Golden Face
A Tale of the Wild West
Vol.I

By

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Freeditorial

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Chapter One

The Winter Cabin

“Snakes! if that ain’t the warwhoop, why then old Smokestack Bill never had to keep a bright lookout after his hair.”

Both inmates of the log cabin exchanged a meaning glance. Other movement made they none, save that each man extended an arm and reached down his Winchester rifle, which lay all ready to his hand on the heap of skins against which they were leaning. Within, the firelight glowed luridly on the burnished barrels of the weapons, hardly penetrating the gloomy corners of the hut. Without, the wild shrieking of the wind and the swish and sough of pine branches furiously tossing to the eddying gusts.

“Surely not,” was the reply, after a moment of attentive listening. “None of the reds would be abroad on such a night as this, let alone a warparty. Why they are no fonder of the cold than we, and tonight we are in for something tall in the way of blizzards.”

“Well, it’s a sight far down that I heard it,” went on the scout, shaking his head. “Whatever the night is up here, it may be as mild as milkpunch down on the plain. There’s scalping going forward somewheremind me.”

“If so, it’s far enough away. I must own to having heard nothing at all.”

For all answer the scout rose to his feet, placed a rough screen of antelope hide in front of the fire, and, cautiously opening the door, peered forth into the night. A whirl of keen, biting wind, fraught with particles of frozen snow which stung the face like quailshot, swept round the hut, filling it with smoke from the smouldering pinelogs; then both men stepped outside, closing the door behind them.

No, assuredly no man, red or white, would willingly be abroad that night. The icy blast, to which exposurebenighted on the open plainmeant, to the inexperienced, certain death, was increasing in violence, and even in the sheltered spot where the two men stood it was hardly bearable for many minutes at a time. The night, though tempestuous, was not blackly dark, and now and again as the snowscud scattered wildly before the wind, the mountain side opposite would stand unveiled; each tall crag towering up, a threatening fantastic shape, its rocky front dark against the driven whiteness of its base. And mingling with the roaring of the great pines and the occasional thunder of masses of snow dislodged from their boughs would be borne to the listeners’ ears, in eerie chorus, the weird dismal howling of wolves. It was a scene

of indescribable wildness and desolation, that upon which these two looked forth from their winter cabin in the lonely heart of the Black Hills.

But, beyond the gruesome cry of ravening beasts and the shriek of the gale, there came no sound, nothing to tell of the presence or movements of man more savage, more merciless than they.

“Snakes! but I can’t be out of it!” muttered the scout, as once more within their warm and cosy shanty they secured the door behind them. “Smokestack Bill ain’t the boy to be out of it over a matter of an Indian yelp. And he can tell a Sioux yelp from a Cheyenne yelp, and a Kiowa yelp from a Rapaho yelp, with a storefull of Government cornsacks over his head, and the whole lot from a blasted wolfs yelp, he can. And at any distance, too.”

“I think you are out of it, Bill, all the same;” answered his companion. “If only that, on the face of things, no consideration of scalps or plunder, or even shecaptives, would tempt the reds to face this little blow tonight.”

“Well, well! I don’t say you’re wrong, Vipan. You’ve served your Plainscraft to some purpose, you have. But if what I heard wasn’t the warwhoop somewhereI don’t care how farwhy then I shall begin to believe in what the Sioux say about these here mountains.”

“What do they say?”

“Why, they say these mountains are chock full of ghostsspirits of their chiefs and warriors who have been scalped after death, and are kept snoopin’ around here because they can’t get into the Happy HuntingGrounds. However, we’re all right here, and ’live or dead, the Sioux buck ’d have to reckon with a couple of Winchester rifles, who tried to make us otherwise.”

He who had been addressed as Vipan laughed goodhumouredly, as he tossed an armful of fat pine knots among the glowing logs, whence arose a blaze that lit up the hut as though for some festivity. And its glare affords us an admirable opportunity for a closer inspection of these two. The scout was a specimen of the best type of Western man. His rugged, weathertanned face was far from unhandsomefrankness, selfreliance, staunchness to his friends, intrepidity toward foes, might all be read there. His thick russet beard was becoming shot with grey, but though considerably on the wrong side of fifty, an observer would have credited him with ten years to the good, for his broad, muscular frame was as upright and elastic as if he were twentyfive. His companion, who might have been fifteen years his junior, was about as fine a type of AngloSaxon manhood as could be met with in many a day’s journey. Of tall, almost herculean, stature, he was without a suspicion of clumsiness; quick, active, straight as a dart. His features, regular as those of a Greeksculpture, were not,

however, of a confidenceinspiring nature, for their expression was cold and reticent, and the lower half of his face was hidden in a magnificent golden beard, sweeping to his belt. The dress of both men was the regulation tunic and leggings of dressed deerskin, of Indian manufacture, and profusely ornamented with beadwork and fringes; that of Vipan being adorned with scalplocks in addition.

These two were bound together by the closest friendship, but there was this difference between them. Whereas everyone knew Smokestack Bill, whether as friend or foe, from Monterey to the British line, who he was and all about him, not a soul knew exactly who Rupert Vipan was, nor did Rupert Vipan himself, by word or hint, evince the smallest disposition to enlighten them. That he was an Englishman was clear, his nationality he could not conceal. Not that he ever tried to, but on the other hand, he made no sort of attempt at airing it.

This winter cabin was a substantial log affair, run up by the two men with some degree of trouble and with an eye to comfort. Built in a hollow on the mountain face, it hung perched as an eyrie over a ravine some thousands of feet in depth, in such wise that its occupants could command every approach, and descry the advent of strangers, friendly or equivocal, long before the latter could reach them. Behind rose the jagged, almost precipitous mountain in a serrated ridge, and inaccessible from the other side; so that upon the whole the position was about as safe as any position could be in that insecure region, where every man took his rifle to bed with him, and slept with one eye open even then. The cabin was reared almost against the great trunk of a stately pine, whose spreading boughs contributed in no slight degree to its shelter. Not many yards distant stood another loghut, similar in design and dimensions; this had been the habitation of a French Canadian and his two Sioux squaws, but now stood deserted by its former owners.

Vipan flung himself on a soft thick bearskin, took a glowing stick from the fire, and pressed it against the bowl of a long Indian pipe.

“By Jove, Bill,” he said, blowing out a great cloud. “If this isn’t the true philosophy of life it’s first cousin to it. A tight, snug shanty, the wind roaring like a legion of devils outside, a blazing fire, abundance of rations and tobacco, any amount of good furs, andno bother in the world. Nothing to worry our soulcases about until it becomes time to go in and trade our pelts, which, thank Heaven, won’t be for two or three months.”

“That’s so,” was the answer. “Butdon’t you feel it kinder dull like? A chap like you, who’s knocked about the world. Seems to me a few months of a log cabin located away in the mountains, Can’t make it out at all.” And the scout broke off with a puzzled shake of the head.

“Look here, you unbelieving Jew,” said the other, with a laugh. “Even now you can’t get rid of the notion that I’ve left my country for my country’s good. Take my word for it, you’re wrong. There isn’t a corner of the habitable globe I couldn’t tumble up in every bit as safely as here.”

“I know that, old pard. Not that I’d care the tail of a yaller dog if it was t’other way about. We’ve hunted, and trapped, and ‘stood off’ the reds, quite years enough to know each other. And now I take it, when we’ve lit upon a barrelful of this gold stuff, you’ll be cantering off to Europe again by the first steamboat.”

“No, I think not. Except” and a curious look came into Vipan’s face. “Well, I don’t know. I’ve an old score to pay off. I want to be even with a certain person or two.”

“You do? Well now don’t you undertake anything foolish. You know better than I do that in your country you’ve got to wait until your throat’s already cut before drawing upon a man, and even then like enough you’ll be hung if you recover. Say, now, couldn’t you get the party or parties out here, and have a fair and square stand up? You’d make undertaker’s goods of ’em right enough, never fear.”

“No, no, my friend. That sort of reptile doesn’t face you in any such simple fashion. It strikes you through the lawyersthose beneficent products of our Christian civilisation,” replied the other, with a bitter laugh. “However, time enough to talk about that when we get to our prospecting again.”

“If we ever do get to it again. Custer’s expedition in the fall of last year didn’t go through here for fun, nor yet to look after the Sioux, though that was given as the colour of it. Why, they were prospectin’ all the time, and not for nothin’ neither. No, ‘Uncle Sam’ wants to have all the plums himself, and, likely enough, the hills’ll be full of cavalrymen soon as the snow melts. Then I reckon we shall have to git.”

“Well, the reds’ll be hoist with their own petard. It’s the old fable again. They call in ‘Uncle Sam’ to clear out the miners, and ‘Uncle Sam’ hustles them out as well. But we may not have to clear, after all, for it’s my belief that the moment the grass begins to sprout the whole Sioux nation will go upon the warpath.”

“Then we’d have to git all the slicker.”

“Not necessarily,” replied Vipan, coolly. “I’ve a notion we could stop here more snugly than ever.”

“Not unless we helped ’em,” said the scout, decidedly. “And that’s not to be done.”

“I don’t know that. Speaking for myself, I get on very well with the reds. They’ve got their faults, but then so have other people. Wait, I know what you’re going to

saythey're cruel and treacherous devils, and so forth. Well, cruelty is in their nature, and, by the way, is not unknown in civilisation. As for treachery, it strikes me, old chum, that we've got to keep about as brisk a lookout for a shot in the back in any of our Western townships as we have for our scalps in an Indian village."

The scout nodded assent; puffing away vigorously at his pipe as he stared into the glowing embers.

"For instance," went on the other, "when that chap 'grazed' me in the street at Denver while I wasn't looking, and would have put his next ball clean through me if you hadn't dropped him in his tracks so neatlythat was a nice example for a white man and a Christian to set, say, to our friends Mountain Cat, or Three Bears, or HoleinaTree, down yonder, wasn't it? But to come to the pointwhich is this: Supposing some fellow had rushed us while we were prospecting that place down on the Big Cheyenne in the summer and invited us to clear, I guess we should briskly have let him see a brace of muzzles. Eh?"

"Guess we should."

"Well, then, it amounts to the same thing here. We are bound to strike a good vein or two in the summerin fact, we have as good as struck it. All right. After all the risk and trouble we've stood to find it, Uncle Sam lopes in and serves us with a notice to quit. It isn't in reason that we should stand that."

"Well, you see, Vipan, we've no sort of title here. This is an Indian reservation, and Uncle Sam's bound by treaty to keep white men out. There are others here besides us, and I reckon in the summer the Hills'll be a bit crowded up with them. So we shall just have to chance it with the rest, and if we're moved, light out somewhere else."

"Well, I don't know that I shall. It's no part of good sense to chuck away the wealth lying at our very feet." And the speaker's splendid face wore a strangely reckless and excited look. "The scheme is for the Government to chouse the Indians out of this section of country by hook or by crookthen mining concessions will be granted to the wirepullers and their friends. And we shall see a series of miscellaneous frauds blossoming into millionaires on the strength of our discoveries."

"And are you so keen on this gold, Vipan? Ah I reckon you're hankering after Europe again, but I judge you'll be no happier when you get there."

The scout's tone was quiet, regretful, almost upbraiding. The other's philosophy was to end in this, then?

"It isn't exactly that," was the answer, moodily, and after a pause. "But I don't see the force of being 'done.' I never did see it; perhaps that's why I'm out here now.

However, the Sioux won't stand any more 'treaties.' They'll fight for certain. Red Cloud isn't the man to forget the ignominious thrashing he gave Uncle Sam in '66 and '67, and, by God, if it comes to ousting us I'll be shot if I won't cut in on his side."

"I reckon that blunder won't be repeated. If the cavalrymen had been properly armed; armed as they are now, with Spencer's and Henry's instead of with the sickest old muzzleloading firesticks and a round and a half of ammunition per man, Red Cloud would have been soundly whipped at Fort Phil Kearney 'stead of t'other way about."

"Possibly. As things are, however, he carried his point. And there's Sitting Bull, for instance; he's been holding the Powder River country these years. Why don't they interfere with him? No, you may depend upon it, a war with the whole Sioux nation backed by the Indian Department, won't suit the Govermental book. 'Uncle Sam' will cave inall the other prospectors will be cleared out of the Hills, exceptexcept ourselves."

"Why except ourselves?" said the scout, quietly, though he was not a little astonished and dismayed at his friend and comrade's hardlysuppressed excitement.

"We stand well with the chiefs. Look here, old man: I'd wager my scalp against a pipe of Richmond plugif I wasn't as bald as a billiard ball, that isthat I make myself so necessary to them that they'll be only too glad to let us 'mine' as long as we choose to stay here. Just thinkthe stuff is all there and only waiting to be picked upjust think if we were to go in on the quiet, loaded up with solid nuggets and dust instead of a few wretched pelts. Why, man, we are made for life. The reds could put us in the way of becoming millionaires, merely in exchange for our advicenot necessarily our rifles, mind." And the speaker's eyes flashed excitedly over the idea.

Chapter Two.

A Nocturnal Visitor.

No idea is more repellent to the mind of a genuine Western man than that of siding with Indians against his own colour. Contested almost step by step, the opening up of the vast continent supplies one long record of hideous atrocities committed by the savage, regardless of age, sex, or good faith; and stern, and not invariably discriminate, reprisals on the part of the dwellers on the frontier. It follows, therefore, that the racehatred existing between the white man and his treacherous and crafty red neighbour will hardly bear exaggeration. Thus it is not surprising that Smokestack Bill should receive his reckless companion's daredevil scheme with concern and dismay. Indeed, had any other man mooted such an idea, the honest scout's concern would have found vent in words of indignant horror.

There was silence in the hut for a few minutes. Both men, lounging back on their comfortable furs, were busy with their respective reflections. Now and again a fiercer gust than usual would shake the whole structure, and as the doleful howling of the wolves sounded very near the door, the horses in the other compartmentwhich was used as a stablewould snort uneasily and paw the ground.

"You don't know Indians even yet, Vipan," said Smokestack Bill at length, speaking gravely, "else you'd never undertake to help them, even by advice, in butchering and outraging helpless women, let alone the men, though they can better look after themselves. No, you don't know the red devils, take my word for it."

"I had a notion I did," was the hard reply. "As for that 'helpless woman' ticket, I won't vote on it, Bill, old man. There's no such thing as a 'helpless' woman; at least, I never met with such an article, and I used to be reckoned a tolerably good judge of that breed of cattle, too"

His words were cut short. The dog uttered a savage growl, then sprang towards the door, barking. Each man coolly reached for his rifle, but that was all.

"I knew I wasn't out of it," muttered the scout, more to himself than to his hearer. "Smokestack Bill knew the warwhoop when he heard it. He ain't no 'tenderfoot,' he ain't."

SwishWhirr! The fierce blast shrieked around the lonely cabin. Its inmates having partially quieted the dog, were listening intently. Nothing could they hear beyond the booming of the tempest, which, unheeded in their conversation, had burst upon them with redoubled force.

“Only a grizzly that he hears,” said Vipan, in a low tone. “No red would be out tonight.”

Scarcely had he spoken than the loud, longdrawn howl of a wolf sounded forth, so near as to seem at their very door. Then the hoofstrokes of an unshod horse, and a light tap against the strong framework.

“It’s all straight. I thought I knew the yelp,” said the scout. Then he unhesitatingly slid back the strong iron bolts which secured the door, and admitted a single Indian.

The new comer was a tall, martiallooking young warrior, who, as he slid down the snowbesprinkled and gaudycoloured blanket which had enshrouded his head, stood before them in the ordinary Indian dress. The collar of his tunic was of bears’ claws, and among the scalplocks which fringed his leggings were several of silky fair hair. But for three thin lines of crimson crossing his face, and a vertical one from forehead to throat, he wore no paint, and from his scalplock dangled three long eaglefeathers stained black, their ends being gathered into tufts dyed a bright vermilion. For arms he carried a short bow, highly ornamented, and a quiver of wolfskin, the latter adorned with the grinning jaws of its original owner, and in his belt a revolver and bowie knife. This warlike personage advanced to Smokestack Bill, and shook him by the hand effusively. Then, turning to Vipan, he broke into a broad grin and ejaculated

“Hello, George!”

He thus unceremoniously addressed made no reply, but a cold, contemptuous look came into his eyes. Then he quietly said:

“Do the Ogallalla dance the SunDance (Note 1) in winter?”

“Ha!” said the Indian, emphatically, grasping at once the other’s meaning.

“When I was lost in the Ogallalla villages, all the warriors knew me,” went on Vipan, scathingly. “There may have been boys who have become warriors since.”

“Ha!”

The Indian was not a little astonished. This white man spoke the Dahcotah language fluently. He was also not a little angry, and his eyes flashed.

“You are not of the race of those around us,” he said, “not of the race of The Beaver,” turning to the scout. “Your great chief is George.”

“Don’t get mad, Vipan,” said Smokestack Bill, hastening to explain. “He only means that you’re an Englishman. It’ll take generations to get out of these fellers’ heads that Englishmen are still ruled by King George.”

Vipan laughed drily. He had given this cheeky young buck an appropriate setting down. Whether or no it was taken in good part was a matter of indifference to him.

Meanwhile, the scout, having put on a fresh brew of steaming coffee, threw down a fur in front of the fire, and the warrior, taking the pipe which had been prepared for him, sat in silence, puffing out the fragrant smoke in great volumes.

This done, he drew his knife, and proceeded to fall to on some deer ribs provided by his entertainers. The latter, meanwhile, smoked tranquilly on, putting no question, and evincing no curiosity as to the object of his visit. At length, his appetite appeased, the warrior wiped his knife on the sole of his mocassin, returned it to its sheath, and throwing himself back luxuriously, ejaculated

“Good!”

To the two white men, the visit of one or more of their red brethren was a frequent occurrence; an incident of no moment whatever. They were accustomed to visits from Indians, but somehow both felt that the arrival of this young warrior had a purpose underlying it.

The pipe having been ceremonially lighted and passed round the circle, the guest was the first to break the silence.

“It is long since War Wolf has looked upon the face of The Beaver” (Smokestack Bill’s Indian name), “or listened to the wise words which fall from his lips. As soon as War Wolf heard that The Beaver had built his winter lodge here, he leaped on his pony and wasted not a moment to come and smoke with his white brothers.”

Vipan, listening, could have spluttered with sardonic laughter. Though he had never seen him before, he knew the speaker by nameknew him to be, moreover, one of the most unscrupulous and reckless young desperadoes of the tribe, whose hatred of the whites was only equalled by their detestation of him. But he moved not a muscle.

“It is long, indeed,” answered the scout. “War Wolf must have journeyed far not to know, or not to have heard of Golden Face,” and he turned slightly to his friend as if effecting an introduction.

By this sobriquet the latter was known among the different clans of the Dahcotah or Sioux, obviously bestowed upon him by reason of his magnificent golden beard.

“The name of Golden Face is not strange, for it is not seldom on the lips of the chiefs of our nation,” continued the savage with a graceful inclination towards Vipan. “The hearts of the Mehneaska (Americans) are not good towards us, but our hearts are always good towards Golden Face and his friend The Beaver. To visit them, War Wolf has journeyed far.”

“Do the Ogallalla (a subdivision or clan of the Sioux nation) send out warparties in winter time?” asked the scout, innocently. But the question, harmless and apparently devoid of point as it was, conveyed to his hearer its full meaning. The eyes of the savage flashed, and his whole countenance seemed to light up with pride.

“Why should I tell lies?” he said. “Yes, I have been upon the warpath, but not here. Yonder,” with a superb sweep of his hand in a westerly direction. “Yonder, far away, I have struck the enemies of my race, who come stealing up with false words and many rifles, to possess the landour landthe land of the Dahcotah. Why should I tell lies? Am I not a warrior? But my tongue is straight; and my heart is good towards Golden Face and his friend The Beaver.”

Vipan, an attentive observer of every word, every detail, noted two things: one, the boldness of this young warrior in thus avowing, contrary to the caution of his race, that he had actually just returned from one of those merciless forays which the frontier people at that period had every reason to fear and dread; the other, that having twice, so to say, bracketted their names, the Indian had in each instance mentioned his own first. In his then frame of mind the circumstance struck him as significant.

After a good deal more of this kind of talk, safeguarded by the adroit fencing and beating around the bush with which the savage of whatever race approaches a communication of consequence, it transpired that War Wolf was the bearer of a message from the chiefs of his nation. There had been war between them and the whites; now, however, they wished for peace. Red Cloud and some others were desirous of proceeding to Washington in order to effect some friendly arrangement with the Great Father. There were many white men in their country, but their ways were not straight. The chiefs distrusted them. But Golden Face and The Beaver were their brothers. Had they not lived in amity in their midst all the winter? Their hearts were good towards them, and they would fain smoke the pipe once more with their white brothers before leaving home. To that end, therefore, they invited Golden Face and The Beaver to visit them at their village without delay, in fact, to return in company with War Wolf, the bearer of the message.

To this Bill replied, after some moments of solemn silence only broken by the puffpuff of the pipes, that he and his friend desired nothing better. It would give them infinite pleasure to pay a visit to their red brethren, and to the great chiefs of the Dahcotah nation especially. But it was midwinter. The weather was uncertain.

Before undertaking a journey which would entail so long an absence from home, he and his friend must sleep upon the proposal and consult together. In the morning War Wolf should have his answer. Either they would return with him in person, or provide him with a suitable message to carry back to the chiefs.

In social matters, still less in diplomatic, Indians are never in a hurry. Had the two white men agreed there and then upon what their course should be, they would have suffered in War Wolfs estimation. The answer was precisely what he had expected.

“It is well,” he said. “The wisdom of The Beaver will not be overclouded in the morning, nor will the desire of Golden Face to meet his friends be in any way lessened.”

While this talk was progressing, Vipan’s eye had lighted upon an object which set him thinking. It was a small objecta very small object, so minute indeed that nine persons out of ten would never have noticed it at all. But it was an object of ominous moment, for it was nothing less than a spot of fresh blood; and it had fallen on the warrior’s leggings, just below the fringe of his tunic. Putting two and two together, it could mean nothing more nor less than a concealed scalp.

“Bill was right,” he thought. “Bill was right, and I was an ass. He did hear the warwhoop right enough. I wonder what unlucky devil lost in the storm this buck could have overhauled and struck down?”

The discovery rendered him wary, not that a childlike ingenuousness was ever among Vipan’s faults. But he resolved to keep his weather eye open, and if he must sleep, to do so with that reliable orbit ever brought to bear upon their pleasantspeaking guest.

Soon profound silence reigned within the log cabin, broken only by the subdued, regular breathing of the sleepers, or the occasional stir of the glowing embers. The tempest had lulled, but, as hour followed hour, the voices of the weird waste were borne upon the night in varied and startling cadence; the howling of wolves, the catlike scream of the panther among the overhanging crags, the responsive hooting of owls beneath the thick blackness of the great pine forests, and once, the fierce snorting growl of a grizzly, so near that the formidable monster seemed even to be snuffing under the very door.

The two owners of the cabin are fast asleep; Vipan with his blanket rolled round his head. The scout, however, is lying on his back, and his blanket has partially slipped off, as though he had found its weight too burdensome. The three are lying with their feet to the fire in fanshaped formation from it: the scout in the centre, their guest on the outside. The latter, too, is fast asleep.

Is? Surely not. Unless a man can be said to sleep with both eyes open.

A halfcharred log fell into the embers, raising a small spluttering flame. This flame glowed on the fierce orbs of the red warrior. For a fraction of a second it glowed on something else, before he hid his hand within his blanket. But the still, steady breathing of the savage was that of a sleeping man.

