position. He would be shrewd enough to suspect its meaning, and would take care that he did not throw away the golden opportunity he had so brilliantly won.

Ah, if his wife and Dinah could but learn the exact truth! They would quickly prove potent factors in the scheme. Their familiarity with the house would enable them to eliminate that wretch who just then seemed to be master of the situation.

Yes; the door moved again. The Indian must be beneath, and was striving to do something with the covering, which at present shielded him from the vengeance of the white man whom he had foiled.

The latter silently extended his hand to the edge of the door, hoping that the purchase for which he was waiting was within reach. He was disappointed. If the structure had been moved, it was to such a slight extent as to afford no advantage.

He held his hand in the same position, intent on seizing the chance the instant it presented itself, but the Indian was wonderfully cunning. It would seem that having introduced himself into the ranchman's home, he would have been content to follow the purpose that had taken him thither, without giving more attention to the white man, whom he had certainly spared for the time, when he was in his power. The captain could not understand the logic which appeared to be controlling this warrior from the moment he climbed over the edge of the roof.

CHAPTER XVIII.

AN UNEXPECTED QUERY.

As long as Captain Shirril stayed near the scuttle, he could not command a view of the entire roof of his cabin. His interest in what was going on below made him anxious to do this, but he was too alive to his own danger to remain motionless for more than a few minutes at a time.

The indistinct rustling that had awakened his hope soon ceased, and he was compelled to believe the Comanche had given up his intention of trying to gain a stealthy shot at him and was now devoting himself to the inmates of the dwelling.

How he longed to descend through the scuttle and take part in the stirring events that must soon be under way there! What short work he would make of the wretch who had dared to assume such a risk!

But it was useless to regret his own shortsightedness, now that it rendered him powerless to strike a blow for his friends. He crept to the peak of the roof, and scrutinized every portion thus brought into his field of vision. Not the slightest sound fell upon his ear that could indicate danger, nor could he discern anything of his enemies.

The wind was still blowing fitfully, and he heard the familiar rustle of the mesquite bush, with now and then a signal passing between the Comanches. He listened in vain for the noise made by the hoofs of their mustangs. They seemed to have ceased their aimless galloping back and forth, and were probably plotting some new form of mischief.

Suddenly the rattle of a horse's feet struck him. It broke upon his hearing for an instant, and then ceased as abruptly as it had made itself manifest.

It was as if a steed were galloping over the soft earth, and, reaching a small bridge of planks, dashed over them with two or three bounds, his hoofs immediately becoming inaudible in the yielding ground beyond.

That which might have puzzled a listener was plain to the Texan, who had spent many years on the plains of the Southwest. He knew that what might be called a peculiar eddy in the fitful wind had brought the sound to him. A sudden change of direction—ended as soon as it began—whirled the noise as straight across the intervening space as if it had been fired by an arrow.

The sound was similar to that which he had noticed many times that evening, but the impression came to him that it possessed a significance which belonged to none of the others. It was a single horse, and he was going at a moderate speed, which, however, was the case with most of those he had heard.

All at once the sound broke upon his ear again, but this time it was accompanied by the noise of many other hoofs.

"They are cattle," was his conclusion; "a part of the herd has been stampeded, and one of the men is trying to round them up: it was his mustang that I heard—ah! there it goes again!"

It was the crack of a rifle and the screech of a mortally struck person that startled him this time.

"I believe that was a Comanche who has gone down before the rifle of one of our men."

As the reader is aware, the Texan was correct in every particular, for it was the report of Gleeson's Winchester, which ended the career of the warrior pressing Avon Burnet so hard, that reached the captain as he lay on the roof of his own dwelling.

The whimsical nature of the wind, that had been blowing all the night, excluded further sounds. The stillness that succeeded seemed so unnatural in its way that it might have alarmed a more superstitious person. Once the faintest possible rumbling of the cattle's hoofs was detected, but it quickly subsided, and nothing more of the kind was noticeable.

It was clear that the Comanches in the immediate vicinity of the cabin must have noted all that interested the Texan. Whatever the issue of the remarkable meeting on the prairie, there could be no doubt that one of the red men had been laid low. Another had been shot by the captain a short time before, not to mention the other one or two that he believed had fallen.

Thus far, no one of the inmates had been harmed, unless perchance his nephew was overtaken by disaster. Consequently, the game the Comanches were playing, though they did their part with rare skill, was a losing one up to this point.

As the minutes passed, the Texan found himself more hopeful than he had been through the entire evening. He was strong in the belief that Avon had succeeded in reaching the camp of the cattlemen, and that the latter would soon

appear on the scene with an emphasis that would scatter his assailants like so much chaff.

The only vulnerable point for fire was on the roof, but the designs of the Indians had been defeated thus far, and he believed they could be stood off indefinitely, at least until the arrival of the cowboys, who would then take charge of business.

The two matters that gave him anxiety were the presence of the warrior below in the cabin, and the probability of himself being struck by some of the bullets that he expected to come scurrying over the planking every minute.

The two shots that had been fired came alarmingly near, and the next were likely to come still nearer.

But immunity from harm gives one confidence, and only a few more minutes passed when, instead of contenting himself with peering about him, the captain began stealthily creeping toward the part of the eaves where the last Indian had appeared and disappeared so suddenly.

Mindful of the risk of the action, he paused when close to the edge, and waited several minutes before venturing to peep over. The stillness was as if every living person were a hundred miles away. This, however, as he well knew, might be the case with a score of Indians grouped directly beneath.

But having gone thus far, he did not mean to return to his post without accomplishing something. With the greatest possible caution, he raised his head just far enough to look over. He held it in this position only a second or two, for, if any of his enemies were on the alert, they would be sure to observe him.

Nothing greeted his vision, beyond that which he had seen times without number. He did not catch the outlines of a single person or mustang, though convinced they were near at hand.

Had there been any doubt on this point, it would have been dissipated by a repetition of the signals that seemed almost continually passing between the besieging Comanches.

Captain Shirril noticed that the sounds came from the direction of the mesquite bush, as though most of them had gathered there apparently for consultation, and were calling in the other members of their party.

"If that is so, they can't do us much harm," was his conclusion, "but they are not likely to stay there. I suppose they have gathered in Avon and my horses long ago, and we shall have to ride other animals on the tramp to Kansas."

On the whole, the result of his survey was satisfactory; whatever mischief the Comanches were plotting, there was no immediate danger. Minutes were precious, but they were more valuable to the defenders than to the assailants. The cattlemen must arrive soon, and when they did so the siege would be over.

The reconnoissance, if such it may be termed, lasted but a few minutes, when the captain started on his cautious return to the scuttle, in the hope that something in the way of information awaited him there.

To his amazement, he was still within several yards, when he perceived that it was open.

The door was raised fully six inches, the opening being toward him, so that the Comanche had him at his mercy. It looked indeed to the Texan as if his enemy had got the drop on him, and at last he was at his mercy.

The captain whipped out his revolver, but before he could fire a familiar voice called out in a husky undertone:

"Am dat you, captin'? And am you well?"

CHAPTER XIX.

DOWN THE LADDER.

The colored servant Dinah never knew how near she came to being shot by her own master. Had she delayed speaking for a second, he would have discharged two more chambers of his revolver, and the distance was so slight, and her head was in such position, that there could have been no miss.

"Good Heavens!" gasped the captain, "I never dreamed that was you, Dinah."

"But I knowed it war *you*. How is you gettin' 'long?"

"I'm all right, but where is your mistress?"

"Downsta'rs tending to tings."

"But--but do you know there's an Indian in the house?"

"I reckons so; we didn't know it at fust, but we found it out putty soon after he arrove; why didn't you told us?"

"I tried to do so, but was afraid you wouldn't hear my voice."

"We heerd you say somefin, but couldn't quite make out what it was."

"But what of the Indian?" asked the captain, who was now at the scuttle with his hand on the door.

"He am all right; and if you don't t'ink so, jes' come down and see for you'self."

Dinah stepped out of the way, and her master lost no time in descending through the opening into the dark room below.

"Fasten the door, for there may be more of them trying to enter."

"I doesn't t'ink so," was the confident reply.

Nevertheless, Dinah reached up and fastened the hook in place, making it as secure as before.

"Is your mistress safe?" asked Captain Shirril, the moment he was within the apartment.

"Didn't I jes' tole you she was? Does you t'ink I would try to deceibe you?"

"But tell me how it is; this strikes me as the strangest part of the whole business."

Standing thus, in the stillness and gloom of the upper room, the servant related in her characteristic way the extraordinary experience of herself and mistress with the dusky intruder.

As she had said, the warning which the captain shouted from the roof was heard by them, but the words were not understood.

Mrs. Shirril, however, was keen-witted enough to suspect the truth. The muffled tones showed that her husband was on the roof, while the noise of the body dropping upon the chair proved that someone had entered by that means. That being the case, the stranger of necessity must be a foe, against whose evil intentions they must prepare themselves without delay.

"One of the Indians has dropped through the scuttle," said the startled lady.

"Anoder ob dem warmints has comed into my room, eh?" muttered the angered servant; "I'll sarve him wuss dan the oder one."

"You will not find the task so easy; keep at my side, make no noise, and don't stir till I tell you."

By this time, the embers on the hearth were so low that they gave out only a faint illumination, which extended but a foot or two into the room. The women had kept their places near the door, where, as will be remembered, they noticed a pressure, as if someone was trying to shove it open.

Light-footed as was the Comanche, his weight was too great, and his descent too sudden, for him to keep the knowledge from the women below-stairs. They stepped softly away from the door, and into the denser gloom, where they were unable to see each other, although their persons touched. In this attitude, they could do nothing for a time but listen with rapidly beating hearts.

The dusky intruder dropped so squarely on the chair that it did not overturn. He kept his place, instantly securing the scuttle against the entrance of the white man, whom he had baffled with such cleverness. Probably he had some idea of taking a shot at him, but the little manoeuvring in which he indulged told him the danger was too great, and he gave

over the purpose.

The stillness in the room was so profound that the women plainly heard his moccasins touch the floor, when he stepped from the chair. Then he began gliding softly about the apartment, like a burglar who is obliged to feel every inch of his way with hands and feet.

Great as was his care, he had not continued this long, when he struck the chair and overturned it.

"De willian!" muttered Dinah, "and dat's in my abpartment too---"

"Sh!" whispered her mistress, touching her arm, "he can't do any harm, and he must not hear us."

Had Mrs. Shirril given permission, the servant would have hurried up the ladder and taken the fellow to task, without a moment's delay or hesitation.

But the Comanche was better prepared for his work than they suspected. They plainly heard him scratch a match on the wall of the room, and the next moment the faintest possible glow showed through the gloom, above the open door at the head of the ladder. The redskin was taking the only effectual means at his command to learn his bearings.

With the tiny light still burning, he passed quickly from one room to another, his location being easily told by the listeners below. It took him less than a minute to gain the knowledge he wished, when the match burned out and was flung aside.

"I wonder wheder he'll set fiah---"

A sharp pinch on Dinah's arm warned her that she was displeasing her mistress, and she closed her mouth.

The Comanche was too wise to attempt to go down the ladder with a burning match in his hand. Had he done so, he would have committed the fatal error of the citizen who awakes in the night and sets out with lighted lamp to hunt for a burglar: all the advantage is on the side of the law-breaker.

But the Indian had seen the ladder leading from the second story to the lower floor, and the women were sure he would pay them a visit. Indeed, his errand would be futile unless he did so, for it was not to be supposed that he had come into the cabin through simple curiosity.

Mrs. Shirril had no fear of his trying to burn the structure, for, if he did so, his own situation would be as hopeless as theirs. The sounds of firing and the noise on the roof, which soon reached her ears, caused great uneasiness for her husband, but, like a pioneer's wife, she gave her whole attention to the peril that confronted her.

Suddenly the servant touched her arm. She did not speak, but her mistress knew the meaning of the act. The Comanche had placed his foot on the upper round of the ladder and was about to descend to the lower apartments, where they were awaiting him.

"Leave him to me," whispered Mrs. Shirril; "don't stir or do anything."

The cunning warrior knew the women were below, and he knew, too, that unless he used extreme caution, he would find himself in a veritable hornet's nest. The care with which he placed his moccasins on the rounds, and gradually came down, proved this, but the hearing of the women was attuned to so fine an edge that they traced his descent step by step until he stood on the lower floor.

Having arrived there, he paused for a minute or two, as if in doubt what next to do. Evidently he was listening in the hope that the women would betray their presence by some movement, but in this he was mistaken.

During those brief moments, Mrs. Shirril was on the point, more than once, of bringing her rifle to her shoulder and shooting down the wretch who was seeking their lives; but accustomed as she was to the rough experience of the frontier, she could not nerve herself to the point of doing so. She knew the precise spot where he was standing, and, at the first direct approach, she would shoot him as if he was a rabid dog. But so long as he was motionless, she refrained.

What the Comanche would have done at the end of a few minutes it is impossible to say, had not an interruption, as surprising as it was unexpected by all parties, taken place.

CHAPTER XX.

"THE BOYS HAVE ARRIVED!"

The embers on the hearth had smouldered so low that they were mere points of light that served to make the gloom deeper and more expressive. But suddenly a half-burned stick fell apart, and a little twist of flame filled almost the entire room with light.

By its illumination the Indian was seen standing at the foot of the ladder, his rifle grasped in his left hand, his right at his hip, while his body was crouching in the attitude of intense attention, and as if he were on the point of making a leap forward.

He happened to be looking toward the fireplace; but, fortunately for the women, both were gazing straight at him. He glanced to the right and left, and, catching sight of the figures behind him, wheeled like a panther, emitting a hiss of exultation at the knowledge that he had found his victims at last.

But the first dart of his serpent-like eyes showed the white woman, as immovable as a statue, with her rifle levelled at his chest and her delicate forefinger on the trigger.

Mrs. Shirril had the drop on him!

"If you move, I will shoot you dead!" she said in a low voice, in which there was not the first tremor.

Possibly the Comanche did not understand the English tongue, but he could not mistake her meaning. He knew that on the first motion to raise his rifle, draw his knife, or take one step toward the couple, he would be slain where he stood. He, therefore, remained as motionless as she who held him at her mercy.

The tiny twist of flame on the hearth, that had served our friends so well, would soon burn itself out; it was already flickering, and, if left alone, the room would soon be in darkness again, and the situation would undergo a radical change.

"Dinah," said her mistress, without changing her position, or raising her voice, "keep the fire burning!"

"Yes'm, I will," she replied, shuffling hurriedly across the floor to the hearth, where she stooped down. She scorned to turn out of the way of the prisoner, lest he should fancy he was held in fear. She passed him almost close enough to touch, and showed her contempt by shaking her fist at him.

"Oh, you willian! I'd like to wring your neck for comin' into my dispartment without axin' permission."

A strange flicker shot from the eyes of the warrior as they followed her for a moment, but he neither moved nor spoke, his gaze reverting again to his conqueror.

Under the deft manipulation of Dinah's fingers, the flames shot up with more vigor than before. Then, recalling the risk that this involved, Mrs. Shirril told her to come to her side, where she would be out of range of any of their enemies who might be near the windows.

"That will burn for a considerable time," added the lady, referring to the fire the servant had renewed, "so, if you please, you may go to the scuttle and see how the captain is getting along."

"Wouldn't you like to do that, missis?" asked Dinah.

"But I must watch this person."

"I'll do dat."

Her mistress, however, read her meaning in her tones and manner. She was eager to get a chance at the fellow, and, if she did, even for only a few seconds, it would go hard with him.

"No; I will attend to him; do as I told you."

There was no questioning the decision of the little lady, and Dinah, with another threatening gesture at the painted face of the savage, went by him and began climbing the ladder.

"Neber mind," she said to herself, though her mistress overheard the words, "when I come downstairs again, I'll cotch one ob my feet and tumble onto you, and you'll be squashed worsen dan if de house tumbled ober your head."

The captive seemed to understand what all this meant. He had escaped thus far, but he might well fear the consequences, after the man aloft put in an appearance.

Dinah had hardly passed out of sight when the Comanche said in a low voice:

"Me go--won't hurt."

Although the intonation of the words was wrong, the woman knew from the glance at the door, which accompanied them, that he meant to ask permission to depart.

"Yes, you can go," was the astonishing answer, and she nodded her head.

