

Ross Grant Tenderfoot

by

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Freeditorial 

CHAPTER I

A BORN SURGEON

DR. FRED GRANT, recalled in haste from his daily round of professional visits by a telephone message from his nephew, leaped out of his carriage over the yet moving wheel, and, stuffing an open letter into his pocket, rushed up the walk and into his office, which occupied a wing of his commodious house.

A sight met his eyes which was not uncommon, situated as he was in the midst of the coal fields of Wyoming Valley in Pennsylvania. Stretched out on the leather couch lay a man from the mines, black and grimy, his right arm crushed. Two other miners, also blackened with coal-dust, sat on the edges of their chairs, their eyes following the movements of Ross Grant, the doctor's nephew and self-constituted assistant.

Those movements had been rapid and effective. Again and again had this seventeen-year-old boy been brought face to face with such cases as this, and he handled it promptly and wordlessly. Words, indeed, would have been wasted, as none of his callers spoke English. He had quieted the sufferer with a hypodermic injection of morphine, stripped the injured arm, cleansed it, and treated it with a temporary dressing.

Then, with the bandages firmly in place, he had gone to the telephone and patiently called up house after house until he found his uncle.

When Dr. Grant entered the office, he found Ross calmly taking the temperature of the wounded man.

"He must have met with the accident at least an hour before they got him here," the boy explained, "for he was suffering awfully. I thought I ought to fix him up before trying to find you."

His uncle nodded with satisfaction, and bent over the man. "All right," he commended briefly, but his tone said more. Words were not always necessary to an understanding between uncle and nephew.

The younger man was an abridged edition of the older in form and feature. In movements the two were alike only so long as Ross was aiding the doctor on such an occasion as this. Then there were in both the same alertness and quiet intentness, the same compression of the lips and narrowing of the eyes. But when the strain of the hour was past and the miners gone, the boy's manner changed. The alert quality which characterized the uncle at all times seemed to desert the nephew, and his movements became slow. From the born surgeon in embryo he became a rather awkward, self-conscious boy.

Throwing himself into a chair behind the table, he drew toward him Gray's "Anatomy," and began reading at a line marked by a paper-cutter, his closely cropped head grasped in both hands.

The older man moved around the room restlessly, occasionally glancing with troubled eyes at the figure behind the table. Standing finally in front of the window, he drew the letter from his pocket, smoothed it out, and read it again.

In front of him, in the valley, lay Pittston and Wilkes-Barre, with Scranton in the distance, and beyond, the sun-burned hills, almost hidden now by the smoke from a hundred coal-breakers, and by the late August haze.

"Ross," began Dr. Grant abruptly, without turning, "I'm afraid you are going to meet disappointment—to a certain extent. I have a letter from your father."

The boy raised his head with a jerk. "Do you mean that he forbids—"

"No,"—the doctor turned slowly,—"not exactly. He expects to send for you in a few days, and will tell you himself."

Ross's chin came up. "And I shall not be twenty-one for nearly four years yet!" he exclaimed aggressively.

His uncle looked at him with more sternness than he felt. "Remember, Ross, that he is your father and that you owe him—"

Ross interrupted hotly, looking longingly at the letter. "I don't owe him as much as I do you and Aunt Anne."

Dr. Grant made no reply, nor did he share the letter. Putting it into an inner pocket, he left the office, and presently Ross heard the sound of wheels on the drive. Dr. Grant was starting again on his interrupted round of calls.

The boy leaned back and drew a deep breath. His father was going to send for him, and would then tell him—what? That he could not enter a medical college? That he could not become a surgeon? That he must fit himself for a business career? His chin came up again. He looked around the office lingeringly. It had been the heart of his home for seven years. It represented to him all that he wished to become. His father was almost a stranger to him; his uncle had stood in the place of a father since he, a sickly boy of ten, had been sent from the city to gain health on the hills which girdle Wyoming Valley.

He had gained health. In so far he had fulfilled his father's wishes. But, in addition, he had gained a knowledge and been settled in a desire extremely displeasing to Ross Grant, Senior, who expected to train his only son to continue his own business.

"Grant & Grant" was the father's ambition; "Dr. Grant" the son's.

Presently Dr. Grant's wife appeared in the doorway of the office. She was a short, round woman, with a laughing face and a pretty, bustling air of authority. Stopping abruptly, she shook a chubby forefinger at Ross.

"All day to-day," she accused, "you have bent over that book."

Ross, his elbows planted on the table and his chin resting on his fists, shook his head. He did not look up.

"I've been studying Gray on Anatomy, Aunt Anne. Got to master him."

Aunt Anne bobbed energetically across the room, and slammed the volume shut. "There!" she cried triumphantly. "Get out and walk five miles, and strengthen your own anatomy!"

Under her light tones and in the affectionate touch of her hand as she ran her fingers through his hair, Ross detected an undercurrent of solicitude, which brought forth a counter-accusation. Rising hastily, he laid both hands on her shoulders, and looked down from an altitude of five feet ten.

"Aunt Anne, you know what father wrote to uncle, don't you?"

Mrs. Grant's eyes fell. "Better take a good run over the mountain, Ross," she parried.

Ross's hands slipped from her shoulders. "I see there's no use asking either of you what he wrote."

Mrs. Grant flicked some dust from the table. "Sometimes, Ross," was her only reply, "disappointment is the very best and most strengthening tonic we can take."

She turned away, adding without glancing back as she left the room: "I do wish, Ross, that you'd get out and exercise more. You would conquer Gray's 'Anatomy'—and all other difficulties—more quickly if you would."

"I guess you're right, Aunt Anne," assented Ross.

"Yes," scolded Aunt Anne to her sister in the living-room—but the scolding rested on a very apparent foundation of love—"Ross always agrees with me about taking vigorous exercise—and then never takes it. Now watch him walk, will you?" she fretted, looking out of the window.

Her sister, busily sewing, paused with suspended needle, and glanced out. Ross was going slowly down the drive, his head bent forward, his youthful shoulders carelessly sagging, his long arms aimlessly hanging, giving him a curiously helpless appearance at variance with his large frame.

"It's Ross's own fault," declared Aunt Anne. "He doesn't like to exert himself physically. Not that he's lazy," defensively, "for he isn't. He would work all night over a patient, and never think of himself; but to get out and exercise for the sake of exercising, and straightening himself up, and holding himself, somehow—well, I've

talked myself hoarse about it, and then found that he had been reading some medical book or other all the time I was talking!"