“Tuwhoowhoowhoo!”

Nothing is more dismal than the hoot of an owl in the dead silent night. That owl is very near; almost upon the tree overhead. His voice must have had a disturbing effect upon the dreams of the red man, for in some unaccountable fashion the distance between the latter and the sleeping scout has diminished by about half. Yet the white man has not moved.

“Tuwhoowhoowhoo!”

That time it is nearer still. Noiseless, and with a serpentine glide, the head of the savage warrior is reared from the ground, in the semigloom resembling the hideous head of some striped and crested snake, and in the dilated eyeball there is a fierce scintillation.

The attitude is one of intense, concentrated listening.

Honest Bill slumbers peacefully on. That hideous head raised over him, scarce half a dozen yards distant, is suggestive of nightmare personified. Yet its owner is his guest, who has eaten at his fireside, and now rests beneath his roof. Why should his slumbers be disturbed?

“Tuwhoowhoowhoo!”

Again that doleful cry. Butlook now! What deed of dark treachery is this stealthy savage about to perpetrate? He is a yard nearer his sleeping host, and his right hand grips a long keen knife. Ah! will nothing warn the sleeper?

The murderous barbarian rises to his knees, and his blanket noiselessly slips off. And at that moment through the intervening space of gloom comes a low distinct whisper:

“Are the dreams of War Wolf bad, that he moves so far in his sleep?”

Vipan has not moved. His blanket is still rolled round his head, but the fierce Indian, darting his keen glance in the direction of the voice, espies an object protruding from the speaker’s blanket that was not there when last he looked. It is about three inches of a revolver barrel, and it is covering him. No fresh scalp or scalps for him tonight.

Let it not be supposed for a moment that the treacherous villain was in any way abashed. It was not in him. He merely replied, pleasantly:

“NoI cannot sleep. I am hungry again, for I have ridden far, and it is now near morning. I would have found the ‘chuck’ (food) without disturbing Golden Face and The Beaver, who are very weary, and sleep well.”

And, knife in hand, he deliberately stepped over to the corner where hung the carcase from which they had feasted the evening before, and cutting off a portion, placed it upon the coals to broil.

Vipan could not but admire the cool readiness of both reply and action. He knew that but for his own wariness, either his friend or himselfpossibly bothwould by now be entering the Happy HuntingGrounds, yet from his bloodthirsty and treacherous guest he apprehended no further aggressionthat night at any rate. The surprise had failed abjectly; the enemy was on the alert; it was not in Indian nature to make a second attempt under all the circumstances. Moreover, he recognised in the incident a mere passing impulse of ferocity, moving the savage at the sight of these two victims ready,as he imaginedfor the knife, combined with the overmastering temptation to the young warrior to bear back to his village the scalps of two white menmen of considerable renown, tootaken by himself, alone and singlehanded. So he calmly laid down again as if nothing had happened.

The scout, who had awakened at the first sound of voices, and who took in at a glance the whole situation, fully equalled his friend’s coolness.

“Snakes!” he remarked, “I had a pesky bad dream. Dreamt I was just goin’ to draw on some feller, when I awoke.”

“The Beaver has slain many enemies,” rejoined War Wolf, nodding his head approvingly. “When a man has taken scalps, he is prompt to take more, even in his dreams.”

“And to lose his own, you pison young skunk!” thought Smokestack Bill, in reply to this. “I’ll be even with you one day, see if I don’t.”

But the “pison young skunk,” unenlightened as to this event of the future, merely nodded pleasantly as he sat by the fire, knife in hand, assimilating his juicy venison steak with the utmost complacency.

Note 1. Part of the initiatory festival during which, by virtue of undergoing various forms of ghastly selftorture, the growingup boys are admitted among the ranks of the warriors.

Chapter Three.

A Tragedy of the Wild West.

It may seem strange that on the face of so forcible a demonstration of the treacherous disposition of their guest, yet a couple of hours after sunrise should see our friends starting in his company for the Sioux villages. But the incident of the night, which might have had so tragic a termination, impressed these men not one whit. It was "all in the day's journey," they said, while admitting that they had been a trifle too confiding. That, however, was a fault easily remedied. But to men who habitually carry their lives in their hands, one peril more or less matters nothing.

As they threaded the mountain defiles nothing could be more good humoured and genial than the young warrior's manner. He chatted and laughed, sang snatches of songs in a high nasal key, bantered Vipan on the poor condition of his nag, and challenged him to a race as soon as they were domiciled in the village. He wanted to know why Golden Face had not followed the example of other white men in the matter of squaws. Red Cloud's village could furnish some famous beauties. Golden Face was richhe could take his choice. There would be great festivities in his honour, and the prettiest girls would be only too glad to be chosen by a man of his prowess. Thus the genial War Wolfwho amid shouts of laughter extended, or, to be more accurate, "broadened" this vein of fun. Now all this was very jolly, very entertaining; but on one point our two friends were of the same mind. Under no circumstances whatever should the sportive young barbarian be suffered to ride behind. When he stopped, they stopped; and one or two crafty attempts which he made to fall back, they, with equal deftness, resolutely defeated.

It was a lovely morning, crisp and clear. A thin layer of snow lay around, diminishing as the altitude decreased. The frosted pines sparkling in the sun, the great crags towering up to the liquid blue; here the ragged edges of a cliff shooting into the heavens, there a long narrow cañon, whose appalling depth might well make the wayfarer's head swim as his horse slipped and stumbled along the rugged track which skirted its dizzy brinkall this afforded a scene of varied grandeur, which, with the strong spice of danger thrown in, was calculated to set the blood of the adventurously disposed in a tingle.

They struck into a tortuous defile, whose lofty sandstone walls almost shut out the light of day. High above, soaring in circles, a couple of eagles followed the trio, uttering a harsh yell, but otherwise the voices of Nature were still. Vipan found an opportunity of chaffing the Indian, whom he challenged to bring down one or both of the birds with his bowa proposal which was met by the suggestion that he could do so with a riflewould Golden Face let him try with his? Then a wide valley, into which boulders and rocks seemed to have been hurled in lavish confusion. Oak and box elder, dark funereal pines and naked spruce, lay dotted in clumps about a level

meadow, through which rushed a halffrozen stream. Suddenly a white shape darted through the leafless brake.

Flashbang! A snap shot though.

“Get to heel, Shanks! Darn yer hide, you’ve become so tarnation fat and skeery you ain’t worth a little cuss, you ain’t,” cried the scout, dropping the smoking muzzle of his piece. The dog thus apostrophised was a mangy and utterly useless Indian cur, which the scout had picked up in the woods, and which Vipan was continually urging upon him to shoot. “Sho! you gavorting jackrabbit! A white wolf ’ll make a mouthful of you. And he ain’t touched,” went on Shanks’s master, disgustedly, as the dog slunk to heel. Better not to fire at all than to miss in the presence of an Indian. Then something seemed to strike him.

A raven rose from the ground, uttering a plethoric croak, then another, and the pair flopped heavily up to a limb overhead. A plunge or two through the leafless thicket and they were in a small open space. The wolfthe ravenseach had been disturbed in a hideous repast. There, in the midst of their ravaged camp, the remnants of its fire strewn around them, lay the corpses of two white men, halfcharred, frightfully mangled, andscalped.

Looking upon this doleful spectacle the scout was able to locate the warwhoop he had heard the night before. Vipan, for his own part, cherished a shrewd conviction that he could restore the missing scalpsthough too latemerely by the simple process of stretching forth an arm. But the matter was no concern of his. On the other hand, to seize and hold on to the chance of monopolising the search after the precious metal here, preeminently was.

The unfortunate men were evidently miners. The implements of their calling lay around, together with their modest baggage; but their weapons had disappeared. Both had been shot to death with arrows, and that at very close quarters, probably while they were asleep. They were rough looking fellows, one redhaired and redbearded, the other hatchetfaced, but both with skins tanned to parchment colour.

“Reckon we’ll give the poor boys a hoist under the sod,” said the scout, shortly. Then as for a moment his steady gaze met that of War Wolf, the latter said:

“Wagh! Bad Indians are about. The white men were too reckless. When they come to find wealth in the country of the Dahcotah they should sleep warily. The Beaver is going to bury his friends. Good. When the shadow is there” (about half an hour) “War Wolf will return.”

If there was the faintest satirical gleam in the warrior’s eyes as he uttered these words, there would be nothing gained by noticing it. Smokestack Bill, seizing one of

the murdered men's picks, began to dig, lustily and in silence, every now and again shaking his head ominously. Vipan, who thought this voluntary sextonship a bore, lent a hand to oblige his friend. These two unknown miners were no more his kin than the savage Sioux who had slain them. He had no kin. All the world was an enemy, to be turned to advantage when possible, and defeated at any rate when not. Had he been alone he would merely have looked, and passed on his way.

By half an hour a hole of adequate dimensions received the two mangled and mutilated corpses. Then, having trodden down the last spadeful of earth, the scout, with a knife, marked a couple of rude crosses upon the trunk of the nearest tree. His companion, consistently callous, said nothing.

As they turned to leave this lonely grave in the wilderness, they were rejoined by the young warrior. He had not been idle. A brace of ruffgrouse, shot by arrows, dangled from his saddle, and the three moved forward in silence, seeking a suitable midday camp.

Chapter Four.

The “Squarson” of LantHanger.

The Rev. Dudley Vallance was “squarson” of Lant with LantHanger, in the county of Brackenshire, England.

Know, O reader, unversed in the compound mysteries of Mr Lewis Carroll, that the above is a contraction of the words squireparson.

On the face of this assertion it is perhaps superfluous to state that the Rev. Dudley was a manifest failure in both capacitiessuperfluous because if this is not invariably the rule under similar circumstances, the exceptions are so rare as to be wellnigh phenomenal.

As squire he was a failure, for he had a pettifogging mind. He was not averse to an occasional bit of sharp practice in his dealings, which would have been creditable to an attorney after the order of Quirk, Gammon, and Snap. Moreover, he was lacking in geniality, and for field sports he cared not a rush.

As parson he was a failure; for so intent was he upon the things of this world that he had neither time nor inclination to inspire his parishioners with any particular hankering after the things of the next. Now this need not seem strange, or even severe, since the fiat has gone forth from the lips of the highest of authorities“Ye cannot serve God and Mammon.”

In aspect the Rev. Dudley was tall and lank. He had a very long nose and a very long beard. Furthermore, he had rather shifty eyes and a normally absent manner. When not absentminded, the latter was suave and purring. His age was about fifty.

In the matter of progeny he was blessed with a fair quiverfuleight to witof whom seven were daughters. His spouse was nothing if not fully alive to a sense of her position. This she imagined to consist mainly in a passion for precedence, gossip, cliquerie, and deft mischiefmaking at secondhand. If she fell short in one thing it was in that aggressive and domineering fussiness habitually inseparable from the type, but this was only because she lacked the requisite energy. Howbeit, she never forgot that she was “Squarsina” of Lant with LantHangerif we may be allowed to coin a word. This was not wholly unnecessary, for others were wont to lose sight of the fact.

Lant Hallcommonly abbreviated to Lantthe abode of the Vallances, was rather an ugly house; squat, staringly modern, and hideously embattled in sham castellated style. But it was charmingly situateddropped, as it were, upon the side of a hill, whose vivid green slope, falling to a large sheet of ornamental water, was alive with the branching antlers of many deer. Overshadowing the house lay a steep wooded

acclivityor hangerat one end of which lay the village, whence the name of the latter. “A sweetly pretty, peaceful spot,” gushed the visitor, or the tourist driving through it; “a nook to end one’s days in!”

Scenically, the prospect was enchanting. On the one hand, line upon line of wooded hills fed the eye as far as that organ cared to roam, on the other, softly undulating pastures, with snug farmhouses and peeping cottages here and there. Skirting the village on one side, the limpid waters of the Lant sparkled and swirled beneath the old grey bridgewhich bore the Vallance armsand then plunged on, to lose themselves in a mile of dark fir wood, where the big trout lay and fattened. A lovely champaign, in sooth; small wonder that the aesthetic stranger should be smitten with a desire to end his days in so sweet a spot.

But this sweet spot had its disadvantages. It was frightfully out of the way, being five miles from the nearest railway station, and that on a branch line. The necessaries of life were only to be obtained with difficulty, and farm and dairy produce was expensive, and in supply, precarious. There was one butcher, and no baker, and a postoffice chiefly noteworthy for the blundering wherewith Her Majesty’s mails were received and dispensed. Moreover, the Brackenshire folk were not of a particularly pleasant rustic type. They were very “independent,” which is to say they did what seemed right in their own eyes, irrespective of such little matters as honesty or square dealing. They were, as a rule, incapable of speaking the truth, except accidentally, and they had very long tongues. Suffice it briefly to say, they excelled in the low and sordid cunning which usually characterises the simplehearted rustic of whatever county.

The Rev. Dudley Vallance had a shibboleth which he never wearied of pronouncing. This was it:County Society.

Now, at LantHanger this article, within anything like the accepted meaning of the term, did not exist.

It was a crying want, and like all such so capable, it must be supplied. Our “squarson” set to work to supply it by a simple device. He went into bricks and mortar.

His jerrybuilt “bijou residences,” and tinkeredup rustic cottages soon let, and let comfortablyfor him. Not so for the tenants, however, for the honest Brackenshire craftsmen “did” their employer most thoroughly, and the luckless householders found themselves let in for all sorts of horrors they had never bargained for. Thus the Rev. Dudley “did” as he was “done.” But he got his “County Society.”

This, at the period with which we have to deal, in the year of grace 1875, consisted of a sprinkling of maiden ladies and clergymen’s relicts, who leased the delectable dwellings aforesaid; a retired jerrybuilder, who knew better than to do anything of

the kind; the village doctor; a few neighbouring vicars of infinitesimal intellect; a couple of squireens evolved from three generations of farmers, and, lastly, Mr Santorex of Elmcote; all of whom, with the notable exception of the lastnamed, constituted an array of satellites revolving round the centre planet, the Rev. Dudley himself.

The Lant property, though comparatively small, was a snug possession. Aesthetically a fair domain, it was all of it good land, and the five to six thousand acres composing it all let well. Wholly unencumbered by mortgages or annuity charges, it was estimated to bring in about 7,000 pounds a year, so that in reckoning the present incumbent a fortunate man, the neighbourhood was not far wrong. There were, however, halfforgotten hints, which the said neighbourhood would now and again let drophints not exactly to the credit of the present squire. For it was well known that the Rev. Dudley had inherited Lant from his uncle, not his father, and that this uncle's son was still living.

Chapter Five.

The Santorexes of Elmcote.

“Now, Chickie, hurry up with the oats, and we’ll go and try for a brace of trout before the sun blazes out.”

“Mercy on us, do let the child finish her breakfast! It’s bad enough being obliged to have it twice laid, without being hurried to death, one would think.”

But the “child” stands in no need of the maternaland querulouschampionship.

“I’m ready, father,” she cries, pushing her chair back.

“Right. Get on a hat then,” is the reply, in a prompt and decisive, but not ungenial tone, and the head which had been thrust through the partially opened door disappears.

“That’s your father all over,” continued the maternal and querulous voice. “How does he know I don’t want you at home this morning? But no, that doesn’t matter a pin. I may be left to toil and slave, cooped up in the house, while everybody else is frisking about the fields all day long, fishing and what not”

“But, mother, you don’t really want me, do you?”

”And then your father must needs come down so early, and, of course, wants his breakfast at once, and then it has to be brought on twice; and he must flurry and fidget everyone else into the bargain. Want you? No, child, I don’t want you. Go away and catch some fish. If I did want you, that wouldn’t count while your father didoh, no.”

Yseulte Santorex made no reply. She did the best thing possiblehowever, she kissed and coaxed the discontented matron, and took a prompt opportunity of escaping.

One might search far and wide before meeting with a more beautiful girl. Rather above the medium height, and of finely formed frame, it needed not the smallness of her perfectly shaped hands and the artistic regularity of her features to stamp her as thoroughbred. It was sufficient to note the upright poise of her head, and the straight glance of her grand blue eyes, but surer hallmark still, she was blessed with a beautifully modulated voice. When we add that she possessed a generous allowance of dark brown hair, rippling into gold, we claim to have justified our opening statement concerning her. Her age at this time was twenty; as for her disposition, well, reader, you must find that out for yourself in the due development of this narrative.

Losing no more time than was necessary to fling on a wide straw hat, the girl joined her father in the hall, where he was waiting a little impatientlyrod, basket, landingnet, all ready.

“You shall land the first fish, Chickie,” he said, as they started. “It isn’t worth while taking a rod apiece, we shall have too little time,” with a glance upward at the clouded sky which seemed disposed to clear every moment.

“I oughtn’t to tax your selfdenial so severely, dear,” answered the girl, “when I know you’re dying to get at the river yourself.”

“Selfdenial, eh? Thing the preachers strongly recommend, andalways practise. Beginning here,” with a slight indicating nod.

Yseulte laughed. She knew her father’s opinion of his spiritual pastorin point of fact, shared it.

“I knew a man once who used to say that selfabnegation was a thing not far removed from the philosopher’s stone. Its indulgence inspired him with absolute indifference to life and the ills thereof, and at the same time with a magnificent contempt for the poor creatures for whose benefit he practised it.”

“Very good philosophy, father. But the compensation for foregoing the delights of having one’s own way is not great.”

“My dear girl, that depends. The key to the above exposition lies in the fact that that individual never had a chance of getting his own way. So he made a virtue of necessityan art which, though much talked about, is seldom cultivated.”

“Your friend was a humbug, father,” was the laughing reply. “A doleful humbug, and no philosopher at all.”

“Eh? The effrontery of the rising generationcommonly called in the vulgar tonguenerve! A humbug! So that’s your opinion, is it, young woman?”

“Yes, it is,” she answered decisively, her blue eyes dancing.

“Pheww! Nothing like having your own opinion, and sticking to it,” was all he said, with a dry chuckle. Then he subsided into silence, whistling meditatively, as if pondering over the whimsicality he had just propounded, or contemplating a fresh one. These same whimsicalities, by the way, were continually cropping up in Mr Santorex’ conversation, to the no small confusion of his acquaintance, who never could quite make out whether he was in jest or earnest, to the delight of his satirical

soul. To the infinitesimal intellects of his neighboursthe surrounding vicars, for instancehe was a conversational nightmare. They voted him dangerous, even as their kind so votes everything which happens to be incomprehensible to its own subtle ken. What sort of training could it be for a young girl just growing to womanhood to have such a man for a fatherto take in his pernicious views and ideas as part of her education, as it were? And herein the surrounding vicaresses were at one with their lords. Stop! Their what? We mean theirchattels.

But Yseulte herself laughed their horror to scorn. Her keen perceptions detected it in a moment, and she would occasionally visit its expression with a strong spice of hereditary satire. She could not remember the time when her father had treated her otherwise than as a rational and accountable being, and the time when he should cease to do so would never comeof that she was persuaded. Nor need it be inferred that she was “strongminded,” “advanced,” or aspiring in any way to the “blue.” Far from it. She had plenty of character, but withal she was a very sweet, lovable, eventempered, and thoroughly sensible girl.

There were two other children besides herselfhad been, rather, for one had lain in Lant churchyard this last ten years. The other, and eldest, was cattleranching in the Far West, and doing fairly well.

Mr Santorex was unquestionably a finelooking man. A broad, lofty brow, straight features, and firm, clear eyes, imparted to his face a very decided expression, which his method of speech confirmed. He was of Spanish origin, a fact of which he was secretly proud; for although Anglicised, even to his name, for several generations, yet in direct lineage he could trace back to one of the very oldest and noblest families of Spain.

Though now in easy circumstances, not to say wealthy, he had not always been so. During the score of years he had lived at LantHanger, about half of that period had been spent in dire povertya period fraught with experiences which had left a more than bitter taste in his mouth as regarded his neighbours and surroundings generally, and the Rev. Dudley Vallance in particular. Then the tide had turnedhad turned just in the nick of time. A small property which he held in the north of Spain, and which had hitherto furnished him with the scantiest means of subsistence, suddenly became enormously valuable as a field of mineral wealth.

With his changed circumstances Mr Santorex did not shake off the dust of LantHanger from his shoes. He had become in a way accustomed to the place, and was fond of the country, if not of the people. So he promptly leased Elmcote, a snug country box picturesquely perched on the hillside overlooking the valley of the Lant, and having moved in, sat down grimly to enjoy the impending joke.

He had not long to wait. LantHanger opened wide its arms, and fairly trod on its own heels in its eagerness to make much of the new “millionaire,” whom, in his indigent days, it had so consistently coldshouldered as a disagreeable and highly undesirable sort of neighbour. Next to Lant Hall itself, Elmcote was the most important house in the parish, and its tenant had always been the most important personage. So “County Society,” following the example of its head and cornerstone, the Rev. Dudley Vallance, metaphorically chucked up its hat and hoorayed over its acquisition.

Down by the riverside this warm spring morning, Yseulte, never so happy as when engaged in this, her favourite sport, was wielding her flyrod with skill and efficiency, as many a gleaming and speckled trophy lying in her creel served to show.

The movement became her well. Every curve of her symmetrical form was brought out by the graceful exercise. Her father, standing well back from the bank, watched her with critical approval. True to his character as a man of ideas, he almost forgot the object of the present undertaking in his admiration for his beautiful daughter, and his thoughts, thus started, went off at express speed. What a lovely girl she was growinghad grown, indeed. What was to be her destiny in life? She must make a good match of course, not throw herself away upon any clodhopper in this wretched hole. That young lout, Geoffrey Vallance, was always mooning in calflike fashion about her. Not good enough. Oh, no; nothing like. Seven thousand a year unencumbered was hardly to be sneezed at; still, she must not throw herself away on any such unlicked cub. He fancied he could do better for her in putting her through a London seasonmuch better. And then came an uneasy and desolating stirring of even his philosophical pulses at the thought of parting with her. He was an undemonstrative manundemonstrative even to coldness. He made at no time any great show of affection. He had long since learned that affection, like cash, was an article far too easily thrown away. But there was one living thing for which, deep down in his heart of hearts, he cherished a vivid and warm love, and that was this beautiful and companionable daughter of his.

“Never mind about me, dear. I think I won’t throw a fly this morning,” he said, as the girl began insisting that he should take a turn, there being only one rod between them. “Besides, it’s about time to knock off altogether. The sun is coming out far too brightly for many more rises.”

“Father,” said the girl, as she took her fishingrod to pieces, “I can’t let you shirk that question any longer. Am I to pay that visit to George’s ranche this summer or not?”

“Why, you adventurous Chickie, you will be scalped by Indians, tossed by mad buffaloes, bolted with by wild horses. Heaven knows what. Hallo! Enter Geoffry Plantagenet. He seems in a hurry.”

“No! Where? Oh, what a nuisance!”

Following her father's glance, Yseulte descried a male figure crossing the stile which led into the field where they were sitting, and recognised young Vallance, who between themselves was known by the above nickname. He seemed, indeed, in a desperate hurry, judging from the alacrity wherewith he skipped over the said stile and hastened to put a goodly space of ground between it and himself before looking back. A low, rumbling noise, something between a growl and a moan, reached their ears, and thrust against the barrier was discernible from where they sat the author of ita red, massive bovine head to wit. Struggling to repress a shout of laughter, they continued to observe the new arrival, who had not yet discovered them, and who kept turning back to make sure his enemy was not following, in a state of trepidation that was intensely diverting to the onlookers.

"Hallo, Geoffry!" shouted Mr Santorex. "Had old Muggins' bull after you?"