The Indian moved hesitatingly at first, in the direction of the entrance, keeping his gleaming eyes on the woman, as if doubtful whether she understood him.

"Go on, be quick," she added reassuringly, though she took care that the old-fashioned weapon was not lowered or turned aside.

The voices of the servant and her master were plainly heard above, and the Comanche saw it was no time for tarrying. A couple more steps took him to the door, and, with little effort, he lifted the huge bolt from its place, pulled open the structure, and whisked out in the darkness, without so much as a "good-night" or "thank you."

The instant he vanished, Mrs. Shirril set down her gun, darted forward, and slipped back the bolt, making the door as secure as before.

It was a strange act on her part thus releasing the red miscreant who was seeking her life, but, after all, it was characteristic of her sex.

She had little more than time to set things to rights, as may be said, when she stepped back and away from the windows, and sat down in the nearest chair. A slight reaction came over her; she felt weak, though she knew it would not amount to anything: she had been through too many perils before.

The feet and lower limbs of Captain Shirril soon appeared on the rounds of the ladder, with Dinah close behind him. In her eagerness to get at the Indian, she stooped forward, so that her big dusky face showed almost over his shoulders. She was just getting ready to fall on the warrior, when she observed that he was gone.

"Whar's dat willian?" she demanded, glancing round the dimly lit room.

"Yes, Edna, I heard you had a guest down here."

"He asked me to let him go, and I thought it was the best way to get rid of him," replied the wife with a smile, for her strength was returning to her.

"Humph!" snorted the disgusted Dinah, as one of her feet came down on the floor with a bang, "It's got my 'pinion of sich foolishness as dat."

"Let me hear how it was, Edna," said the husband, laughing in spite of himself.

She quickly gave the particulars, and he in turn told what he had passed through during his sojourn on the roof.

"The fellow deserved something, but, after all, I find no fault with your action. Much as I am exasperated against these Comanches for their attack, I couldn't help feeling an admiration for this fellow, who got the better of me in the neatest style I ever had it done in all my life."

"Is it not time we heard something from Avon?" asked the wife; "he certainly has been gone more than an hour---"

"Hark!"

The shouts, whoops, and the reports of guns and pistols suddenly broke the stillness on the outside.

Most of the voices bore a familiar sound, and there were a dash and vim about the whole business which left no doubt of its meaning.

In the firelight of the room, husband and wife looked in each other's glowing faces, and instinctively the two uttered the same expression:

"The boys have arrived!"

CHAPTER XXI.

THROUGH THE BUSH.

Oscar Gleeson the cowboy, who appeared at such a timely juncture for Avon Burnet, when he was hard pressed by his Comanche pursuer, took the young man on his mustang behind him, as the reader will recall, and set out for the camp, several miles distant.

Despite the fears of the youth for the safety of his friends in the cabin, the veteran ranchman was more concerned for the fifty-odd cattle that had chosen to stampede themselves, and were at that moment dashing over the prairie for no one could tell where.

But inasmuch as the captain had sent for help, it must be given, regardless of other matters, and the easy swing of the mustang continued until the two arrived at the fire that had been kindled in a small valley, where the provision wagon was stationed with the other animals tethered near, ready for the start that was set for an early hour the next morning.

Most of the men had stretched themselves out in the wagon to sleep, for a hard and arduous campaign was before them, in which they were likely to be compelled to keep their horses for fifteen or twenty hours at a stretch, changing them when necessary and catching snatches of slumber as chance presented.

But the unaccountable stampede of a portion of the herd had roused all, and, at the moment "Ballyhoo," as he was known to his friends, reined up, preparations were under way for a general start after the absent ones.

"Where's Madstone and Shackaye?" asked Gleeson, looking down in the faces of the group, dimly shown in the firelight, and noticing that two of their number were missing.

"They started out for the cattle a little while ago," replied one of the ranchmen, "thinking as how you might not be able to manage them."

"I'd fetched 'em back all right," replied Gleeson, "if it hadn't been for some other business that turned up."

"What's that?"

"The reds are down at the cabin raising the mischief; a lot of 'em got after Baby here, and I had to drop one, and then take him on my hoss and bring him along with me."

"What was he doing out at night on foot?" was the natural query of another of the cowboys.

"Wal, he was putting in the tallest kind of running, when I set eyes on him; if he had kept it up, I don't believe I would have been able to overhaul him myself."

This remark caused several of the grinning ranchmen to turn toward Avon, who had slipped off the horse and laughed as he made answer:

"I got into the worst scrape of my life," he explained, "and it would have gone hard with me if Ballyhoo hadn't turned up just as he did. The reason I was abroad was because Uncle Dohm thought it best I should come to camp after you fellows."

"What's the matter with *him*?" asked one, who, despite the brief explanation already given, could not understand how it was their leader and his family were in special danger, even if their home was surrounded by Comanches.

"The folks could stand them off for a week, or month, if they had water and provisions, if it wasn't for one thing; the roof of the cabin is as dry as tinder, and the captain knows they intend to set fire to it. If they do, nothing can save the folks, for the building will burn down before we can get there."

This was putting a new face on matters, and the ranchmen realized that more serious work was required of them than rounding up the strayed cattle. Captain Shirril was too brave a man to feel needless alarm, and the fact that he had sent for help was proof that there was urgent need of it.

Two of the party were gone and might not be back for several hours. That, however, was of no account, since, including young Burnet, seven were left, and not one of them would have hesitated, with his companions, to attack a party of Comanches two or three times as numerous as that which had laid siege to the captain's cabin.

These men were fully armed with Winchester, revolvers, and knives, they had no superiors as horsemen, they were accustomed to the rough out-door life, and it may be said that all welcomed the chance of a stirring brush with the red men that had been hovering in their vicinity so long, but who took care to avoid anything in the nature of a fair stand-up fight.

There were horses for all, including Avon Burnet, and, in a very brief space of time, the men were in the saddle and heading toward the home of their leader.

It would be hard to find a company of cowboys or plainsmen whose members are not known by distinctive names, generally based on some personal peculiarity. Thus young Burnet, as we have stated, was nearly always addressed as "Baby," because of his youth. Oscar Gleeson, one of the most skilful and famous cowmen of the Southwest, was addressed as "Ballyhoo," for the reason that, whenever he indulged in a shout or loud call, he used that exclamation.

Hauser Files, the associate of Gleeson, once took part in a game of baseball in San Antonio, during which he received the elusive sphere on the point of his nose. He withdrew in disgust from the amusement, and was always known thereafter as Short Stop.

Gleeson and Files were between thirty and forty years of age, but Ward Burrell, from the lowlands of Arkansas, had rounded his half-century of existence, acquiring during the journey such a peculiar complexion that he was known as Old Bronze. Andy Wynwood, from the same State, was younger. One of his most stirring narratives related to the manner in which he escaped hydrophobia, after being bitten by a rabid wolf. He claimed that the only thing that saved him was the use of a madstone. Whether he was mistaken or not is not for us to say, but there was certainly no mistake about the origin of the name of Madstone, which clung to him forever afterward.

Antonio Nunez, the Mexican, was the "Greaser," Zach Collis from New Mexico, who was also more than fifty years of age, was "Rickety," because of a peculiarity in his gait, while George Garland was "Jersey George," for no other reason than that he was born in the State of New Jersey.

The remaining member of Captain Shirril's party was Shackaye, a Comanche Indian, about a year older than Avon Burnet, concerning whom we shall soon have something to say further.

Captain Shirril was right when he expressed his belief that the arrival of his friends would be in the nature of one of those wild western cyclones, which have grown quite familiar of late in the West and Southwest.

The cowboys swung along at an easy gallop, until near the cabin. They wanted to arrive without giving the Comanches more notice than was inevitable; but, when they knew their approach could be concealed no longer, they drove their spurs into the flanks of their ponies, gave utterance to their wild whoops, and went forward on a dead run.

Before this, the Indians must have suspected that matters were not progressing right. They were aware that one or more white men were in the vicinity, and as a matter of course knew of the Texan camp, only a few miles away. If the cowboys had not learned what was going on from the reports of the guns, they must soon learn it from the whites, who were not only near the building, but who managed to keep out of their clutches.

Not only that, but the red men had already lost several of their best warriors, and having been repeatedly baffled in their attempts to fire the building, were considering a withdrawal, at the moment they were joined by their comrade, who received such unmerited mercy from Mrs. Shirril.

The shouts, firing of guns, and tramp of the horses settled the question off-hand. There was an instant scattering to their own steeds, upon whose backs they vaulted, and then, turning their heads toward the mesquite bush, they sent them flying away at breakneck speed.

But the Texans were not to be disappointed of their entertainment in that style. Catching a glimpse of the scurrying horsemen, they were after them like so many thunderbolts, firing their pistols and rifles, even when there was no chance of hitting anything. There was no time to aim, and they took the chances of so much powder accomplishing something, when burned with ardor and eagerness.

Thus it came about that, within a minute after the arrival of our friends, they were out of sight again in the brush, doing their utmost to teach the marauders a lesson that would keep them forever away from that neighborhood.

"Ballyhoo" fixed his eye on one of the red men, who seemed to be at the rear. He was in fact the very fellow whose life had been spared by Mrs. Shirril. Arriving on the ground at the last moment, he was obliged to run several rods before reaching his horse; but he did it quickly, and, turning his head toward the bush, dashed after his companions and was almost upon their heels.

"You're my game!" exclaimed Gleeson, banging away with his revolver at him, but, so far as he could see, without effect.

The mesquite bush was not vigorous enough to offer much obstruction to the mustangs, though it was much more objectionable than the open plain. The horses could plunge through it, almost as if it were so much tall grass, besides which it gave something of shelter to the Comanches, who were now fleeing for their lives.

Flinging themselves forward on the necks of their steeds, who were as fleet as those of their pursuers, with the brush swaying on all sides, they became such bad targets that only chance or wonderful skill could tumble them to the earth.

Gleeson was so close to the savage he had singled out as his special target, and his own steed coursed so swiftly through the bush, that it looked as if he would down his man. The fugitive was hardly visible, as he stretched forward, not upon his horse's neck, but along the further side and almost under it. About the only part of his person within reach was his foot, the toes of which were curved over the spine of his animal, and his left arm, which clasped the neck from below.

It was useless, therefore, for the Texan to try any sort of aim, and when he discharged his pistol now and then, until the chambers were emptied, it was with the same hope as before, that by accident one of the missiles would reach home.

But this little amusement was not to be entirely on the side of the pursuer. Suddenly there was a flash beneath the neck of the mustang, a resounding report, and the bullet grazed the temple of the enthusiastic cowboy.

"Well done, old fellow," he muttered, shoving his smaller weapon in his holster, and bringing his Winchester round in front; "it makes things more lively when they are not one-sided."

He bent forward, and, sighting as best he could, fired. A whinnying scream rang out in the confusion, and the mustang plunged forward on his knees and rolled over on his side, stone dead because of the bullet that had bored its way through his brain.

Such a mishap would have been fatal to the majority of riders, but the wonderful activity of the Comanche saved him from harm because of the fall of his animal. He struck the ground on his feet, and showed a tremendous burst of speed, as he took up the interrupted flight of his horse, keeping straight on, without darting to the right or left.

"I've got you now," exclaimed the exultant Texan, holding the nose of his animal toward him.

Astonishing as was the fleetness of the Comanche, it could not equal that of the intelligent mustang, that knew what was needed from him. He wanted no guidance from his rider, who was therefore left free to manipulate his Winchester as best he could with the brush whipping about him.

All at once the gun was brought to his shoulder, but, before it was fired, the Indian dropped his head, dodged to one side, and vanished as if by magic.

Where he had gone was a mystery to the Texan, whose steed checked himself so suddenly that the rider was nearly thrown from his saddle.

There was so much noise and confusion that Gleeson could not hear clearly, but something caused him to turn his head, under the impression that he detected a movement near at hand.

He was just in time to catch a glimpse of the Comanche, darting through the bush in a direction almost the opposite of that which he had been following so long.

"How the mischief did you get there?" was the astonished exclamation of the Texan, as he again brought his rifle to a level.

At the moment of doing so, he comprehended how it all came about. The Comanche had darted directly under the mustang, doing so with a quickness and skill that baffled the eye of his foe. Few, even of his own people, could have performed the exploit which he executed with perfection.

Ballyhoo Gleeson lowered his gun.

"You can go! I'll be hanged if you don't deserve to get away after *that* trick!"

CHAPTER XXII.

THUNDERBOLT.

Avon Burnet knew that when the cattlemen reached a point within a half mile of his home, and the fire had not yet been started, that all danger was over. It was beyond the power of the assailants, with the slight time at their command, to harm the defenders.

Then naturally his thoughts turned to his mustang Thunderbolt, that had been left in the mesquite bush with the animal belonging to his uncle. The chances were that the Comanches had captured both, but he was not without hope regarding his own pony.

The steed was so intelligent that he was certain to resist the approach of a stranger at night, especially if he were an Indian. The redskins were so occupied in trying to encompass the death of the Texan and his family, besides being well supplied with their own steeds, that they were not likely to put forth much effort to capture a single animal.

The youth was as eager as his companions to do his part in driving off the red men, but the chance was denied him. The spare horse which he rode, and which he put to his best pace, could not hold his own with the rest, and consequently he arrived at the rear of the procession.

He glanced right and left, but caught the outlines of but one figure, whose identity he suspected, because he was standing in front of the cabin door.

"Helloa, uncle, is that you?"

"Yes, Avon; I see you have arrived; I hope you suffered no harm."

"Matters were stirring for a time, but I am safe."

At this moment, Mrs. Shirril and Dinah, recognizing the voice, opened the door, the captain inviting them to come outside.

The fire was now burning so briskly on the hearth that the interior was well illuminated, so that their figures were plainly stamped against the yellow background.

"There isn't anything left for you to do," said the captain, "so you may as well dismount."

The firing, shouts, and yells came from a remote point in the bush, and were rapidly receding.

Avon came down from his saddle, kissed his aunt, shook hands with his uncle, and spoke kindly to Dinah, who was proud of the handsome fellow.

"Uncle," said he briskly, "what do you suppose, has become of your horse Jack and Thunderbolt?"

"Taken off by the Comanches, or killed."

"I suppose that is probable, but I shall make a search for them."

Believing this could be done better on foot, he left the pony in charge of his relative and walked hastily into the bush.

"I don't suppose there is much hope, but I have an idea that maybe Thunderbolt has been wounded and needs looking after. The bullets have been flying pretty thickly during the last few minutes, and for that matter," he added, pausing a few seconds to listen, "they are not through yet."

On the edge of the bush he encountered a horseman, whose voice, when hailed, showed that he was "Jersey."

"What's the trouble?" asked Avon, pausing to exchange words with his friend.

"Aint nothing more to do," was the response; "the varmints are travelling faster than this horse can go, though he was one of their animals."

"How was that?"

"I got it in the neck--that is my critter did. I had one of them pretty well pinned, when he fired from under his horse's belly and my pony went down, as dead as a doornail. I came mighty nigh being mashed under him, but I dropped the other chap, for all I couldn't see him when I drew bead. I 'spose it was a chance shot, but the minute he went off his horse got so bewildered he didn't know what to do with himself. While he was trotting about, I caught him, put my bridle on him without trouble, and here I am, Baby."

"Sure he isn't one of ours?" asked Avon, approaching still nearer and looking him over as well as he could in the

darkness.

"He is now, but he wasn't fifteen minutes ago."

Knowing that he was not Thunderbolt, the youth was hopeful that it might prove Jack; but it took only a minute to learn that Jersey was right. The steed had been brought to the spot by one of the Comanches and was a fine animal, though so much time passed before the Texan secured him that he was simply prudent in not trying to follow after the red men, who were far beyond reach.

Jersey laughed when Avon told him his errand, but said he would not be much surprised if he was successful, for the reasons which have been already stated.

There had been hot work in the bush, for when the cattlemen charged the Comanches, they did so with all the vigor of their nature. These Indians were among the most persistent thieves in Texas, and, as the reader knows, the man who attempts to run off another's cattle or horses commits a more flagrant crime in that section of our Union than he does when he seeks the owners' lives.

Avon bore to the left, leaving the principal theatre of the scrimmage, and had not reached the border of the mesquite when he almost stumbled over a fine horse that lay on its side, without a particle of life.

"I wonder whether that is Thunderbolt," he said, with a feeling of dread, as he bent over to examine the body.