Here Aunt Anne laughed silently, and ran her shears through a length of gingham, adding, as if the addition were a logical sequence to her monologue:

"It's a mystery to me how his father can feel so disappointed in him."

"Disappointed in Ross?" exclaimed the sister in a tone of wonder.

Mrs. Grant nodded. "His father sends for him once a year, sees him for a day or two when Ross is at the greatest disadvantage in unaccustomed surroundings—you know the stepmother is a woman of fashion; and the result is that he is so awkward and slow and tongue-tied that his father—well," Mrs. Grant bit off her thread energetically, "of course, we feel tender on the subject because we have had Ross now for seven years, and we think a better boy never lived. But now the time has come," her voice trembled, "when we must give him up."

"Will his father forbid his going to medical college?" asked the sister.

Mrs. Grant hesitated. "No, I don't think he will forbid it; but he will prevent it—if he is able," she added significantly.

Two days later the summons from Ross Grant, Senior, arrived in the shape of a telegram brief and to the point. "Take night-train," it read, "September first. Reach office at nine."

"Ross," worried Aunt Anne as she straightened his tie and hovered around him anxiously the afternoon of September first, "you'd better get a new hat in Scranton. This one is—well, I think you better appear before Mrs. Grant in a new one."

"All right, aunt."

Dr. Grant extended his hand, and gripped Ross's. "Remember, my boy, that the telegram appointed nine A. M. as the time for your appearing."

Ross laughed. "Don't you worry, uncle," he returned confidently. "I shall be at the office before father gets there."

But, despite his confidence, it was nearly ten the morning following before he stepped out of the elevator of a Broadway office building and presented himself hesitatingly before the clerk in his father's outer office.

His hesitation was due to his appearance. His hat, new the afternoon before, was soiled and pierced by the calk of a horse's shoe. His shirtfront was also soiled and then smeared over by a wet cloth in a vain effort to remove the dirt. His right coat-sleeve was wrinkled, and bore marks of a recent wetting. About his clothes lingered a subtle "horsy" odor, which caused the clerk to sniff involuntarily as he curiously looked over the heir to the house of Grant before disappearing into the inner office.

When he returned he bore the crisp message that Ross was to wait until his father had time to see him.

Ross waited. He retreated to a window through which the sunshine streamed, and there sat, industriously drying his wet sleeve. He pulled it, and smoothed it, and stretched it, only to see it shrivel and shrink while he waited. The clerk occasionally glanced with no abating of curiosity from the boy to the clock. Two hours passed. Others waiting in that outer office grew restless. They read. They took quick turns about the room. They went out into the corridor, and returned. At last, one by one, they were ushered into the inner office, while Ross still waited.

It was past twelve before his father sent for him, and the first glance the boy encountered was one of displeasure.

"Did you come in on the night-train?" was the elder Grant's greeting.

"Yes, sir."

The father frowned, and looked up at a clock which ticked above their heads.

"I telegraphed you that I could see you at nine."

Ross sank into a great padded, leather-upholstered chair. All about him were evidences of luxury, but he was conscious only of his father's displeasure and of his own disreputable appearance. He studied his hands awkwardly, and stumbled in his reply.

"I should have been here by nine, sir, but for an accident which occurred on the ferry—"

"Accident?" His father's tone softened.

Ross looked at his coat-sleeve. "There was a fine horse, a big bay that stood behind a truckster's cart. He took an apple. It lodged in his throat, and he nearly choked to death." The boy hesitated and glanced up. "I got it out," he explained simply, adding apologetically, "I got awfully mussed up doing it, though."

"You!" Grant burst out, paying no attention to the apology. "You got it out!" He leaned forward, genuinely interested. "How did you do it?"

Ross warmed under the interest in the tone. "I was standing in the bow of the boat, just over the rail from the horse, and I saw what the trouble was. There was no one else who seemed to know what to do." He spoke modestly. "The horse would have died before we reached the landing; and so," simply, "I ran my arm down his throat, and got the apple."

"You did!" ejaculated Grant. He leaned further forward. "And what prevented the horse from chewing up your arm while you were after the apple?"

"A bootblack's brush," Ross explained. "A boy was rubbing up a man's shoes near me; and I grabbed his brushes, and got busy. One of the deck hands helped me prop the horse's mouth open. I threw off my coat"—here Ross surveyed himself ruefully, and left the subject of the horse; "and I got pretty dirty all over. Couldn't help it. There wasn't any time to think of keeping clean. But after we got over on the New York side the owner of the horse took me to a stable, and helped me to clean up; but—I don't think it's much of a success."

Mr. Grant leaned back in his swivel chair, rested his elbows on the arms, and fitted his finger-tips together. His imagination, country-trained in his youth, was supplying some of the details which his son had omitted. He nodded his iron-gray head, and narrowed his eyes, a trick common to all the Grants when intent on any subject.

"Quick work," he remarked after a pause. His eyes were taking the measure of his son. "It had to be quick work," he added as if to convince himself that Ross could act swiftly.

"Where did you get breakfast?" was his next question.

"I haven't had any," Ross replied. "I tried to get here by nine o'clock."

A low whistle escaped the father. He arose, and reached for his hat, which lay on the top of a safe behind him. "We'll go out to lunch now."

Ross glanced doubtfully from his father's well-groomed person to his own dirty coat.

"Perhaps, father, you'd like me to go out alone so long as—"

"Nonsense!" interrupted Grant brusquely.

As they left the room, he took his boy's arm. There was little resemblance between the two. Ross had his uncle's head with its high brow and well-shaped chin, lean cheeks, and prominent ears. He was taller than his father, but wholly lacked his father's energetic manner and erect carriage.

"You graduated in June from Wyoming Seminary," the father stated as they entered a large Broadway restaurant and sat down near the door.

"Yes, sir."

"No honors?"

The boy's eyes fell. "No, sir. I stood tenth in a class of thirty-four."

Evasion of the truth was not one of Ross's strong points.

"And," stated his father, "it took you five years to do a four years' course."

Ross looked his father squarely in the eyes, and lifted his chin a little. The father noticed for the first time that the boy's chin could indicate aggression.

"I flunked on mathematics. But I made them up the next summer, and went on."

Again Grant looked at his son attentively, the son who retrieved his failure and "went on."