He addressed started as if a shot had been fired in his ear. It was bad enough to have been considerably frightened, but to awake to the fact that Yseulte Santorex had witnessed him in the said demoralised state was discouraging, to say the least of it.

"That's worse than the last infliction of Muggins you underwent, isn't it, Mr Vallance?" said the latter mischievously, referring to the idiotic game of cards of that name.

"Did he chevy you far, Geoffry?" went on Mr Santorex, in the same bantering tone.

"Erahno; not very," said the victim, who was somewhat perturbed and out of breath. "He's an abominably vicious brute, and ought to be shot. He'll certainly kill somebody one of these days. I musterreally mention the matter to the governor."

But there was consolation in store for the illused Geoffry. Having thus fallen in with the Santorex's it was the most natural thing in the world that he should accompany them the greater part of the way home. Consolation? Well, have we not sufficiently emphasised the fact that Yseulte Santorex was a very beautiful girl?

It must be admitted that the future Squire of Lant did not, either in personal appearance or mental endowment, attain any higher standard than commonplace mediocrity. He was very much a reproduction of his father, though without his father's calculating and avaricious temperament, for he was a goodnatured fellow enough in his way. "No harm in him, and too big a fool ever to be a knave," had been Mr Santorex' verdict on this fortunate youth as he watched him grow up. Had he been aware of it, this summingup would sorely have distressed the young Squire, for of late during the Oxford vacation Geoffry Vallance had eagerly seized or manufactured opportunities for being a good deal at Elmcote.

Chapter Six.

The Indian Village.

A long, open valley, bounded on either side by flat, tabletopped hills, and threaded by a broad but shallow stream, whose banks are fringed by a straggling belt of timber. Sheltered by this last stand tall conical lodges, some in irregular groups, some dotted down in twos and threes, others in an attempt at regularity and the formation of a square, but the whole extending for upwards of a mile. In the far distance, at the open end of the valley, the eye is arrested by turretshaped buttes, showing the bizarre formation and variegated strata characteristic of the "Bad Lands." The stream is known as Dog Creek, and along its banks lie the winter villages of a considerable section of the Sioux and Cheyenne tribes.

The westering sun, declining in the blue frosty sky, lights up the river like a silver band, and glows upon the white picturesque lodges, throwing into prominence the quaint and savage devices emblazoned upon their skin walls. Within the straggling encampment many dark forms are moving, and the clear air rings ever and anon with the whoop of a gang of boys, already playing at warlike games; the shrill laughter of young squaws, and the cackle of old ones; an occasional neigh from the several herds of ponies feeding out around the villages and the tramp of their hoofs; or vibrates to the nasal song of a circle of jovial merrymakers. Here and there, squatted around a fire in the open, huddled up in their blankets, may be descried a group of warriors, solemnly whiffing at their long pipes, the while keeping up a drowsy hum of conversation in a guttural undertone, and from the apex of each pyramidal "teepe" a column of blue smoke rises in rings upon the windless atmosphere. It is a lovely day, and although the surrounding hills are powdered with snow, down here in the valley the hardened ground sparkles with merely a crisp touch of frost.

Then as the gloaming deepens the fires glow more redly, and the life and animation of the great encampment increases. Young bucks, bedaubed with paint, and arrayed in beadwork and other articles of savage finery, swagger and lounge about; the nodding eagle quill cresting their scalplocks giving them a rakish, and at the same time martial, aspect, as they wander from tent to tent, indulging in guffaws amongst themselves, or exchanging broad "chaff" with a brace or so of coppery damsels here and there, who, for their part, can give as readily and as freely as they can take. Or a group is engaged in an impromptu dance, both sexes taking part, to a running accompaniment of combined guttural and nasal drone, varied now and again by a whoop. Wolfish curs skulk around, on the lookout to steal if allowed the chance, snarling over any stray offal that may be thrown them, or uttering a shrill yelp on receipt of an arrow or two from some mischievous urchin's toy bow; and, altogether, with the fall of night, the hum and chatter pervading this wild community seems but to increase.

Great stars blaze forth in the frosty sky, not one by one, but with a rush, for now darkness has settled upon the scene, though penetrated and scattered here and there by the red glare of some convivial or household fire. And now it becomes apparent that some event of moment is to take place shortly, for a huge fire is kindled in front of the large councillodge, which stands in the centre of the village, and, mingling with the monotonous “tomtom” of drums, the voices of heralds are raised, convening chiefs and warriors to debate in solemn conclave.

No second summons is needed. The unearthly howling of the dancers is hushed as if by magic, the horseplay and boisterous humour of youthful bucks is laid aside, and from far and near all who can lay claim to the rank of warrioreven the youngest aspirants to the same hanging on the outskirts of the crowdcome trooping towards the common centre.

Within the councillodge burns a second fire, the one outside being for the accommodation of the crowd, and it is round this that the real debate will take place. As the flames shoot up crisply, the interior is vividly illumined, displaying the trophies with which the walls are deckedtrophies of the chase and trophies of war, horns and rare skins, scalps and weapons; and, disposed in regular order, the mysterious “medicine bags” and “totems” of the tribal magnates, grotesque affairs mostly, birds’ heads and claws, bones or grinning jaws of some animal, the whole plentifully set off with beadwork and paint and feathers.

Then the crowd outside parts decorously, giving passage to those whose weight and standing entitle them to a seat within the sacred lodge, and a voice in the council. Stately chieftains arrayed in their most brilliant warcostumesthe magnificent warbonnets of eagles’ plumes cresting their heads and flowing almost to the ground behind, adding an indescribably martial and dignified air to their splendid stature and erect carriageadvance with grave and solemn step to the council fire and take their seats, speaking not a word, and looking neither to the right nor to the left Partisans, or warriors of tried skill and daring, who, without the rank and following of chiefs, are frequently elected to lead an expedition on the warpath, these, too, in equally splendid array, have a place in the assembly; after them, lesser braves, until the lodge can hold no more. The crowd must listen to what it can of the debates from without.

From the standpoint of their compatriots, some of these warriors are very distinguished men indeed. There is Long Bull, and Mountain Cat, and CrowScalper, all implacable and redoubted foes of the whites. There is Burnt Wrist, and Spotted Tail, and Lone Panther, and a dozen other notable chiefs. Last, but not least, there is Red Cloud, orator, statesman, and seer, the warchief of the Ogallalla clan, and medicine chief virtually of the whole Sioux nation.

The flames of the council fire leap and crackle, casting a lurid glow on the stern visages of the assembled warriors. Many of these wear brilliantlycoloured tunics of cloth or dressed buckskin, more or less tastefully adorned with beadwork or shining silver plates. Over this, carelessly thrown, or gracefully dangling from its wearer's shoulder, is the outer "robe" of soft buffalo hide, blazoned all over with hieroglyphics and pictures setting forth the owner's feats of arms or prowess in the chase, and among the scalplocks fringeing tunics and leggings may be descried not a few that originally grew upon AngloSaxon heads. But all is in harmony, tasteful, barbarically picturesque; and the air of selfpossessed dignity stamped upon the countenances of these plumed and stately warriors could not be surpassed by the most august assembly that ever swayed the affairs of old civilisation.

One more personage is there whom we have omitted to mention. Leaning against a lodge pole, as thoroughly unconcerned and at his ease among the red chieftains as ever he was in Belgravian boudoir, his splendid face as impassive as their own, sits Rupert Vipan, and if ever man lived who was thoroughly calculated to inspire respect in the breasts of these warlike savages, assuredly he was that man. That he is here at all is sufficient to show in what honour he is held among his barbarian entertainers.

And now in order to render more clearly the drift of the subsequent debate, some slight digression may here be necessary.

The Sioux, or Dahcotah, as they prefer to be called, are about the only aboriginal race in North America whose numbers and prowess entitle them to rank as a nation. They are subdivided into clans or tribes: Ogallalla, Minneconjou, Uncpapa, Brulé, and many more, with the specification of which we need not weary the reader, but all more or less independent of each other, and acting under their own chiefs or not, as they choose. At the time of our story the whole of these, numbering about 60,000 souls, occupied a large tract comprising the southwestern half of the territory of Dakota, together with the adjacent extensive range in eastern Montana and Wyoming, watered by the Yellowstone and Powder Rivers and their tributaries, and commonly called after the lastnamed stream. On the borderline of Dakota and Wyoming, and therefore within the Indian reservation, stand the Black Hills, a rugged mountain group rising nearly 8,000 feet above the sea level, an insight into whose wild and romantic fastnesses we have already given.

At that period popular rumour credited the Black Hills with concealed wealth to a fabulous extent. Gold had already been found there, not in any great quantities, but still it had been found, and the nature and formation of the soil pointed to its existence in vast veins, at least so said popular rumour. That was enough. Men began to flock to this new Eldorado. Parties of prospectors and miners found their way to its sequestered valleys, and soon the rocks rang to the sound of the pick, and the mountain streams which gurgled through its savage solitudes were fouled with the washing of panned dirt.

But the miners had two factors to reckon withthe Government and the Indians. The former was bound by treaty to keep white men, particularly miners, out of the Indian reservation; the latter became more and more discontented over the nonfulfilment of the agreement. The shrewd tribesmen knew that gold was even a greater enemy to their race than rum. The discovery of gold meant an incursion of whites; first a few, then thousands; cities, towns, machinery. Then goodbye to the game, whereby they largely subsisted; goodbye, indeed, to the country itself, as far as they were concerned. They threatened war.

It became necessary for something to be done. Troops were sent to patrol the Black Hills, with strict injunctions to arrest all white men and send them under guard to the settlements. This was extensively done. But the expelled miners, watching their chance, lost no time in slipping back again, and their numbers, so far from decreasing, had just the opposite tendency, arrests notwithstanding.

Then the United States Government resolved to purchase the Black Hills, and made overtures to the Sioux accordingly. The latter were divided in opinion. Some were for terms, the only question being as to their liberality; others were for rejecting the proposal at any price, and if the Government still persisted in its neglect to keep out the white intruders, why then they must take the defence of their rights into their own hands.

Pause, O philanthropic reader, ere running away with the idea that these poor savages' rights were being ruthlessly trampled on; and remember the old legal maxim about coming into court with clean hands. The Government tried to do its best, but in a vast, rugged, and lawless country the inhabitants are not to be policed as in a wellordered city of the Old World. Men could not be hung merely for encroaching on the reservation, and the state of popular feeling precluded any sort of deterrent punishment. And then, were the Indians themselves strictly observing their side of the treaty? Let us see.

For several summers the bands roaming in the Powder River country had perpetrated not a few murders of whites, had run off stock and destroyed property to a considerable extent, in short, had taken the warpath, and this although nominally at peace. Now it was by virtue of keeping the peace that their exclusive rights over the encroachedupon territory had been conceded.

We have said that the Sioux were made up of various subdivisions or clans. Now at that time there was not one of these which did not furnish a quota of warriors to swell the ranks of the hostiles. Nominally at peace, and drawing rations from the Government, the turbulent spirits of these tribes would slip away quietly in small parties, to join the hostile chiefs for a summer raid, returning to the agencies when they had had enough fighting and plunder, and becomingin popular parlance"good

Indians" again. These escapades were either winked at by the tribal chiefs, who remained quietly at the agencies, "keeping in" with the Government, or were simply beyond their power to prevent. Probably both attitudes held good, for the control exercised by an Indian chief over his band or tribe seldom amounts to more than moral suasion.

Briefly, then, the Sioux and their allies, the Northern Cheyennes, might be thus classified:

1. The hostiles, i.e., the bold and lawless faction who hardly made any secret of being on the warpath. These held the broken and rugged fastnesses of the Powder River country already referred to.

2. The Agency Indians who, sitting still on their reserves, helped their hostile brethren with information and supplies.

3. The turbulent youths on the reservation, always ready to slip away on their own account, or to join the hostiles, in search of scalps, plunder, and fun in general.

4. The whole lot, ripe for any devilment, provided it offered a safe chance of success.

Such was the state of affairs in 187345, and now apologising to the reader for this digression, let us get back to our council.

Chapter Seven.

The Council.

In silence the “medicineman” prepared the great pipe, his lips moving in a magical incantation as he solemnly filled it. Then handing the stem to Vipan, who was seated on the right of Red Cloud, he applied a light to the bowl. This “medicine” or council pipe was a magnificent affair, as suited its solemn and ceremonial character. The large and massive bowl was of porous red stone, the stem, upwards of a yard in length, being profusely ornamented with beadwork and quills, and at intervals of a few inches flowed three long and carefullydressed scalplocks. Vipan, fully alive to the position of honour he occupied, gravely inhaled the aromatic mixture with the utmost deliberation, expelling the smoke in clouds from his mouth and nostrils. Then he passed it on to Red Cloud, who, after the same ceremony, in similar fashion passed it to the chief next him on his left, and so in dead silence it went round the circle, each warrior taking a series of long draws, and then, having handed the pipe to his neighbour, emitting a vast volume of smoke by a slow process which seemed to last several minutes, and the effect of which was not a little curious.

No word had been uttered since they entered the lodge, and not until the pipe had made the complete round of the circle was the silence broken. Then a sort of professional orator, whose mission was something similar to that of counsel for the plaintiffviz., to “open the case”arose and proceeded to set forth the grounds of debate. The Dahcotah, he said, were a great nation, and so were their brethren the Cheyennes, who also had an interest in the matter which had brought them together. Both were represented here by many of their most illustrious chiefs and their bravest warriors, several of whom, in passing, the orator proceeded to name, together with the boldest feat of arms of each, and at each of these panegyrics a guttural “Howhow!” went forth from his listeners. The Dahcotah were not only a great people and a brave people, but they were also a longsuffering people. Who among all the red races had such good hearts as the Dahcotah? Who among them would have remained at peace under such provocation as they had received and continued to receive?

The debate was getting lively now. An emphatic exclamation of assent greeted the orator, whose tone, hitherto even, began to wax forcible.

When the Dahcotah agreed to bury the hatchet with the Mehneaska (Americans)went on the speakera treaty was entered into, and under this the Great Father (the President of the United States) promised that the reservations they now occupied should be secured to them for everthat no white men should be allowed within them, either to hunt or to settle or to search for gold, and on these conditions the Dahcotah agreed to abandon the warpath. That was seven years ago. They had abandoned it. They had “travelled on the white man’s road,” had sat within their reservations, molesting no one. They had made expeditions to their huntinggrounds to find food

for their families and skins to build their lodges, but they had sent forth no warparties. They had always treated the whites well. And now, how had the Great Father kept his promises? White men were swarming into the Dahcotah country. First they came by twos and threes, quietly, and begging to be admitted as friends. Then they came by twenties, armed with rifles and many cartridges, and began to lay out towns. Soon the Dahcotah country would be black with the smoke of their chimneys, and the deer and the buffalo, already scarce, would be a thing of the past. Look at Pahsapa (the Black Hills). Every valley was full of white men digging for gold. What was this gold, and whose was it? Was it not the property of the Dahcotah nation, on whose ground it lay hidden? If it was valuable, then the Great Father should make the Dahcotah nation rich with valuable things in exchange for it. But these intruding whites took the gold and gave nothing to its ownersthreatened them with bullets instead. It had been suggested that they should sell Pahsapa. But these Hills were “great medicine”sacred ground entrusted to the Dahcotah by the Good Spirit of Life. How could they sell them? What price would be equivalent to such a precious possession? There was a chief here of mighty renownthe warchief of the Ogallallawho had led the nation again and again to victory, whose warwhoop had scattered the whites like buffalo before the hunters, the “medicine chief” of the Dahcotah race. When the council should hear his words on this matter their path would be plain before them.

As the orator ceased an emphatic grunt went round the circle with a unanimity that spoke volumes. Red Cloud (Note 1), thus directly referred to, made, however, no sign. Motionless as a statue, there was a thoughtful, abstracted look upon his massive countenance, as though he had not heard a word of the harangue.

A few moments of silence, then another chief arosea man of lofty stature and of grim and scowling aspect, his eyes scintillating with a cruel glitter from beneath his towering warbonnet. After less than usual of the conventional brag as to the greatness of his nation and so forth, speaking fiercely and eagerly, as if anxious to come to the point, he went on:

“What enemy has not felt the spring of Mountain Cat? From the far huntinggrounds of the Kiowas and the Apaches to the boundary line of the English in the North, there is not a spot of ground that Mountain Cat has not swept with his warparties; not a village of the crawling Shoshones or skulking Pawnees that he has not taken scalps from; not a waggon train of these invading whites that he has not struck. When in the South the destroying locusts sweep down upon the land, they come not in one mighty cloud. No. They come one at a time at first, then a few more, fluttering quietly, far apart. It is nothing. But lo! in a moment there is a cloud in the aira rush of wings, and the land is black with themeverything is devoured. So it is with these whites. One comes to trade, another comes to hunt, a third comes to visit us, two more come to search for this gold, and lo! the land is hidden beneath their devastating bands. Their stinking chimneys blacken the air, their poisonous firewater kills our young men or

reduces them to the level of the whites themselves, who drink until they wallow like hogs upon the earth, and brother kills brother because he has drunk away his mind and has become a brute beast. Who would have dealings with such dogs as these?

“There was a time when our huntinggrounds shook beneath the tread of countless buffalo. Then we were great because free and fearedfor who in those days dared incur the enmity of the Dahcotah? What happened? The whites built their accursed roads and the steamhorse came puffing over the plains, and where are the buffalo today? The land is white with their skeletons, but will skeletons feed the Dahcotah and supply skins for their winter lodges? The Great Father” (and the savage uttered the words with a contemptuous sneer) “then said, ‘Let us send and kill all the buffalo, and the red races will starve.’ So the white hunters came from the east and destroyed our food for ever. And where are we today? Are we not living like beggars? Are we not dependent on the Agencies for our daily food and clothing, instead of upon our own arrows and lances as of yore? First came the settlers, whom we treated as friends, then the steamhorse and the iron road, then the finding of the gold. Where this gold is, there the whites swarm. What do we gain, I say, by treating with these lying Mehneaska? What have we ever gained? When they sought to throw open our territory by cutting it with a broad road, did we treat? No, we fought. Where is that road today? Where are the forts built along it to keep it open? Goneall gone. But the buffalowhat few are leftare there. How many would be left now had we traded away our rights? Not one. The whole Dahcotah nation went out upon the warpath.

“The whites begged for peace, and we granted it them. They agreed to respect our country, which was all we asked. Seven years have gone by, and how is that agreement kept? Go, count the white men digging in Pahsapa. Ha! There are many scalps to be had in Pahsapa.”

His tone, which had hitherto been one of quick, fierce emphasis, here assumed a slow and deadly meaning. The young warriors, listening without, gripped their weapons with a murmur of delighted applause. Mountain Cat was a chieftain after their own heart. Let him but set up the warpost that very night. All the young men in the village would strike it.

“We are strong,” he continued, “strong and united. Our bands are defending our huntinggrounds between this and the Yellowstone, but what shall be thought of us if we allow the whites to invade us here, to deprive us of the medicine hills without a struggle? Are we men, or have we become squaws since we began to receive doles of Government beef?”

Then the fierce savage, raising his voice, his eyes blazing like lightning, stretched forth his arm in denunciatory gesture over the assembly, and continued:

“Mountain Cat will never trust the promises of these Mehneaska. If they want Pahsapa, let them take it by right of conquestby seizing it from the unconquerable Dahcotah. There are scalps to be taken in Pahsapa. Let the whole Dahcotah nation once more go out upon the warpath. I have said.”

Vipan, listening impassively, though with keen attention, to every word that was uttered, here caught the eye of War Wolf. The young warrior’s face was a study in sardonic ferocity at the words, “There are scalps to be taken in Pahsapa,” and he grinned with delight over the fiendish joke shared between himself and Golden Face.

The young bucks in the background were in ecstasies of glee. They anticipated no end of fun in the near future.

Several other speakers followed, and opinions on the advisability of war varied considerably. Most of them advocated the sale, but for an enormous price. There was a white man among them tonight, they said, of a different race to these other whites, and towards him their hearts were good. He loved his red brethren; he was their brother. He had told them about other lands than that of the Mehneaskalands as large and as rich beyond the great Salt Lake. They must listen to him, for he was wise. He understood the ways of the whites, and would teach the Dahcotah how to deal with themso that if Pahsapa should be sold they should receive full price; and not, as in other transactions, receive payment in promises.

This, more or less plainly put, was the burden of their speeches. Vipan, listening with more than Indian composure, felt that things were tending all as he would have them. It may here be stated that he was alone among his red entertainers; Smokestack Bill, foreseeing how affairs were likely to drift, having returned to the log cabin among the mountains. For once the adventurer was glad of his comrade’s absence. He could play his cards more freely; besides, the Indians trusted him as belonging to another race. Had the scout been still in the village, the two white men would not have been admitted to this council.

Then arose Spotted Tail, the head chief of the Brulé bands, and after Red Cloud, perhaps one of the most influential chiefs of the nation. He made a long oration, of considerable eloquence, but it was all in favour of peace. There was no need, he said, to reiterate that they were a great nation. Everybody knew it. As many speakers had asserted, the Dahcotah had never been conquered. Why was this? Because they were not only a brave but a prudent people. A brave man without prudence was like a grizzly bearhe might slay so many enemies more or less, but he invited his own destruction by rushing upon their rifles. As with a man, so it was with a nation. Prudence was everything. This gold which white men were now finding among the Hillsdid not all experience show that wherever it was discovered, there the whites would soon appear in countless swarms? Gold was the “medicine” of the whitesthey could not resist it. Not even all the warriors the Dahcotah could muster could in the

long run stand between the whites and goldno, nor all the warriors of every tribe from the Apaches in the south to the Blackfeet on the English boundary line. The last time they went upon the warpath it was to prevent the whites from making a broad road through their countryand they succeeded. If they went upon it this time it would be to keep the whites away from this gold. That was a thing which no tribe or nation had ever succeeded in doing yet, or ever would. Let the Dahcotah be prudent.

As for these Hills, it was true they were "great medicine," but the people seldom hunted in them. They were not of much use. The Mehneaska were very anxious to possess them, and the Great Father was so rich he could afford to give such a price as would make the Dahcotah rich too. Besides, it was evident that he wished to treat them fairly this time, for had he not sent troops to drive away the intruding goldseekers? They had come back, it was true; but this only proved the difficulties besetting the whole question. Let the Dahcotah nation be prudentprudence was the keystone to every matter of international difficulty. His counsel was for entering into negotiations at once about the purchase. He was also emphatically on the side of peace.

Very faint were the murmurs of applause from the young men outside as Spotted Tail resumed his seat. The war spirit was in the air, and the burden of his speech was unpalatable to them. Then Red Cloud said:

"Golden Face sits in an honoured place at the council fire of the Dahcotah people. They will listen to his words as to the voice of a brother."

With a slight bend of the head in acknowledgment of this graceful invitation, Vipan arose. As he stood for a few moments silently contemplating the circle of stately chiefs, the firelight glinting on the flowing masses of his beard and bringing into strong relief the herculean proportions of his towering stature, there was not an eye among the crowd of fierce and excitable savages but dilated with admiration. Here was indeed a man.

"Who am I that stand to address you tonight?" he began, speaking in their own tongue with ease and fluency. "Who knows? I will not boast. Suffice it to say that I have led men to war, in other lands beyond the great salt seas. I have struck the enemy, and that not once only. I have seen his back, but he has never seen mine. Enough. Who am I? It has been said that I am not of the race around us. That is so. There are many white races; that to which I have belonged matters nothing, for I own no race, I am akin to all the world," with a sweep of the arm that would have done credit to one of their own most finished orators.