Drawing a rubber safe from his pocket, he struck a match, and by the tiny flame looked at the head and side of the dead steed.

One scrutinizing glance was enough; the body was not that of his own favorite, but of Jack, belonging to his uncle.

"Poor Jack!" murmured the youth with a thrill of sympathy, "you have been on many a stirring campaign, but you will go on no more. I wonder how it was you met your death."

It looked as if the mustang had been stricken by a stray shot, that may have been fired by a friend, for it was not to be supposed that a Comanche would have killed him purposely, when he would have been a valuable prize.

The bridle and saddle were in the cabin, so that the owner had simply lost one of his horses, his supply of extra ones being sufficient to replace him without trouble.

"I am afraid there is little chance of finding Thunderbolt alive," added the youth, as he resumed his search.

He made his way through the bush with the utmost care, for, although the Indians had been sharply repulsed, he was aware of the custom of those people, when any of their number are killed or wounded. The survivors put forth every exertion to take them away with them, having the horror of their race against any falling into the hands of their enemies. It was more than likely that when the sun rose not a body would be anywhere in sight. Even the warrior who had run him so hard, only to succumb to the rifle of Ballyhoo Gleeson, would not be forgotten by his former comrades.

Advancing with the utmost caution, he heard a rustling in the bush in front. Quite sure that it was caused by his enemies, he stood a minute or two listening, uncertain whether to advance or withdraw. But he found the parties were receding, and he ventured to steal forward in order to gain a closer sight of them.

A short walk took him to the edge of the mesquite, where the additional light offered a partial view of a strange scene.

Two able-bodied warriors were supporting a third between them. The wounded one was able to walk slowly with help, but it was apparent that he was badly hurt, for he leaned heavily upon his support, who stopped at intervals to give him rest.

Finally the party halted, and one of them emitted a tremulous but sharp whistle. The signal was for a couple of their own horses, which loomed to sight in the gloom, as they advanced in obedience to the command.

Fearful of being discovered, if he left the bush, Avon kept in the shadow and watched the party. His view was indistinct, but it was easy to see that the two warriors were lifting their wounded companion upon the back of one of the mustangs. When this was done a Comanche took his seat behind him, so as to hold him in place by passing an arm around his waist. Those people had no need of saddles, their accoutrement consisting of the single thong fastened around the head of the animal, and by which he could be guided at the will of his master. Indeed, many of the Comanches ride without any such aid at all, their intelligent animals being obedient to their voices, and seeming to comprehend their wishes as if by intuition.

Soon after the mustangs and their riders faded from view in the gloom, the horses on a moderate walk. They would have proven easy victims to a couple of the cattlemen, had they appeared at this moment, but, much as the fiery ranchmen despised and hated this tribe, it may be doubted whether there was one of their number who would have taken advantage of such an opportunity.

The Texans were ready to fight at all times, but there is a chivalry in their composition which prevents their taking an

unfair advantage of a foe. They would have allowed the trio to ride away unmolested, which is just what the Comanches would not have done, had their situations been reversed.

Avon Burnet was considering whether it was worth while to push his search further, when, to his surprise, an exclamation broke upon his ear, in the form of a vigorous "*Oofh!*" as nearly as it can be put in letters.

He knew it came from the lips of an Indian, who was not far off, though in a different direction from that taken by the warriors and their wounded comrade. It was more to the south, though the penetrating glance he cast in that direction failed to reveal the individual.

But it was heard again, and now, when he looked, he was able to catch the dim outlines of a horse, walking slowly toward him.

"What's the matter with the Comanches to-night?" the puzzled youth asked himself; "they seem to be up to all manner of tricks."

As the horseman gradually became more distinct, he saw that the rider was in an odd quandary. He was striving to turn the animal in the opposite direction, but he would not obey. He flung up his head, sometimes reared angrily, and, though he maintained a walk, kept pushing straight on toward the bush, despite the savage attempts of the rider to make him wheel about.

A suspicion flashed through the mind of Avon. The man was an Indian beyond question, and the horse could not be his own, for, if it were, he would have obeyed him without urging. It must be one of the Texan horses that he was trying to steal.

The youth uttered the familiar signal by which he was able at all times to bring Thunderbolt to his side, when he was within hearing. The mustang replied with a glad whinny, and broke into a trot straight for his master. It was indeed his prized animal, with a Comanche warrior on his back.

CHAPTER XXIII.

"GOOD-BY!"

The Comanche must have been disgusted. He had been trying for some time to steal the mustang of Avon Burnet, with the result that the pony was about to steal him, unless he prevented it offhand.

The Indian heard the whistle from the edge of the bush, and the instant increase of speed, on the part of the stubborn mustang, made the meaning clear to him. He did not know but that three or four Texans were waiting in the mesquite, and that, if he stayed on the back of the steed a minute longer, he would be carried directly into their arms.

Consequently he did not hesitate. He went off of Thunderbolt, as if struck by a cannon ball, and, heading out on the prairie, ran with might and main, quickly disappearing in the darkness, and was seen no more.

"Ah, my own Thunderbolt!" exclaimed the delighted Avon, patting the nose of his beast, who was as happy as he at being restored to his young master; "I thought I would never see you again, but here you are."

He sprang upon the bare back, and the pony started through the bush for the cabin.

Arriving there, matters were found in a satisfactory shape. Ballyhoo Gleeson was the only cowboy that had remained behind with Captain Shirril. The rest had started to look after the cattle. It has been shown that a number had been stampeded, and since all care was necessarily withdrawn from the others, they were likely to follow suit. Then, too, it was probable that the Comanches would see their chance of securing some of the herd, and would make the attempt despite the rough handling they had received.

Nothing could have attested more strikingly the fact that our friends were accustomed to their wild, dangerous life, than the manner in which they now acted. A half hour before, the little family within the cabin considered themselves in such imminent peril of being burned to death that they allowed young Burnet to run the greatest risk to secure help, before it was too late.

But now Captain Shirril and Ballyhoo Gleeson sat before the fire, that was burning brightly, smoking their pipes, and talking as though the occurrence was of the most ordinary nature. The ranchman had made sure of his supply of tobacco, and intended to ride back to camp, after spending an hour or so within the house.

Everyone had eaten supper before the lively incidents opened, and Mrs. Shirril now resumed her sitting in front of the fire, occasionally taking part in the words of her husband and guests. Dinah was heard muttering angrily to herself upstairs, as she investigated the damages done by the visitor in her apartment.

Avon, on his return, told his uncle about his horse, explaining that he was fortunate enough to recover Thunderbolt.

"You were luckier than I supposed you would be," said the captain, as his nephew drew up his chair near them.

"Do you think," asked the wife, "that the Comanches will trouble us further, husband?"

"There is no danger," he replied, calmly puffing his pipe; "is there, Ballyhoo?"

"None at all," was the calm response.

"I thought perhaps that because they had suffered so severely, they would come back to revenge themselves," ventured the little woman, still busily plying her needle.

"But you see the damage was done, not by you and Dinah, though you did your part, but by the men, and *them's* the ones they'll go for," observed Ballyhoo.

"That is not the invariable rule with Indians," was the truthful remark of Mrs. Shirril. "It makes little difference to them whether the innocent or guilty suffer."

"But," said the husband, "the prime object of the redskins is cattle, with perhaps horses thrown in. You know they have been hanging round for a number of days, waiting for a chance before we started north; they will make an effort to run off those stampeded cattle to-night, and likely enough will follow us into the Indian Nation, on the watch for a chance to gather in several hundred hoofs."

"I think there's one thing that's encouraging," said Avon, addressing all his friends; "you know how dry the roof of the house is. If Dinah hadn't put her foot down when she did, there would have been no cabin at this moment. The Comanches tried to fire the sides, and failing in that, gave their attention to the roof, where they came so near succeeding."

"What do you refer to as encouraging, Avon?" asked his uncle.

"There's a storm in the air; we are going to have a regular driving rain, that will soak the roof until a ton of live-coals on the top wouldn't set fire to the planking."

"Baby is right," said Ballyhoo, with a nod of his head; "rain will fall within twelve hours."

"That *is* good news," said the wife, with a pleased look; "I shall now see the captain and the rest of you leave without a misgiving as concerns ourselves."

"You wouldn't feel frightened, Edna, if old Wygwind and his gang of imps should come whooping down upon you?" asked the captain, looking sideways, with an expression of admiration and love glowing from his shaggy face.

"I don't pretend to say we would not be frightened, but Dinah and I would feel secure inside, so long as there was no danger of the building being burned. I wonder whether Wygwind led this party."

"I shouldn't be surprised if he did; he's one of the worst scamps that ever lived."

"You're right," assented Ballyhoo. "I believe he led this gang, though a chap couldn't tell in the darkness. You know what a thief he is."

The allusion was to the notorious Comanche Wygwind, one of the many leaders belonging to that tribe. He was a powerful, wiry Indian, in middle life, who had long been detested by the ranchmen for his thievish and brutal propensities. He had stolen hundreds of cattle, not to mention horses, and though often pursued, and driven more than once into dangerous quarters, he had managed in some way to pull through to the present time.

"If he should get inside," said the captain slyly, "and you should get the drop on him, wife, I advise that you don't let him walk out of the door unharmed."

"That depends on circumstances," quietly replied his better half; "if he should appeal to me, and he had done no particular harm, I could hardly refuse him. However, I don't think if he does enter it will be through the scuttle."

"The next time it will be best to turn him over to the mercies of Dinah."

"I am afraid it will go ill with him if I do. I heard her say to herself, when she went upstairs after you, that, on the return trip, she meant to fall from the round of the ladder upon him: the result would have been frightful."

"Yes; that red man doesn't know all that he escaped."

The mutterings of Dinah were still audible overhead, and she was seen the next minute, descending the primitive stairs.

The little party smiled, and the captain turned toward her.

"Well, Dinah, you didn't find much damage done in your room, did you?"

"Humph! 'cause de warmint didn't hab time. I only wish I had a chance to wrung his neck."

"No doubt you would have done it, but I think we all have cause for gratitude that things turned out as well as they did."

"I guess you didn't notice dat big hole dey come nigh burning frough de roof, did you?"

"Oh, yes; I saw it; it would have been much worse but for you; I hope the fire didn't injure your shoe."

She turned her foot and looked at the broad sole of the heavy shoe, as though the thought had not occurred to her before.

"It am scorched a little," she said.

"Never mind," remarked Ballyhoo gravely; "I'll give out a contract for a new pair for you, when we get into Kansas, and send a couple of the boys back with them, if they don't prove too big a load."

"I consider such remarks as unnecessary and slighting," replied Dinah, with a scornful toss of her head; "I wore number 'lebens, which am just a lady's size; I reckons you can't do much better dan dat."

"If my feet keep on growing for a few years, I may get there in time, but you shall have the shoes, Dinah, if the right size can be bought in any of the big establishments."

"T'ank you," replied the African, who thought it best not to repel the offer of her friend; "dese am gettin' wored consid'ble, and by de time you got back, I'll need anoder pair."

The evening was advancing. In answer to Ballyhoo's inquiries, Captain Shirril looked at his watch, and said that it was nearly eleven o'clock.

"I must be off," remarked the tall ranchman, rising to his feet; "we make an early start, and I don't know how the boys have made out with the cattle; they may need my help."

"I may as well go with you," said Avon, looking inquiringly at his uncle; "for there is to be no more work here."

"It will be just as well," replied the captain.

The youth took his saddle and accoutrements from the corner, where they had been lying, and stepping outside, adjusted them upon Thunderbolt, who whinnied with pleasure at the promise of carrying his loved owner on his back indefinitely. The two had become attached by their companionship on the hunt and ranch, and the delight of the youth on recovering his mustang was beyond expression.

While he was busy at this brief task, the members of the little family kept their feet, discussing matters in which each was interested.

"Well, I'm ready, Ballyhoo," called Avon, in his cheery voice, stepping quickly through the open door.

He placed one arm around the neck of his aunt and kissed her affectionately, shook hands with Dinah, adding as he crossed palms with his uncle:

"I expect to see you again, soon. Keep up a good heart, auntie, while we are gone, which I don't think will be for long. Good-by, all!"

He put his foot in the stirrup, swung himself into the saddle, at the same moment that his companion did the same, and the couple headed their animals to the northward.

Captain Shirril and the women remained in the door, looking forth in the darkness, and listening until the sounds of the hoofs died out in the distance. Then the Texan led the way inside, adjusting the bar in place so that no one could enter without permission.

The extra horse which Avon had ridden to the cabin was turned loose in the bush, to be recovered and used by the captain when he wished to ride to the camp. Ballyhoo had removed the saddle and bridle, which lay in the corner where Avon's had awaited him.

The Texan stood a minute, looking around the room, as if trying to recall any forgotten duty, but thought of none.

"It is later than I suspected," said he, addressing his wife and consulting his watch again; "and we may as well retire."

He lighted a common tallow candle, and with that in his hand, led the way up the ladder, followed by the others. Fifteen minutes later, everyone was sleeping as soundly as though the evening had not been disturbed by any unusual incident.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A STRANGE DELAY.

Meanwhile Avon Burnet and Gleeson continued riding northward at an easy gallop, their eyes and ears on the alert for sounds of their friends or enemies.

"Do you remember this spot?" asked the elder, drawing his mustang down to a walk, after going some distance.

The youth looked keenly round in the gloom, but saw only the level plain, similar to that over which they had ridden since leaving the cabin. A dark object on the ground caused him to force his pony toward it.

"That must be one of our cattle," he said inquiringly.

"It's what is left of him; that's the steer that the Comanche brought down when he took a shot at you."

"Ah, this is the place where you joined me?"

"Precisely."

"But where is *he*--that is, his body?"

"They've took it off; you know how hard the Comanches try to carry away their dead and wounded."

"I saw a proof of that while hunting for Thunderbolt, but I didn't think they would be able to find this one."

"They must have heard the shot and his cry, and though we made things hum about them, they took time to look into it and bear the body away."

"I wonder now whether that could have been Wygwind," said Avon, referring to the notorious leader of whom we have spoken.

"No," was the decisive reply of Ballyhoo.

"Why not?"

"He is a powerful brave Injin, but plenty of his warriors can outrun him. This one was too good on his feet to be him."

The couple gave their horses rein again, and they broke into a gallop which carried them swiftly toward their destination. The glimmer of the camp-fire was discerned when they rode to the top of the next moderate elevation.

"Hark!" exclaimed Ballyhoo, abruptly checking his pony.

His companion did the same, for he had caught the sound, which was that made by many hoofs.

"The confounded beasts are still at it," added the elder, allowing his steed to resume his walk.

"The boys may be driving them back to camp."

"No; it doesn't sound right."

"Do you imagine the Comanches are taking any hand in this?"

"It doesn't strike me so, but there's no saying what those varmints will do; they're so fond of stealing that they'll run great risks."

However, since the couple were able to locate the running animals, they felt it their duty to bear a hand in helping to bring them back to camp. There was danger that if they were not speedily brought under control, the start could not be made on time.

"Come on, Baby," called Gleeson, wheeling his animal to the right, and sending him off at a dead run.

Thunderbolt knew what was expected of him, and without waiting for orders, stretched away in the same direction, with the old thrill stirring his rider at the prospect of exciting work at hand.

It was not long before they caught sight of the frightened animals, going as if a legion of wolves were at their heels. They were running from camp, and, unless their course could be changed, would be far from it before daylight.

In fact their presence so comparatively near proved that they were either another part of the main herd, or if the ones first stampeded, had broken off again, after being well on their way to their regular pasturing grounds.

"Look out! they may be Comanches!" called Ballyhoo to his youthful companion. "No, they are not either."

The last remark was caused by the sight of two of their friends riding like mad, shouting and swinging their whips,

which they had brought from camp. They were Madstone and Rickety, who were doing all they knew how to check the animals that seemingly would not be checked or turned aside.

It looked as if Ballyhoo and Avon must be trampled to death, for they were directly in front of the rushing herd, but they swung their arms, holding each his rifle aloft, and shouted loud enough to be heard miles distant.

The mustangs were a little nervous, but were used to such experiences, and they did not catch the contagion. They held their ground, though it was manifest they would have preferred to be somewhere else.