"You're seventeen," he said abruptly. "What's next?" The question, as both knew, was superfluous.

"Medical college," Ross answered as abruptly as the question had been put. "I am preparing for the entrance examinations in the University of Pennsylvania. I want to go down and take them in January, and at the same time pass upon a couple of subjects in the freshman year."

There was a gleam of curiosity in Grant's deep-set eyes as he put the next questions.

"Haven't I told you repeatedly that I shall never advance one penny on a medical education for you?"

"Yes, sir." Ross's eyes met his father's steadily but respectfully. "And I shall not ask you to advance a cent."

"But haven't I forbidden your uncle, also, to help you out?"

"Yes, sir, and Uncle Fred has no intention of helping me. He'll keep the letter and the spirit of the law you have laid down."

"Well, then—"

Ross smiled quietly. "But you have never forbidden my getting a medical education through my own efforts; and that, father, is what I intend to do."

Ross Grant, Senior, found himself looking into eyes which he recognized as strangely like his own and shining with the same determination which in himself had established a thriving business and built up a moderate fortune. Never had he been so interested in his son. Never had he so coveted him for a business career. But, as he ate a moment in silence, young Ross's determined voice seemed to be repeating in old Ross's ears, "That, father, is what I intend to do."

During the remainder of the meal the elder Grant listened attentively to the younger's plans. To Ross this was a new experience. After the first irritation over his tardiness, his father had not once oppressed him with that sense of disapproval and disappointment which usually sent him back to his uncle with a buoyant relief at his escape from New York.

Still, he was not deceived. He knew that his father's summons had to do with the thwarting of his surgical career; and he was prepared to argue, persuade, do anything short of actual defiance, to gain permission to work for the object toward which all his inclinations pulled.

As they made their way up Broadway through the noon-hour crowd, a feminine voice behind them suddenly piped out excitedly:

"There he is, Kate, right ahead of you—that tall, round-shouldered young man. He's the one I told you about on the ferry this morning. I tell you what, he made all the men around step lively for a few minutes."

Ross suddenly quickened his pace. His face flushed uncomfortably, but the voice of "Kate's" companion was still at his heels.

"Why, he grabbed them brushes and was over the rail as quick as a cat, and had that horse's mouth open before its owner even knew that it was chokin'—"

Ross, Senior, strode along behind Ross, Junior, now in a vain attempt to keep up. He chuckled in a sly enjoyment of the boy's embarrassment.

"He certainly can move, I see," he muttered, "when he has something to move toward—or away from!"

But the mutter was lost on Ross seeking an escape from that voice of praise by dodging in and out among the crowd until his father lost sight of him, and found him again only at the entrance to the office building.

When the two were again seated in the private office, the father for the first time broached the matter which he had called the son from Pennsylvania to hear; and, had he studied the boy for months, he could not have overcome his opposition more tactfully and completely.

"Ross," he began quietly, "I am not going to forbid your going to a medical college this year or any other year. To be honest with you, I admire your grit. I believe it will bring you success. And so, as I say, I am not going to forbid your entering the University of Pennsylvania. But—I am going to ask a favor of you."

Ross's eyes sparkled. His father swung around, and, picking up a pencil, marked aimlessly on a pad lying on the big mahogany desk.

"Well, father."

"I am going to ask you to help me pay a debt which I owe—and the payment will certainly spoil this year so far as college is concerned."

Grant paused. He did not look up, but he heard Ross draw a deep breath. Then there was silence.

"Keep in mind," Grant began again, "that I am not requiring this of you—I am asking it."

"Yes—sir."

The tone gave the father the uncomfortable impression that he was assisting at a surgical operation on his son, but he bent his head a little lower over the pad, and traced figures more carefully as he began abruptly on a seemingly new subject.

"Have I ever told you about my Western partner, Jake Weimer?"

"No, sir."

"Well, I started business in the West without a cent, and it was Weimer who gave me my start. He was running a store in Butte, and took me with him. I have managed to get beyond a start, but Weimer never has. After I came East he lost his share of our earnings, and turned prospector. Ever since he has spent his life trying to squeeze gold out of the mountains. Again and again he has staked out claims, and I've grub-staked him to the finish. For twenty-five years this has gone on. So far, none of the properties have amounted to much; still, we hold them; there's always a chance of a rise in value."

Grant drew straight, heavy lines on the pad as he told the story of his grub-staked partner. He fell easily into the vernacular of the gold-fields.

"Four years ago Weimer went prospecting among the Shoshones in Wyoming over near Yellowstone Park. There he began development work on some deserted claims, a few miles from Miners' Camp."

Here Grant pulled a letter from his pocket, and consulted it.

"The claims, it seems," he continued, "had been originally worked by two men named Allen and Waymart McKenzie. They did the required work for three years, and then threw up their job and left Wyoming. Now they're back again, wishing, evidently, that they had never left."

Ross nodded. His eyes had not left his father's face.

"Weimer has felt from the first that he would make good on these claims. He has sent me quartz from time to time, and I've had it assayed. It carries moderately high values in gold, silver, and lead; but, as the camp is eighty miles from a railroad, up among almost impassable mountains, where it's impossible to get the quartz to a smelter, I confess I have paid but little attention to Weimer's work. It has seemed a waste of energy, despite his enthusiasm."

Grant suddenly threw himself back in his chair. His manner took on a keener edge, and his tone became brisker.

"But this year things bid fair to change there because the Burlington Railroad is surveying a line from Cody, and a boom is in prospect for next summer. Our claims have suddenly acquired a new importance; they promise to become valuable."

"Then," commented Ross in a low, constrained tone, "Weimer will get beyond a 'start' at last."

Grant regarded his son keenly. He did not answer the comment directly.

"According to the law of Wyoming," he continued, "one hundred dollars' worth of work a year for five years must be done on a claim, or five hundred dollars' worth all together within five years, before the tract can be patented, by which I mean before the owners can receive a clear title to it. Now, Weimer has done four years' work all right; but this year, the fifth and last in which he can hold the claims without fulfilling the conditions of work to the full, he is failing because of snow-blindness. It seems he had an attack last spring, and was obliged to stay in his cabin for weeks at a time instead of working."