"The people whose hearts are straight towards me, whether light or dark, white or red, that is my people. Those who deal fairly with me, I deal fairly with; those who do

not, let them beware. You in council have asked my advice. I cannot give advice, but my opinion the chiefs before me can value or not.

“I have listened to the speeches of many valiant men. Some have advocated peace, others have been for war. It is a simple thing to go to war. Is it? When the red men strike the warpost, they muster their warriors, and go forth to battle. When the whites decide on war, they collect their dollars, and pay soldiers to go and fight for them. The red men fight with weapons, the whites with dollars. The red men would rather forego their chance of booty than lose one warrior. The whites would rather lose a thousand soldiers than five thousand dollars. But, you will say: If the whites have the dollars, and value not the lives of other people, what chance have we, for they are rich, and can pay? Wait a moment. Men are wonderfully alike, whether red or white. Is it your experience that the richest man is the man who cares least for his possessions? It is not mine.

“Now let your ears be open, for this is the point. The fear of losing men will not deter the whites from going to war; no, not for a moment, but the fear of losing dollars will. It is not the soldiers who make the war, it is the people who pay for it. These will not allow war to be made by their rulers for fun.

“Were I a councillor of the Dahcotah nation, this is what I should say: First, let the Great Father prove that he is in earnest by turning all the whites out of Pahsapa, or allowing us to do so. When this is donebut not until thenwe will enter into negotiations for the purchase. Then I should ask eighty million dollars in cash. It is a large sum, but nothing compared with the value of the ground itself. The Mehneaska will gladly pay this, rather than embark in a war which they know will cost them twenty times as much, for they know the prowess of the Dahcotah nation, and respect the name of Red Cloud,” turning with a graceful inclination towards the chief at his side.

“And there are many whites who will refuse to pay for a war with the red men. They love their red brethren, they say. It is no trouble to love people you have never seen. They do not really love you, but pretend to, which is more to your interest still; so that others shall say:‘What good people, to take such care of the poor red man.’ They will take your part and see that you are not wronged, because sympathy gives no trouble, and is cheap, and they think it a sure and easy way to the white man’s Happy Huntinggrounds.

“In short, then, were I one of themselves, these would be my words to the chiefs and warriors of the Dahcotah nation:Be firm; fix your price, and in any attempt to beat you down, stand as immovable as the towering Inyan Kara. Having fixed it, get someone whom you can trust to see that you obtain it; and, above all, write in your hearts the warning of the great chief who has just sat down, for it contains the words

of golden wisdom: ‘A brave man without prudence is like the grizzly bearhe invites his own destruction.’

“There is one more thing to talk about. I and the warriors of the Dahcotah nation are brothers, and our hearts are the same. I who speak with you am of no race. I am akin to all the world, to all men whose hearts are good towards me. But although I am of no race I have friends of every race. When the warparties of the Dahcotah are abroad, it may be that they will find me. Who would strike the friends of his brother? Such of the Mehneaska as may be with me are my friends, and the Dahcotah warriors will pass on, saying:‘We do not strike the friends of our brother, lest we turn him into an enemy.’ Yet why should I talk of this? Only that in the days of youth the blood is hot, and young men upon the warpath strike first, and think afterwards. Enough, my words are for the ears of chiefs. My heart and the hearts of the great chiefs to whom I speak, are the same. I have spoken.”

The clear ringing voice, the fluent language, the determination, even the veiled menace in the last words of the speaker, appealed straight to the most susceptible side of his savage hearers. One white man alone in their midst, and he did not shrink from threatening them with his hostility in the event of certain contingenciesthreatening them, in their own estimation the most redoubtable warriors in the world! Assuredly he knew the way to their respect.

There were some there, however, in whom these last words aroused a feeling of rankling hostility, among them that fierce, that uncompromising abhorrer of the whole white race, Mountain Cat. This grim chieftain smiled sardonically to himself, as he inwardly promised what sort of treatment should be meted out to anyone whom his warparty should surprise, be they the friends of whom they might. Then ensued a period of silence, and every eye was turned with expectation upon Red Cloud.

But that crafty chief was not yet prepared to commit himself to a definite policy either way. Sitting motionless, he had weighed every word which had fallen from the speakers, and notably from the last. He was too farsighted to plunge his nation into open war before the time was ripe: and his thinking out of the situation had convinced him that it was not. There were still cards to be played. So when he spoke it was briefly. Cautiously touching on the pros and cons of the speeches they had listened to, he announced that the situation must further be delayed, hinting that meanwhile such of his countrymen as felt aggressively disposed towards the common enemy had better exercise great prudence.

The council was at an end.

Note 1. This chief, over and above his skill and intrepidity as a warrior, enjoyed a high reputation among the Indians of the Northern Plains as a magician and a seera reputation really due to his astuteness, keen foresight, and extraordinary luck.

Chapter Eight.

The ScalpDance.

Uncas and Wingenund are very pretty creations, but they represent the savage as he really is about as accurately as the Founder of Christianity represents the average Christian of the current century. Which may be taken to mean that all preconceived and popular ideas of the "noble red man" can safely be relegated to the clouds.

Nobody was more aware of this than Vipan, consequently he knew exactly at what valuation to take all these overwhelmingly fraternal speeches of his red brethren. He knewnone betterthat the wily chiefs intended to make use of him; he knew, moreover, that he could be of use to them; equally was he determined to receive a full equivalent for his services, and this equivalent he intended should be nothing less than the exclusive right of mining in the Black Hills.

His shrewd mind had grasped the sense of the council, and he realised that a sort of desultory warfare, for which no one was responsible, would be undertaken against the white men already there. These, isolated by twos and threes at their scattered mining camps, could not hope to make a successful stand against bands of savages raiding upon them incessantly. They would be driven out, and then he, Vipan, the friend and "brother" of the red possessors, would pick out all the best claims, work them with a will, and quickly make his fortune.

A daring and unscrupulous plan? Yes; but Nature had endowed the man with indomitable daring, and circumstances had combined to render him utterly unscrupulous. In advising the chiefs to ask the enormous sum named above, and to abide by their demand, he was perfectly well aware that the United States Government would not agree to it, but the larger the demand the more protracted would be the haggle, and the more protracted the haggle the more time would be his wherein to enrich himself.

There was one factor which he overlookedor if it occurred to him he preferred to put it asidethe possibility that the yield of gold would not come up to anything like his expectations. But he was sanguine. Adventurers of his type invariably are. Give him a fair chance and his fortune was made.

Vipan was very popular in the Indian village. Apart from the consequence attaching to him as the friend and guest of the great chieffor he had taken up his quarters in Red Cloud's own lodgehe mixed freely with all the warriors, chatting with them, and treating them as friends and equals. Indians in private life are arrant gossips, and the adventurer being one of those adaptable persons at home in any society was in great request, for he was essentially "good company," and twothirds of the night would be spent in this or that warrior's teepe, the structure crowded to suffocation, listening to

his droll, or tragical, or romantic stories of all parts of the world. Then, too, he would accompany the young bucks on their hunting trips, in no case allowing their success to excel his; or would organise shooting matches among them. There were instances even wherein he was not above cutting out one or two of them in somewhat we will callboudoir intrigue, purely for the devilment of the thing, and if only to show them that there was nothing in which he could not surpass themwhether in love, war, or the chase. All this told. Their respect and admiration for him were unbounded, yet had they by chance the good fortune to surprise him alone on the prairie, and get him into their power, it is doubtful whether any consideration of friendship would suffice to restrain some of the young bucks from taking his scalp. And of this he himself was well aware.

It was the evening of the day after the council. Vipan, returning from a solitary hunt, to the success of which an antelope strapped behind his saddle, and several brace of sandgrouse dangling from the same, bore silent testimony, found his thoughts fully occupied weighing the position of affairs, and the more he looked at it the less he liked it. There was a hitch somewhere, and on this he had no difficulty in putting his finger. A powerful faction in the village was hostile to him altogether, and this was the uncompromising warfactionGrey Wolf, the chief of the Cheyenne band; Mountain Cat, the Ogallalla; also War Wolf, who, although not a chief, yet aspired to this dignity, and who, his youth notwithstanding, was a warrior of such prestige among his fellows as to be no mean adversary. These especiallyand there were othershe knew distrusted him and his plans. They were inveterate haters of all whites indiscriminately, and while they had hitherto treated him with grim courtesy, yet the covert hostility of their manner and words was not lost upon so shrewd an observer as himself. But it was certain that although the distrust or antipathy of these men might place obstacles in his path, yet no sort of alarm did it inspire him with. He was the proper stuff out of which adventurers are madeutterly reckless.

The crisp, frosty ground crackled beneath the hoofs of his powerful black horse; the sun had gone down, and the white conical lodges of the Sioux village stood spectral in the grey twilight. There was a stillness and peace pervading the scene, which was very unusual in such close proximity to the savage encampment. Suddenly, shrilling forth loud and clear upon the evening air, rang out the terrible warwhoop.

To say that Vipan saw that his weapons were ready to hand would be superfluous, for they were always in a state of readiness. But he did not quite like the look of things, and more than one keen, anxious glance did he cast, without seeming to do so, into the belt of timber which he was skirting. Suddenly the semigloom seemed alive with dusky shapes flitting among the tree stems, and then all around him arose once more the warwhoop, which was taken up and echoed back from the village amid the frantic hammering of many drums.

“What’s it all about, Three Elks?” he asked tranquilly, as a tall warrior glided past him in the twilight.

“How! Scalp!” replied the savage laconically, and then opening his mouth he once more set up the hideous shout as he rushed on.

The aspect of the Sioux village was that of the nethermost shades with all the fiends holding high revel. For the open space in front of the councillodge was alive with excited Indians, those coming in from without whooping or shrilling their warwhistles as they rushed into the thick of the surging throng. Gangs of squaws squatted around, keeping up a wild, nasal, yelling chant, to the monotonous “tomtom” of drums. Red fires glared upon the night; while hundreds of excited warriors, plumed and hideously painted, falling into something like a circular formation, revolved around several poles, from which dangled and flapped scalps in various stages of preservationsome dry and parchmentlike, others fresh and only half cured.

Round and round circled the wild dance, the hoarse howling of the warriors, varied occasionally by a deafening warwhoop; the nasal yelling of the squaws; the hammering of drums and the screech of whistles; the lurid glare of the fires upon the fierce bounding shapes and the hideously streaked bodies and plumed heads; the gleam of weapons and the disgusting trophies flapping up aloft; all went to make up a weird and appalling pandemonium which baffles description. And yet so contagious, so insidious in its effect was this barbarous saturnalia that Vipan could with difficulty restrain himself from rushing into the maddened throng, and, brandishing his weapons, whoop and howl with the wildest of them.

One thing he observed which, in any other man as well acquainted with the Indian character as himself, would have been productive of uneasiness. The dancers consisted almost entirely of young bucks, every chief or partisan of any note being conspicuous by his absence. But although he knew that his position was precarious in the extreme there in the midst of that crowd of savages, quickly working themselves into a state of uncontrollable excitement, yet there was such an irresistible fascination about the whole thing that he felt rooted to the spot.

Suddenly War Wolf, bounding up to one of the poles, detached a couple of scalps, and, waving them aloft, uttered an earsplitting yell. The savage, bedaubed from head to foot with yellow paint spotted all over with blotches of vermilion, brandishing a tomahawk in one hand and the ghastly trophies in the other, while with blazing eyes he yelled forth the history of his bloody exploit, looked a very fiend. Then as his eyes met those of Vipan, standing on the outside of the circle, he gave vent to a devilish laugh, flourishing the scalps ironically towards the latter.

The warwhoop pealed forth again, shriller, fiercer, and many a bloodthirsty glare was turned upon Vipan from a hundred pairs of eyes, as the maddened barbarians revolved in their frenzied rout. But he never quailed. The fascination was complete. And through it he noted two things. Both scalps were fresh. Hardly a week had passed since they grew upon the heads of their ownersand one of them was plentifully covered with a thick crop of red hair.

A voice at his side, speaking in quiet tones, broke the spell.

“Golden Face should be hungry and tired. Will he not come in, and rest and eat?”

Turning, he beheld Red Cloud. The latter’s eyes wandered from his to the crowd of furious dancers with a meaning there was no mistaking. Without a word he turned and strolled away with the chief.

Chapter Nine.

Some Old Correspondence.

Mr Santorex and his daughter were seated in the former's own especial sanctum, busily engaged in sorting and destroying old letters and papers.

The room was a pleasant one, somewhat sombre perhapsthanks to its panelling of dark oakbut the window commanded a lovely view of the Lant valley. Round the room stood cabinet cupboards, enclosing collections of insects, birds' eggs, plants, etc., and surmounted by a number of glass cases containing stuffed birds and animals. Fishingrods on a rack, a few curiosities of savage weapons, and a portrait or two adorned the walls.

"Had enough of it, Chickie? Rather a sin to keep you boxed up here this lovely morning, isn't it?"

"No, father, of course it isn't. Besides, we are nearly at the end of these 'haunting memories of bygone days,' aren't we? or we shall be by lunchtime, anyhow."

It was indeed a lovely morning. The sweet spring air, wafting in at the window, floated with it the clear song of larks poised aloft in the blue ether, the bleating of young lambs disporting amid the buttercups on the upland pastures, and many another note of the pleasant country blending together in harmonious proportion.

"'Haunting memories,' eh?" replied Mr Santorex, seeming to dwell somewhat over the sheaf of yellow and timeworn papers he held in his hand. "Instructiveyes. A record of the average crop of idiocies a man sows in earlier life under the impression that he is doing the right thing. Acting under a generous impulse, I believe it is called."

Thus with that cynical halfsmile of his did Mr Santorex keep up a running comment on each separate episode chronicled among the papers and letters filed away in his despatchbox. Some he merely looked at and put aside without a word; others he descanted upon in his peculiar dry and caustic fashion which always inspired the listeners with something bordering on repulsion. Yseulte herself could not but realise that there was a something rather coldblooded, not to say ruthless, about her tranquil and philosophical parent that would have awedalmost repelledher but that she loved him very dearly. Her nature was a concentrative one, and unsusceptible withal. She had hardly made any friends, because she had seen no one worth entertaining real friendship for, and she was a girl who would not fall in love readily.

"I wish I hadn't seen this just now, father," she said, handing him back a sheaf of letters. It was a correspondence of a lively nature, and many years back, between

himself and Mr Vallance. “You see, the Vallances are all coming up here this afternoon, and I don’t feel like being civil to them immediately upon it.”

“Pooh! civility means nothing, not in this location at least. Why, when we first came here we were overwhelmed with it. It didn’t last many months certainly, but it broke out afresh when rumour made me a millionaire. Why, what have you got there?”

For she was now scrutinising, somewhat intently, a photograph which had fallen out of a bundle of papers among the piles they had been sorting. It represented a youngish man, strikingly handsome, and with a strong, reckless stamp of countenance; and though the original must have been prematurely bald, the mouth was almost hidden by a long heavy moustache. A queer smile came into Mr Santorex’s face.

“Think that’s the type you could fall in love with, eh, Chickie? Well, I advise you not to, for I can’t bring you face to face with the original.”

“Why? Who is it?”

“Who is it? No less a personage than the disinherited heir, Ralph Vallance. The plot thickens, eh?”

“I didn’t know. I thought he was dead, if I ever knew there was such a person, that is. Why was he disinherited?”

“Ah, that’s something of a story. Poor Ralph! I think he was most unfairly treated, always did think so; especially when that humer, I mean, our spiritual guide, jumped into his shoes. No, I daresay you never heard much about it, but you are a woman now, my dear, and a deuced sensible one too, as women go, and I always hold that it is simply nonsensical and deleterious to their moral fibre to let womensensible ones, that isgo about the world with their eyes shut. To come back to our romance. The old squire of Lant was a straightlaced, puritanical fossil, and Master Ralph was just the reverse, an extravagant, roystering young dog who chucked away ten pounds for every one that he was worth, in fact the ideal ‘Plunger’ as you girls estimate that article. Naturally, there were occasional breezes down at the Hall, nor were these effectually tempered by the crafty intervention of cousin Dudley, who ran the vicarage in those days. The old man used to get very mad, especially when Ralph began dabbling in post obits, and vowed he’d cut off that hopeful with a shilling, and leave everything to his reverend nephew. Finally, the regiment went on foreign service, and while the transport was lying at the Abraham Islands, where she had put in for coal and other supplies, that young idiot, Ralph Vallance, must needs get mixed up in a confounded domestic scandal there was no clapping an extinguisher on. The mischief of the thing was that it nearly concerned the Governor of the place, whose interest was considerable enough to get Master Ralph cashiered, in the event

of his failing to send in his papers at once. Of the two evils, he chose the latter, and least; and as it could not be kept from his affectionate parent, that sturdy Pharisee duly cut him off with a shilling and departed this life forthwith. So the revered and reverend Dudley reigns in both their steads."

"I wonder Mr Vallance has the conscience to take the property at the expense of his cousin, whatever the latter might have done."

"You do, do you! Oh, Chickie, to think that you and I should have been sworn allies all through your long and illustrious career, and you still capable of propounding such a sentiment! Know then, O recreant, that our sacred friend, although he may be something of a kn ah'm! has nothing of the fool about him, although the other was a consummate young ass, or he would never have gone the length of getting himself cut out of his patrimony."

"But didn't Mr Vallance do anything for him?"

"I have it on the best authority, that of the victim himself, that he did not. Ralph, however, was determined not to be outdone in generosity, for he came raging down here one fine day consumed with anxiety to take his reverend cousin by the scruff of the neck and give him a liberal thrashing. It was just as well, perhaps, that chance enabled me to prevent him."

"You knew him then, father?"

"Yes, we struck up acquaintance on that occasion. Poor Ralph! He was a fine fellow, whatever his faults, and, mind you, my impression is that in the last affair it was a case of clapping the saddle on the wrong horse, that he was screening somebody else, and allowed the blame to fall on himself rather than 'peach.' It was magnificent, butstark idiotic."

"He has a very, fine face," said Yseulte, again taking up the photograph and examining it thoughtfully. The fact that he had suffered at the hands of his slippery cousin was quite enough to enlist all her sympathies in behalf of the romantic scapegrace.

"Yes, it is. You know I am not given to indiscriminate eulogium, but without hesitation I think Ralph Vallance was about the finest specimen of manhood I ever saw."

"What has become of him now?"

"I haven't the faintest notion. All this happened a good many years ago, when you were almost in your cradle. Why, Ralph, if he is alive, must be getting on in years by

this time. There, that's about all the story that it's worth your while to know, my dear, and now we'll lock the correspondence away in my private safe. Let me have the portrait again when you have done with it."

Yseulte, as we have said, was not a romantically inclined girl, yet, somehow, this faded portrait of the man of whom nobody had heard anything for almost as many years as she herself had lived, made a vivid impression on her. As she sat contemplating it, a voice arose from the lawn beneath, saying in the most approved Oxford drawl:

"Ah, how do you do, Mrs Santorex? I've brought rather a queer plant that your husband may not have in his collection. It strikes me as a curious specimen." And then Mrs Santorex was heard asking the speaker in.

Father and daughter looked at each other with the most comical expression in the world. Then the former murmured, with a dry, noiseless laugh:

"He's found the fourleaved shamrock. Oh, Chickie, Chickie! have some pity on poor Geoffry Plantagenet, and put him out of his misery, once and for all!"

The girl could hardly stifle her laughter. Her father, for his part, was thinking resignedly that to the bald expedients devised by enamoured youth as pretexts for numerous and wholly unnecessary visits to the parent or lawful guardian of its idol, there is no limit.

Chapter Ten.

Poor Geoffry.

The clever author of “Mine is Thine” lays it down as an axiom that nothing so completely transforms the average sensible man into a consummate idiot for the time being as an arrière pensée; and it is an axiom the soundness of which all observation goes to prove.

Geoffry Vallance, if not passing brilliant, was endowed with average sense and more than average assurance, yet when he found himself seated opposite Yseulte at the luncheon table in accordance with that young lady’s father’s impromptu invitation, his wits were somewhat befogged. Not to put too fine a point upon it, he was distressingly conscious of feeling an ass, and, worse still, of looking one. His conversation, normally lucid, and, like the brook, apt to “go on for ever,” was now a little incoherent, jerky, and limited in area; his demeanour, normally selfpossessed, not to say a trifle assertive, was now constrained, spasmodic, and painfully apprehensive of saying or doing the wrong thing.

The poor fellow was over head and ears in love, which blissful state developed a new phase in his charactera selfconsciousness and a diffidence which no one would have suspected to lie hidden there. Eager to show at his best in the eyes of Yseulte and her father, he, of course showed at his worst. It never occurred to himit does not to most men under the circumstancesthat heroic qualities are not essential to the adequate looking after of multifold dress baskets and hand luggage at the railway station or on board the Channel packet; that a Greek profile is hardly requisite to the unmurmuring liquidation of milliners’ bills, or the torso of a Milo to the deft fulfilment of the rôle of domestic poodle. These considerations did not occur to him, but a wretched consciousness of his own deficiencies in appearance and attainments did, and now to this was added the recollection of that ridiculous position they had seen him in only a day or two ago, and which had lain heavily on his mind ever since.

“Too great a fool ever to be a knave” had been Mr Santorex’s dictum, not meaning thereby that Geoffry was a dunce or a blockhead, the fact being that he was a hard reader and expected to take high honours at the end of the ensuing term. But in other matters, field sports and real savoir vivre, he was something of a duffer. Yet though father and daughter disliked the residue of the house of Vallance, they entertained a sort of goodhumoured kindness towards Geoffry, who was at worst a muff, and goodnatured, and with no harm in him. And of this feeling poor Geoffry had an inkling.

A little chaff about Muggins’ bull, and Yseulte, seeing that the topic was distressful to the hero of the adventure, goodnaturedly turned it; for in spite of her previously expressed disinclination for showing any civility towards the Vallances that day, she

seemed quite to have forgiven them as far as Geoffry was concerned, and was as kind to him as ever. The plant, by the way, which had served as pretext for this visit, was a fraud of the first water, but Mr Santorex, while showing its worthlessness as a specimen, had not only spared, but even flattered, the feelings of the donor, for, thorough cynic as he was at heart, in his practice he was a very tolerant man where the wretched little tricks and subterfuges of mediocrity in distress were concerned, always provided that these were not intended to serve as a cloak to knavery. When they were, his merciless predilection for, and powers of, dissection had full indulgence.

The hereditary searingiron must have found place in his daughter's composition, though untempered by the experience of years and maturity. For there was something of feline cruelty in the way in which, when luncheon was over, she lured poor Geoffry out into the garden, talking serenely in that beautifully modulated voice of hers, as, every action full of unconscious grace, she bent down to pluck a flower here, or raise a drooping plant there; or looking up into his face now and then with such a straight glance out of her grand eyes as to make the poor fellow fairly tremble with bewilderment, and stammer and stutter in his attempts to express himself, until he was pitiable to behold. But though ashamed of the impulse, Yseulte was unable wholly to resist it. This poorspirited adorer of herswas he not standing in another's place, smugly enjoying and thriving upon what had been reft from its rightful owner by a pitiful and underhanded tricka trick which, though legally permissible, was morally as complete an act of deliberate fraud as any for which men were sent into penal servitude? That photograph, you see, had fired a new train of thought in the girl's adventurous mind. It was a splendid face, that which looked at her from the bit of faded cardboard. Its strong, reckless expression had seemed to haunt her ever since. She had never seen anything like it. And it was that of an injured and illused man; a man, too, with a vein of real heroism running through his character, and therefore unlike other men; for had not her father expressed his conviction that this man was suffering wrongfully, was a beggar for life, rather than speak the word which should inculpate someone else? She looked at her stuttering, flurried admirer there present, and turned away to hide a contemptuous curl of the lip; she thought of the defrauded and absent onewhose place he had usurpedwandering destitute over the earth, and her feelings were strangely stirred. Yet the former she knew well, his failings and his good points; the latter she had only seen in a portraitand an old and faded portrait at that. Was she going to fall in love with an old and faded portrait? Well, it was beginning to look uncommonly as if she might.