Suddenly, when the terrified beasts were almost upon them, they swerved to one side. The change of direction was slight, but it was important as a beginning. The cowboys were quick to take advantage of it, and redoubled their shoutings and gesticulations. The cattle trended further and further from the course they had been following, and ere long were headed toward the camp.

They were now on the run and the four men kept them there, determined that they should not get away again.

Madstone explained that they were the ones that took fright earlier in the evening, and were on a dead run, when Ballyhoo shot down the Comanche that was pursuing Avon Burnet. The cattle had drifted a considerable way, but they were soon brought under control and headed in the right direction.

All was going well, when off they went again at a more frantic rate than before. The cowboys were at loss to understand what caused the new outbreak, when, to their amazement, three Comanches appeared in their front.

The dusky scamps did their best to run them off, but it was evident they were afraid of the Texans, who made a dash for them, whereupon they disappeared.

But they had turned the cattle in a new direction, and the Texans had all their work to do over again. There was little prospect of success, until Ballyhoo and Avon added their efforts, when matters assumed a better shape.

But the trouble was by no means over. If these animals should plunge into the main herd at the rate they were now going, they were sure to spread the panic, with the probability that the whole two thousand would soon be on the run, and the difficulty of the ranchmen intensified ten-fold.

Accordingly, as the ground was approached, the four horsemen resorted to the well-known practice of what may be called rounding-up. They galloped back and forth, on the outer edge of the herd, and here and there, circumnavigating them continually and as fast as the fleetness of their mustangs would permit.

By this means they finally succeeded in turning the heads of the cattle toward each other, and they were crowded into a compact mass, whose members were obliged to stand still, since they were huddled in one heap, with the yelling cowboys careering back and forth, around the circumference.

This was not accomplished a moment too soon, for they were close upon the main herd, which showed a restlessness that might have broken forth into another stampede, but for the skill of the other cowboys who had them in charge.

When the reunion of the Texans took place near the camp-fire, and there was a general talk over the incidents of the evening, the arrangements were made for the night. All had been so actively engaged that rest would have been acceptable, but there was not one who would have murmured, had he been ordered to take his position and hold it for hours.

Indeed Avon Burnet volunteered to do his part in looking after the cattle that it was necessary to keep under watch through the darkness.

"No," replied Ballyhoo, "I've fixed it. You and me will take a hand to-morrow night, when we're likely to find it a blamed sight more unpleasant than now."

"And why so?"

"That storm that we've been talking about is holding off, as though it finds it hard to make up its mind to come, but it will be here within twenty hours or less."

"I am glad of it," remarked the youth, thinking of his friends in the distant cabin, which had escaped burning by such a narrow chance.

It was now past midnight, and those who were to be off duty did not squander the precious hours; but, crawling into the covered wagon, bundled themselves up and slept the sleep which waits on rugged health.

At the earliest streakings of light the camp was astir. The man who served the party as cook had no light task on his hands. He generally carried a lot of wood in the wagon with him, for the reason that it was not always easy to obtain, and, by doing this, he was sure of always having enough dry fuel to burn readily when wanted.

Those Texans were satisfied at times to go without anything at all in the way of food, or to snatch a bite by checking

their mustangs long enough to allow them to receive it, when they were off again; but whenever the opportunity for a "square meal" presented itself, they proved themselves full hands.

Gleeson, who acted as master during the absence of Captain Shirril, mounted his horse and rode out to inspect the herd. He was relieved to find them all in place. Most of them were lying down, drowsily chewing their cud, but a few had risen and were cropping the grass, which grew quite abundantly in the neighborhood.

While employed in this duty, Ballyhoo cast frequent looks in the direction of Captain Shirril's home. He expected to see their leader before it was light, but the sun was already showing in the horizon and he was not in sight.

The Texan galloped to the top of the adjoining elevation, from which he could see the low flat building in the distance. Shading his eyes with his hand, he peered long and earnestly, but without catching sight of a horseman galloping toward him.

"It's very odd," thought Gleeson, "that he doesn't show up; something must have taken place. I wonder if those varmints have come back after Baby and I left last night."

It seemed impossible that anything like this should have occurred, but it was beyond his power to explain the non-appearance of the "boss" on any other theory. He was prompt and energetic, and was more likely to be ahead than behind the time he set for his own appearance at a particular place.

Without giving expression to his fears, he joined the group at the wagon and partook of his breakfast, washing down his food with a cup of delicious steaming coffee. He avoided Avon for a time, because he plainly saw the young man was disturbed; but, when the meal was finished, the remarks became general over the absence of Captain Shirril.

"I've just come from the top of the swell," said Madstone, who had been there since Ballyhoo, "and can't see anything of him. I 'spose he has overslept himself, because of the flurry last night."

"I wish I could believe it is nothing worse," said Avon, walking thoughtfully out to where his mustang stood saddled and bridled.

"Why, what else could it be, Baby?" asked Ballyhoo, repressing his own uneasiness.

"That's just what I want to find out; I tell you, I don't think we ought to stay here, when it's pretty sure something is wrong at the house; if the Comanches are going to keep this up, it will never do to leave the women alone; I shall have to go back and stay with them."

"I can't believe it's that, but we shall soon know."

He sprang into the saddle, and the two rode to the elevation which has already been referred to several times.

"I will wait here," said the elder, checking his animals, "while you ride on to the cabin."

Avon looked inquiringly at him.

"Don't you think it best you should go with me?"

"No; I will keep you under my eye all the way; if you see anything out of gear, you need only to signal, and I will fetch two or three of the boys with me."

It struck the youth as strange that Ballyhoo should stop after starting for the dwelling. The young man had made up his mind there was something wrong there, and it seemed to him like a waste of time for his friend to hold back.

However, he said nothing further in the way of protest, but, speaking briskly to Thunderbolt, sent him off at headlong speed toward the cabin.

"I am afraid this knocks all my plans to smithereens," he said to himself; "for if there is the least danger of the Comanches putting in their appearance again, it would never do for me to leave home. It is bad enough for uncle to go, but there is no help in his case, while there is in mine."

As he drew near the dwelling his feelings intensified, and all other thoughts went from him.

"I don't see a sign of a living person," he added, slowing the gait of his steed; "suppose the Comanches made a descent upon them in the night and managed to secure entrance--well, by gracious!"

CHAPTER XXV.

HEADING NORTHWARD.

Avon Burnet's misgiving increased as he drew near the cabin of his uncle, for the unwonted stillness was impressive to the last degree. The only sign of life which caught his eye was the horse cropping the grass near the mesquite bush.

It seemed dangerous to do as he did, but in his anxiety he sprang to the ground and walked hastily to the front of the dwelling. Observing the latch-string out, he gave it a sharp twitch and the door swung open.

Dinah confronted him with a look of surprise, and just beyond her, he saw his aunt preparing the morning meal.

"Why, Avon, you are frightened," said she with a smile.

"So I am; where's uncle?"

"He will be down in a minute; when I awoke, I saw he was asleep, and I concluded not to awake him. You know he had a hard time yesterday and last night, and I took the responsibility of not calling him. The poor man needs rest and it won't hurt you folks to wait a while."

The youth dropped into a chair and laughed.

"Well, now, that beats everything! We were worried half to death, and feared something dreadful had happened."

"Nothing of the kind; we haven't been disturbed since you and Gleeson went away. If we had, the captain would have been awake."

The gentleman referred to was heard moving about overhead, and a few minutes later put in an appearance. He scolded his wife in a good-natured way for her well-meant kindness, and adding that no harm had been done, sat down to his morning meal.

The preliminaries were quickly finished, the good-by said, and leaping into his saddle, the captain joined his nephew in a smart gallop northward to camp, where they joined their anxious friends.

And so what promised to furnish a stirring sensation proved nothing at all. It was rare that the Texan allowed his weariness to get the better of him, but it had done so in this case, and none laughed more heartily over it than he.

A brief investigation showed everything to be in readiness, and the sun was not far above the horizon when the start on the long journey northward was made.

The cattle seemed to have recovered from the restlessness of the night before, and were as tractable as could be desired. They moved forward at a moderate pace, having browsed so fully on the succulent grass that it was easy to keep them going, until nearly the middle of the day. At this time a halt was made for an hour, during which the cattle spread out on the sides of the well-marked trail, and ate as though they had not partaken of food for days.

Shortly after resuming the journey a small stream was reached, which was easily forded, there being no portion where it was necessary for the beasts to swim. All drank heartily, and, upon climbing the sloping bank on the other side, another herd was observed several miles to the east.

"They haven't got as many as we," remarked the captain to Gleeson, who was riding by his side; "and I hope we shall keep far enough apart to prevent our cattle mixing."

"He's off the trail," replied Ballyhoo, "but will come into it before long."

"If we keep moving briskly, he must strike it behind us."

It soon became evident that the other cattlemen were trying to force their herd to a point on the trail ahead of the larger drove, which was strung along for many yards. Since they were about equally far north, the struggle was an interesting one for some time; but the action of the smaller collection of cattle showed they were not as manageable as the larger one, and, before the close of day, they gave over the struggle and dropped back so far that, when they struck the trail, they were fully a mile to the rear.

The promised storm still hung off, though the sky was cold and lowering, and toward night a misty rain began falling. It did not become severe at any time, but it added to the dismal gloom. The wind blew in gusts, much the same as on the previous evening, and the temperature fell until, had the cowmen been less accustomed to exposure, they would have suffered more than their animals.

Our friends did not forget to keep a lookout for the Comanches, who were likely to show themselves, whenever a

chance presented itself for a raid upon the herd.

If they had been too roughly handled to venture upon anything of the kind, there were plenty of others to take their places, if only the temptation was strong enough.

The misty rain shortened the view in every direction, but the horsemen who dashed hither and thither, when the cattle showed a disposition to stray off, reported no signs of their old enemies, who, however, might be keeping out of sight until darkness should settle over the earth.

Prudence required that the cattle should be treated considerately, especially at the beginning of the long journey, for it was to the interests of the owners that they should arrive at their destination in good condition. Like men in training for a pedestrian contest, particular care was needed at the start to prevent a general breakdown. After a few days the beasts, if well used, would be able to stand much more.

It, therefore, lacked considerable of night when the final halt was made, and the cattle were allowed to crop the grass until they became sated and chose to lie down.

The men in charge of the other herd were equally thoughtful, for they came to a pause about the same time, with nearly a mile separating the camps. It was hardly dark, indeed, when a horseman was seen approaching from the southward, on an easy gallop, and there was no doubt that he belonged to the other party.

"It's my old friend Sclevinger," said Captain Shirril, recognizing the visitor, as he saluted, and, checking his steed beside that of the old Texan, extended his hand, with the heartiest of salutations.

"I suspected it was you," said the new arrival, whose pleasant countenance was covered by as shaggy a growth as that of the captain, "and I concluded I would run over and shake hands."

"That's right, pard. I'm mighty glad to see you; you must take supper with us."

"Thank you, I guess I will," replied Sclevinger, dismounting and accepting the invitation as readily as it was given; "I tried to run in my herd ahead of you this afternoon," he added, with a twinkle of his fine eyes, "but I couldn't quite make it."

"We saw what you were up to, and we had to bestir ourselves to head you off. How many have you, colonel?"

"Only about twelve hundred--that is, I *had* twelve hundred, when I started from the ranch two days ago, but we lost nearly a hundred yesterday."

"How was that?" asked the captain, as they reached the provision wagon, and paused while the cook made their meal ready.

"A confounded lot of Comanches cut out some of our cattle, and, despite all we could do, got off with them."

"They have been hanging round us, but didn't do anything. Seems to me, colonel, you shouldn't have allowed that."

"That's what makes me so mad," was the bluff response of the guest. "It was just after crossing the creek to the southwest, which doesn't lie in your way. A lot of the beasts took fright at something, and away they went on a bee line for Arizona. I thought a couple of the boys would be able to bring them back, and I sent them off, while the other four looked after the main herd. Thank you," said the colonel, as he took the hot coffee from the hand of his host.

"Well, I judge from what you said, they didn't bring back the hoofs," observed the captain, interested in the narrative of his friend.

"No, by George, it was worse than that. Three or four hours after the stampede, one of the men came in sight, riding like mad. There were no cattle with him, and he was alone. I saw that one of his hands was bleeding badly, and he had a woful story to tell. He said he and the other fellow were working like the mischief to turn the animals back, and had almost succeeded, when the first they knew a dozen whooping Comanches were right upon them.

"It was bang, bang, shoot, cut, yell, and whoop her up again, with no thought of doing anything but save themselves. The other chap fought like a Trojan, but his horse was killed and he went down with half the fiends on him, fighting as long as the breath remained in his body.

"The one who came back with the news was pretty badly cut up and had the closest kind of a call, but his horse was better than any of the others and he managed to escape."

"Of course it was idle to think of getting your cattle after that," remarked the captain.

"I was so infuriated that I gathered the rest of the men, intending to take the trail, but by the time I was ready, I became cooler, and saw it would never do. Haven't you been troubled with the redskins?"

"Not in the manner that you have, but they stirred things up for us last night."

Thereupon, Captain Shirril gave an account of his own experience in his cabin. His friend listened attentively to his story, for it was interesting. He remarked, at its conclusion, that the Indians had been more troublesome that spring than he had ever known them. Twice, within the preceding month, they attempted to steal a number of his cattle, but failed in each instance, with the loss of several of their warriors.

"And in my opinion we are likely to have more trouble before we get through the Indian country," added the colonel.

"I think so, too; it will be well for us to get not too far from each other, for we ought to be in shape to give mutual support."

"Of course; there must be other droves on the march, and we ought to get a twist on them that will make them squeal."

The supper being finished, the two leading cattlemen sat down under the shelter of the covered wagon and smoked their pipes. They had been old army officers, though Colonel Sclevinger fought on the Union side in the war. The singular feature (and yet it was not so singular either), was that they had come in contact more than once during that period. It fell to the lot of the colonel to take the captain prisoner. He treated the brave Texan with so much consideration that a strong friendship was formed, which remained uninterrupted to the present time.

It was by Captain Shirril's invitation that Colonel Sclevinger came to Texas on the return of peace. The Northern man felt an interest in the ranch business, but followed the counsel of the Texan, who warned him against going blindly into it. He took pains to give him points, and, when the proper time arrived, helped him to that extent that the gentleman avoided the disastrous blunders committed by those who fancy the ranch business offers a straight avenue to wealth, without any preliminary training in its many difficulties.

Enough has been told to explain the friendship between the two men. The colonel intended to make only a brief call, but he so enjoyed the company of his old friend that he sat a long time in the wagon, smoking and exchanging reminiscences of the war times, which theme must ever be deeply entertaining to those who were actors in that tremendous epoch of our nation's history.

Finally the visitor bade his friend good-night, and, mounting his horse, galloped off in the night.

Avon Burnet had listened to a part of the conversation, for he was always interested in what this occasional visitor to their cabin had to say, but he could not remain as long as he wished. It was arranged that he should assume his place in helping to watch the herd, Ballyhoo Gleeson being one of those sharing the duty with him.

So it was that the youth rode out in the dismal rainy night to make a "full hand" at the calling of a cattleman.

CHAPTER XXVI.

A SHOT FROM THE DARKNESS.

It was singular that Avon Burnet's most humiliating experience overtook him on his first night in helping to watch his uncle's herd of cattle, while following the Great Cattle Trail toward Kansas.

The starting point was so far north in Texas that the first day carried them close to the Indian Nation, through whose territory they expected to tramp for several days.

The night, as has been explained, was raw, with a fine, misty rain and a cutting wind. The youth was seated on his fleet-footed and intelligent Thunderbolt, with his back to the wind, after the fashion not only of all cowboys, under such circumstances, but of the animals themselves, who sometimes drift many miles before a driving storm.

He had his thick army blanket gathered about his body and shoulders, and, though the night was dismal and his situation far from pleasant, it still lacked the discomfort of many hours spent on the vast plains of the Lone Star State.

The young man had held his position for less than an hour when the wind changed, veering completely around, so that, instead of being in front of the herd and edging gradually from it, he was thrown behind the cattle, for they immediately faced about and began moving away from him.

The situation of the young herdsman became a delicate one at once. His proper place was in front, and to reach that point, he must ride around the animals, and not among them. One of the many singular features of herding and driving cattle is the wonderful sensitiveness shown at times by them. While there is nothing extraordinary in the wild panic often created by a thunderstorm, there are occasions when a whole herd is stampeded by a cause too trifling to be understood.