Ross cleared his throat. "And if he fails—"

"We lose the claims, and the McKenzies get them back." Grant again consulted the letter. "Weimer got a man named Steele to write this—an Amos Steele in Miners' Camp. He writes that the McKenzies are taking advantage of some technicalities in the law. They have already filed a claim on the tract based on their three years' former occupancy. This will clear the way for them to take possession in case Weimer fails with the work. Steele goes on to say that, if the claims are saved, some one must come out and look after them—preferably some one with a personal interest in the property."

Mr. Grant laid the letter down, adding slowly, "If you go, I shall give you a substantial personal interest."

There ensued a pause. Ross sat motionless. His gaze had left his father's face, and was fixed on the rug.

"Now, knowing," Grant continued, "that Weimer has set his heart on these claims, I can't desert him. That work must be done and the claims patented."

There was another pause. Grant looked at his son expectantly, but still Ross neither moved nor spoke.

"Weimer is a good sort," Grant went on tentatively. "You'd like Weimer. He's a big man and jolly in every pound of his avoirdupois. Great story-teller—stories worth listening to, what's more. You wouldn't be dull with him."

Grant leaned forward suddenly, and asked directly the question to which his son felt there could be but one reply in view of his father's appeal.

"My boy, will you go?"

CHAPTER II

A STEADY HAND

IN the two weeks which elapsed between Ross's visit to his father and his start for Wyoming he planned hopefully for the year.

"Father has given me a free hand," he told his uncle. "As soon as I can get the work done and the claims patented I am at liberty to come back home, and I tell you I shall hustle. I shall hire as many men as are necessary in Miners' Camp, and take 'em over to Meadow Creek, where the claims are located, and just rush that work through."

"I wonder," remarked Dr. Grant thoughtfully, "why that man Weimer doesn't hire it done instead of sending East for some one to manage the matter."

Ross frowned into the open grate before which the two were sitting. "Why, uncle, I never thought of that, and father didn't mention it. In fact, he knows but very little about Miners' Camp or Weimer's work, and you know he hasn't seen Weimer in years. All he knows about the business is contained in a letter that Weimer got a man named Amos Steele to write. Weimer, it seems, can't use his eyes to read or write. The letter is very short. That man Steele is a mine-superintendent out there. Father knows about the company which he works for."

"The very idea," cried Aunt Anne a few moments later in tearful indignation, "of Ross Grant's sending that boy away out West to the jumping-off place into the wilderness without knowing the conditions into which he's sending him! It's a shame. He's our boy, and I don't want him to go."

The doctor made no reply, but retired precipitately to the office, where he had occupied himself at intervals all day with fitting up an emergency chest for Ross.

The chest was a little oblong, hair-covered strong trunk, which had held all of the doctor's worldly possessions when, thirty years before, he had started to the medical college just as his brother, Ross's father, had started West for his financial "start." Into this chest uncle and nephew fitted all sorts of objects medical, from books to bandages.

"When you're eighty miles from a physician, Ross, and shut in by snow-drifted mountains at that, it's well to have a few remedies and appliances on hand."

"And, when you're several Sabbath days' journey from civilization, with time to burn on your hands, it's also well to have some light literature along," laughed Ross, tucking into the chest Piersol's "Histology." "I intend to make my time count for myself, as well as for Weimer and father."

Aunt Anne, meantime, was packing another and more modern chest, her tears besprinkling the contents.

"I have put your winter shirts and chamois-skin vest right on top of the tray, Ross," she sobbed as she bade him good-bye. "You better put 'em on as soon as you reach the mountains, as it will be cold there."

"All right, aunt; I shall." Ross's voice was a little husky as he turned to his uncle.

Dr. Grant was standing beside the vacated breakfast table absorbed in filling a glass of water. Carefully he brimmed it drop by drop.

Aunt Anne peered through her tears. "Why, Fred," she exclaimed, "what are you up to? Don't make Ross miss his train."

Calmly the doctor added a few more drops, and then turned to his nephew. His eyes narrowed intently as he motioned toward the glass.

"I want to test your nerves, Ross. Hold it out," he directed.

The boy smiled confidently, raised the glass, carried it from him the length of a long, steady arm, and held it there. Then he returned it to the table without spilling a drop.

The doctor grasped the hand that had held the glass, looking earnestly into the boy's eyes.

"Ross, the hand that holds the surgeon's knife successfully must *keep as steady as this*."

For a long, silent moment uncle and nephew looked into each other's faces as their hands gripped. Ross made no reply, but in the expression which leaped to his eyes the older man read the resolution which satisfied him, and which seemed a part of this slow, steady nephew of his.

An hour later the boy was being borne westward on the way to Chicago and the "jumping-off place into the wilderness."

At the same time his father sat behind his desk on Broadway reading a letter postmarked Cody, Wyo., and signed D. H. Leonard. It was written in reply to a recent communication from Ross Grant, Senior.

"Of course I shall be glad to do anything in my power for your son," the letter read, "along the lines you have suggested. I see the wisdom of your move, too. It doesn't always do to refuse a boy's demands point-blank. It's far better to turn him from his purpose as you are doing—or trying to do, I should say, because, if young Ross is anything like old Ross, he will not be so easily turned. Yet, as you say, a little stirring up and jostling out of his uncle's beaten tracks may put some new ideas into his head. This country certainly bids fair to be stirring enough now to fascinate any young man. It's a good idea also to give him a half-share in your share of the claims; and I'm sure, if the railroad makes good its promise of a way up to Miners' Camp, the claims will be worth working for. And, as a real estate dealer, I don't need to be urged to do my best to interest him in the business of this vast land, the country of the future."

In Chicago a telegram overtook Ross. It was from his father. "Stop overnight at Hotel Irma, Cody," it read. "Leonard will meet you there."

Two days later, early in the morning, the west bound express dropped Ross Grant and half a dozen other passengers at Toluca, in southern Montana, a station with a water-tank and some cattle corrals attached. Here stood the train which by day plied over the branch road to Cody, and by night returned to Toluca. It was a mixed train consisting of freight and express cars with a sleeper at the end.

The half dozen passengers, reinforced by others left by the east bound express, all men, transferred themselves to this coach. Every one except Ross seemed to be more or less acquainted with every one else. Ross sat silent, listening and looking out on as much of the great West as was visible from the slowly moving car. Across the windswept, sun-cracked plain grumbled the old engine. On either side were herds of cattle fattening on the dusty dried grass, which looked to Ross dead and worthless. Not a tree met his eyes, and not a house.

"Got the Western fever yet?" drawled a voice behind him finally, and Ross looked around into the good-natured face of a man who had boarded the north bound express at Omaha.