Geoffry was on tenterhooks. They were alone, and likely so to be left for some little while longer at any rate. Should he try his fate? Anything was better than this suspense. He would.

Alas for the defeat of praiseworthy enterprise! The words would not come. He pounced upon a flower which Yseulte had been toying with and had thrown down,

and while stuttering over the discarded blossom as a preliminary, a wellknown and silky voice behind the pair made him start and redden like a child detected in the forbidden jamcupboard.

“Ah, there you are, Geoffry. We thought you were being well taken care of by our good friends here, so we didn’t wait lunch for you. How are you, Yseulte? My young people will be here soon. I left them on the road, or just starting.”

It is doubtful whether Geoffry’s feelings towards his sire were affectionate just then. Yseulte, however, felt that the latter’s presence was rather welcome. Her adorer’s embarrassment portended something she preferred to avoid. So she welcomed the reverend squire quite cordially.

A gleam of colour on the lawn and the sound of voices betokened the arrival of the rest of the family, and loLucy and Agnes and Cecilia and Anastasia, tennisracquet in hand and arrayed in white flannels or scarlet flannels, or blue flannels, and crowned with hats of stupendous dimensions. They were all fair, blueeyed girls, passablelooking if somewhat expressionless, very much alike, and numbering just a year apiece between their ages.

No great cordiality existed between these young ladies and Yseulte Santorex, as we have said; still, society has its duties, and leaving the latter to fulfil the provisions of this threadbare truism on the sunny lawn at Elmcote, wave we our magic wand to transport the reader to a very different scene.

Chapter Eleven.

"Hands Up!"

A dull, leadengrey sky; a few stray feathery flakes floating upon the frosty air; an icebound stream; a dark serrated ridge rising to the heavens on the one hand; on the other a lofty peak towering away into the misty heights. The dull moaning noise of the wind through the forest, and the distant howling of wolves, for the wintry evening is rapidly closing in, renders the whole scene and surroundings indescribably desolate and dreary.

A hoofstroke on the frostbound earth. Who is this riding abroad in the weird wilderness at such an hour, with the snowstorm lowering overhead, darkness and the multifold perils of the great mountains in front! Phantom steed and phantom rider?

Whether visionary or material, however, the latter glances upward anxiously from time to time. Darkness and the impending storm! What he urgently needs is daylight and tranquillity. He reins in his powerful black steed, and gazes intently for a few moments at the towering peak half lost in the snowcloud; then abruptly turning his horse, rides about forty yards at right angles, and again sits contemplating the lofty crag.

Somewhat of an extraordinary proceeding this. Why does not the man hasten upon his way? A matter of but a few hours and these desolate solitudes will be the theatre of such a strife and whirl of the elements that any human being, one would think, would strain every effort to reach a place of safety and comfort before the fury of the tempest is upon him. But this man seems in no sort of hurry; indeed, were it not for his occasional anxious glances heavenward, he might be deemed ignorant of the impending cataclysm.

"There is Maipah, the Red Peak," he muses. "There is the forked pine, and I have got them in line. So far good. The next thing is to find the scathed tree. Butoh curse the snowcloud! It may be months before"

"Cauaak!"

A flapflap of wings in the brake. A raven, rising almost under the horse's feet, wings its way to the boughs of a neighbouring oak.

So sudden is the hideous croak, echoing upon the stillness of this deathly solitude, that even the iron nerves of the horseman are not proof against a superstitious thrill. But those nerves are strung up to a pitch of suppressed excitement which is all engrossing.

“CauaakCauaak!”

A second raven rises from the brake, and floats lazily off to join the first, resembling in its grim blackness some foul demon of the wilderness disturbed in his den of horrors. Struck with an idea, the rider turns his horse and enters the covert. Following him, we seem to have stood on this spot before.

There are the two crosses recently cut upon the huge pinetrunk, so recently that the fresh resin exuding from them is all red and sticky as though the very tree were weeping blood for the two hapless ones, victims of a deed of blood, lying beneath it. There is the mound of earth and stones. Stay! that mound has surely undergone a transformation; for it is half overthrown, and the earth is rent and burrowed, and cast up in all directions. And there, scattered around, lie the bones of the murdered men, broken and picked nearly clean by the carrion beasts and birds of the wilderness. By a ghastly coincidence, the two scalpless heads, half denuded of flesh, lay side by side grinning as if in agony, their sightless sockets, gory and half filled with earth, gaping up at the intruder. An awful, an appalling sight to come upon suddenly in the twilight gloom of that grisly foresta sight to shake the strongest nerves, to haunt the spectator to his dying day.

But he who now looks upon it is little concerned, though even he cannot repress a slight shiver of disgust as he contemplates the horrid spectacle. He dismounts, and leading his horse away from the mournful relics, at which the animal snorts and shies in alarm, hitches him up to a sapling, and then proceeds narrowly to scrutinise the ground.

The man’s figure looks gigantic in the semigloom, as casting his ample buffalo robe off one shoulder, he lays his rifle on the ground and extracts something from the breast of his fringed huntingshirt. It is nothing less than a crumpled and dirty piece of paper, oblong in shape, and containing what is evidently a plan of some sort, rudely drawn, and undecipherable without the aid of a few words equally rudely written and misspelt, clearly the work of some unlettered person.

“Forkt pine, Red Peak, Blarsted tree, the creek where halfburied rock!”

“The plot thickens,” murmurs the investigator excitedly, conning over the laconic cipher. “Having established the relationship between the forked pine and Maipah, otherwise the Red Peak, the next thing is to discover the blasted tree, which should not be difficult, unless the term represents obloquy rather than the effects of lightning. That done, the rest will be easy.”

A few steps further into the brake. Suddenly the blood surges into his face. Something white and ghostlike glints athwart the gloom. A huge pine, dead, and stripped of all its lower bark, clearly by several successive strokes of lightning. This

can be no other than the “blasted tree” of the cipher. Almost trembling with excitement, once more he unfolds the dirty sheet of paper and eagerly scans it.

“Hands up, stranger! Hands up! or you’re a stiff ’un, by God!”

The harsh, threatening voice, cleaving the twilight solitude, where a moment before Vipan had imagined himself absolutely alone, was enough to unnerve a less resolute hearer. It proceeded from a tall, sinisterlooking man, who standing on a ridge or bank some fiveandtwenty yards off, and slightly above him, had him covered with a riflebarrel. There was no disputing the grim mandate. The other held him at a complete disadvantage. Any hesitation to comply would mean a bullet through his heart that instant. But while holding both hands high above his head, his eyes were keenly on the lookout for the smallest chance.

“I don’t seem to have the pleasure of your acquaintance, friend,” he answered coolly. What a fool he was to have parted company with his Winchester, he thought.

“You don’t?” yelled the man, amid a volley of curses. “You soon will, though, I reckon, you peskywhite Injun. I’ll learn you to set the red devils on to scalp and knife my pardners. Now, you jest throw down that hunk of paper, slicker nor greased lightningmind me.”

The tone was so fierce and threatening that there was no room for delay. No man living was more keenly competent to realise the situation than he who had now the worst of it.

“All right,” he answered. “I’m standing on it. You’ll see it when I move my foot.”

“Don’t move a hair else then, or you’re a stiff,” was the grim uncompromising reply.

“Now,” went on the fellow, having assured himself that the paper was there, “take six steps backwardsix and no more. Quick march!”

With the deadly riflebarrel still covering his heart, Vipan obeyed.

“Well! what’s the next thing?” he said, and at the same time he noticed that the other carried a lariat rope dangling in loose coils from his left arm.

“The next thing, eh?” jeered the fierce aggressor. “I and some of the boys have kept our eye upon you for a good while, and the next thing is we’re going to lynch you. NowTurn round!”

The man in his eagerness had made a step forward, with the result that, the little ridge of ground whereon he was standing being slippery with the frost, he missed his

footing, stumbled, staggered wildly in his efforts to recover his balance, and finally rolled headlong almost at Vipan's feet.

Crack!

The aggressor lay writhing in his deaththroes. All this time warily on the lookout for the smallest chance in his favour, Vipan, quick as thought, had whipped out the little Derringer which he carried in his breastpocket, and sent a bullet through his adversary's brain.

"I think I've turned the tables on you with effect, my hearty," he said, contemplating the dead man with a savage sneer. Now that there was no further necessity for coolness, his blood boiled at the recent humiliation this fellow had made him undergo. "Ha, ha! Go and tell your two precious 'pardners' what a sorry hash you made of it on their account, you miserable idiot, and bait a few more Tartar traps down in the nethermost shades. Ha, ha!"

The first thing he did was to pick up and secure the sheet of paper. Then he searched the dead man lest anything bearing upon the cipher might be in his possession, but without avail. He was about to leave the spot, when an idea struck him.

For a moment he stood contemplating his late enemy. Bending down, an expression of strong disgust in his face, he gripped the dead man by the haira couple of quick slashes, and the scalp was in his hand. Then he drew his knife across the throat of the corpse.

"The Siouxhis mark," he muttered, with grim jocosity. "Faugh! Now to stow away this beastly thing," wiping the scalp upon its late proprietor's clothing.

He removed the latter's weaponsrifle, revolver, knifeand keeping a sharp lookout against any further aggression, regained his horse. In mounting, he trod on something which crackled crisply. It was a dried and shrivelled kneeboot, from which the legbone still protruded. And his attention being once more attracted to these ghastly relics, it almost seemed to him that the two heads had changed their position, and were glaring at him with hideous and menacing scowl. The ravens, from a neighbouring tree, renewed their lugubrious croak, as if resentful at being so long kept away from their repulsive feast. Overhead, the sky grew blacker and blacker, and the snowflakes whirled round the horseman as he emerged from the gloom of that grisly brake.

"There's more carrion for you, you black devils," he muttered, apostrophising the ravens. "Heavens! What had I to do with the brute's unwashen 'pardners'? If I'm to be held answerable for the scalp of every idiot who goes to sleep with both eyes shut,

I've got my work cut out for me. Ha, ha! The red brother comes in mighty convenient sometimes."

Thus musing, he had gained the crossing of a mountain torrent, at the entrance to a long, narrow cañon, whose sheer, overhanging walls were gloomy and forbidding, even by the light of day. Dismounting, he took out the scalp, and wrapping it round a stone, hurled it away into a deep, swirling pool, whose centre was free from ice. The dead man's weapons followed suit.

"There! Pity to throw away good serviceable arms, but'Selfpreservation, etc.' I only treated the dog as he would have treated me, but I don't want to establish a vendetta among his desperado mates with myself for its object. A lot the scoundrels care about such a plea as selfdefence. No. Let them credit the reds with the job."

The rising gale shrieked wildly overhead, but within the black walls of the cañon the wayfarer was entirely protected from its force. The snowflakes, large and fleecy, now fell thickly about him. And now there was exultation in place of the former anxiety in his glance as ever and anon he studied the dark and overcast sky.

"Better and better. Nothing like snow for covering up a trail, and by the time it's open again there'll be not much left of yon carrion. Up, Satanta! We'll soon be home now."

The black steed arched his splendid neck responsive to his master's voice. And his said master, muffling himself closer in his buffalo robe, settled himself down in his saddle with every confidence in the ability of one or other, or both of them, to keep the right trail, even through the pitchy blackness which was now descending upon them. The driving snow, the shrieking of the gale, the howling of wolves in the dark forest, the grisly sight left behind, the stain of blood, were nothing to him who rode thereonon through the night.

Chapter Twelve.

"To Quit."

When Vipan narrated the events of the last chapter to his friend and partner, the latter looked grave.

"I know the chap you dropped," he said, "and he'll be no loss to this territory, nohow. He's one o' them desperate, harddrinkin', cussin' bullies that a whole townshipay, and many a township 'll be only too glad to see laid. But then, you see, there are his mates to reckon with; bullies, all of 'em, like himself. I'm afraid if they light upon the trail we shall have some warm work along."

"But they won't light on it, Bill, thanks to this friendly blizzard. Why, the snow'll be there for the next three months, but most, if not all, of my late friend won't. He'll be pretty evenly distributed among the wolves and crows by that time," was the grim reply. And the speaker kicked the logs into a blaze, and took a long pull at his whiskyhorn. "Besides," he added, "I took all precautions. If they do strike the trail, they'll credit the whole business to the red brother."

The scout puffed earnestly at his pipe for some little while, his features in no wise relaxing their gravity.

"See here, Vipan," he said, at length; "that's one side of the affair I've been cudgelling over. Most of the chaps located around have got a notion that you're too thick with the reds, and they're pretty mad. I've run against several of 'em, and have been hearin' some tall talk among 'em while you were away down there. Now, the best thing we can do is to clear out our caches (Note 1) as soon as the weather lifts, and git."

"No, no, Bill; that's not my line at all. It's no part of my idea to be choused out of the goose with the golden eggs just as I've brought that biped home, not to mention being obliged to sneak away from a lot of yapping curs, any one of whom I'm ready to meet, how, when, and where he chooses." And Vipan's face was a picture of contemptuous resentment.

"Whatever they are, old pard, they can shootthey can. I don't know what's to stand in the way of a straight volley just any time we hap to be on the move, even if not when we poke our noses out of our own door. But if your mind's set on stayin' on, I'll just dry up."

The other's face softened. This staunch and loyal comrade of his was prepared, as a matter of course, to stand by him and equally share the peril in which the jealous resentment of the incensed miners placed or might place himself.

“Now, look here, old chum,” he said, “I’ll just tell you what sort of a prospecting I’ve made. I always maintained the upper bend of Burntwood Creek was worth tapping. It’s my private opinion we’ve at last struck the real yellow, and if you don’t think it worth following up after what I’m going to show you, why I’ll fall in with your idea, and light out now for some where else. Look at this,” and he placed in his friend’s hand the paper which he had taken from the pocket of one of the dead miners whom he had helped to bury.

Smokestack Bill studied the plan thoughtfully for a few moments.

“It’s tarnation vague,” he said at length: “‘Forkt pine, Red Peak, blarsted tree, and the creek where halfburied rock.’ Why, there’s parks of forked pines, and as for the blasted tree it’s like enough to be some stem against which one o’ them chaps was squelched by his mule, and known only to them. And the creek’s just chock full of halfburied rocks.”

“Ha, ha, ha! Bill, my boy, I’ve located them allall but the halfburied rock, that is. The tree’s a scathed pine all right, close to where the two fellows were scalped. I was just going to locate the creek part of the business, when that unhung skulker ‘jumped’ me. You may just bet your bottom dollar we’ll light upon something rich.”

“Well, well, I’ll see you through it,” said the other in a tone as if he began to think there might be something in it. “But seems to me we shan’t be much the better for a lot of gold even if we find it. You’re bent on a rush to Great Britain, Vipan, I can see that. Well, my boy, if we light on a find, you can take the bigger half, and go and pay off old scores with the party that’s tricked you. I’ve not much use for the stuff, I reckon.”

“Bill, old friend, you’re an extraordinary production of your day and speciesa thoroughly unselfish specimen of humanity to wit. Now, do you think it in the least likely that I should agree to any such arrangement? No, no; share and share alike is the motto between partners. If we make a good thing of it we’ll take our jaunt together.”

“’M, p’raps. Cities don’t like me, and I don’t like cities. If it were otherwise I should be jingling my tens of thousands of dollars today, instead of owning nought but a good rifle, a good horse, and a cache full of pelts. There’s mighty mean tricks done in cities, and those done in a lawyer’s office ain’t the least mean. My old dad was in that line, and though a good chap in other ways, I saw queer things done in that office of his. I couldn’t stand it, and I couldn’t stand the life, so I kicked over the stool and struck out West. I got blown up in a Missouri steamboat first thing, and came down on a chunk of the smokestack into the mud on the Nebraska sideleastways, that’s what the boys declared, and that’s why they call me Smokestack Bill, though I reckon

I must have got astride of the smokestack while I was half drowning. And now my brother Seth, who took kindly to lawyering, is the richest man in Carson County."

"But that you are thoroughly happy as a plainsman, Bill, I should say you had made a mistake," answered Vipan, in whom the other's story seemed to have touched a sympathetic chord. "Otherwise the man who sacrifices wealthbeggars himself for a principleis a consummate ass, and deserves all he condemns himself to; that is, a lifetime spent in regretting it," he added, with an unwonted bitterness. "But never mind that," resuming his normal tone. "When the snow melts we'll go down and prospect Burntwood Creek, and as it's unluckydeuced unluckyto discount one's successes beforehand, we'll just dismiss the subject out of hand until then. Meanwhile, life being uncertain, we'll cache the cipher in some snug place in case anything should happen to me."

Three months went by. All the rigours of winter had set in upon the Black Hills. Everywhere the snow lay in an unbroken sheet, attaining in many places such prodigious depths as almost to bury the brakes and thickets of a shorter growth. The dark foliage of the great pines afforded some relief from the dazzling whiteness around, but even that was almost concealed by the huge masses of snow which had there effected lodgment. And here and there a mighty cliff of red sandstone stood forth from the surrounding snow, its face half draped with glistening icicles. But the weather was glorious, and the air as exhilarating as champagne. The peaks, shining like frosted silver, rearing their heads to the evercloudless bluethat marvellous combination of subtle shades of the richest azure, tempered with green, which is produced by contrast with a snowenshrouded earththe smooth face of each great precipice, frowning beneath its brow of dark and bristling pines; the muffled roar of the mountain torrent struggling for freedom, far down under its successively imprisoning layers of ice; the wild cry of bird or beast, even more at fault in the icebound rigours of its native waste than its artificial enemy, manall this went to make up an engraving from the scenes of Nature in her winter magnificence, in all her savage primeval beauty, in her unsurpassable and most stately grandeur.

In the midst of it all our two friends were thoroughly comfortable. They trapped a good deal and hunted occasionally. Many a valuable fur of silver fox and marten and beaver were added to their stores, and the thick coat of the great white wolf, and the tawny one of the cougar, or mountain lion. Two grizzlies of gigantic size also bit the dustthe redoubted "Old Ephraim" standing no chance whatever before the rifles of two such dead shotswhile deer, both blacktailed and red, unable to make much running in the deep snow, fell an easy prey.

The entrance to their cabin was all but buried in snow, but within it was thoroughly warm and snug. Here, before a blazing fire, they would lounge at night. Stores of every kind were plentifulflour, coffee, and sugar, whisky, warm furs, and abundance of tobaccoand surrounded by every creature comfort they would sit and smoke their

long pipes, after a day of hard and healthful exercise, while the wind shrieked without, and all the voices of the weird wilderness were abroad, and the great mountains reverberated ever and anon the thunderous boom of some mighty mass of snow which, dislodged by the wind or its own weight, roared down the slopes, perchance to plunge with a crash over a huge cliff. Now and then old Shanks would lift his shaggy head and growl as the dismal yell of a cougar would be borne upon the night, but he was wellused to the sounds of the forest, and quickly subsided again. And the ghostly hooting of owls, and the shrill barking of foxes, in the dark pine forest mingled with the ravening howl of the wolves in ceaseless chorus from the frozen and windswept slopes.

Sometimes an Indian, belated on his hunt, would take advantage of their hospitality, and on such occasions Vipan would delight to "draw" his savage guest, with the result that the redskinned warrior, replete with good cheer and good humour, would lie back on his furs, puffing out huge clouds of tobacco smoke, and narratewith that absence of reserve which characterises the savage when so engagedmany a strange tale of love and war, and among them, here and there, an instance of such fiendish and ruthless atrocity as would have caused the ordinary listener's hair to stand on end with horror and repulsion, not swerving in the smallest degree from his smiling and goodhumoured imperturbability during the narration. But Vipan was wholly proof against any such ordinary weakness. The way to know Indians, he said, was first to get them to talk, and then to let them talk. He wanted to know Indians thoroughly, and reckoned by this time he had about succeeded. So in him the red warrior found an attentive, not to say appreciative, listener.

Thus the months went by, and when the crocuses and soldanellas began to appear from beneath the melting snow, and the torrents and creeks ran red in the first spring freshets, an impatience, a feverish longing to be up and doing came upon Vipan, rendering him moody, and at times irritable. But until the rivers should have run off the melted snows nothing could be done. In vain his comrade preached philosophy.

"I judge you'll get no good by tearing your shirt, old pard," said the honest scout. "See here, now. Did you ever set your heart on a single thing, that when you got it you wondered how the snakes you could ever have been so hot on gettin' it? No, you didn't. About this placer. Maybe we shall find plenty of stuffmaybe littlemaybe none at all. But whatever we find or don't find, it's no part of good sense to tear our shirts a' thinkin' of it."

"No, it isn't," agreed the other. "But'many a slip,' etc."

"'M, yes. What's the odds, though? We can always light on fresh ground. And if the reds go on the warpath soon as the grass grows, it'd do us both good to get a scouting berth with the command for a spell."

Vipan's forebodings were destined to be realised. A few mornings later the two occupants of the winter cabin were awakened by the trampling of many hoofs. With their minds full of the threats of those around them, both seized their rifles and stood ready for any emergency. But with no body of jealous and exasperated miners had they now to deal. Cautiously peering forth, their gaze fell upon the trappings and accoutrements of a cavalry patrol.

A furious curse escaped Vipan's lips. His plans were ruined.

Note 1. A cache is a sort of underground storeroom or place of concealmentgenerally jarshapedwherein peltries and other goods are deposited, pending their convenient removal.

Chapter Thirteen.

Henniker City.

Henniker City was a typical prairie township in no wise bearing out the imposing idea which its name might convey.

It might have contained some five score dwellings, mainly of the loghut order; a few frame houses, with real glazed windows figuring as the aristocratic and advanced representatives of civilised architecture among the more primitive structures. It boasted a brace of churches, one of which, only occasionally used, having been reared through the efforts of a travelling priest attached to the nearest Catholic mission, the other representing no creed in particular, though chiefly resorted to by what our friend Smokestack Bill was wont to define as "the pizenest kind of Hardshell Baptists," a definition we should be loth to attempt to elucidate. It boasted more stores than churches, and more drinking saloons than stores. It contained a bank, whose manager reckoned handiness at drawing, and, if necessary, using, the sixshooter at least as essential a qualification for his clerks as the footing up of figures. It boasted a sheriff, whose three predecessors had "died in their boots" within less than the same number of years. And for population, fixed and floating, it mainly comprised about as daredevil, swashbucklering, unscrupulous a set of cut throats, as ever shot a winning adversary at euchre or "held up" (from "Hold up your hands"the "road agent's" warning) the Pony Express.

Such was the place to which our two friends were moved by the detachment of troops which had so suddenly and unwelcomely invaded their mountain retreat. A shout of mingled mirth, derision, and resentment went up in the township at this fresh evidence of the highhandedness of Uncle Sam, and in a trice the whole population crowded around the prisoners and their escort.

"Hello, pard!" sung out a slouchinglooking fellow in a frowsy shirt and cabbagetree hat, addressing Vipan. "Don't be down on your luck, now. When the Colonel here's fightin' the Sioux, we're the boys to slide back and pouch the stuff. Hey!"

"Say, Colonel! Going after Sittin' Bull soon?" sung out another, to the officer in command of the cavalry. "'Cause Smokestack Bill's the boy to raise a mob of scouts for yer, and we're the boys to jine."