Our experience leads us to agree with many veteran cowboys that the cattle, when lying on the ground asleep, are sometimes troubled with bad dreams which cause such fright on their part that their excitement becomes contagious. Then again the electrical conditions produce a morbid uneasiness among them as well as among men, and there seem to be times when they are simply awaiting a pretext for dashing off in uncontrollable panic.

Avon Burnet's fear was that if he rode directly after the cattle, the sound of his mustang's hoofs would cause alarm, since it was too dark for them to identify him. A stampede is the terror of the cowmen's life, and no labor or trouble is too great to avert it. He, therefore, checked Thunderbolt and waited a few minutes until the cattle were so far off that he could wheel and gallop around their flank without frightening them.

When he thought sufficient time had elapsed, he decided to wait a brief while longer. His dread of a stampede was so strong that he was unusually careful, but with no thought of shirking any duty, he twitched the reins of his horse, spoke sharply, and without touch of spur, was off like an arrow.

Although not an animal was visible, the rider had the contour of the herd so vividly impressed on his mind that he felt no misgiving, when he began edging his steed more to the left, and finally brought him to a stand-still, as he believed, at the very front of the collection. Indeed, his confidence would not have been greater had the sun been shining.

But when he halted and listened he failed to hear anything of them.

"I must have ridden too far ahead," was his conclusion, as he started his horse on a walk to meet them; "but they are surely near by."

Five, ten, fifteen minutes passed, and then he drew rein with an exclamation of amazement, for his keen sense of hearing did not catch the first sound of the cattle.

"I have lost the herd!" he muttered in dismay, and such was the fact. His cheeks burned with chagrin at the consciousness of what at first thought seems an impossible error on the part of man or youth with any experience in attending cattle.

It was Avon's first mishap of the kind, and he felt as though he could never face his comrades again, if they should discover the blunder, which, after all, was not so striking, when the attendant circumstances are borne in mind.

But if excuse could be accepted for his slip, there was none for inaction after its discovery. It was not to be supposed that the animals would set out to hunt him, nor that any knowledge could be gained of them by idleness. There were other men on duty, and he shouted at the top of his voice, in the hope of receiving a response, but there was none.

Slipping from his saddle, he knelt down and placed his ear to the ground. He fancied he detected faint sounds, such as are made by multitudinous hoofs on the soft, wet earth, but the noises were so slight that he could not identify the

direction whence they came, and he hastily climbed into the saddle again.

He realized that he was lost, and well aware that at such times it is useless to puzzle one's brains about the point of the compass, he dashed in the direction which seemed to be the right one. Of course, as in his recent experience, it proved to be wrong, and he now spurred toward the top of the ridge or hill, which it was easy to identify under the tread of his mustang. He was confident that this elevation would yield the key to the situation and he was not mistaken.

From the crest he observed the starlike glimmer of a lantern, and no sight, except that of the herd itself, could have been more welcome. It was the signal suspended every night from the front bow of the wagon, to guide the men whenever they needed guidance.

Confident that someone would be found at that point who could give him the important news he was seeking, Avon rode thither on a dead run. He saw no one stirring as he galloped up. The cook, who had charge of the wagon, was asleep, and the men off duty were slumbering soundly, while the chance was theirs.

But young Burnet had scarcely checked his mustang, when the sound of someone riding his horse equally fast reached his ear, and the next instant Oscar Gleeson dashed beside him.

"Howdy, Baby, is that you?" he asked, peering at the young man dimly seen in the scant yellow rays of the lantern.

"Yes, Ballyhoo," was the reply; "I'm in trouble."

"What is it?"

"I've lost the herd."

The Texan shook in his saddle with laughter.

"That's me, too; the first thing I knowed they was gone. I yelled for you, but you couldn't have heard me, and, after cantering round awhile, I struck for the wagon in quest of news."

Avon drew a sigh of relief, and with a smile:

"I'm glad you lost them, for the boys won't laugh at you, while they would at me."

"I don't think there's anyone in that crowd that will laugh, for they all had the same experience. I know Old Bronze and Short Stop have lost a herd more than once."

"It won't do to stay here," remarked Avon, "for you know there is another herd only a mile off, and if the two become mixed, it will be a big job to cut out ours to-morrow."

"I shouldn't wonder," replied Gleeson, "if the cattle have gone back to the bed-ground; at any rate we'll look for them there."

The return to the wagon enabled the couple to obtain their bearings, and they knew the proper course to reach the spot, but the possibility of the theory being wrong caused them to separate, so as to proceed thither by routes which, while substantially parallel, were so far apart that they were out of each other's sight and hearing, the latter being chiefly due to the direction of the wind.

Avon spurred Thunderbolt into an easy canter, the soft grass making the travel easy, though there was always the risk of his animal sinking one or more of his hoofs into a hole, with the prospect of a broken leg for the horse and a dislocated neck for his rider.

When it seemed to the latter that he had passed the intervening distance, he drew his mustang to a walk, listening and peering through the gloom with all the power at his command. There was no lighting of the darkness, the wind still blew keenly, and the fine drizzling rain continued.

No sight nor sound came to him, and, once more bringing his animal to a halt, he dismounted and pressed his ear to the ground.

This time he caught a distinct noise: it was that made by the hoofs of a horse. He was walking, and was so near that Thunderbolt pricked his ears and uttered a faint whinny of salutation. Avon instantly rose to his feet, and remounted.

Looking keenly into the wet darkness, he became aware that a horse was standing motionless but a short distance off on his left. In the gloom the outlines could be traced, but so dimly that he was uncertain whether he had a rider or not. The steed held his head well up like Thunderbolt, and appeared to be scrutinizing the youth and his animal with a curiosity equal to theirs.

There was something so impressive in the sight of the statue-like object, which emitted not the slightest sound, that young Burnet hesitated whether to advance or to await its approach. The man could not be Gleeson, and, whoever he was, it was evident that he regarded Avon with inquiring suspicion.

But unwilling to maintain the trying situation, the latter touched the neck of his mustang in a way which the animal recognized as a command to move forward very slowly. He obeyed, and had advanced but a few short steps when Avon to his astonishment perceived that the strange horse was without a rider.

"I don't understand that," mused the mystified young man, stopping his own animal, with several yards separating them; "he must have an owner, and what can have become of him, and why is---"

At that instant he observed a suspicious movement, seemingly from the other side of the steed. Before he could divine its nature, a rifle was discharged almost in his face and he went off his mustang like a flash.

CHAPTER XXVII.

SHACKAYE, THE COMANCHE.

Avon Burnet was in the act of lifting his Winchester from across the front of his saddle, when he made the discovery that, although the strange mustang in front of him bore no rider, yet a man was on the ground directly beyond and evidently watching every movement made by himself.

This discovery could mean but one thing: the individual was an enemy, and was on the point of making a hostile movement against him. He had undoubtedly dismounted on learning of Burnet's approach and interposed his steed between them. Despite the gloom on every hand, Avon read aright the meaning of the almost imperceptible movement on the other side of the saddle, and he slipped from the back of his mustang with a celerity which, being displayed almost at the instant of the discharge of the other weapon, looked as if it was the result of a fatal shot.

But, although the bullet so treacherously fired came near its mark, the youth was not touched. His action was in the nick of time: a second later could not have availed him.

He was incensed, as he had the best cause for being, and he resolved that the miscreant should not escape him. His rifle was snatched from its resting-place, and, stepping from behind Thunderbolt, he drew the best bead possible on his foe.

The dexterity of the latter was marvellous. It was as if, at the very instant of discharging his weapon, he had vaulted into the saddle, and, wheeling the head of his horse away, sent him scurrying straight from his intended victim.

Not only that, but, in accordance with the fashion of the frontier in such emergencies, he flung himself forward on the neck of his animal, so as to offer the least possible target to the other, who, if not hit hard, was certain to return the shot.

The curious feature of the proceeding was that the man, having seen the youth vanish from the back of his steed at the instant the gun was discharged, did not assume that he was killed. Possibly such was his supposition, and his hasty flight was partly due to his anxiety to place himself beyond reach of his friends, who were likely to be drawn thither by the sound of firing. His act in throwing himself upon the neck of his mustang was simply in obedience to the rule which requires the frontiersman to avail himself of every possible means of safety, even when there is seemingly no call for it.

Despite the quickness of young Burnet, he was able to bring his Winchester to a level only at the moment the steed was thundering out of sight in the darkness, but he let fly three times in rapid succession, reckless whether he struck rider or animal; but since the sound of the hoofs still came to him, he was chagrined at the conviction that he had missed both.

"But you haven't escaped me yet," he muttered, swinging himself into the saddle; "there is no horse in Texas or the Indian Nation that can leave me behind; now, Thunderbolt, run him down!"

But, while the fates had been kind to Avon, in that he escaped death by the narrowest conceivable chance, they seemed equally well disposed toward the object of his wrath. The boast of the pursuer as to the fleetness of his mustang was warranted, and had the circumstances continued favorable for only a few minutes, he would have brought his young rider beside the fleeing steed, where the account between the two men must have been quickly settled.

But at the very moment of starting, the forelegs of Thunderbolt sank into a hole above the knees. His activity saved him from harm, but his rider took a header over his ears, sprawling on the wet grass in front with a shock that stunned him.

By the time he could rally and remount his mustang, the other was not only beyond sight, but his listening ear could not detect the slightest sound of the flying hoofs.

"He has escaped this time," thought Avon, as he once more resumed his place in the saddle, "but the account is still open and must be settled very soon."

He was right, except that the account was closed not only sooner than he suspected, but in a manner of which he never dreamed.

Despite his alarming experience he had not lost his reckoning, and, facing toward the bed-ground of the herd, he had ridden but a short way, when the familiar sounds told him he was near the animals from which he was lost only a short time before.

"They are here, Baby, just as I thought." The remark was made by Gleeson, who loomed up in the gloom as he spoke, with his mustang on a deliberate walk.

"I am glad of that, and, since no one beside you and me knows of our slip last night, we'll keep it to ourselves."

"I've no objection; but didn't I hear a gun go off a few minutes ago? What was you shooting at?"

"It wasn't *I*--someone shot at *me*."

And thereupon Avon related the particulars of his encounter with the treacherous horseman. Gleeson listened and said nothing until he had finished. Then, with a characteristic exclamation, he expressed his regret that Thunderbolt should have stumbled as he did.

"Keep your eyes open," he added. "I'll do the same, and we'll get the drop on him soon."

"Why does he want to hurt *me*?" asked Avon, "when there has never been a word between us?"

"It's the nature of the animal," was the reply. "It wouldn't have made any difference whether it was you or me, so he thought he had a sure thing of it. That's what he's here for."

It was evident from these words that each of the speakers was satisfied as to the identity of the one that had fired the well-nigh fatal shot. Gleeson named him immediately.

"I warned the cap, when he hired that Comanche, that we would have trouble with him. We left Texas a little short-handed, but we could have got through well enough without him. Howsumever, Shackaye, as you remember, rode into camp one day and asked the cap to give him a job, and the cap done it."

"I recall your words about him, and I thought they were not justified; but what made you so suspicious?"

The Texan uttered an impatient exclamation.

"In the first place he's an Injin, and *that* ought to be enough. I never seen one of his race that it's safe to trust; they'll shoot the man that gives them a cup of water or a piece of bread. Talk about Injin gratitude! There aint any such thing."

"What did my uncle say to your sentiments?"

"He laughed in that quiet way of his, and said maybe as I was right, but he didn't see what we had to fear from one Injin that was in camp with us; he reckoned we could pull his teeth before he could bite enough to hurt."

"I am sure he will think differently when he hears my story."

"Don't tell him or anyone else a word about it. Promise me that."

"And why?" asked the surprised Avon.

"Well," was the hesitating answer, "I've several reasons: one of them is that though you and me have fixed on the Comanche as the chap, we aint sure of it. It looks very much that way, but it may be someone else after all. We mustn't make any mistake, and above all, don't let Shackaye think we suspect him."

The youth gave his promise, though in his mind there was no doubt of the identity of the man that had come so near shooting him from his mustang. He saw the wisdom of not allowing Shackaye to know that he was suspected.

The cattle having been located, the couple had little to do but to hold them where they were. This proved less difficult than at other times. They had the help of Burrell, or Old Bronze, in the work, and the three did little but ride back and forth, timing their course in such a way that they skirted the large body of animals, often meeting and exchanging greetings, but more often passing without seeming to see each other.

Sometimes one of the cattle would show a determination to dash away from the main body, but before he went far, a horseman was in front of him and he was forced back. The night was too chilly for sleeping, else one or more of the herders would have stretched out on the damp earth, with his bridle reins so interlocked with his arm that his horse could not wander off, or he would have fallen asleep in his saddle. When worn out with fatigue and loss of slumber, a cowboy often rides for miles totally unconscious of what is going on around him.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A MISHAP.

The weather cleared toward morning, and the sun rose without a cloud obscuring its face. The halt had been made along a small tributary of the Wichita, whose upper waters flow through the country of the Kiowas, Comanches, and Apaches, that of the Cheyennes and Arapahoes lying further north.

The scene was inspiring. The cowboys gathered around the wagon for breakfast, the cook having been thoughtful enough to protect the wood against the rain. The animals were busy cropping the grass, which was rich and succulent on all sides of the Trail, the hands for the time being bestowing only general attention on them, but everyone was ready to leap into the saddle and dash off at a instant's call.

Captain Shirril discovered that a bunch of thirty cattle were missing, and believed they had joined his friend's herd a mile to the southward, from which it would be necessary to separate or cut them out.

Antonio Nunez, the Mexican, and Shackaye, the Comanche (the latter of whom showed no evidence of having been engaged in questionable business during the preceding night), were similarly attired, though it would be supposed that the full-blooded Indian would have dressed in accordance with the fashion of his people. He claimed, however, to have been engaged in the cattle business before, and, when he first presented himself in camp on his wiry pony, he wore the broad-brimmed sombrero, baggy leather breeches, and red sash around his waist, which were the most noticeable features of the Mexican's make-up.

The Comanche, however, used no spurs, his feet being shod with moccasins, and, instead of the revolver worn by the Mexicans, he carried a knife thrust in at his girdle and a breech-loading rifle, which was not repeating.

The cowboys sported the same broad-brimmed hats, which in some instances cost more than all the rest of their suits, the leggings, flannel overshirts, and gaudy handkerchiefs tied loosely around their necks.

All, as a matter of course, were expert horsemen, and were furnished with two or three excellent animals apiece, for their business is as trying upon them as upon the men.

The meal was quickly finished, and Captain Shirril, with two of his hands, set out for the camp to the rear, where he hoped to find the missing cattle. Since there was a possibility that they had strayed in other directions, three more men were despatched to make search.

It was rather curious that the captain selected as his assistants his nephew Avon and the young Comanche Shackaye. When they were riding off, Gleeson, the Texan, looked at the youth and winked, but said nothing.

Half-way to the camp, the three galloped over a ridge or swell in the prairie, when to their surprise they came upon the missing animals browsing just beyond.

"That's lucky!" said the captain; "the job is going to be easier than I supposed. Avon, you and Shackaye ride to the left, while I will turn to the right. Look out for that ugly steer; we have had trouble with him before, and I believe he is in a bad mood now."

The Indian grinned on hearing these words and said:

"Me no 'fraid; me rope him if he fight."

And to show his contempt for the huge brute, he drove his mustang straight for him as he was grazing on the further side of the group. The steer raised his head, with the grass hanging from his jaws, and looked quietly at the approaching Indian. He seemed to be in doubt as to his purpose, until Shackaye, when almost upon him, swung his arm above his head and uttered a tantalizing shout, as if he wished to enrage the beast.

If such was his purpose he succeeded, for with a muttered bellow, the steer dropped his head and charged fiercely at the pony, which, to save himself, was obliged to wheel with such suddenness that the young Comanche, despite his superb horsemanship, was thrown violently to the ground directly in front of the animal.

Occasionally a cowboy is caught in the perilous situation of the young Comanche. His horse may stumble, his lasso (always called a "rope" except in California) become entangled, or he may be thrown to the ground in the path of the charging steer or bull, which is sure to be upon him before he can regain his feet and steed.

In such emergencies there is but the single thing to do: that is, to shoot the animal, and to hesitate to do so means certain death to the endangered cattleman.