Ross shook his head decidedly. "There's nothing here to give a fellow the Western fever," he returned, pointing to the flat yellow plain overlaid by the dull yellow sunshine.

The man lounged forward, his elbows on the back of Ross's seat, and grinned. He was apparently about thirty, short and fair, with sandy hair and mustache. He wore corduroy trousers and coat, with a dark flannel shirt and turn-over collar under which was knotted carelessly a broad green silk tie. Hanging to the back of his head was a brown, broad-brimmed hat, the crown encircled with a narrow band of intricately woven hair dyed in all the colors of the rainbow.

"I'll tell ye what's out there that gives most of us the Western fever," he declared; "and that's money prospects. Sort of a yellow fever, ye know, it is, except that no one wants to be cured."

"Then I don't want to catch it in the first place," declared Ross, looking out of the window again.

Presently some one in the rear of the car lowered a newspaper, and rumbled over the top of it:

"You fellers rec'lect old man Quinn?"

Some did; some did not. To the latter, the speaker explained.

"Used to live in Cody. Friend of Buffalo Bill, old man Quinn was. Went down to Oklahomy five years ago, and bought a sheep ranch. He and some of the cattlemen around him got by the ears over how much of the range belonged to the sheep—"

Here an inarticulate murmur sounded through the car. There was a "cattle war" on in Wyoming at that time.

"Wall, one night two years ago about now, after a big round-up at North Fork, one thousand of old man Quinn's sheep was driven over the bluffs into North Fork River. All that old man Quinn could find out was that four men done it. But he kept a-tryin' to find out, and got a *detective* down from Kansas City, feller who used to be a cow puncher himself; and he nabbed three of 'em. They had had the gall to stay right there on the range all this time."

"Good reason," volunteered some one, "why it took so long to land 'em. I suppose old man Quinn was lookin' for 'em among the punchers that had left after the round-up."

"Jest so," declared the informant. "He was tryin' to track up every one who cleared out after the round-up—jest so."

"How long did they git?" asked some one further up the aisle.

"Two years."

"Sandy," some one across the aisle said to the man behind Ross, "wa'n't you down t' Oklahomy punchin' two year ago?"

There was a perceptible pause. Then a note of irritation spoke through Sandy's drawl as he answered briefly, "No, north Texas."

And, while the rest continued the discussion concerning old man Quinn, he leaned forward and devoted himself to Ross.

Presently they came to the hills whose barrenness and sombreness were relieved at intervals by the brilliant coloring of the rocks.

"Well," asked Sandy, "what do ye think of this? It ain't every day East that ye can walk around the crater of an old volcano."

"Is this—" began Ross, his head out of the window.

"This is!" chuckled he of the sandy hair.

The train was crawling slowly around the edge of a wide, shallow well, on all sides of which the hills frowned darkly, stripped of every vestige of verdure.

"An extinct volcano!" ejaculated Ross.

"Yep,"—the other sagged forward until his laughing face was close to Ross's,— "but just let me tell ye right here, young man, that volcanoes is the only thing in the West that's extinct. Everything else is pretty lively."

Ross joined in the laugh which greeted this sally all around him. The man opposite lowered his paper, and looked over his glasses.

"Volcanoes *and* hopes, Sandy," he amended quickly, instantly retiring again behind his paper.

Ross did not understand the significance of the retort, but he noticed that several men around exchanged glances and that Sandy's face lost a fraction of its good nature. And when Sandy's face lost its humorous expression, it was not pleasing.

Dusk and Cody drew near together. The train dropped over the "rim," and steamed along through the Big Horn Basin, coming to a final standstill in front of another station and water-tank.

"Cody," announced the brakeman. "All out."

Ross, suitcase in hand, his top-coat over his arm, stumbled out of the train, still swaying with the perpetual motion of the last few days. A big open wagon with side seats stood beside the platform. At the call of the driver Ross looked around interrogatively at Sandy, who was still beside him.

"Oh, we're two miles from the town yet," Sandy replied to the look. "Pile in. Train can't make it over the shelves between here and Stinkin' Water."

Ross silently "piled in." Sandy sat down beside him, and the wagon filled with the other passengers.

Behind them, stretching back into the darkness, their heads sagging sleepily, was a row of teams, their neck-yokes joined by a chain, their heads connected by a single rein running through the ring at the left side of the bit.

"Hey, there," called one of the men in the wagon, "does Grasshopper strike the trail to-night for Meeteetse?"

"Yep," came a voice beside a lantern which was traveling to and fro. "There's a lot of freight to pack up to Miners' Camp; and, if it gits there ahead of the snow, these freighters have got to hit the pike more rapid than they have been doin'."

A horseman dashed past the wagon and into the circle of light from the lantern hung in front of the station. Dropping the reins to the ground, he swung his leather-enveloped legs off the horse, and yelled at the station agent:

"Have those boxes of apples come yet?"

"Just here," replied the holder of the moving light.

"Can't you start 'em up by the Meeteetse stage to-night?" demanded the newcomer. "The boys are about famished."

"Them surveyors," complained the agent, "are always hollerin' for more grub. 'N' no matter how much ye fill 'em, they don't go faster than molasses in January. Ain't got beyond Sagehen Roost this minute, and they'll probably be a-quittin' in a month."

Ross pricked up his ears. The same interest was manifested by Sandy.

"Don't you worry about our quitting," the newcomer returned brusquely; "if the Burlington Railroad starts out to run a track up to Miners' Camp, why, it will run one, that's all, if the track has to go under snow-sheds all the way up from the Meadows."

At this point the big open bus rumbled off over the dust-choked "shelf" toward Cody. An unwieldy swaying coach drawn by four horses passed them on its way to the station.

"Meeteetse stage is late to-night," remarked Sandy.

On rumbled the wagon. Its brake screamed against the wheel as the horses plunged down the steep inclines which marked the descent from one "shelf" to another. Presently a vile odor greeted Ross's nostrils, and at the same time the wagon struck the bridge over the sulphurated waters of the Shoshone, and began the climb on the other side.

Ross was keenly alive to this strange new world in which the convenience of the East met the newness and crudeness of the West. Brilliant electric lights illuminated dust-deep, unpaved, unsprinkled streets. Tents stood beside pretentious homes, and stone business blocks were rising beside offices located in canvas wagons with rounded tops. And to and fro past the wagon flashed horsemen, cowboys dressed like Sandy except that their corduroy trousers were incased in leather "chaps."