"Not till you put a hunk of lead through yon cussed white Injun, I reckon," growled a forbidding ruffian, on the outskirts of the crowd, with a scowl at Vipan.

“Snakes! Wasn’t he with the Injun as scalped Rufus Charlie and Pesky Bob?” said another, taking up the suggestion. And then a knot of men, gathered in conclave, eyed the object of the discussion in a manner that boded no good.

Meanwhile the crowd, surging round the new arrivals, continued to pour forth banter and queries.

“Got the ‘dust’ about yer, strangers, or did yer cache it?”

“Say, pardners, whar did yer leave yer squaws? Or did Uncle Sam confiscate ’em as national property? Ho, ho!”

“See here, boys, am I sheriff of Henniker City, or am I not?” drawled a cool, deliberate voice, as the chaff reached its height. “’Cause if I am, jest clear a way; and if I’m not, I reckon I’d like to cotch a glimpse of the galoot as says so.” A shout of mirth greeted this speech, and speedily a lane was opened through the crowd, down which advanced a tall, spare man. This worthy’s sallow visage was adorned with a grizzled beard of the “doorknocker” order, above which protruded a halfchewed cigar, a pair of whimsical grey eyes, and a determined mouth. In his hand he carried a Winchester rifle, and the inevitable sixshooter peeped forth from his hippocket.

“How do, Colonel? Brought me some more citizens, hey? Smokestack Bill, as I’m a miserable sinner! That your pard, Bill? All right, come this way. Citizens of Henniker, the High Court is about to sit.”

Without more ado, the two “prisoners” and their custodian, resuming the thread of their previous conversation, followed the whimsical sheriff into the Courthouse, as many as could crowding in until the room was full, laughing, chatting, bantering each other; kicking up an indescribable uproar. At last, raising his voice above the shindy, the whimsical sheriff succeeded in obtaining something like silence.

“Citizens!” he said, “we must proceed with the business which has brought us together. The prisoners at the bar having been handed over to me to be dealt with according to lawthat is, kept in custody until able to take their trial for ’truding on Indian landscannot be so kept because the gaol with which this city is supplied would not hold a clerk of a dry goods store, let alone a couple of Indian fighters. That being so, the prisoners may consider themselves under bail to the tune of fifty dollars apiece, to appear when wanted; snakes, and that’ll be never,” he parenthesised, in an undertone. “Citizens, the court is adjournedand now dispersegitvamoose the ranch. Those who are not too drunk will go home peaceably, those who are, will adjourn to Murphy’s saloon and get drunker. Prisoners at the bar, you will accompany me right along and take supper. I have spoken.”

If any confiding reader imagines that when night settled down upon Henniker City the wearied denizens of that historic township retired to their welcome couches to recruit their toilworn limbs in sweet and wellearned reposewhy we are sorry to dispel the illusion. But in the interests of stern truth we must place it upon record that the hours of darkness usually witnessed the liveliest of scenes, for it was only then that the township began to live. The saloons drove literally a roaring trade, for the shindy that went on in them as the night wore on, and their habitués waxed livelier, was something indescribable. Miners in their rough shirts and cabbagetree hats, here and there a leatherclad trapper, cowboys and ranchmen in beaded frocks and Indian leggings, and more or less "on the burst," but all talking at a great rate; all tossing for, or shouting for, or consuming drinks, and, we regret to say, a large proportion somewhat the worse for the latter. Now and then a chorus of earsplitting whoops, a clatter of hoofs down the street, to an accompaniment of pistolshots, while the red flashes and whistling of balls in the darkness, warning those who might be under cover not to venture forth just yet, told that a group of cowboys were engaged on the timehonoured and highly popular pastime known among their craft as "painting the town red," i.e., galloping through the streets whooping and discharging their sixshooters at everything or nothing. But this was far too ordinary an occurrence to attract any attention. It all meant nothing. Here and there, however, it did mean something. Partitioned off from the barroom was the space devoted to cardplaying, and it might be that from here the ominous sound of cards vehemently banged down with a savage curse upon the table warned those who heard it to stand clear. In a twinkling the flash and crack of pistolshotsthen a lull, and amid inquiries from many voices, eager, hurried, perhaps in a lowered tone, a dead man is raised and deposited on a table or carried forth to his home if he have one.

"Who is it?"

"How did it happen?"

"Was it a fair draw?"

"Oh yes, both blazed together!" "All rightfair and square enough!" and the other players resume their gamble, and the talkers their narratives, and more drinks are ordered, and nothing further is thought of the affair.

At that time Henniker City was blessedor the reversewith a considerable influx on its normal population. Grouped around the outskirts of the town lay the tents of many of the dispossessed minerswho, like our two friends, had been removed from the Indian lands. All these men were more or less discontented; and suffering in addition from enforced idleness, it follows that monotony and drink rendered them ripe for any mischief which might suggest itself. Moreover, among their ranks was a sprinkling of the very scum of the frontierhorse thieves, "road agents" or highwaymen, professional assassins, and bullies of repute whose presence here was

due to the fact that they had rendered every other State too hot to hold them, and where, did they venture to return, they would be lynched without fail, if not shot on sight.

Into one of these tents we must invite the reader to peep with us.

Look at those two knights of the hangdog countenance. He who is now speaking would stand not a chance before any intelligent jury, if only on account of his aspect alone. By the dim oillamp in the tent we can make out two other forms lying around, but the cloud of tobacco smoke, added to the dimness aforesaid, precludes a more familiar study of their not less forbidding features.

“See now, Dan,” hangdog number one was saying. “May I be chopped in splinters by the reds if I allow this darned white Injun to get away out o’ this without a carcase full o’ lead. So we’d better go up and finish the job tonight.”

“Can’t be done, I reckon. What about his pardeh? To say nothin’ about Nat Hardroper, who seems to have kinder taken him up!”

“Darn his pard, and darn Nat Hardroper!” replied the other, furiously. “Only a set of doggoned skunks ’ud have elected Nat Hardroper sheriff, and only a set of whitelivered coons ’ud have kep’ him in the berth. I guess I don’t fear him.”

“See here, Rube,” suggested the other, “why not tumble to my plan? He’ll be going to Red Cloud’s village in a day or twosee if he don’t. Then we can ambush him at Bald Eagle Forks and plant him full of lead.”

“Don’t want that. Want to string him up. Shooting’s too good. Didn’t he set the red devils on to sculp my pardners? Didn’t he wipe out my brother? leastways, he must have, for I reckon ChineeKnifer Abe ain’t the boy to be taken playin’ possum. Ef it hadn’t bin for a squad of his reds, we’d have strung him up down in Burntwood Creek the day before the snow.”

“Guess our scalps sat loose that day. Snakes! but they ran us hard,” answered the fellow addressed as Dan. “This Vipan ’d have been buzzardmeat then but for that.”

“Reckon he shall be tonight,” furiously retorted the first speaker. “I’ve said itand Bitter Rube ain’t the boy to go back on his word. That blanked white Injun, helpin’ to dance around my pardners’ sculps!”

And a volley of curses drowned the speaker’s utterance.

Chapter Fourteen.

In a Tight Place.

“StrangerI guess I want this floor!”

The place, an inner room partitioned off from Murphy’s saloon; the time, late evening; the speaker a tall, halfdrunken ruffian in frowsy miner’s dress; the spoken to, Vipanwho, lounging against a table was chatting with the saloonkeeper; the tone, insolent and threatening to the last degree; the attitude, that of a man sure of his advantage.

“StrangerI guess I want this floor!”

“And I guess you’ve got it,” came the quick reply, but not more quickly than the change of attitude which it described. For, in a twinkling, a straight “right and left” from the shoulder had sent the aggressor to earth like a felled ox, while his pistolbullet buried itself in the wall half a yard above Vipan’s head.

Then ensued a stupendous hubbub. Pistols cracked, as the stricken man’s mates in the outer room hurled themselves at the partition door intent on taking up their comrade’s quarrel. But the door, a solid slab one, met them in full career, pinning the foremost of their number half in, half out.

“Now, Dan Harper, back’s the word!” said the quiet, but stern voice of Smokestack Bill, to whose promptitude was due this first check to the enemy.

“You move a little inch forward and you’re a stiff, you bet.”

“Leggo the darn door, thenFfixed ttight,” gasped the pinned one, who, with the muzzle of the scout’s sixshooter within an inch of his nose, would willingly have obeyed, but could not. Smokestack Bill, however, relaxing his pressure, the crushed one was able to draw back, considerably bruised, into the outer room, and the door was jammed to, but not before a couple of bullets fired into the room had narrowly grazed Vipan’s shoulder.

“Now then, boys,” called out the scout. “Anyone feel like trying an entrance? Better not, believe me.”

All this had befallen within infinitely fewer minutes than it takes to chronicle. The felled bully lay prone where he had first dropped, stunned, insensible, and motionlessand disarmed, for the first act of his adversary was to put it out of his power to get the advantage of them. The room, half filled with stifling smoke from the pistolshots; the barricaded door, against which the besieged ones had run up a

couple of casks; the two determined men, fully prepared to defend themselves at the expense of any number of their adversaries' lives; the fierce, threatening summons to yield entrance from the infuriated gang without; all went to make up a strange and startling metamorphosis on the hitherto quiet evening, which the two men had reckoned upon when they retired into the private room of the saloonkeeper to be clear of any disturbance.

"Air you agoin' to open?" sung out a harsh voice, at the close of a muttered consultation. "We know you, Smokestack Bill, and we've nothin' again you. But that pizen skunk, the white Injun, we're bound to have him if we burn down the old log to do it. So you come out of it, Bill, right along, while you can."

"You be advised, Dan Harper," cried the scout in reply. "You're a dead man this very night if you don't gitmind me."

"So are a dozen of you, by God!" sung out Vipan. He knew the whole business was a deliberate plan to take his life. The ruffian whom he had felled was to pick a quarrel and shoot him on sight, while his scoundrelly mates stood ready to make sure of him if the first part of the scheme miscarried. A roar went up from the crowd. "Let's get at him! What'll we do with him, boys?"

"Tar and feather him!"

"Burn him at the stake!" "Scalp him!" "String him up!" were some of the yells that burst from the maddened throng as it surged round the building, narrowly scanning every door and window for a chance of forcing an entrance. But the defenders of the inner room knew better than to be caught that way.

"One minute before you begin any tricks," cried the scout, and his voice had the dangerous ring about it of that of an ordinarily cool and quiet man roused at last. "One minute, and just listen to me. We've molested nobody, and don't want to molest nobody. Bitter Rube in here picked a quarrel with my pardner and got knocked down. If he'd done it with any of you boys he'd have been shot dead. He'll be shot before anyone gets in here"

"Darn Bitter Rube! Serve the bunglin' fool right! What do we care about Bitter Rube? It's the pizen white Injun we're going to lynchand lynch him we willby God!"

"Try it!" rejoined the scout. "There'll be a few of you dead in your boots before mornin', I reckon. And anyone who thinks Smokestack Bill the boy to go back on a pardner is makin' an almighty big error in the undertaking. So now, stand clear for squalls."

A roar and a yell was the only reply. A deafening crash, as some of the rioters in the outer saloon vented their rage in smashing all the glass they could lay hands on; then a shock, as the end of a beam, wielded as a battering ram, came full against the door. A couple of flashes and reports, mingling like a single one. The beam fell to the earth at the same time as three of its bearers, whom the fire of the besieged, discharged through a chink at such close quarters, had literally raked in line. The remainder promptly got out of the way.

“Put in the faggot. Don’t give any of the skunks a further show,” yelled the frantic mob, exasperated by this reverse. And a rush was made for the further end of the building.

Chapter Fifteen.

Judge Lynch takes a Back Seat.

It is not wonderful, all things considered, that the citizens of Henniker, together with its fortuitous and floating population, should have been moved to such lengths as to resolve upon lynching Vipan. Indeed, it would have been surprising had matters turned out otherwise. Here was a man they very much more than suspected of being in league with their barbarous and dreaded foes, at a time when the frontier was almost in a state of war. A man of known daring and unscrupulousness, and whom they knew to have been presentthe only white manat an important council, involving issues of peace or war; to have taken part in its deliberations, going even so far as to advise the chiefs, and that, if report were to be believed, by no means in the direction of peaceful results. Several of their friends and neighbours had been murdered and scalped, those who had escaped a similar fate being obliged to carry on their mining or other operations rifle in hand, even if not forced to quit altogether. Meanwhile, this man, it was well known, could move about the country perfectly unmolested, visiting the Indian encampments at willindeed, in one instance he was known to have witnessed a scalpdance, wherein the prime attraction of the entertainment lay in the exhibition of the scalps recently torn from the heads of two of their murdered comrades.

And then he was an alien, which was the crowning point of the whole offence; and the good citizens of Henniker were virtuously stirred that a foreigneran Englishmanshould, while dwelling on their free and sacred soil, presume to be on friendly terms with its dispossessed and original owners; even as here and there in Great Britain may still be found a misguided and hardheaded Tory moved to honest indignation at the prospect of Fenians and Invincibles and National Leaguers stirred up to dynamite and murder by IrishAmerican agents and American dollars.

But how came it that so much should be known of Vipan's movements, seeing that he himself was almost the only white man who could safely penetrate the semihostile country or venture among the roving bands who even then were raiding and murdering at their own sweet will? Well, human nature is rather alike all the world over. Gossip on that wild Western frontier was circulated through very much the same channels as, say, at Lant with LantHanger in the county of Brackenshirethrough the agency of the squaws to wit. Some of the miners owned red spouses, others, again, were not above open admiration for the savage beautiesand, presto!sooner or later the gossip of the Indian villages leaked out.

Peering through the chinks, the besieged could descry a sea of threatening faces, savagely hideous in the red torchlight. Prominent among these was a man who held a noosed cord. Hither and thither he moved, stirring up the crowd, his sinister features

distorted with malicious rage. Hatred, envy, disappointed greed, all were depicted there, as with bloodcurdling threats the mob clamoured for the object of its resentment.

Suddenly a clatter of approaching hoofs became audible alike to besiegers and besieged. The crowd paused aghast, the first thought being that of an Indian attack. Then a score of horsemen darted into the light, and a ringing voice was heard inquiring

"Say, boys, what in thunder's all this muss?"

"That's the sheriff," said Smokestack Bill, coolly, lowering his revolver. "We're out of this fix, anyhow."

A roar was the answer.

"The white Injun! The pizen white Injun! We're going to lynch him."

"I guess not," was the reply. "Not while Nat Hardroper's sheriff of Henniker City. When it comes to reckoning with that invaluable officer, Judge Lynch'll have to take a back seat. Eh, boys?" turning to his wellarmed followers, a score of cowboys and welldisposed citizens, whom he had prudently collected in haste on receiving the first intimation of a riot.

"That's so, sheriff," was the prompt reply.

"Say, Dan Harper," called out the sheriff, "Judge Lynch's sittin' in the State you've just left. Why not go and talk to him there?"

The face of the fellow named blanched at this allusion.

Meanwhile the crowd, composed mainly as it was of ruffians and bullies, began to show a disposition to slink off, in the presence of these wellarmed and determined representatives of law and order.

"Never mind, boys," shouted someone. "We'll plant him full of lead yet. Now let's git."

"How do, sheriff?" said the scout, calmly stepping forth with extended hand. "Guess you've raised the siege on us right slick in the nick of time."

"How do, Bill? How do, colonel?" to Vipan. "Now you come right along to my log and we'll talk."

“Hold hard, friends,” objected Vipan. “We’ve got to drink first. Murphy, bring out the juice.”

“Whurroo, sheriff darlint,” chuckled the saloonkeeper. “Whurroo! but it’s purty shootin’ there’s bin around here afure you came. Be jabers! and thur’ll be a big inquist tomorrow, and the power of the ‘crame’ ’ll be on hand for the jewry, I reckon. Bedad! and whur’s that shuckfaced omadhaun?” he added, gazing at the corner. For Bitter Rube, having recovered his confused senses, had profited by the confusion to steal away unperceived.

“Now, boys, mind me,” said Nat Hardroper to Vipan and the scout, after a substantial supper a few hours later. “This same Henniker City’s a powerful survigerous place. I’ve got you out of one fix, but I can’t go on getting you out of fixes. It’s too big a contract on one man’s hands, I want you to see. Now, a power of those chirruping roarers’ll be on your trail first thing you show your noses out of this shebang. If I warn’t sheriff this’d be my adviceto take your hosses this very night and git. But it ain’t my advice, because, you see, I am sheriff, and you’re under my charge. No, no; it ain’t my advice.”

Save for the faintest possible wink, he looked them straight in the face, as solemn as an owl. Vipan burst into a roar of laughter.

“Right you are, Nat. It’s not your advicewe’ll remember that.”

“Well, goodnight, boys; goodnight.”

They shook hands heartily. But our two friends did not go to bed; they went to the stable. By daybreak they had put a considerable number of miles between Henniker City and themselves.

Chapter Sixteen.

A Conjugal Debate and its Sequel.

With all his failings, the Rev. Dudley Vallance had one redeeming pointhe was excessively fond of his children; but it is probable that he loved his only son more than all the rest put together. To him he could refuse nothing. Indeed, so loth was he to part with him even for a time that he could not bring himself to allow Geoffry to enter any profession. He must remain at home. There was no need for him to earn his living, since he would one day succeed to the Lant property, and meanwhile he could be learning to look after it.

Fortunately, Geoffry was something of a bookworm, and studious of temperament, or the bringingup he had received, and the aimless life which it entailed upon him, would have sent the boy straight to the dogs. As it was, he was cut out by Nature for a college don rather than for a country squire, and during his University career he was known essentially as a reading man.

It may be imagined, then, that when he returned home at the end of the summer term, after taking a brilliant double first, the pride and delight of his reverend parent knew no bounds, and by a series of festivities, unparalleled since the distinguished youth's coming of age, was LantHanger at large, and particularly its "County Society," bidden to share the parental joy.

But, alas! that the latter should be so shortlived. The object of all this fun and frolic seemed in no way to relish it at all. Instead of returning home cheerful, overflowing with spirits, thoroughly enjoying life with the zest of the average young Englishman who has just scored a signal success, and sees a congenial and rosebestrewn future before him, poor Geoffry seemed to have parted with all capacity for enjoyment. He was pale and listless, absent, bored, andshall we own it?at times excessively irritable, not to say peevish. His father was deeply concerned, and his mother, who read off the symptoms as briefly as the village doctor would diagnose a case of incipient scarlet fever, felt more of anger than concern.

"I really don't know what to do about the boy," said the Rev. Dudley, dejectedly, coming into his wife's morningroom the day after the last of their house party had dispersed. "It's dreadful to see the poor fellow in such low spirits. He must have been working too hard, whatever he may say to the contrary. It's hard to part with him so soon, the dear fellow, but we positively must send him abroad to travel for the summer. Nothing like travel."

"Try him, and see if he'll go," was the short reply.

“We must insist upon it. We must get medical advicea doctor’s opinion to back us up. The boy will be illill, mark me. He eats nothing. He doesn’t sleep, for I hear him moving in his rooms far into the small hours. He looks pale and pulled down, and doesn’t even care for his books. Then, when all the people were here, he would steal away from everybody, and wander about and mope by himself all day. We had some nice people, too; and pleasant, goodlooking girls. Come, hadn’t we?”

“Oh, yes; a most complete party. Only one ingredient left out.”

“And that?”

“Yseulte Santorex.” And Mrs Vallance shut down the envelope she was closing with a vicious bang.

“God bless my soul! you don’t say so? Surely it hasn’t gone so far as that?”

“It has gone just as far as that abominable girl could carry it,” was the uncompromising reply. “Surely you are not simple enough to imagine that the daughter of that hybrid Spanish atheist would neglect such an opportunity? The girl has simply made a fool of him.”

“You dislike her to that extent?” said Mr Vallance, vacantly, his mind full of the woeful plight into which his son was plunged. “I don’t know. Sometimes I think her not a bad sort of girl considering the fallow in which her mind has been allowed to lie. And Geoffry might do worse.”

“Oh, yes. He might, but not much. A forward, bold, masculine minx, tramping the countryside, fishing and shooting. And she is utterly devoid of respect for her elders, and as for principle or religionfaugh! I beg leave to think, Dudley, that he hardly could do worse.”

This spitefulness on the lady’s part was not wholly devoid of excuse. For her elders, as represented by Mrs Dudley Vallance, Yseulte certainly had scant respect. And then, if she became their son’s wife, the day might come when Mrs Vallance would have to abdicate Lant Hall in her favour, whereas no such calamity could in the nature of things ever befall its reverend squire. Of course Geoffry must marry somebody or other one day; but Geoffry’s mother could contemplate such a contingency with far more equanimity than that of being dispossessed by a girl whom she detested, and whom she knew despised her.

“Well, well! we won’t say that; we won’t say quite that,” rejoined Mr Vallance. “Perhaps you are a little hard on poor Yseulte. She is young, remember, and at a thoughtless age. But she is thoroughbred in the matter of birth, and will be well off.

We must not expect everything at once. And the girl is very pretty, with all her faults. I am not surprised at Geoffry's infatuation."

"No more am I," was the short reply.

"Oh, but you must look at a question of this kind apart from prejudice. And then I can't bear to see poor Geoffry simply eating his heart out like this. I am becoming seriously alarmed about him; and I tell you what it is, my dear, as he really has staked his happiness on this girl, he shall have her. I'll see Santorex about it this very day."

"Oh, well, if you have quite made up your mind, the sooner you do so the better," answered his spouse, resignedly.

"Very well, then, that's settled," said the Rev. Dudley, with a sigh of relief.

There was just one thing they forgot, this worthy couple, namely, that before settling a matter of the kind so comfortably and out of hand, it might be necessary to obtain the concurrence of the party most concerned, to wit Yseulte Santorex herself. But that Yseulte might unhesitatingly decline the honour of the projected alliance never occurred to them for one moment, and any suggestion of the bare idea of such a contingency would have thrown them into a state of wild amazement.

During the above debate, the subject thereof was doing exactly as his father had said; wandering about by himselfand moping. Strolling down the cool mossy lane, shaded between its high nuthedges, he found himself upon the riverbank. It was time to go home. They would be wondering what had become of him; perhaps sending everywhere in search of him. In his then morbid frame of mind, Geoffry shrank from being made a fuss over. Mechanically he turned to retrace his steps.

"Great events from little causes spring." The little cause in this instance was a little flock of sheep, which a farmer's lad, aided by his faithful collie, was driving into the lane from an adjacent field. The animals were kicking up a good deal of dust; Geoffry was no fonder of walking in a cloud of dust than most people. The lane was narrow, and sheep are essentially idiotic creatures; were he to try and pass these, they would, instead of making room for him, inevitably scamper on ahead as fast as their legs could carry them, thereby kicking up about ten times more dust. That decided him. He would extend his walk.

Over a rail, an unexpected flounder into a dry ditch, and he stood up to his neck in brambles and nettles. But the sting of the latter was hardly felt; for his eyes fell upon an object which set his knees trembling and his heart going like a hammer. A moment earlier and he would have missed the phenomenon which evoked this

agitation, but for the sheep. What was it? Only a broadbrimmed straw hat, and beneath it a great knot of dark brown hair rippling into gold.

It needed not this, nor the supple figure in its cool light dress which became visible, as with an effort poor Geoffry staggered up from his thorny hidingplace, to reveal the identity of this new feature of the situation. She was standing with her back towards him, about fifty yards away, taking a fishingrod to pieces, and she was alone.