Two causes prevented Shackaye from appealing to this last and only recourse. His fall was so violent that he was

slightly dazed, though he did not lose sight of his peril, but he made the mistake of attempting to climb to his feet and darting aside, when the time at command was insufficient to take him beyond reach of the savage steer.

His rifle remained in place on the front of his saddle, so that it was beyond his reach, while, as I have stated elsewhere, he carried no pistol. He was, therefore, without firearms.

Captain Shirril was fully two hundred yards away, but he saw the imminence of the danger, and, bringing his gun to a level, fired at the steer, calling at the same moment to his nephew to shoot it. The captain's bullet struck the beast, but without producing any effect, unless to add to his rage.

It took Avon but a second or two to raise his Winchester to his shoulder and aim at the animal, which was near at hand.

"If I was sure that was you last night," he thought, "I would let the steer do his duty, but maybe you are innocent, so here goes!"

It was no special feat of marksmanship to send a rifle-ball through the heart of the charging brute, but he was so close to the Comanche when he received the shot that he would have tumbled over him, had not Shackaye managed to roll aside in time to avoid the huge mass, which ploughed along the ground, as if fired from an enormous gun.

The occurrence alarmed the other cattle, and they started off at such a pace that the instant attention of the captain and his nephew was required. Paying no further heed to the unhorsed Shackaye, Avon sent his mustang after the flying animals, the captain doing the same from his direction.

The hardest of riding was required to round them up and turn their faces toward the main herd, and it was not long before Avon found himself pitted against a steer fully as ugly as that which he had been obliged to shoot a few minutes before. All the others were finally forced into the right course, and this obstinate animal was disposed to join them, but after trotting for a short distance, he seemed to tire of being good, and, wheeling about, charged like a runaway engine at the youthful horseman who was harrying him so hard.

In such crises a great deal depends on the intelligence of the horse. Thunderbolt sprang aside with the nimbleness of a monkey, and Avon received just enough warning to hold his place in the saddle. The steer attempted to keep up his pursuit, turning with remarkable quickness for such a large animal, but the dexterity of Thunderbolt was still greater, and he easily evaded the sharp horns which came near him more than once. Finally, as if he saw the uselessness of his pursuit, the steer headed in the opposite direction from that which he ought to have taken, and sped away with all the fleetness he possessed.

Avon saw his uncle galloping to his help.

"Leave him to me!" called the nephew; "I'll conquer him."

Captain Shirril drew up, and, from his perch in the saddle, watched the result of the curious contest.

Avon had his rope ready to fling over the horns of the fugitive, but before doing so, he resorted to another artifice, which few persons of his years can carry out successfully. It is not only difficult, but it is vastly more dangerous, in the event of the animal showing fight, as the steer had already done.

It was necessary to force Thunderbolt close beside the fugitive, and, despite the courage of the mustang, it was only natural that he should feel some reluctance against doing this. Those horns possessed prodigious length and sharpness, and had already been turned upon him; but he was obedient, and urged by the pricking of the spur and the words of his master, he edged still nearer, though it need not be said that he kept an eye to windward. It was well he did so.

Young Burnet was in the act of leaning forward to attempt the dangerous and difficult feat, when the steer again dropped his head, with one side lower than the other, as such animals do when assailing a foe sideways, and charged upon the mustang.

Nine horses out of ten would have been fatally impaled by the suddenness of the assault, for there was no time for him to wheel; but with a dexterity that seemed incredible, he instantly rose on his hind feet and bounded clean over the steer. The wonder of the exploit was how the horse gathered himself and applied his strength with such astonishing quickness, but he did it like a trained gymnast, his rider maintaining his seat without difficulty and feeling a thrill of admiration at the amazing skill of his steed.

If a dumb animal can ever show surprise, the steer displayed it at the action of the mustang. Having made his lunge with his horns, he must have become aware that, instead of piercing flesh and blood, they clove vacancy only. With his head aloft, and snorting with anger, he stared where the horse and rider were a moment before, but where now they were not.

He looked to the right and left, as if unable to comprehend what had become of them. Captain Shirril was seated motionless on his steed, several hundred yards distant, and, if the steer decided for a moment in his own mind that he

was the individual he was looking for, he must have been puzzled to know how it was his horse traveled so far in such an amazingly brief space of time.

The sound of hoofs caused the animal to look on the other side of him, where, sure enough, only a short distance off was the identical offender, calmly surveying him as if plotting further mischief.

Instantly the head of the steer dropped again, and he was in the act of charging with the same impetuosity as before, when he changed his mind, and, instead of becoming a pursuer, resumed the character of a fugitive.

CHAPTER XXIX.

OLD ACQUAINTANCES.

Without hesitation the mustang was after the stubborn steer again, showing less fear than before, though he maintained a sharp lookout against a repetition of the attack. It may have been that the dexterous manner in which he had just eluded the brute gave him self-confidence, as it weakened that of the fugitive without lessening his obduracy, for he took care that the line of his flight led straight away from his own herd.

With the same care Thunderbolt began edging up, and, in a brief while, his head was abreast of the haunch of the steer, and steadily gaining. Avon now leaned over the right shoulder of his mustang, and reaching forward and downward, seized the tail of the steer, and in a flash twisted all that was sufficiently flexible around the horn of his saddle. At the same instant he called sharply to Thunderbolt, who made a vicious bound to the left, and the steer, with a short bellow of pain, went down with fearful violence.

But he was not yet conquered. As full of energy and obstinacy as ever, he seemed to leap to his feet as if made of rubber, but without attempting to resent the indignity he had suffered, he continued his impetuous flight.

The brief interval had given Avon time in which to uncoil his rope. Instead of flinging it over the horns of the steer he dexterously caught the loop around one of his hind legs, and jerked it taut with the quickness of lightning. Down went the animal again, kicking and bellowing and struggling hard to regain his feet.

The youth allowed him to succeed, when, with the help of the mustang, he was thrown again. This was repeated several times, until it was apparent that the captive was subdued. Finally, after receiving another fall, he refused to try to regain his feet.

Avon now managed to loosen the loop sufficiently to slip it off the imprisoned leg. Then, holding several coils in his grasp, he reached over and gave the panting animal several resounding whacks on his ribs.

He smiled as the brute hastily clambered up, and, turning his nose toward the other cattle a considerable distance off, broke into a trot after them, still bellowing as if asking them to wait until he could join them. No refractory urchin was ever brought to terms with more completeness than was the defiant steer.

Now that the disciplined animal was travelling in the right direction, his conqueror also faced Captain Shirril, who had been watching him with much interest, while the cattle were stringing along at a rapid gallop in the direction of the ridge beyond which lay the invisible camp of the cowmen.

The lull in the stirring proceeding led Avon to recall the mishap of Shackaye, who had escaped the horns of the other steer by such a narrow chance. He cast his eye toward the body of the dead animal plainly seen across the prairie, but the young Comanche himself was not in sight. He concluded that he must have remounted his mustang and galloped back to camp. Possibly he had received some injury from his fall which placed it beyond his power to help in the work of gathering the stray members of the herd.

Avon turned his attention to his relative, when he was astonished to perceive fully a dozen horsemen a short distance off between him and the ridge.

The first natural thought of the youth was that the party at the camp had ridden out to their help, but he instantly saw that such could not be the case, since there were so many of them, and it did not require a second glance to ascertain that each one was a mounted Indian.

The first emotion following this discovery was that of a wonderment as to what it could all mean. It was not remarkable that they should encounter Indians, while crossing the section set apart especially for their occupancy, nor was anything to be feared from them unless the temptation to violence became unusually strong on the part of the red men.

But there was something ominous in the sudden and singular appearance of these dusky plainmen. They had shown up unexpectedly, the indication being that they had emerged from a group of hills a short distance to the eastward. Colonel Sclevinger and his herd were beyond sight, so that the two friends were in anything but a pleasant situation.

But while it looked as if the Indians must be friendly from force of circumstances, their conduct justified the grave alarm Avon felt on first seeing them. Perceiving they were discovered, they broke into a rapid gallop beyond the unsuspecting Captain Shirril, spreading apart like a fan, as if they meant to inclose him in the circle beyond escape.

A shout from the young man caused his uncle to look around, when he discovered what was going on. He instantly touched his animal with his spurs and sent him swiftly toward Avon, who advanced to meet him.

"What does it mean?" asked the younger as they came together.

"It means mischief," was the reply. "I believe some of them belong to the party that tried to burn our house."

"Then they are Comanches?"

"Every one of them--where's Shackaye?" abruptly asked the captain, as if the naming of the tribe had recalled that interesting youth to his mind.

"I shouldn't wonder if he were among them," replied Avon, with a certain grim pleasure, as he recalled the faith his uncle had shown in the savage in the face of Gleeson's warnings.

"Like enough," remarked the captain, watching the actions of the warriors, who had diverged so far already that it was impossible for the couple to escape in any direction without coming in collision with them; "we've got to stand them off."

Without any appearance of alarm in his manner Captain Shirril slipped down from his saddle, his nephew being but a few seconds behind him, and the two coolly prepared to make a stand against the attack of the Comanches.

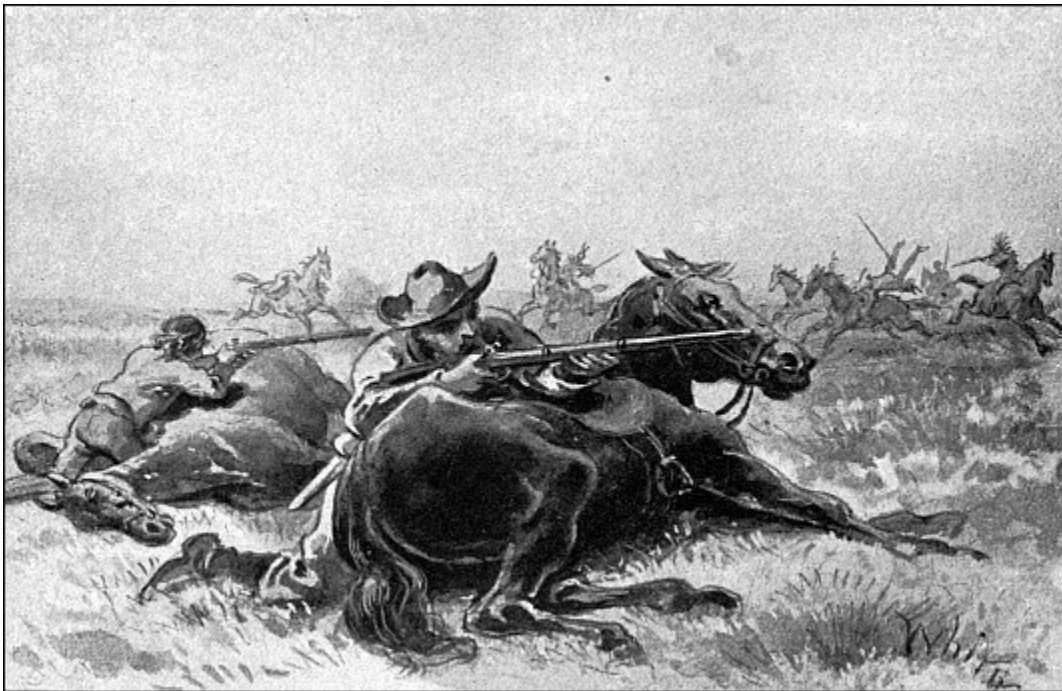
CHAPTER XXX.

AT BAY.

Captain Shirril and his nephew placed their ponies beside each other, with a space of only a few feet intervening. Then, standing on the ground, they rested their Winchesters across the saddles, facing in opposite directions, and were ready for the assault of the red men, who were circling back and forth and gradually drawing nearer to them.

"Keep cool," said the captain, "and, when you fire, don't throw away a shot."

They were a mile from camp, and, as soon as the shooting began, it ought to attract the notice of the rest, who were sure to hurry to the spot. There was reason to believe the Indians could be held off for a long time, and, brave as they were, it was not to be expected that they would maintain their ground before such a charge as the cowboys would make, and had made a short time before.



THE LAST STAND.

The warriors were armed with excellent rifles, and belonged to a tribe that is unsurpassable in horsemanship. Several had blankets on their mustangs, but most were without even that protection, being bareback, while few possessed anything in the nature of a bridle. The well-trained steeds, as we have shown, were perfectly managed by word and touch, and often seemed to divine the wishes of their riders, without word or movement on their part.

But, daring as were the latter, they knew the peril involved in assailing two well-armed white men at bay. They continued their rapid galloping at a safe distance, some of them describing a complete circle around the couple, who were quietly awaiting the chances for effective work.

Before long the assailants began operations. Hardly one retained an upright position on his steed for more than a few seconds at a time. They flung themselves forward, as if in wantonness, their painted faces appearing below their horses' necks, with their long black hair streaming away, as if it were a part of the mane of their steeds. Then they extended themselves seemingly along the spine of their animals, as if for slumber in the sun. While the steeds sped back and forth, the riders lolled here and there on their backs, as though it was impossible for them to lose their balance. Trying as were the circumstances, Captain Shirril could not help admiring the equestrian exhibition, which could not have been excelled.

But he quickly proved that he meant business of the most serious kind. He fixed his attention on one of the half-naked miscreants, who was not only nearer than any of his companions, but kept edging closer. For a time, he maintained

himself on the further side of his mustang, seeming to hold himself in place by the toe of one of his moccasins thrust over the spine at the haunches, with hardly less significant help from a hand at the base of the neck.

When the horse wheeled to return over his own trail, as he frequently did, the matchless rider, with a grace that was inimitable, swung himself over in a corresponding position on the other side, so as to preserve the body of his steed as a shield.

Without warning, he discharged his rifle from beneath the neck of the animal, and the excellence of his aim was proven by the whiz of the bullet near the head of Captain Shirril.

But the latter was not disturbed. He was biding his time, and knew the opportunity was near.

Suddenly the mustang wheeled again. At the moment of doing so, he was closer to the defenders than at any period before. The rider rose to view for a moment, like a leaper going over a fence sideways. Then as he descended on the other side of the steed, he continued descending until he struck the ground, where he rolled over a single time and never stirred again.

At the critical instant, Captain Shirril had fired. An ear-splitting screech followed, and that particular Comanche was eliminated from the problem that confronted him.

The riderless horse flung up his head, with a whinny of affright, and, looking hither and thither, as if unable to understand the meaning of the occurrence, dashed off to join his companions, further away on the prairie.

The thin puff of smoke had not lifted from before the captain's face, when his nephew let fly at one of the warriors, who was extended along the back of his animal, as if inviting a shot. Avon missed, and the Indian, with astonishing quickness, brought his own gun to a level and fired in return. The ball nipped the brim of his sombrero, passing so close that for a second the youth believed he was hit.

The situation was growing serious, and, since this particular Comanche was so defiant, Avon decided that the occasion was a good one for the use of a repeating weapon. Without pausing to take special aim, he fired three times in rapid succession at his foe.

Though the latter escaped for the moment, his steed was less fortunate. He was hit hard by the first shot, while the last brought him to earth with a bullet through his brain.

His rider was too nimble to be caught by the fall, but, leaping clear, ran swiftly across the plain in the effort to get beyond reach of the rifle, which seemed to be raining bullets all around him. His courage had given place to panic, and as he ran he bounded from side to side and up and down with the grotesque contortions of a Digger Indian when seeking to baffle the aim of an enemy.

Avon continued his fusillade, and by a piece of pure accident winged the fugitive. He did not fall, but the height of his leap and the resonance of his outcry, instantly succeeded by a pronounced limp in his gait, left no doubt that he had gotten in the path of the hurtling messenger.

"How are you making out, Baby?" asked Captain Shirril, turning his head and coolly scrutinizing his relative.

"Only fairly," replied Avon, replenishing the magazine of his gun and keeping his gaze on the plain in front.

"It is well enough to drop a mustang, but it is better to tumble their riders off them."

"I meant to do that, but failed."

The natural supposition of the friends was that the hot reception they had given their assailants would check them, and cause their withdrawal beyond the deadly range of their Winchesters. The reports must have reached the cowboys, and both glanced at the ridge to the west, over which they expected to see their comrades coming to their rescue.

But the Comanches could not have failed to know of the presence of others near at hand, which fact warned them that whatever they did must be done quickly. Instead of falling back, therefore, because of the loss of a single warrior and steed, they rallied and pushed the fight with greater vigor than ever.