Sandy, watching Ross out of the corner of his eye, grinned at the boy's expression.

"Buck up here, tenderfoot," he advised good-naturedly. "This here is 'The Irma'; and, if you've got any better hotels in the East, why, don't tell Colonel Cody of it, at any rate, for 'The Irma' is the Colonel's pet."

Then Ross found himself in the foyer of "The Irma," the hotel that "Buffalo Bill" erected to honor his home town, which bears his name, a comfortable, modernly equipped house decorated with hundreds of paintings, water colors, and etchings, all picturing the scenes in Colonel Cody's life as represented in his "Wild West Show."

Sandy had registered in advance of Ross, and stepped to a swinging door at the end of the counter. There he stopped and turned back. "Come on and have a drink, tenderfoot," he invited good-naturedly.

Ross was writing his name, and did not look up. "No, thank you," he returned quietly. "I don't drink."

Several men lounging about glanced curiously at the boy. Sandy thrust his hands into his pockets, and, leaning against the counter, looked at him in open interest.

After Ross had registered, he drew a nickel from his pocket and laid it on the counter. "A two-cent stamp, please."

The clerk, impatient with the deliberation of his movements, cast the nickel hurriedly into the cash drawer and handed out a stamp. Ross waited for the change, while three men behind him pressed forward to the register.

Sandy grinned broadly. "There's no change comin', tenderfoot," he said with a chuckle. "You've reached a land where nothin' less'n a nickel can be got outside a post-office."

"Pennies don't grow in the Rocky Mountains," added the clerk in a tone which plainly invited the boy to move on.

The tone brought the blood to Ross's cheek. His eyes suddenly narrowed. His head went up, and his voice quickened and deepened.

"Very well, then," he returned coolly, "give me another two-cent stamp and a postal card."

Sandy patted his thigh softly. "You'll pass, tenderfoot," he murmured. "No flies on you—at least, they don't stick there."

Ross took his trophies, and retired to a desk beside the swinging door. Just as he had finished directing a letter to his Aunt Anne he noticed that his new friend was waiting again beside the counter.

When the last man had registered, Sandy pulled the book toward him and leaned over it. Suddenly he bent lower, and jabbed hard on the page with his forefinger. When he turned, all the good humor had dropped out of his face. With a glance of keen interest at the boy beside the desk he passed on into the barroom.

So marked was the change in his manner that Ross paused in the act of dipping his pen into the ink-well.

"Guess I'll see who Sandy is," he thought, and, dropping his pen, crossed to the book.

The name stared up at him in big bold letters directly above his own, but he had not noticed it at the time of registering.

"Allen McKenzie, Miners' Camp."

Ross pursed his thin lips, and nearly whistled aloud as he returned to his desk.

"It's one of the McKenzies who are after our claims," he wrote at the end of a long letter to his uncle and aunt; "but he is a funny, good-natured fellow. I partly like him and partly don't. He has no six-shooter in sight—in fact, I'm told that six-shooters have gone more or less out of fashion in Wyoming; and he doesn't look a bit as I had imagined a 'claim-jumper' would. But one thing he may reckon on; there will be no chance for him or any one else to jump the Weimer-Grant claims in a few months."

And, sealing this confident declaration, he slipped the letter into the mail-box, ate a hearty dinner, and went to bed.

The following morning at nine o'clock D. H. Leonard, his father's old-time friend, appeared, and greeted the son most cordially. Mr. Leonard was a man of middle age, hale, red-faced, bald-headed, and wearing a "boiled" shirt and collar. He was a dealer in real estate, with offices in both Cody and Basin. It was to his office that he first took Ross.

"We'll go for a drive by and by," he began, throwing himself back in his chair and tossing a cigar across the desk. "We have the country of the future here, and I want you to see it. Perfect gold-mine in this land once it's irrigated."

Ross picked up the cigar, played with it a moment, and laid it again on the desk, listening attentively.

The older man drew a match across the woodwork beneath his chair, and lighted his cigar. "It's *the* place for young men, Grant, a greater place than it was when Horace Greeley gave his advice to young men to go West—here's a match," he interrupted himself to say.

Ross accepted the match, bit on the end of it a moment, and laid it beside the cigar.

"Don't you smoke?" asked Leonard in some surprise.

Before Ross could reply, some one called Mr. Leonard out into the hall. As the door closed behind him, Ross arose and stood silently in front of the open window. Beyond the little town and beyond the level stretch of "shelves" arose the Big Horn Mountains, miles away, but so sharply outlined in the clear air that they seemed only a short walk distant.

As Ross leaned against the window-casing, some one in the room adjoining came to the open window. The stub of a cigar was thrown out, and a voice exclaimed:

"But if Grant realized the situation, he'd never have sent a boy out here to look after those claims. And it looks as though it was his son—same initials. But with such a boy and Weimer you ought to be able—"

The speaker left the window at this point, and Ross lost the rest of the sentence. In a few moments, however, some one clattered through the hall and down the stairs, with spurs jingling. A horse stood on the street below, tethered only by its bridle-reins dangling to the ground. From the entrance to the building Sandy McKenzie emerged, clad as on the previous day, except for a colored handkerchief knotted about his neck. Mounting his pony, he touched a spur to its flank, and galloped away in a cloud of dust just as Leonard returned.

"Who's in the next room?" asked Ross.

"Over on the right?" asked Leonard carelessly. "Oh, a lawyer has that office." He crossed to the window, and glanced out just as McKenzie disappeared. "Evidently Sandy's pulling out for the mountains," he observed. "Miners' Camp, that is."

"Are there only two McKenzies?" asked Ross.

Leonard shrugged his shoulders. "Two are all that have ever showed up around here—Sandy and Waymart; but they say there are half a dozen more brothers and cousins, some figurin' under names not their own; but where they put up I don't know."

Here he turned and looked curiously at Ross. "I suppose your father told you that Sandy and Waymart are sitting up on Meadow Creek waiting to jump the Grant-Weimer claims."

"Yes, he told me," answered Ross, and hesitated. "Do they use guns in the jumping process?"

Leonard laughed. "Not much! They have other and safer methods of getting their own way in case Weimer doesn't do the work the law requires this year."

Then he glanced at the unsmoked cigar, and repeated his question of some time before. "Don't you smoke?"

Ross shook his head shortly.