At the tearing and rustling noise caused by his efforts to free himself from the clinging brambles, she turned quickly, the halfstartled look upon her features giving way to a wholly amused one as she took in the situation. Geoffry, noting it, felt savage, reckless, mad with himself and all the world. Could he never appear before her but in a ridiculous lightthe central figure of some absurd situation?

“Why, Mr Vallance, you seem to have fallen among thorns,” she cried, adding, with a merry laugh, “and the thorns have sprung up and choked you. But never mind. Sit down and rest here in the shade, while I do up my tackle, and then we can walk home together as far as our ways lie.”

The tone was kind and sympathetic, and Geoffry felt soothed. Red and perspiring, he cast himself down with a grateful sigh upon a mossy bank, in the shadow of the great oak beneath which she was standing.

“That’ll be some consolation,” he replied ruefully. “It was nothing, thoughthe tumble, I mean. I must have caught my foot in something, and came a cropper. But, it was well worth while.”

Yseulte smiled, trying hard not to render the smile a mischievous one.

“Well, you’re the best judge of that. And now, have all your visitors left?”

“Yes, and a good job too,” was the fervent reply.

“How ungrateful! I’m sure they did their best to make themselves agreeable, especially to you. Confess; you are dreadfully bored now that they are gone.”

“Not in the very least. You are hereandand” He broke off, helpless and stuttering.

“But I shall not be much longer. I am going away too.”

He sprung to his feet as if he had been stung.

“What? You are going away? When?”

“Very soon. In a week or ten days; perhaps not quite so soon.” Already she wished she had not told him. It would have been better, for every reason, that he should have heard the news at second hand.

“In a week or ten days!” he echoed. “But not for longYseulte, say it will not be for long!”

If at times the girl had been guilty of a touch of feminine spitefulness in the reflection that she had completely subjugatedand through no artful intentthe hope of this family whom, not without reason, she detested, assuredly she felt sorry and ashamed of it now, as she noted the pitiable effect which her announcement produced upon her admirer. His face was as pale as death.

“But what if it will be for long?” she answered, gently. “For months, perhapsor a year.”

“Then I’ll go and hang myself.”

Poor Geoffry! For weeksfor monthshe had been anticipating such a moment as this; had revolved every kind of set speech; every form of the most moving entreaty; every promise to devote his life to her happiness and welfare; all in the most impassioned language that the earnestness of his love could suggest: and had shivered with apprehension lest his nervousness and misgiving should intervene to mar the effect and leave him stuttering and looking an ass; yet now that the critical moment had come, all his carefullyplanned oratory had resolved itself into the brusque, passionate statement“Then I’ll go and hang myself.” Yet never was declaration more exhaustive.

She understood his meaning; she did not wish him to say more; and her tone was very gentle, very pitiful, as she replied:

“Be a man.”

The utterly wretched expression upon his face, showed that he had understood her. Never was proposal more terse; never refusal more prompt and decisive. It was impossible for each to misunderstand the other.

“Have I no chance, Yseulte?” he said, the eager trepidation of his former tone having given way to one of dull hopelessness, which moved her infinitely.

“No,” she answered, gently. “It would be cruel to leave you in any doubt. There are many reasons against itinsuperable reasons.”

“Oh, what are they? Tell me what they are,” he cried, relapsing into his former tone. “They can be removedthere is nothing I will not do, or give up, for you. What are

they? You don't like my people, I know; but you have always been kind and friendly with me. Surely my relations need not stand in the way?"

"You must not ask me for reasons, Geoffry. Let us talk over this rationally. If I cared for you as you wish, nothing should stand in the way. But as I do not, even you would not thank me for coming between yourself and those who do. Only think what a firebrand I should be."

"No, you would not. I tell you there is nothing I would not do for youor would not give up for you. Only just try me."

What complicationloving fiend should have brought to her recollection then the vision of that pictured face which had made such an impression upon herthe face of the disinherited heir of Lant Hall? The leaven of her father's cynical philosophy almost moved her to experiment on this corpus vili ready to her hand, and ascertain whether his protestations would go the length of espousing her ideas of right and wrong as regarded that particular subject. But she restrained herself in time.

Very dejectedly and in silence he walked beside her as far as their ways lay together. He would fain have reopened his pleadings, but with a hurried farewell she left him before he could detain her.

"Well, Chickie? Been having it out with Geoffry Plantagenet?" said her father, who, from his library window, had witnessed their parting at the divergence of the roads.

"Yes; that's just what I have been doing. AndI think, dear, we oughtn't to laugh at poor Geoffry quite so much."

"Oh, that's how the land lies, is it?" answered Mr Santorex, struck by the unwonted gravity which she had brought to bear upon the subject. "All right, we won't. Not that we shall have much longer to laugh at anyone," he added somewhat ruefully.

Chapter Seventeen.

War Wolf is "Wanted."

"Say, Vipan. Guess we'd better draw off out o' this for a bit. There's no call for us to help do police work just now, and we can't stand looking on. There'll be hairlifting here in a minute, I reckon."

Thus Smokestack Bill to his friend and boon companion as the two lounged on the turf, a hundred yards or so from the trading store attached to the Blue Pipestone Agency. The place was alive with Indians, gathered there for the purpose of drawing the rations with which a paternal Government supplied them, contingent on their good behaviour and in consideration of their peaceably abiding on their reservation and eschewing the fiery delights of the warpath. So Uncle Sam's red nephews occupied the ground in crowds, indulging in much jollification on the strength of newlyacquired beef and flour and other commodities which should refresh and comfort both the inner and the outer man, and while the squaws were busily packing these upon their muchenduring ponies, their lords were lounging about, chatting, smoking, merrymaking, and having a good time generally. Meanwhile, the trading post had been doing a brisk business.

"Police work, eh?" returned Vipan, with a glance at the detachment of U.S. Cavalry, which, encamped in the neighbourhood of the store, showed no sign that any serious undertaking was in contemplation. "Who are they after nobbling?"

"See here, old pardif I didn't know you well enough to stake my life you'd never go back on a pardner, you and I wouldn't be here together today. If they can't claw hold of their man, it mustn't be through any meddlin' of ours."

"Who is it they want?"

"War Wolf."

"The devil they do! They gave out a different story."

"That's so. Joe Ballin, who's with them, 's an old pard of mine. We've done many a scout together in '67 and '68. Well, he told me all about it. This command is out after no less a chap than War Wolf. You see the pizen young skunk has been braggin' all over the section how he scalped Rufus Charley and Pesky Bob, them two fellers we buried down by Burntwood Creek. It's got to the General's ears, and now they've come to take him over to Fort Price. They've given out a lie that they're bound down the river on the trail of a Minneconjou who ran off a lot of Government beef last month, but that's just a red herring. As sure as War Wolf comes along, they'll grab himmind me."

Vipan meditatively blew out circles of smoke into the air, without replying. This was a most untoward contretemps. He remembered the scalpdance which he had witnessed; the two scalpsincluding the redhaired onewhich War Wolf had so boastfully brandished during that barbarian orgie, and it flashed across him vividly now that, were the Indian arrested for the deed, the bulk of his clansmen and the Sioux at large would look upon himself as having betrayed their compatriot into the enemy's hand, or would for their own purposes affect to. Here were the troops, and he, Vipan, on good terms and hobnobbing with their leaders. The captureif it took placewould be to himself most disastrous. It was characteristic of the man that he lost sight of the grave peril in which he himself would be placed, alone here in the midst of hundreds of exasperated savages. His plans of future enrichment would be utterly broken up, and it was of this he was thinking. Unscrupulous, selfseeking as he was, Vipan had his own code of honour, and he would no more have dreamed of betraying his friend's confidence than of cutting his friend's throat. But had the information reached him through any other channel, it is more than doubtful whether Uncle Sam's cavalry would have effected their capture that day.

"You're right, Bill," he said, at length. "There'll be an almighty rumpus if that game's tried on. Why, there are enough reds here to chaw up this command twice over, and they'll do it, too, I'll bet a hat. Why the devil did they send out so few men?"

"Well, what d'you say? Hadn't we better git?"

"Not this child. You see, if we make tracks, and War Wolf gets grabbed, the reds'll certainly think I gave him away. He's an infernal young skunk, and I'd gladly see him hung; still, it nohow suits my book that he should be just now. So I'll see it out, but if you'd rather be outside it, don't stay. We can rendezvous anywhere you like afterwards."

"Oh, well; it's no great matter. I don't care if I stay," answered the scout, with his usual imperturbability. "Here's a big burst of rain coming. We'd better get inside the store, anyhow."

Great drops began to plash around them; there was a steely gleam, followed by a long, muttering roll of distant thunder. As they made their way towards the loghouse, the Indians were breaking up into groups of twos and threes, and hurrying away in the direction of a cluster of teepes erected hard by. Failing any necessity for it, they were no more inclined for a ducking than most people. The cavalrymen, beyond taking precautions for keeping their arms and ammunition dry, seemed indifferent to the weather.

“Hello, Smokestack Bill!” cried a hearty voice, as they entered. “So that’s how Nat Hardroper custodies his State prisoners, eh?”

They recognised in the speaker the officer who had arrested them in the Black Hills. With him was Joe Ballin, the scout above referred to. Vipan, especially, further noticed a sergeant and a dozen men posted, apparently by accident, within the room.

“Lord, Colonel,” replied the scout, “you don’t want us to foot the Henniker trail again?”

“Not I,” said the other, with a laugh. “Other game afoot this journey.”

Then at Vipan’s suggestion, drinks were dispensed, the storekeepera long, lank Eastern manparticipating in the round.

Suddenly the latter exclaimed:

“Snakes! here come three reds. Your man in ’em, Colonel?”

Through the open door three Indians could be descried approaching rapidly. It was raining hard, and their blankets were drawn over their heads and shoulders, leaving only a part of their faces visible. The swarthy features of Ballin the scout lit up with a momentary excitement.

“The centre one, Colonel,” he whispered, hardly moving his lips. “The centre one. He’s the skunk we want, and no mistake.”

The Indians continued to advance with their light, springy step. When about a hundred yards from the store they were suddenly joined by a large band of fullyarmed and mounted warriors, clearly a band which had just arrived upon the ground, but which had hitherto been unseen by those inside the store, owing to the limited range of vision afforded by the latter’s doorway.

This untoward arrival placed a critical aspect on the state of affairs. But Captain Fisher’s ordersthe higher rank by which that officer was commonly addressed, was mere popular brevetwere concise. They were to the effect that he should apprehend upon sight, and convey to Fort Price an Ogallalla Sioux, known as War Wolf. This was sufficient. If that Indian were not apprehended it would only be because he had made himself remarkably scarce. As it was, however, here he stood before them, advancing confidently into the trap. But then, he had at his back a formidable force of his compatriots, outnumbering the cavalrymen three to one, not reckoning the number of warriors already on the ground, and whom the first whoop would bring upon the representatives of authority in crowds. Clearly here was a critical situation. So thought Vipan, who stood prepared to watch its dénouement with intense

interest. So thought Smokestack Bill and the storekeeper, who, however, with characteristic phlegm, stood prepared to act as events should decide. So, especially, thought the Captain and the dozen men disposed inside the store to effect the capture.

The whole band, in delightful disorder, was now straggling around the door; the three pedestrians, who had been joined by a couple of the new arrivals, leading. All unconscious of danger, War Wolf was chattering and laughing with his companions. Then a shadow darkened the doorway, and the first Indian entered. Before his eyes became sufficiently accustomed to the sudden darknessfor the windows had been purposely shadedthe second was in the room. A rapid movement, a sudden exclamation, and two struggling bodiesall quick as lightning. Captain Fisher had seized the second Indian from behind, effectually pinioning him.

It was done in a moment. The desperate struggles of the lithe and active savage taxed all the efforts of the halfdozen men who had been told off for the purpose, while the remainder held the entrance. In a trice he was subdued, disarmed, and securely bound. His comrade, to whom Ballin the scout had hurriedly explained that no harm was intended, stood by sullen and immovable.

Then arose an indescribable hubbub. The warriors outside, who had dismounted, rushed helterskelter for their ponies, and the loud, vibrating shout of the warwhoop rose above the clamour of angry and inquiring voices. At its sound the temporary village became as a disturbed ants' nest, Indians pouring from the teepes in swarms: and in less than a minute a crowd of excited savagesmounted and afootcame surging down upon the logstore, brandishing their weapons, and fiercely clamouring for the instant release of their compatriot.

But a line of disciplined men barred their way. Drawn up in front of the store, the troopers, some fifty strong, stood with carbines levelled, awaiting the word of command; while Ballin, duly instructed, went outside and informed the Indians that, should they approach twenty paces nearer, the troops would fire.

The effect was magical. The entire mass halted dead. Then, yelling the warwhoop, a number of young bucks darted out from the main body and, putting their ponies at full speed, began circling round the tenement and its defenders. But a peremptory mandate from one of the chiefs present recalled these youngbloods, and for a moment the two rival forces stood contemplating each otherthe savages with a fierce scowl of hatred, the troops, cool, determined, and not altogether anxious for a peaceful solution to the difficulty.

Then the chief who had recalled the more ardent of his followers, advanced making the peacesignextending his right hand above his head with the palm outwards.

What had War Wolf done, he asked, that he should be seized like a common thief in the white men's towns? Had he not come peaceably with the rest to obtain his rations, and had obtained thema clear proof that the Government was not angry with him? He had been living on the reservation with them all, as everybody knew; why then should the Great Father send soldiers to take him?

Briefly Captain Fisher explained the charge against the young warrior. The killing of two citizens in time of peace was murdernot an act of war. The prisoner would have to answer for it before the Civil Courts of the Territory.

The chief's face was a study in admirably feigned surprise, as the above was interpreted to him. He was a warrior of tall, commanding aspect, just past middle age, and looked almost gigantic beneath his nodding eagle plumes. He was the head warchief of the Minneconjou clan, and had the reputation of being welldisposed towards the whites. He rejoiced in the name of Mahtosapa, or The Black Bear.

"What the white Captain had just told them contained sound sense," he replied. "But would it not do as well if War Wolf were released now, and called upon to answer to the charge against him later on, when the Great Father should want to try him. Such a course would be most gratifying to his countrymen, who were highly incensed that a warrior of his standing and repute should be seized in the way he had been. It would be best, perhaps, for all parties," the Indian explained, with just a shadow of meaning in his uniformly courteous tone"for his young men were so hotblooded and impatient, he feared they might not act with the prudence and moderation to be looked for in men of riper years, a contingency which would be in every way lamentable to himself and the other chiefs of the Dahcotah nation."

If the speaker expected his veiled threat to produce any effect on Captain Fisher, he must have been sadly disappointed. Concisely that officer informed him that, in the matter of a grave charge of this kind, War Wolf could not expect more lenient treatment than would be accorded to a citizen under similar circumstances. No white man would be held to bail if arrested for murder, and an Indian must look for precisely the same treatmentno better and no worse. At the same time he guaranteed that the prisoner should receive every consideration compatible with his safe keeping until such time as the authorities should decide upon his guilt or innocence. As for the anger of the warriors he saw before him, greatly as he should regret any breach of the peace, that consideration could not in any way be suffered to interfere with him in the discharge of his duty. Were he, the speaker, the very last man left of the command they saw before them, he should still do his best to convey his prisoner whither he had been ordered, and would die rather than release him.

The chief, seeing that further parley was useless, turned and rejoined his followers. Then once more arose a wild hubbub of angry and discordant voices, and for a moment it seemed that the crowd of impulsive and exasperated barbarians would

hurl itself forward and in one overwhelming rush annihilate that mere handful of troops. Suddenly a body of warriors, some hundred strong, sprang on their ponies, and, unmindful of their leader's mandate, scoured away over the plain, whooping and brandishing their weapons. The remainder having withdrawn some little distance gathered into knots, or squatted in circles on the ground, talking in eager and menacing tones.

"Thunder! Reckon that lot's gone to raise hell among the pesky varmints camped along your return trail, Colonel," said the lank storekeeper, pinning a fly to the wall with his quid at halfadozen paces. "You'll need to keep a bright lookout on the road if you're ever going to get this skunk to Fort Price."

And what of the captive? The first expression of rage, mingled with amazement and mortification, having rapidly glinted across his countenance, his features became as a mask of impassibility. Only once, as his glance met that of Vipan, his eyes glared as he hissed in a tone inaudible to those around:

"Golden Face! The Dahcotah's brother! Ha! We shall meet again!"

"War Wolf walks straight into the trap, as a silly antelope walks up to the fluttering rag upon the hunter's wand. Who is to blame but War Wolf himself?" replied Vipan, in the same almost inaudible tone. But the Captain hearing it, turned sharply round. Vipan's reputation as being on more than ordinarily friendly terms with the Sioux had already reached him. However, he made no remark, but having disposed his prisoner in such wise as to guard against all possibility of escape or rescue, he prepared to start. Just then the other Indian who had accompanied the prisoner into the store, inquired if he might go and fetch his pony. War Wolf was his brother, and he, Burnt Shoes, did not intend to leave him. He would go as a prisoner too.

"He's a fine, staunch fellow," said the Captain, kindly, as this request was interpreted. "But we can't take him. Tell him so, Ballin, and also that he can serve his brother's interests better by going back to his people and notifying them that in the event of their making any attack upon us either now or along the road, the prisoner will be shot dead."

This was interpreted, and at War Wolfs request the two Indians were allowed a few moments' conversation together. Then Burnt Shoes, having taken leave of his brother, strode away, looking straight in front of him.

The threat and the warning were by no means superfluous. As the troopers appeared outside with their prisoner, the bands of savages clustered hard by sprang to their feet with an angry shout. Many of the warriors could be seen fitting arrows to their bowstrings, and the click of locks was audible as they handled their rifles in very suggestive fashion.

Even the emphatic message which Burnt Shoes strove to deliver, concerning the fate awaiting his brother in the event of a rescue, was hardly heard. The clamour redoubled, and the attitude of the savages became menacing to the last degree. Meanwhile the cavalry escort, with its prisoner in the midst, had got under way, and was retiring cautiously, and at a foot's pace. By this time, however, the authority of Mahtosapa, and the earnest appeals of Burnt Shoes, had availed to quell the tumult. The crowd began to melt away. By twos and threes, or in little groups of ten or twelve, the warriors began to disperse over the plain in all directions, only the chief, with comparatively few followers, remaining.

"Say, but there'll be trouble when those chaps come up with the sodgers," said the lank storekeeper, contemplating the retreating Indians. "They'll jump 'em in an overwhelming crowd somewheres about Blue Forks, and I'll risk ten dollars there'll not be a scalp left in that command."

"Well, I'm going to persuade the residue to hear reason, anyhow," said Vipan carelessly, making a step towards the door.

"Don't risk it," urged his friend, promptly. "They're plaguy mad, and it's puttin' your head into the alligator's jaws to go among 'em jes now."

"Well, you see, it's this way," was the rejoinder. "They are plaguy mad just now, as you say, but they'll be madder byandby. A classical authority has said, 'agree with thine adversary quickly,' and I'm going to agree with mine."

"You're a dead man if you do," said the storekeeper.

"No fear. Mahtosapa and I are rather friends. I reckon I'm going to sleep in his village tonight, and I'll risk twenty dollars if you like, Seth Davis, that I look round here again, with all my hair on, within a month."

"Done!" said the storekeeper, shortly.

They watched him join the group of sullen and brooding savagesmoving among them, alone, absolutely fearless, as among a crowd in an English markettownaddressing one here, another there. Then they saw him fetch his horse and ride away with the band, which had been preparing to take its departure.

"Gosh! I never saw such a galoot as that pard of yours," said Seth Davis, ejecting an emphatic quid. "Takes no more account of a crowd of Ingians abustin' with cussedness, nor though they were a lot o' darned kids. Wal, wal! Reckon that wager's on, all there; hey, Smokestack Bill?"

“That’s so,” was the laconic reply. “Let’s liquor.”

Chapter Eighteen.

"Through a Glass Darkly."

About a month later than the events just detailed, a solitary individual might have been descried occupying one of the high buttes overlooking a large tract of the northern buffalo range, somewhat near the border between the territories of Montana and Wyoming. Howbeit, we must qualify the statement in some degree. Save to the keen eye of yon wareagle, poised high aloft in the blue ether, the man was not to be descried by any living thing, for the simple reason that he took very especial care to keep his personality effectually concealed.

Beneath lay the broad rolling plains extending in bold undulation far as the eye could reach, stretching away to the foothills, and then the distant snow peaks, of the Bighorn range. No cloud was in the sky. The atmosphere in its summer stillness was wondrously clear, all objects being sharply definable up to an incredible distance. From his lofty perch the man looks down upon the surrounding country as upon a map lying outspread before his feet.

That something is occupying his attention is evident. Lying flat on his face, his gaze is riveted on the plain beneath. What object has attracted his keen visionhas sufficed to retain it?

Crawling onward, unwinding its slow length like some huge variegated centipede, comes a waggon train, and, though it is at least ten miles distant, the observer, from his vantageground, can with his unaided vision master every essential detailseveral great lumbering waggons, veritable prairie schooners, their canvas tilts looking like sails upon that sea of rolling wilderness; a little way ahead of these a lighter waggon, drawn by a team of four horses. He can also make out a few mounted figures riding in front.

"Looks a pretty strong outfit," would run his thoughts, if put into words. "Looks a pretty strong outfit. The bosstwo guides, or scoutssix or eight bullwhackersa chap to worry the horse teamprobably two or three more men thrown ina dozen or more all toldpossibly a score. But thenthe family coachesLord knows how many womenfolk and brats they holdall downEasters, too, most likely, who never saw a redskin, except a drunken one at the posts. A dozen men ought to be able to stand off the reds; and anyhow whether they can or not the next few hours will decide. But then they've got their women to look after, and their cattle to mind. No, no; they must be idiots to come crossing this section at this time of day."

The observer's reflections are, to say the least of it, ominous for those who belong to the waggon train. Let us see what there is to justify them.

Far away in front of him, at least as far as the waggon train itselfahead of it, but rather off its line of route, is another object; an object which he has espied before the outfit appeared, and the sight whereof has kept him immovable on his lofty observatory for upwards of an hour. This object the inexperienced eye would hardly notice, or would pass over as an indistinct clump of scrub lying on the slope of a deep ravine. To the practised eye of the watcher, however, that object stood revealed in its true light at the very first glance, and it hardly needed the aid of the powerful double glass which he carried, and which rendered an object at ten miles almost as distinct as one at a hundred yards, to tell him that the harmlesslooking clump of scrub was nothing less formidable than a strong band of Indiansa strong band of red warriors on the warpath.

"That'll be it," he mused. "The old game. They'll jump that outfit at yonder creek while it's unhitching just about sundownrather over two hours from this. If those chaps are, as I suspect, downEasters, they'll be thrown into the liveliest confusion, and while a few of the reds run off every hoof of the cattle, the rest'll rush the whole show. Their guide or guides can't be worth a damn, anyhow, to judge from the free and easy way in which the whole concern is shuffling along. There'll be fresh scalps among that warparty tonight, I'll lay long odds; butit's rough on the womenfolk, to put it mildly."

To the ordinary observer there would have been something terrible beyond words in the situation. That little handful advancing fearlessly into the vast wilderness, their every step watched by the hawklike gaze of savage videttes lying face to the ground on more than one of the adjoining heights, advancing step by step into the trap, heedless of the awful cloud overhanging their march, even that lurking band of the fiercest and most ruthless barbarians to be found upon the earth's surface. And the radiant sun shedding the golden glories of his nearly run course upon the majestic vastness of those fair solitudes sank lower and lower to his rest, only too certain to be lulled in his faroff mountain bed by the crash and rattle of shots, the exultant yells of human fiends, the unheeded prayer for mercy, then massacre mingled with a demon orgie of sickening barbarity from the very thought of which the average mind shrinks in dismay. Well, what then? Only one more chapter of horror in the annals of the bloodstained West.