In the face of the cracking Winchesters they rode closer than before, and then branching apart, put their animals on a run while they discharged their guns from every conceivable position. Instead of wheeling about as at first, they kept them straight away on the circle, which being less than before, enabled them to circumnavigate the defenders in a brief space of time.

The captain and his nephew had their hands full, for assailants were on every side of them, and the popping of their guns was continuous. The attack was so serious, and the defenders were in such a conspicuous position, that it was impossible to escape the storm of bullets flying all around them.

A quick start on the part of Thunderbolt showed that he had been hit, while almost at the same moment the rearing of

the captain's mustang proved that he, too, was hurt.

"Make your horse lie down," called the elder.

Avon had already determined on this recourse, and seizing the head of his animal he ordered him down. Thunderbolt was well trained, but the hurt already received made him restless, and his young master had to engage in a partial struggle before he gathered his legs under him and rolled over on his side.

The instant he did so Avon knelt behind his body and was in the most favorable posture for defense.

Captain Shirril's task proved more difficult. His horse refused to go down at his command, and it was necessary to throw him. He resisted with such vigor that his owner dropped his rifle and was forced to use his utmost strength before he could trip and bring him to the earth. He still fought, and the captain, losing patience for the moment, forgot the whistling missiles and gave his whole attention to the brute, which he speedily conquered.

Avon was on the point of offering help, when he perceived that the mustang was mastered, and he once more turned to the enemy, now pressing his advantage to the utmost.

The Comanches were so close, and the opportunity for aiming effectively was so good, that the shots of the youth began to tell. Had the red men been compelled to maintain one position in front, a single person with a repeating Winchester could have stood off the whole party; but, as has been explained, the Indians were on every hand.

But Avon was not throwing away his cartridges. The very first shot bored its way through the bronzed skull of a shrieking warrior, and the second slew his pony with such suddenness that the two rolled together on the plain, the warrior being unable to extricate himself from beneath his struggling mustang.

The young man, finding no one in his immediate front, turned toward a couple that were advancing from another point, but before he could make his aim sure, he was shocked to hear a groan from Captain Shirril.

"Are you hit?" asked the nephew, turning his scared face toward him.

"Yes, but still able to do something; bring your horse to his feet and make a dash for the camp. There isn't an earthly chance for us here."

"But I cannot leave you, uncle, and, if I could it would be impossible to run the gauntlet."

"It's our only hope; my horse is too badly hurt to carry me off, but you may succeed, if you ride hard."

"It won't do," replied the nephew, who, had the prospect been ten-fold more favorable, could not have deserted his relative at such a time.

"Hurrah!" he exclaimed the next moment, "yonder come the boys!"

He had caught sight of their friends approaching over the ridge, their animals on a dead run.

"They will be too late," said Captain Shirril, whose horse at that moment received another shot and renewed his frantic struggles to regain his feet. His owner interposed, but, he, too, was wounded and unable to put forth the strength that had conquered the brute a moment before.

Avon would have gone to his help had there been anything to gain by it.

"Let him go," he said, "he can do you no good."

"Yes, he can and he *shall*."

As he spoke, the captain whipped out his revolver and drove a couple of bullets through the brain of the mustang. He expected him to drop dead on the instant, when he would serve the purpose intended of a breastwork for his master.

Avon had withdrawn his attention at the critical moment, fearful that the Comanches, realizing the straits of himself and companion, would overwhelm them before resistance could be offered. Thus his head was turned away from the mortally hurt horse of the captain, which, instead of sinking helpless to the earth, made a frantic leap and fell upon the unprepared youth.

It seemed for the moment as if a mountain had descended upon him. He struggled fiercely to free himself, and in his desperate effort worked his head and shoulders clear, but while trying to draw his revolver for his last defence, he succumbed. The sunlight faded from before his eyes, all became blank darkness, and consciousness departed.

CHAPTER XXXI.

FLAG OF TRUCE.

There was nothing to cause apprehension on the part of the cowboys in camp, when they heard the report of a single rifle from beyond the ridge over which Captain Shirril, Avon Burnet, and the young Comanche Shackaye had ridden in pursuit of the cattle that went astray the night before. One of the party might have found a chance to bring down something in the nature of game, which is liable to be encountered at every part of the Great Cattle Trail, from the outskirts of the capital of Texas to its termination in the State of Kansas.

But when, soon after, the shots came thick and fast, it was apparent that something unusual was going on.

"There's mischief afoot!" called out Gleeson, "and that Comanche is at the bottom of it. Come, boys!"

There was not an instant's hesitation on the part of any member of the company. The cattle that were quietly browsing on the succulent grass were left to wander off or stampede themselves, or do whatever they chose, while the cowboys, including Nunez, the Mexican, swung into their saddles and sped away on a dead run toward the ridge.

Before they reached it the missing cattle came up from the other side and appeared on the crest. The advent of the steer that had suffered so severely at the hands of Avon Burnet imparted a mild panic to the others, so that the whole lot were on a trot. The horsemen were in too great haste to turn aside, and the animals, therefore, swerved to the right and continued their brisk gait in the direction of the main herd.

As has been said, every mustang was running at the highest speed, but the impetuous Gleeson maintained his place in front, and thundered up the slope as if his own life were at stake. Before he struck the crest, he rose in his box-stirrups and peered over at the plain beyond.

"Just what I expected!" he exclaimed, "and that Shackaye has done it!"

It was not necessary to explain, for, before he could have done so, his comrades caught sight of the stirring scene which thrilled their leader. Captain Shirril and his nephew were standing off a party of dusky assailants, who were pressing them hard. The two mustangs were plainly seen, while the flashes of the Winchesters from behind them told the story as eloquently as if the cowboys were actual participants in the affray.

Not another word was uttered by the latter, but pressing their spurs deep into the flanks of their horses they sent them with arrowy haste straight toward the spot. They had hardly reached the base of the slope when they held their breath, for they saw the crisis had come. The red men were closing around the two combatants as if they realized that whatever was to be accomplished must be done within the succeeding few seconds.

Half the distance was passed, when the Comanches were observed scurrying toward a mass of hills hardly a half-mile distant. They rode so closely that the cowboys failed to note the momentous fact that they bore a prisoner with them.

In such emergencies a party of American Indians generally manage to carry off their dead and wounded, but the haste was too urgent in this case. The stark figures were left stretched on the prairies where they had fallen, and a number of animals also lay motionless near. The wounded were taken care of, but the dead were left to bury the dead.

The cowboys discharged a score of shots at the Comanches, but the distance was too great to accomplish anything, and, seeing that it was impossible to overtake them before they reached the shelter of the wooded hills, Gleeson led the party toward the spot where they believed their friends needed instant care.

The prostrate horses, and a partial glimpse of a figure lying between them, caused the rescuers to believe that the captain and his nephew were either slain outright or badly hurt.

The approaching mustangs kept up their run until they were thrown on their haunches with such suddenness that the shock seemed to fling the riders from their saddles. They leaped forward, and vigorous arms quickly lifted the body of the captain's horse from off young Burnet, who opened his eyes and looked up with that faint wildness which showed he had no conception of the situation.

"Where's the captain?"

This was the question that was asked by several, as all glared around for their leader. Before anyone attempted an answer, others examined the nephew and found he was without a wound. He had swooned under the sudden pressure of the horse shot by his uncle, but he quickly recovered, and, after being assisted to his feet and shaking himself together, everything came back to him. Turning to Thunderbolt he ordered him to rise, and the animal obeyed. He had received a couple of flesh-wounds, which stung him for the moment without incapacitating him for effective service.

Then, in as few words as possible, Avon told his story. He remembered that his uncle was wounded before his horse was killed, and it was self-evident to everyone that the poor man had been carried off by the Comanches.

"Did you see Shackaye among 'em?" asked Gleeson, his face like a thunder-cloud.

"He was not with those who attacked us; I could not have failed to see him if he had been."

"But what became of him? He started off with you, and you must have parted somewhere on the road."

Young Burnet now told about Shackaye's encounter with the steer which came near slaying him. Avon's pursuit of the other troublesome animal withdrew all attention from him, and there was no certainty of the manner of his disappearance, which, to say the least, was extraordinary.

But the absence of Captain Shirril forbade that the cowboys should waste time in idleness. Instinctively every eye was turned toward the hills to the eastward among which the Comanches had vanished with their captive.

"They haven't had time to go far," said Zach Collis, "and if we ride hard we shall soon run 'em down."

"But is it best to try that?" was the question of Ward Burrell, or Old Bronze.

Gleeson, who was naturally looked upon as the leader, shook his head. "They'll brain him the minute there's a chance of losing him."

"But why did they take him off and spare *me*?" asked the astonished Avon.

"They thought you was dead and so didn't bother with you."

"Why did they make him prisoner instead of doing what they had been trying so long to do--kill him?"

"He's of more account than you; *he* was the chap they was after, and not *you*."

"It looked for a time as though they had designs on me."

The words of the Texan acted like a damper on the ardor of his companions, who were eager to hasten to the rescue of their captain. Had they not known that he was wounded, it is likely they would have insisted upon an instant and vigorous pursuit; but none failed to see the truth of Gleeson's utterances, though it was only a few minutes before that he was as impatient as any of them.

"Boys," said he, observing that they were looking at him, "I think you know what all this means as well as I do. If we had 'em out on the plains where there was a fair chance, or if the cap could put in some licks for himself, it would be different; but they're among them hills over there; they're watching us now; we can't make a move that they won't know it the minute it's started; they've got it on us, and just as soon as they see there's any show of losing the cap they'll finish him."

"Ballyhoo is right," remarked Wynwood, commonly known as Madstone; "they've got us foul."

"That being so, there aint any use for you, pards; so go back to camp, look after the cattle, and leave things to me."

The meaning of this proposition, which may sound strange to the reader, was that the only possible way of saving Captain Shirril was by negotiating for his release. The fact that the Comanches knew he was in charge of two thousand cattle, and had made him prisoner instead of slaying him, established this truth in the minds of Oscar Gleeson and his comrades.

Furthermore, the Texan was confirmed in his belief that the act of Shackaye in joining the company before the start was the first step in an elaborate plot. It was his province to win the confidence of the captain, and to communicate, in the many secret ways so well understood by his people, with the Comanches, and to help when the time came for the important movement.

His absence at the critical period gave color to this theory. Circumstances had helped the treacherous red men, for it was as if Captain Shirril walked directly into the trap set by them.

It was a brave act on Gleeson's part to venture alone among the hills in the hope of opening communication with the red men, when, if there was any mistake, he would be completely at their mercy. But he had uttered his decision with the air and manner of one who would brook no dispute. He waved his friends off, and, wheeling about, they rode in the direction of the camp, frequently looking back at the daring fellow who realized as fully as they the delicate and perilous task he had taken upon himself.

Reaching the top of the ridge which has been referred to so often, the first glance was at the herd of cattle, which it was instantly seen required looking after. They had drifted far to the westward, and were so scattered as to need rounding-up in a general way or rather herding. Everything was favorable for good progress that day, since the stream to be crossed was small and shallow, and the sky was not only clear but the air just crisp enough to render travelling pleasant. But there was no thought of going forward until the fate of the captain was settled.

With only a brief halt the cowboys spurred their mustangs down the slope to attend to the cattle, but Avon Burnet remained on the crest, his interest lying elsewhere.

There was only a single small field glass in the company, and as it happened that was in the possession of Captain Shirril, so that the youth had to depend upon his unaided vision. But the atmosphere in the Southwest is generally of crystalline clearness, and he was able to see his friend quite plainly until the hill beyond should hide him from view.

At the moment Avon turned the head of his horse toward the east, the Texan was quite close to the place where the Comanches had taken refuge with their prisoner. His horse was walking slowly, and it was evident he was on the watch for some sign from the red men who held the key to the situation. As he drew nearer his mustang moved still more deliberately, until it was hard to decide whether he was advancing at all.

Looking closely, however, he perceived that Gleeson's progress had not ceased, and he was making some kind of signal. He had removed the handkerchief from around his neck, and was fluttering it over his head. Although its color debarred it from serving as the regulation flag of truce, there was little doubt that the meaning of its owner would be understood by whomsoever saw it.

"Ah, there they are!"

This exclamation was uttered a few minutes later, when the watcher on the crest caught sight, not of one but of two Indians, who emerged from the hills on foot. They walked directly toward the Texan, their actions proving that they appeared in answer to his signal.

Gleeson, on perceiving them, brought his steed to a stand still and awaited their coming. None could have known better than he that he was within range of the companions of these two warriors, who could shoot him from his horse in the twinkling of an eye.

"And they will do it, too," said Avon to himself, as the thought came to him; "but I believe I shall take a hand in this business."

And, without waiting to observe the result of the interview, the young man set out to execute an extraordinary resolution that was formed on the spur of the moment.

CHAPTER XXXII.

DIPLOMACY.

Oscar Gleeson, the Texan, was correct in his suspicion of the purpose of the Comanches in making Captain Shirril their prisoner; having secured possession of him, they intended to force a liberal ransom on the part of his friends, as a condition of his restoration to liberty.

The act was not only an audacious one on their part, but it will be perceived that the fulfilment of the terms was certain to be attended with the gravest difficulty. The cowboys were not to be trifled with, and, since it was inevitable that a point would be reached where one party must of necessity trust the pledges of the other, a violent collision with serious consequences appeared unavoidable.

It has been shown that it was not until he arrived close to the hills, among which the red men had fled with their captive, that there was any response to the signal he displayed almost from the first.

The moment he caught sight of the two warriors, he stopped his mustang and awaited their approach. It was not singular that a man who had crossed the Indian Nation so frequently as this veteran, recognized the couple as Wygwind, the chieftain, and Richita, whom he had met more than once and knew to be two of the worst miscreants belonging to the American race.

With no evidence, however, of his identification, he deliberately lowered his flag of truce, and returning it to its place around his brawny neck, secured it by tying the usual knot. Then with a half military salute he asked:

"Is the white man with you hurt bad?"

"Hurt not much," replied Wygwind, who spoke English far better than his comrade.

"Why did you take him away?"

The American Indian, as a rule, is of melancholy temperament, but at this question the Comanche displayed an unmistakable grin which revealed his even white teeth.

"We sell him--he worth good much."

"What price do you ask for him?" demanded Gleeson, coming to the point with undiplomatic abruptness.

The expectation of the Texan was that these ambassadors would demand a large number of cattle, probably five hundred, in exchange for their valuable captive. He ardently hoped that such would prove the case, for he had already formed a scheme for paying off the rogues in their own coin.

His intention was to transfer the cattle, managing the payment, however, with such care that all breach of faith on the part of the captain's enemies would be frustrated. Then, after he was safe with his friends, and the property was placed in the hands of the Comanches, it would be necessary for the red men to *hold* them. The field would become an open one, and before they could turn their newly acquired property to account, they were likely to hear from the original proprietors.

But Wygwind was too shrewd to be ensnared in this style. He and his partners, in elaborating the scheme that had worked so well up to this point, had foreseen the very contingency in the mind of the white man, who sat on his horse before the delegates.

"We take horses--so many."

In making this answer, Wygwind raised the fingers and thumbs of his hands twice in succession. Unable to count a score in the English language, he proved nevertheless that he had a clear idea of the number, which was indicated so plainly that the Texan could make no mistake as to his meaning.

Gleeson was disappointed as well as surprised. Since each cowboy was provided with at least three horses, there were about thirty with the company. To turn two-thirds of these over to the red men would seriously cripple the whites, who had still a long journey before them.

Furthermore, it must effect a material change in the programme the Texan had formed. Horseflesh is as dear to the red as to the white man, and, well mounted as the former would be after the exchange, the chances of recovering the property by the Texans must be reduced to the minimum.

But the new phase of affairs had to be met. Suppressing all evidence of his feelings, Gleeson said:

"We have not enough horses to give what you ask; we will let you have *that* many."

And he held up the thumb and fingers of his right hand. Wygwind with another grin shook his head.

"Take *so many*"--and he repeated the gestures by which he first indicated twenty.

Gleeson now doubled his offer, which, it will be understood, was half the price demanded; but the wily Comanche felt that he was in a position to dictate terms, and remained inexorable.