"Why not?" Leonard looked at his old friend's son in friendly interest.

Ross stretched out his right arm in an unconscious imitation of the test his uncle had required of him only a few mornings before. "It's apt to get on a fellow's nerves," was all the reply he made.

There was much to see during the day and much to hear. Leonard took the boy for a long drive up the cañon of the Shoshone, whose densely green waters have a background of brilliant reds and yellows in the sandstone sides of the wall through which the river has cut. Up and yet up the carriage went, with the walls rising higher and higher on either side, the road a mere thread blasted out of the rocks, up to the great dam which was beginning to raise its head across the river bed to hold back the water and distribute it over Big Horn Basin through irrigating canals.

Ross's interest, however, during the drive was divided. He was glad to see the vast "Shoshone Project," as the government reservoir is called; but his most active thoughts were following Sandy McKenzie on his way to Miners' Camp, and his questions were of the Camp and Wyoming mining laws and the conditions he would meet in this new and strange land.

But Leonard had never been up to Camp, and was not interested in mining, but in ranch lands; therefore, Ross got but little enlightenment from him, and finally, ceasing to question, listened in silence while the older man, in obedience to the senior Grant's request, did his best to interest the junior Grant in the business prospects of Wyoming.

"I want you to come down to Basin at Christmas," Leonard said cordially as host and guest sat down to dinner in the dining-room of "The Irma" at six o'clock that night.

"My home is in Basin. It's the county-seat of Big Horn County, you know; and I want you to come down there. I want to show you more of this magnificent country."

Ross was grateful for this friendly invitation, but made no promises; and presently the two were eating in silence, Ross looking with interest on some of the contrasts which were too familiar for Leonard even to notice.

Under elaborate and gaudy chandeliers was a bare and not overclean floor. Looking down on the thickest and heaviest of cracked china were pictures by well-known artists. Seated around the tables spread in linen, were bearded men in chaps and overalls, flannel shirts and spurs, together with those in tan oxfords and broadcloth.

At the table opposite Ross, and facing him, was a man to whom his glance returned again and again. He sat alone. His square, unexpressive face was relieved by a pair of fine dark-brown eyes. The lower part of his face was covered by a stubby reddish beard. His hair was brown, and fell nearly to his eyes, giving him the appearance of having a low forehead. He wore a coat,—the first of its kind Ross had seen,—a short, bulky affair, with a high collar laid over the shoulders and lined throughout with lambskin, the wool badly worn on the collar. His chaps were of undressed leather, with the long hair trimmed short save from the thigh to the ankle. High riding boots, spurs, and a sombrero, which he wore low over his forehead while eating, completed his costume.

"Who is he?" asked Ross.

Mr. Leonard shook his head. "Man next to me here said he rode in this afternoon on the Yellowstone trail. Don't know who he is."

As if he felt he was under discussion, the stranger raised his head, and his eyes met Ross's in a quick furtive glance.

After dinner Leonard gripped Ross's hand in farewell, and left. An hour later there was a rattle of wheels in front of the hotel, the sound of horses's hoofs, and a rollicking voice called:

"Meeteetse stage. All aboard!"

Ross, with a glance around the office which he expected to see again before spring, picked up his bag, and went out on the piazza. Here he stood while his trunk and the emergency chest were swung up behind the stage and roped. Then he climbed up beside the driver, who was glad to have some one near to help him keep awake during the long night ride, and they were off, only to be stopped almost immediately by a man standing in the doorway of a store.

"Hold up there!" shouted the man. "Steele is here, and wants to go on to-night."

The name caught Ross's attention. "Is it Amos Steele?" he asked the driver.

The driver assented. "Yep—superintendent of the Gale's Ridge Mine up in Camp."

Ross leaned forward and surveyed with interest the pleasant-faced, well-dressed, squarely-built young man who came out of the store and climbed into the stage. In his pocket Ross had the letter Steele had written his father at Weimer's request.

"Git out of this," the driver requested briefly of his four bronchos as the stage door slammed to, and the four obligingly "got out" on a run.

Just as they left the last house behind them, a figure on horseback whirled by in a cloud of dust, and Ross recognized in the sheepskin coat and hairy chaps the stranger who had attracted his attention during dinner.

CHAPTER III

DOC TENDERFOOT IN ACTION

BESIDES Steele, there were three other passengers inside the stage that night. One was the assistant manager of the Embar Ranch, south of Meeteetse. He had been to Omaha with a car-load of cattle. The remaining two were miners whom Steele had picked up in Butte. This much Ross learned from the driver. He learned many other things by listening to the conversation between Hillis, the manager, and Steele, although all the while he was keenly observant of his surroundings.

The stage was bowling along smoothly over a road as level as a floor and flooded by brilliant moonlight. Behind them Cody faded into silvery mist, guarded by the huge shadowy bulks of the Big Horn Mountains. Ahead, houseless and treeless, stretched the shelf until the shimmering mist cut off the sight. And in the distance, so far ahead that sometimes he blended with the mist, rode the horseman in the sheepskin coat.

"Hi, there, Andy," called the ranch-manager; "who is that fellow ahead?"

Andy, the driver, turned, and looked down through the open flap into the cavernous darkness of the stage. "Don't know. Didn't find out. I have seen fellers, though, that can give more information about themselves per square inch than that same chap ahead there."

"I never saw 'im in these parts before," returned Hillis.

"Nor I." The driver spat over the flank of the right wheeler. "Gid'ep there, Suke, ye slowmy, you! Hike it, old Blue! Git out of this!" And, having thus jogged the energy of the leaders, Andy gave his attention again to Hillis. "Hain't ever set eyes on that brown chap before. I guessed back there he was bound fer Embar. Looks like a puncher."

"I wish"—the assistant manager of the Embar spoke forcefully—"that he and seven or eight more were bound for the Embar."

"Short of hands, eh?" questioned Andy, whirling his "black snake" so skilfully that the lash missed the heads of the wheelers, and touched the flank of the nigh leader.

"Short of hands?" Steele broke in. "Who isn't short of hands from Butte to Omaha—especially in Wyoming? I've been out two weeks advertising and hunting men, and here I am back again with two only."

Ross turned half around in his high seat, and grasped the low back. "Is labor as scarce as that in Miners' Camp?" he burst out in a brusque, astonished tone which betrayed a personal interest.

"As scarce as diamonds," returned Steele, adding with a laugh, "and almost as expensive."