But if to the ordinary mind the situation would have been appalling, repulsive and incomprehensible to the last degree would have been the attitude of this man, who lounged there as coldblooded a spectator of the coming struggle as a frequenter of the bullring awaiting his favourite entertainment, and in much the same vein; who saw those of his race and kindred advancing step by step to the most terrible form of deathfor the chances in their favour were about equal to those of the bull when pitted against the cuadrillaand made no effort to warn them of their peril. Yet had he delivered his mind on the subject he would coolly have justified himself by the explanation that in the first place he made a point of never interfering in other

people's business; while in the next he was a man who recognised no race or kindred, and who, if anything, had a greater respect for the savage red man than for the huckstering, swindling, lying white Christian. The former was man ruthless as Nature made him, the latter a nondescript productequally ruthless, but plus hypocrisy and cant wherewith to cloak his bloodsucking propensities.

And now the waggon train was wellnigh abreast of his position. Cautiously adjusting his fieldglasses so that no ray of the sun glinting on the lens should betray his whereabouts, either to friend or foe, he narrowly scanned the travellers. There were, as he had conjectured, females among them, two of whom rode on horseback among the group of men in front. He scanned the ground beyond, and not a detail escaped him, even to the heads of the three Indian scouts lying perdu, like himself, at intervals along a high ridge overlooking the line of march. Then he closely scrutinised the lurking warparty.

The latter was astir, and he could easily make out a sea of plumed crests and painted countenances, even to the colour of the pennons floating from the lanceheads. Warriors might be seen rapidly caparisoning their ponies, while others, already prepared for action, were gathered around the little group of chiefs in the centre apparently engaged in debate. It wanted an hour to sundown.

Once more he brought his glasses to bear upon the travellers. Suddenly the blood surged in waves over the man's bronzed and sunburnt countenance, and his hand trembled to such an extent that he nearly dropped the telescope. What did he see? Pausing a moment, with an angry frown at his own weakness, again he sent a long, eager, steady look into the group riding ahead. What did the powerful lens reveal to upset the equanimity, to shake the very nerves of this cool, hardened, cynical plainsman? Among the group of advancing specks is a white onea mere white speck. Framed within the lens, however, that speck becomes a white horse, and upon his back is a girl of extraordinary beauty. Surely this is not the disturbing factor? We shall see.

"That's too good for our dear red brother, anyhow," said the watcher halfaloud, shutting up his glass. Then, without arising to his feet, he slid behind the knoll. But before doing so he sent one more glance at the distant halting place of the savages. The band was on the move, riding slowly down into the ravine.

Chapter Nineteen.

Winthrop's Outfit.

Nearer, nearer, the sun sank down to the western peaks, and upon the wilderness rested the sweet and solemn stillness of the evening hour. Save the call of a bird at intervals within the timber belt, there was a silence that might be felt. The broad stream, tranquilly flowing around its bend, gleamed first with living fire, then red, as the last rays of the sun fell upon its surface, to lift in a moment, leaving its waters grey and cold. Then one last kiss of golden light upon the treetops, and the lamp of day had gone down.

One living creature moved within this solitude, however. Alone, enjoying with all her soul the spacious grandeur of the Western wilderness, stood a very lovely girl. Every now and then she would pause for a few moments to drink in that glorious sense of unfettered freedom which the vast expanding roll of hill and plain, never ending, like a sea of billowy verdance stretching from sky to sky, inspired in her, then return to her occupation. That occupation wasfishing.

She wore a ridinghabit which, fitting her like a glove, revealed the undulating curves of an unrivalled figure. By some clever contrivance she had shortened its otherwise inconvenient length, and with the grace and deftness of a practised hand she was wielding a troutrod. What a spectacle to come upon suddenly in the heart of the wild and bloodstained West! And what insane fatuity should bring her here alone in the fast falling twilight?

At this moment, however, the last thought in her mind is any fear of danger. Her cast whirls in the air; the flies drop noiselessly into a bubbling eddy. There is a rush through the water and a splash. An eager light comes into the velvety blue eyes, fading as rapidly to give place to one of vexation as the cast, suddenly released from its tension, springs high overhead, describing many a fantastic gyration.

"How sickening," she cries, with a little stamp of impatience. "How unutterably sickening! That was a beauty, and I shan't rise another tonight. Butit's nearly dark. I must go back."

What is that stealthy rustle in the depths of yonder scrub? For the first time the girl is conscious of a shade of nervousness as she hurriedly begins to take her rod to pieces. Her thoughts suggest the proximity of some hideous snake, or a panther perhaps.

She turns towards where she left her pony. Can the gathering dusk be playing her tricks? The animal is not there. Though securely fastened, it has disappeared.

But the sight which does meet her eyes roots her to the ground with horror. Stealing noiselessly towards her, in the dark shade of the timber, are three halfnaked Indianstall, athletic, hulking savages, hideously painted. They halt for a moment as they see themselves perceived. They are barely a dozen yards distant.

“How, lily gal!” grunts the foremost, wreathing his repulsive face into a frightful grin, and advancing with outstretched hand. “How, lily gal! No ’fraid! Me good Injun, me. Ha, ha! Me good Injun brudder.”

The exultant mockery underlying this friendly address was too transparent. Her eyes dilating with horror, the girl stepped back, the consciousness that she was alone in the power of these fiends turning her limbs to stone. They, for their part, secure of their beautiful prize, were enjoying her terror.

“No run ’way,” said the first speaker, who had diminished the distance between them. “No run ’way. Injun, good brudder.” And he seized her left wrist in the grasp of a vicewhile another, with a fierce chuckling laugh, made a movement to seize her right one.

But the brutal contact broke the spell of horror which was weaving around her. A wild cry of indignation escaped her lips, and her eyes blazed. Wrenching her right wrist free, she dashed the heavy butt end of her fishingrod with all her forceand it was not smallfull into the first assailant’s face, knocking out some of his front teeth, and causing him to loosen his hold.

With the fierce growl of a wounded cougar, the savage sprang at her again, the blood streaming from his mouth, and as the unhappy girl recoiled to renew her efforts to keep her persecutors at bay, such a marvellous change came over the scene that not one of the actors in it was quite aware what had happened.

An enormous dark mass seemed to fall from the very heavens, simultaneously with a thundrous roar. The girl, now tottering on the verge of faintness, saw, as in a flash, her first assailant lying with his skull crushed to pulp, another lay gasping in the agonies of death, while the third was just vanishing in the timber! At him pointing the still smoking muzzle of a revolver, mounted on a huge black horse, was the most splendidly handsome man she had ever seen.

“Quick! Drop all that gear and mount in front of me. Give me your hand.”

There was no disobeying the curt commanding tone. Resisting a deadly impulse to faint right away, she extended her hand. In a second she was swung up before the stranger on his powerful horse.

It was all done like lightning. The first appearance of the savagesthe assaultthe rescueoccupied barely a couple of minutes. Pale to the lips, shaky, and unnerved, she could hardly now realise it all. But often in the time to come would she look back to that strange ride, the weight of the appalling danger she had just escaped still hanging over her, the courage and promptitude of her rescuer, the struggle she was waging with her own natural terror, dreading she knew not what.

The black steed was going at a gallop now, but his rider had him well in hand. The girl noticed that they were making something of a détour which took them far out on the open plain, whereas her ride down to the river had led her along the very edge of the timber. She noticed, too, the anxious, alert look on the stranger's face. Though he did not turn his head, she felt assured that not a detail in the surroundings escaped him.

"There are your people," he said briefly, as they suddenly came in sight of the camp. The waggons had just unhitched, and the mules and oxen were being driven down to the water; not the river we have seen, but a small creek running into it. Already columns of smoke were rising on the evening air.

"I can never thank you enough," said the girl, suddenly and with a shudder. "But for your promptitude where should I be now?"

"Say but for your own courage and selfpossession. The average idiot in petticoats would have shrieked and fainted and gone into hysterics. Meanwhile, the reds would have captured her and shot me," he rejoined, somewhat roughly. "Be advised by me now. Don't startle the rest of the women, or they'll hamper us seriously. Now we'll dismount."

He lifted her to the ground, and, without another word, turned to confront a man who had hurried up. But the girl's clear voice interrupted him before he could speak.

"This gentleman has rescued me from frightful danger, Major Winthrop. There are Indians about."

"By Jove!" said he addressed, with a start of astonishment, looking from the one to the other. He was a man below middle age, of medium height, active and wellbuilt, and there was no mistaking him for anything other than what he wasan English gentleman.

"Boss of this outfit, I take it?" said the new arrival shortly.

"Yes. Allow me to offer you my most grateful thanks for"

“Well, there’s a big lot of Sioux preparing to ‘jump’ you at any moment. Corral your waggons without delay, and have your cattle brought in at once. Not a second to lose.”

A frightful yell drowned his words. There was a thunder of hoofs upon the turf as a band of some fifty mounted Indians, dashing from their cover, bore down upon the herd of draught stock which was being driven back from the water in charge of three or four men. On came the savages, whooping and whistling, brandishing blankets and buffalo robes with the object of stampeding the now frantic cattle.

But among those in charge of the latter there chanced to be a couple of experienced plainsmen. In a trice there rang out three shots, and two of the assailants’ ponies went riderless. Crackcrack! Another pony went down. This was more than the redskins could stand. Like a bird of prey alarmed in its swoop, the entire band swerved at a tangent and skimmed away over the plain as fast as their ponies could carry them. The herd was saved.

“There goes the first act in the drama,” said the stranger coolly. “Now stand clear for the second.”

The suddenness of it allthe yelling, the shots, the swoop of the painted and feathered warriorshad created a terrible panic in the camp, and had the main body of the savages charged at that moment nothing could have saved its inmates. As the stranger had at first conjectured, two of the waggons were full of women and children, the families of some of the emigrants. These at once rushed to the conclusion that their last hour had come, and shrieks and wailings tended to render confusion worse confounded. But Major Winthrop, with military promptitude, had got the men well in hand, and a very few minutes sufficed to corral the waggons, bring in the cattle, and put the whole camp into a creditable state of defence. It was now nearly dark.

“Will they attack us tonight?” enquired Major Winthrop, as, having completed his arrangements, he returned to where the stranger was seated smoking a pipe and gazing narrowly out into the gloomy waste.

“I should be inclined to say not. Their surprise has fallen through, you see, and then Indians don’t like fighting at night. But it’s at the hour before dawn, when we’re all infernally sleepy and more or less shivery with being up all nightit’s then we shall have to keep a very bright lookout indeed. I should keep about half your men at a time on guard all night through if I were in your place.”

“Who air you, stranger?” said a not very friendly voice.

He addressed turned, and beheld a lank, driedup individual who might have been any age between thirty and fifty. His hawklike face was the colour of mahogany, and, but for a small moustache, was devoid of hirsute adornment. His deepset grey eyes, however, were those of a man prompt and keen to act in the moment of difficulty or danger. His dress consisted of a rather dirty blue shirt and fringed breeches.

“Who am I? Why just who I lookneither more nor less,” was the rejoinder, given with provoking tranquillity.

“And what might your name beif it’s a fair question?”

“It might be Jones, or it might not. The question is a fair one, however. That being so, I don’t mind telling you my name is Vipan. What’s yours?”

“I’m Oregon Dave, champion broncobuster (ranch term for a professional horsebreaker) of Wyoming. I’m bossguide of this hyar outfit, and the chap who reckons he knows Injuns and their little ways better nor I had best just step out and say so.”

“If I were bossguide of any outfit, I’m damned if I’d let a young lady belonging to that same start off by herself to go fishing among a Sioux warparty,” said Vipan, with a quiet satire in his tone that was maddening to the last degree. He resented the other’s truculent bearing, and intended to let him know it.

“Eh! Say that again,” said the first speaker, flushing with anger.

“We mustn’t quarrel my friends, we mustn’t quarrel,” put in Major Winthrop, earnestly. “It was mainly owing to your pluck and promptitude, Dave, that we haven’t lost every hoof of our cattle. And but for Mr Vipan, here, Miss Santorex would at this moment be a prisoner among the Sioux. I was to blame in that matter, and I bitterly acknowledge it.” Then he told him the circumstances of Vipan’s unexpected and opportune appearance among them. Before its conclusion Oregon Dave turned to the latter with outstretched palm:

“Shake, stranger, shake. You’re all there, and I’m only fit to be kicked into a kennel to yelp. Guide? No, I ain’t no guide, only a tenderfoota doggoned professor. Scalp me if I don’t go and hunt bugs upon the perairie with a brace o’ giglamps stuck across my nose. I’ll go now and ask the reds to tar and roast me. Goodbye, Kurnel; goodbye, stranger, I ain’t no guide, I ain’t. Thunder, no!”

“Nonsense, man,” said Winthrop, clapping him on the shoulder. “We were all to blame. We were informed along the road that the Indians were peaceable, and that all chance of war was at an end, for this summer, at any rate,” he explained, for

Vipan's benefit. "That being so, we have travelled much too carelessly, although in camp we've been on the alert for horse or cattle thieves."

"I've been watching your outfit, and I've been watching the reds for nearly two hours," said Vipan. "They mean't jumping you yonder at the creek, and would have done so before this if you had not changed your plan, and camped here. As near as I can count, there are about three hundred of them. See that butte away up there? That's where I've been located. Came down to warn younone too soon, either."

"No, indeed. We owe you a debt of gratitude we can never repay, myself especially. Good God, if harm had befallen Miss Santorex! I can't even stand the idea of it."

"Relative of yours?" said the other shortly.

"No. She's the sister of a neighbour of oursman who runs the adjoining ranch. She's come out from England to stay with her brother for a bit, and took the opportunity of travelling with us. Andif anything had happenedgood God, if anything had happened! It's an awful responsibility, and I devoutly wish we were safe through it. Now, I think, we may go and get some supper."

Major Winthrop, as we have said, was English. He had retired early from the service, and being an energetic fellow had soon found an unoccupied life pall upon him. Accordingly he had migrated to the Far West and started ranchinga life that suited him thoroughly. His wife, a pretty little vivacious brunette, was American. She was considerably his junior, and they had not been long married; and at the time we make their acquaintance were returning from a visit to her home in the Eastern States.

"My! what a finelooking fellow!" she whispered to her friend, as she watched the approach of her husband's guest. "Why, Yseulte, it was worth while getting into a fix to be rescued by such a knighterrant as that."

To her surprise the colour came to the girl's facevisible in the moonlightas she answered:

"What nonsense, Hettie! Do be quiet, or they'll hear you."

"I ought to scold you severely, Miss Santorex, for running such an awful risk," said Winthrop, as they sat down to supper, picnic fashion, beside the horse waggon which served as the ladies' bedroom, saloon, and boudoirand in bad weather, diningroomall run into one.

"Please don't, for I assure you I'm very penitent," she answered.

“And then just think what an adventure she’ll have to tell about when she gets home again,” put in Mrs Winthrop. “Well, now, Yseulte, what do you think of our Indians, now you have seen themreal onesat last?”

“Oh, don’t ask me!” answered the girl, who was still rather pale and shaky, in spite of her plucky efforts to recover her selfpossession. “That last charge was all over so quickly. But aren’t they rather cowardly?”

“Why?” said the Major.

“Well, a number of them like that to be turned back by three men.”

“I trust you may have no practical occasion to alter your opinion,” put in Vipan, speaking for the first time. “That was a small surprise party bent on running off the stocknot fighting. As it was, they lost two killed and wounded at the first fire, and one pony, which is enough to turn any Indian charge of that strength.”

“Killed! Were there any killed?” asked Mrs Winthrop, in a horrified tone. “They seemed only frightened.”

“H’m, perhaps that was all, or they may have been only wounded,” said Vipan, inventing a pious fraud for the occasion. These two delicately nurtured women would require all their resolution on the morrow; there was no need to unnerve them with an instalment of horrors tonight. So both men affected an unconcern which one of them at any rate was far from feeling, and little by little the contagion spread, and the emigrants’ families began to forget their first fears, and the spell of brooding horror which had first lain upon them began to pass away, and the terrible danger with which they were threatened seemed more remote, yet, the night through, men sat together in groups, chatting in an undertone, as, rifle in hand, they never entirely took their gaze off the moonlit waste, lest the ferocious and lurking foe should creep upon them in his strength and strike them unawares.

Chapter Twenty.

The WarPath.

“Steady, boys. Here they come!” whispered Vipan, his eyes strained upon the point of a long narrow spit of scrub looming dark and indistinct in the heavy morning mist. Within the waggons, whose sides were securely padded with sacks of flour and other protective material, the women and children, worn out with anxiety and apprehension, were slumbering hard. It was the gloomy hour of early dawn.

A moment’s aim, and he discharged his Winchester. The report rolled out like thunder upon the heavy mistenshrouded atmosphere. Then a moment of dead silence.

Suddenly a line of fire darted along the ground. Then whirling down like lightning upon the corral came what resembled a number of wavy balls of flame. There was a roar and thunder of hoofs, the loud, horrible, quavering warwhoop rent the air, and a plunging sea of hideously painted centaurs, streaming with feathers and tags and scalplocks, and bathed as it were, in a ring of flame, surged around the corral, enfolding it in a mighty moving mass of demon riders and phantom steeds. A shower of blazing torches came whizzing right into the midst of the camp, followed by another. Thick and fast they fell, lying sputtering and flaring everywhere. The encampment and its defenders were in a sheet of flame, and amid the clouds of sulphurous smoke, even the crash and rattle of volleys was wellnigh drowned in the demoniacal and stunning yells of the attacking savages, who, pressing the advantage afforded them by this unlookedfor panic, saw success already theirs.

In the excitement of this sudden surprise the shooting on both sides was wild in the extreme. Amid the whirling, plunging mass, a warrior was seen to leap convulsively in his saddle, and, throwing up his arms, sink beneath the pounding hoofs. More than one pony rolled upon the ground, but still the flying horde circled in nearer and nearer, full half its strength preparing for a final and decisive charge. It seemed that the doom of every man, woman, and child in that camp was sealed.

Maddened by the terrific yells, by the flames of the burning missiles scorching their legs, the frantic animals picketed within the corral plunged and kicked, and strained wildly at their picket ropes. It only needed for them to break loose to render the general demoralisation complete.

But amid the indescribable tumult, the yelling of the Indians, the plunging of the frenzied cattle, the crash and rattle of volleys, the fiery peril which threatened to wrap the whole camp in flames, the onrushing squadrons of demon centaurs, and the piteous shrieks of terrified women and children, three or four men there kept their heads, and well indeed was it for the rest that they did so.

“Keep cool, boys! Don’t fire too quick,” thundered Vipan, deliberately picking up one of the blazing torches and hurling it with good aim full against the striped countenance of a too daring assailant. Winthrop, whose trained eye took in the weakness, the frightful jeopardy of the situation, had his hands full at the side of the corral which he had elected to attend to.

“Jeehoshaphat!” exclaimed Oregon Dave, between his set teeth. “Now for it, boys! They mean hair this time.”

For the Indians, who, wheeling and turning on their quick active little steeds in such wise as to render themselves difficult targets in the uncertain light, as well as to bewilder the eye of their enemy, were now seen to mass together with marvellous celerity. Then, with a long, thrilling whoop, they charged like lightning upon the weakest point in the defences.

Never more deadly cool in their lives, halfadozen men, among them Vipan and Oregon Dave, stand in readiness.

“Now let drive,” whispers the latter.

A raking volley at barely a hundred yards. Several saddles are emptied, but it does not stop the charge. Led by a chief of gigantic stature and wildly ferocious aspect, the whole band hurls itself forward, as a stone from a catapult. Then the fighting is desperate indeed, for it is handtohand. A score of warriors slide from their horses and leap within the enclosure, their grim and savage countenances aglow with the triumph of victory, only, however, to retreat helterskelter as several of their number drop dead or wounded before the terrible sixshooters of that determined halfdozen. In the confusion the gigantic chief, watching his opportunity, puts forth his lance and spears one of the unfortunate emigrants through the heart. Then bending forward he drags out the still quivering body, and with amazing strength throws it across his horse.

“That’s that devil CrowScalper,” cries Vipan, amid the roar of rage which goes up at this feat. But the chief, flinging the body to the earth again, wheels his horse and utters his piercing rallying cry, brandishing aloft the bleeding scalp he has just taken. More than one bullet ploughs through the eagle plumes of his warbonnet; his horse is shot under him; but he seems to bear a charmed life. Leaping on the pony of a warrior at that moment shot dead at his side, again he utters his shrilling, piercing whoop and strives to rally his band.

But the latter have had about enough. The deadly precision of those unceasing closequarter shots is more than Indian flesh and blood can stand up to.

“They’re off, by th’ Etarnal, they’re off!” roared one of the emigrants, a tall Kentuckian who boasted a strain of the blood of the Boones. “Give ’em another volley, boys!”

“Guess so, Elias,” yelled his spouse, a rawboned masculine virago, who throughout had been wielding a rifle with good effect. But the Indians showed no desire to wait for this parting attention. They kept up a show of fight just long enough to enable them to bear away their dead, always an important feature in their military drill. Then with a final whoop of defiance they vanished into the mist.

Suddenly they returned, but only a handful. One of their fallen comrades had been overlooked. Darting from among the rest a couple of warriors, riding abreast, skimmed rapidly along towards the corral. Suddenly they were seen to bend over, and seizing an inert corpse by the neck and heels, raise it and fling it across the pommel in front of one of them. Then, almost without abating speed, they wheeled their ponies and disappeared.

“By the Lord! but that was well done,” cried Winthrop.

Throughout this desperate affray, which had not occupied many minutes, the weaker members of the community, frozen with fear, crouched shudderingly within their shelters. These helpless women knew what terrible fate awaited them in the event of the savages proving victorious, and to their appalled senses the hideous warwhoop, the thunder of charging hoofs, the shouts and the wild crashing of shots seemed as a very hell opening before them.

Shivering in her wellpadded waggon, poor little Mrs Winthrop was in a pitiable state of terror and anxiety.

“Oh, Yseulte, I wish I could be as brave as you,” she moaned, clinging to her friend as to a final refuge. “How do you manage it? Tell me.”

“I don’t know,” answered the girl, with something of a warriorlight shining in her eyes. “Only I’m sure we shall win.”

The calm, steadfast tones conveyed to the distracted, terrified creature, as she herself phrased it, “tons of comfort.” Then the tumult had ceased.

The mist was rolling back, unfolding heaven’s vault of brilliant blue, and in less than half an hour the whole countryside stood revealed. Not an Indian was in sight. Slain ponies lay around, and here and there a dark clot of gore showed where a warrior had fallen.

“Will they come again?” said Winthrop, turning to Vipan. Many an ear hung upon the answer.

“No,” replied the latter, tranquilly, beginning to sponge out his rifle. “I never saw a finer charge than that last, and they know perfectly that if it wouldn’t carry the corral nothing will. They intended a surprise, you see, but it broke down completely, and unless they try the palaver trick we shall see no more of them just yet. But we shall have to keep a bright lookout, for depend upon it, they won’t let us be out of sight longfor some time at any rate.”

“Waal, boys,” drawled the tall Kentuckian, “I reckon we’ll jest squat around a bit, and be darn thankful.”

“That’s so, Elias,” assented his martial spouse, diving into the waggon to lug out her brood by the ears, as if nothing had happened.