The Texan knew it was useless to haggle, but he kept it up with a view of gaining time. Naturally keen-witted and trained in the subtlety of the dusky men of the plains, he sought to do more than dispute over the conditions of a proposed bargain. While thus employed, he used his senses to their fullest extent. Without seeming to do so, he was scrutinizing the hills just beyond the couple, on the ground in front of him. He sought to learn whether any of their warriors were at hand. They might have been, without his knowledge, but the fact that he saw no sign of them led him to believe they were not within immediate call.

Had he been confronted by a single warrior instead of a couple, the Texan would have attempted an exploit in which there was hardly one chance in a hundred of succeeding. It was to seize the warrior, make off with him, and then hold him as a hostage for the safety of Captain Shirril.

True, this was a violation of the flag of truce, but under the circumstances it would not have been one-tenth as flagrant as that by which our government captured the famous Seminole chieftain Osceola, and held him prisoner until his death; but with two doughty warriors to combat, it would seem that nothing could be more foolhardy than any such effort on the part of the Texan.

And yet Gleeson seriously asked himself whether it was not possible to shoot one, and leaping upon the other, overcome and carry him off before his friends could interfere. In referring to it afterward he admitted its absurdity, and yet he would have made the attempt but for a trifling discovery when almost in the act of taking the decisive step.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

DRIVEN TO THE WALL.

The discovery which checked Oscar Gleeson was the presence of nearly all the Comanches within a hundred feet of the warriors that were holding their conference with him. The signs could not be mistaken, and the Texan abandoned the hopeless scheme he had formed.

The Texan thus found himself forced back upon the original proposition of Wygwind, which was the ransom of the wounded captain for twenty horses. The price under the circumstances was large, but it could not be questioned that the principal individual concerned would have paid far more, for "what will not a man give in exchange for his life?"

It remained to decide upon the method of carrying out the agreement, and again the wily Wygwind displayed his shrewdness. When the Texan referred in his offhand manner to himself and friends as bringing forward the animals to be passed to these two representatives, the Comanche replied that no one but Gleeson himself must act in the transaction. His appearance on the crest of the ridge, with the string of horses, would be the signal for Wygwind and Richita to bring forward Captain Shirril and to release him simultaneously with the driving forward of the animals. The exchange, therefore, could be effected without either party gaining the upper hand.

It was thus the Comanche stated the situation, and on the face of it, everything appeared equitable, but it was hard for the Texan to repress his chagrin, for he saw that every possible advantage remained with the red men. They would group themselves among the hills, so near that not only the prisoner, but Gleeson himself would be within range of their rifles, until the last act of the drama should be completed. There was no chance for any dash on the part of the cowboys, by which they could secure their leader and save their property. Had the Texan been allowed to bring his party with him, such an attempt would have followed with a fair prospect of success.

But he had learned long before to accept the ills of life with grim philosophy, and he did not permit the diplomats to observe any evidence of his resentment at being overreached by them. While he was convinced that they would neglect no opportunity to break faith, he acted as if there was not a doubt in his mind.

The agreement required him to return to camp to secure the animals, and he intimated that considerable time must elapse before the exchange could be effected. Wygwind assured him he would be on the watch for his appearance, and, whatever delay took place should not be chargeable to *him*. With this understanding, the Texan wheeled and galloped toward the ridge, beyond which he knew his comrades were awaiting his return and report.

It was received as he expected; that is to say, the views of his friends were almost as numerous as themselves. Ward, Burrell, and Andy Wynwood, the cowboys from Arkansas, declared that there was but one thing to do, and that was to accept the terms offered. Gleeson was quite certain the Comanches would fulfil their part in spirit and letter, for they could not fail to know that any attempted trickery on their part would be followed by an attack so instant and fierce that they must suffer severely, even with the hill to serve them for refuge.

Zach Collis took the opposite view, maintaining that the only result of the plan would be that the Comanches would secure twenty valuable ponies without benefiting Captain Shirril in the least. They were so villainous by nature that they would shoot him down, after he had left their lines, and more than likely would bring Gleeson himself from the saddle. The New Mexican favored a pretended compliance with the proposition. He wished all to ride to the ridge with the horses, where they would halt, while the Texan went forward with them. This would not violate the conditions imposed by Wygwind, and they could watch proceedings from the elevation. At the proper moment, when Gleeson saw the captain was out of range, he could give the signal and the company on the ridge would spur forward at headlong speed, with the certain result of making matters lively for a time.

Joseph George Garland advocated a fair exchange through and through. He insisted what no one could dispute, that the red men had secured the upper hand, and it was fortunate that they were willing to restore the captain on any terms. If they complied with their pledge, honor required the whites to be equally scrupulous in fulfilling their agreement. When their leader rejoined them, the twenty horses became the rightful property of the Comanches, though he was willing to admit they were subject to reprisal.

Antonio Nunez shrugged his shoulders and said he was willing to do whatever the others decided upon. He had no proposition of his own to make.

"Where's Baby?" asked Gleeson, looking around with surprise, having missed him for the first time. "I would like to know what *he* thinks, since every pard has his own views."

The enquiry developed the fact that Avon Burnet had not returned to camp since his departure with Captain Shirril and

Shackaye. Had the others not been so busily occupied, immediately after their own return, in looking after the cattle, they would have noticed that he remained seated on his horse for some minutes on the crest of the ridge.

"I know," said the Texan, after studying the "lay of the land" for some minutes. "He has ridden along the ridge on this side and got among the hills back of where I was talking with Wygwind."

"What'll be the result of *that*?" asked Hauser Files, who had not yet expressed his views of the situation.

"It will play the mischief with everything," was the truthful reply of the Texan, who added excitedly: "There he comes now as if old Nick was after him!"

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE FLANK MOVEMENT.

It was singular that the youngest member of the cattlemen should make an important discovery, which not only escaped them, but, as subsequent events proved, was not noticed, or at least did not receive due attention from the Comanches themselves.

Avon Burnet, from his place on the crest of elevation, was watching the interview between Gleeson and the two red men, when he awoke to the fact that the ridge joined and formed a part of the hills among which the Comanches had taken refuge. That is to say, one had only to follow the former to reach the broken swell containing the warriors and their prisoner.

If such a ride were made along the right slope, the person must be in plain sight of the Indians; if along the crest, he would be visible to those on the right and left, and, if along the left slope, the cowboys could see him while he would not be perceived by the red men themselves, unless they were on the watch.

These facts were apparent to Avon at the first sweeping glance he cast to the eastward. He wondered that they escaped the notice of his friends, but this was probably due to their attention being diverted for the time by the cattle, and because, too, of their disposition to wait the report of Gleeson before deciding upon their course of action.

The thought instantly came to Avon that if the cowboys would make a sudden break along the base of the slope to the left, they could reach the rear of the Comanches, always provided the latter had taken no precautions against such a flank movement. The plan of campaign was so inviting that he could hardly believe it had been overlooked by the red men. At any rate, before urging his friends to adopt it, he decided to make a little investigation on his own account, especially as he believed sufficient time was at command.

Riding, therefore, to the bottom of the slope, he spurred Thunderbolt to a sharp gait, and quickly covered the intervening space, which was hardly a fourth of a mile. His mustang showed no ill effects from the slight wounds received during the sharp scrimmage some time before.

Avon was well aware of the risk he ran, for, if the Comanches were maintaining guard, they could readily pick him off before he could withdraw or adopt the least precaution, but he did not hesitate. When the ground became more broken, he urged his pony a short way among the hills, and then dismounted. He did this, because he wished to hold his line of retreat open. The way behind him was clear, whereas, if he took his horse further, the course would become so obstructed that he could not mount and dash out upon the plain if it became necessary.

He expected to make a long and tedious search, with the probable result of failure, so far as helping his relative was concerned, and with the certainty of great danger to himself, but events moved along with a rush, before he could anticipate them.

Convinced that he was to the rear of the main party, he advanced with the utmost care. The hills were no more than a hundred feet high at their greatest elevation, and were broken by gullies, ravines, and trails that appeared to have been partly made by the feet of animals, greatly helped by the washing of the severe storms which often sweep over that section.

The youth had penetrated barely a hundred yards from the point where he left his mustang, and was picking his way cautiously forward, when he was startled by hearing voices. The words were too low for him to distinguish them, but he instantly stopped with his Winchester ready for use. A collision seemed unavoidable, since there was no means of concealing himself except by turning about and running back, and that could hardly avail him.

The next minute he was face to face with Shackaye, the young Comanche that was the cause of all the trouble. The fellow was as much startled as he, and stopping short, partly raised his gun, as if to defend himself.

Before, however, either could speak or make any movements, Avon was astounded to catch sight of his uncle, Captain Shirril, walking slowly and evidently in pain, close behind him along the narrow path. The instant he descried his nephew, he raised his hand as a signal for him to do nothing.

"It's all right," he said, in a guarded voice; "Shackaye is our friend, though he hasn't been until now."

"How is this?" asked the youth, motionless and undecided whether to advance or retreat.

The broad face of the dusky youth expanded with a slight grin, and he replied:

"Shackaye fall on ground--Baby shoot steer--Shackaye tell warriors Baby dead--leaving him alone--bringing way

captain--den Shackaye show captain way home--must hurry--Comanche come!"

"Have you a horse with you?" asked Captain Shirril, crowding forward, impatient to improve the precious moments.

"Yes; follow me."

The prisoner had been deprived of all his weapons, and was suffering from the severe hurts received, but he roused himself and moved forward at a brisk walk, Avon taking the lead, with the young Indian close behind him and the captain at his heels.

Very few minutes were required to pass over the intervening space, but while doing so Captain Shirril made clear several facts which needed explanation. To these may be added others that came to light afterward.

As has been intimated elsewhere, the suspicions of Gleeson regarding Shackaye were correct. He had joined the cattlemen for the purpose of helping Wygwind and his band to despoil them. He was unable to do this at the time the cabin was attacked, and therefore kept in the background until the present opportunity presented itself. The intention of the Comanches, as first formed, was to stampede the animals on some favorable night, and thus secure possession of a large number; but there was great risk in the attempt, since the cowboys were watchful, and the cattle being branded, it would have been almost impossible for the thieves to dispose of them, even if able to run them beyond reach of their owners. The Great Cattle Trail is about a hundred yards in width, with smaller paths weaving in and out along the edges, all so distinctly marked that no one can go astray, unless the path is temporarily obliterated by snow. The diversion of a considerable number of cattle would leave footprints that could be readily followed, and Captain Dohm Shirril was not the man to submit to such despoilment, so long as there remained the possibility of preventing it.

The Comanches, however, in the vicinity of the herd kept track of all its movements. The cunning Shackaye succeeded in holding occasional communication with them, and learned of their change of plan. It was decided to make the captain prisoner on the first opportunity, and hold him for ransom.

Since it was his practice to take his nephew with him on almost every excursion he made from camp, Shackaye conceived it necessary to the success of the plot that Avon should be put out of the way. It has been shown that he made the attempt on the preceding night and came within a hair of success. It was characteristic of his race that the atrocious crime was undertaken by him as a matter of course.

The very chance for which Wygwind and his band were waiting came that morning when Captain Shirril, his nephew, and Shackaye set out to hunt the estray cattle. While Avon was engaged in conquering the troublesome steer, with the captain attentively watching him, Shackaye remounted his horse, from which he had been thrown, and made all haste to the hills.

Wygwind and his warriors were ready, and indeed met him on his way thither. He took no part in the fight, but watched it from his refuge. When the last desperate struggle took place he spurred forward and joined the assailants.

The intention of the Comanches had been to shoot down Avon, but to spare his uncle, and it was curious that the very opposite result was effected. It was impossible that Captain Shirril should escape in the melee, though his foes meant only to shoot down the horses and slay his companion.

Shackaye arrived at the critical moment, when the helpless leader was being lifted upon the horse of Wygwind in front of him, and Avon lay senseless beneath the body of the mustang. The fact that Thunderbolt was still lying on the ground bleeding from his two flesh wounds led to the belief that he was mortally hurt, and no effort, therefore, was made to take him away.

Despite the savage nature of Shackaye, a feeling of gratitude had been roused within him by the act of Avon in saving him from the enraged steer. Whether the white youth was already dead or not he did not know, but he interposed a vigorous plea that no further harm should be done him. He had performed his own part so well that his prayers had some effect, while the necessity for urgent haste in leaving before the arrival of the cowboys, who were coming over the ridge, led to the flight of the whole party of Comanches without harming a hair of his head.

It will be readily understood that none of the warriors could hold any suspicion of Shackaye's loyalty toward them and their interests. When, therefore, the time came for the opening of the negotiations with the cowboys, the wounded and unarmed captain was left in charge of Shackaye, while the others went forward and maintained their places within reach of Wygwind and Richita, during their interview with Gleeson. This was simply prudence on their part, since they knew there was the best reason for believing the whites would instantly seize any advantage offered them.

Captain Shirril now did an exceedingly clever thing. He saw it was useless to appeal to Shackaye's kindly feelings toward himself, but he had noticed his vigorous efforts to save his nephew from harm, when he lay senseless under the body of the mustang. He saw that, despite the villainous nature of the youth, he entertained a strong regard for Avon, and upon that regard he wrought, by representing the sorrow that would come to him, if his uncle suffered further. He knew his heart would be broken and he could never, never recover from his woe.

To Shackaye's reply that the chief Wygwind meant to allow the friends of the prisoner to buy him back, Captain Shirril dwelt upon the impossibility of such a thing. He pressed his view of the case with such vigor that Shackaye, influenced alone by his gratitude to Avon, agreed to conduct the captain out of the hills, where he could make his way to camp undetected, provided the interview between Wygwind and the Texan was not ended in time for the Comanches to discover what had been done.

It need not be said that Captain Shirril seized the opportunity thus offered, and began limping forward, behind his guide, who encountered Avon Burnet a few minutes later.

The expectation was that Shackaye would return to camp with his two friends, since he would be assured of good treatment despite his former unfaithfulness, and especially since it was unsafe for him to remain among those to whom he could never justify his course of action. But after the captain was assisted on the back of Thunderbolt, and his nephew took his place, so as to help him in keeping his seat, the young Comanche obstinately refused.

They tarried to urge him to save his life by such a course, but he ended the argument by abruptly turning about and hurrying along the path, where he speedily vanished.

"There's no use of waiting," said the captain, starting Thunderbolt forward; "I can't understand his obduracy."

"He must be afraid of our men."

"But he knows the danger is a thousandfold greater among his own people--hark!"

The sharp report of a rifle rang among the hills behind them, accompanied by a wild cry of mortal pain.

"He has paid with his life for his friendship!" whispered the captain, instantly spurring up Thunderbolt to a dead run.

Such was the truth. Shackaye could offer no excuse for what he had done, nor did he attempt to do so. His act was discovered sooner than he anticipated, and he died at the hands of the infuriated chieftain Wygwind, before those whom he had saved were beyond reach of the sound which told of the completion of the tragedy.

The Comanches attempted pursuit, but the start obtained by the fugitives, brief as it was, sufficed, and they had not ridden far when they met the whole band of cowboys galloping to their defence. Gleeson and his comrades would have been glad had the red men ventured out upon the plain beyond the shelter of the hills, but Wygwind and his warriors were too wise to do so.

THE END.

No. 2 of the Forest and Prairie Series will be "The Path in the Ravine."

Transcriber's Notes:

Archaic and variable spelling, as well as inconsistency in hyphenation, has been preserved as printed in the original book except as indicated in this text with a dotted grey line under the change. Hover the mouse over the word and the original text will appear.

One missing punctuation mark was silently corrected, however, punctuation has not been changed to comply with modern conventions. The author's tribe names and spellings, such as Navajoe and Kioway, have been retained.

The subtitle for Chapter XXXI in the original text is slightly different from the Table of Contents and has been retained.

A List of Illustrations was added.

The following changes were made to the text.

Page 68: Was "were" in original text (and if the youth stayed **where** he was he must be trampled by the mustang)

Page 89: Was "as as" in original text (Your fut isn't **as** promise'us as mine)

Page 133: Was "Shirill" in original text (Supposing the dusky foe was coming for him, Captain **Shirril** rose to a half-sitting position)

Page 174: Was "tnming" in original text (upon whose backs they vaulted, and then, **turning** their heads toward the mesquite bush)

Page 240: Was "lef" in original text (the steed was thundering out of sight in the darkness, but he **let** fly three times in rapid succession)

Page 269: Was "Shirrel" in original text ("How are you making out, Baby?" asked Captain **Shirril**)