Andy pushed back his hat, and surveyed his young companion with curiosity. There was a little stir in the coach also.

"It must be"—Amos Steele spoke as if the matter had been debated before—"that you are related to Ross Grant of New York."

"Yes," returned Ross, "I am his son."

He was conscious of becoming an immediate centre of speculation.

"I wondered," remarked Steele, "when I saw your name on the hotel register. Going out to Camp, are you?"

"Yes," Ross hesitated. "In answer to that letter you wrote father for Mr. Weimer."

"Oh!" Steele's tone was edged with astonishment.

"Come out to see to the work, did ye?" asked Andy.

"Yes."

Andy glanced sidewise, and Ross caught the look of incredulity.

"Expected to hire men to do it, did ye?" That Andy was a general information bureau was due to his faculty for asking questions.

"Yes, I do," emphatically.

The present tense of the reply did not escape the listener's attention.

"Weimer has tried to hire," volunteered Steele; "but it's no use."

"Why not?" demanded the boy.

"Well, in the first place, as I said, there hain't enough men to supply the demand; and, in the second place, no man in his senses is going away over on the Creek, where he'll

be shut in for months, when he can just as well stay down in Camp, and get the same wages."

"Shut in for months?" repeated Ross slowly.

Andy explained. "Along about first of February ye're shut in fer sartain. Trail fills up, and there's apt to be snowslides any time on old Crosby."

Ross sat with widening eyes staring out into the moonlight, and wondering with tightening muscles what he was "up against." The vagueness of his father's knowledge concerning Weimer's work had not counted in New York. But here, swinging along toward Miners' Camp with two-thirds of the width of the continent between himself and his friends, Ross realized that this vagueness had put him at a disadvantage.

The two men behind him began discussing the cattle market, and the stage slid down the side of the first mesa of the Wyoming bad lands and into the coulee, or dry creek, at the bottom. The level road was left behind. Up hill and down plunged the horses ahead of the rocking, tipping stage. There was no regular road. A dozen tracks showed the differing routes of as many drivers. To Ross it seemed as if destruction were imminent every time they came to the top of one of the short, steep hills. But Andy jammed on the brake hard, and, giving a peculiar little whistle, yelled carelessly, "Git out of this."

Presently Andy took advantage of the rattle of wheels and hoofs to say to Ross: "Steele is boss of the Gale's Ridge work up to Camp. They keep open all winter; t'other company shuts down."

"Shuts down?" repeated Ross.

"Yep, has to. Men go down t' Cody t' work on the Project. Hard work to keep men in Camp through the winter. When the railroad goes up there, 'twill be different."

Some one inside the stage struck a match.

"On time, ain't you, Andy?" asked Steele's voice; "it's twelve-thirty."

"Yep," returned the driver. "Here's Dry Creek."

The road, a well-defined track here, was hemmed in between a creek-bed on one hand and a hill on the other. On top of the hill, silhouetted against the star-studded sky, appeared a wagon with a white bellying canvas top. Around it, covering the hilltop and the side clear down to the track was a soft white moving mass that caused Ross to give a startled exclamation.

"Why—that looks like—it *is* sheep!" he ejaculated. "Sheep by the hundreds."

"Sheep's the word!" returned the driver. "This is Sheepy's layout. That's his wagon up yon. He herds fer parties in Cody. There's nigh seven hundred of them sheep. Never seen such a flock before, did ye?"

Before Ross could reply, the stage swung around a corner of the hill and Andy, with a sharp whistle, drew up the leaders abruptly. They were in an open space in front of the stage camp, half cabin and half dugout driven into the hillside. Beside the dugout was a low, stout corral, outside of which were a haystack and a jumble of bales of hay. As the stage stopped, the door of the dugout opened, and a man loomed large against a dim light within.

But all this Ross did not notice at the time. His attention was riveted on the horse just ahead ridden by the stranger. Around and around it whirled, unmindful of the quirt and spur of the rider.

"Pretty ridin'," remarked Andy, spitting appreciatively over the wheel.

The men inside the stage clambered out with grunts at their stiffened limbs, and leaned against the wheels watching. The man in the doorway stepped out, and thrust his hands into his pockets, and looked calmly while the horse placed its four feet together and humped its back with a momentum which sent the rider high in the air.

When he came down, he settled himself in the saddle, drew up on the reins, and dug his spurs into the horse's flank. The animal, his nostrils distended and the foam flying from his mouth, without any warning rose on his hind legs, and threw himself backward. The rider freed one foot from the stirrup; but the other caught, and horse and rider went down in a heap. There was a deep groan from both, and then silence. If the men had seemed indifferent before, they made up in activity now. With a flying leap Andy was down from his high seat. The stage-camp man rushed forward, and threw himself on the horse's head, while the others pulled the unconscious rider from beneath the animal's body.

"Leg's done for," Ross heard Steele say as they carried the wounded man into the dugout.

Ross clambered awkwardly down from his seat, and followed. He nearly fell over an empty chicken-coop and into the one little room of the dugout.

"Put 'im here," directed the stage-camp man, whom the others called Hank. He pointed to the blankets in the corner from which he had crawled ten minutes before.

"Here, boy," Steele said with pale-faced absorption, "smooth the blankets up."

Ross, half dazed by his strange and unexpected surroundings, slowly and clumsily did as he was directed, and they laid the unconscious stranger down carefully, his left leg hanging limply from a point half-way between knee and hip. Then the men straightened up, and looked at one another.

"A bad job," muttered Hank.

"Take 'im back to Cody?" asked Steele.

Hillis shook his head. "Doctor there went to Thermopolis this morning."

Suddenly the daze which had beclouded Ross's brain cleared away. He woke up, and his whole attention focused itself on the prostrate man. In a moment he became alert, resourceful, and active. His boyish hesitation fell from him. He threw off his top-coat, tossed his cap with it to the uncovered board table, and, kneeling by the man's side, laid his ear on the heart.

"Go out," he said authoritatively to the astonished men, "and bring in my smallest trunk. Hurry, for this chap will be conscious in just a moment."

No one stirred.

Whipping out his jack-knife, Ross cut a strap which secured the chaps, and caught one leg at the ankle. "Help me pull 'em off," he cried urgently.

Some one stooped to the other foot, and the chaps were off. Kneeling beside the wounded leg, with his knife, Ross ripped the trousers from ankle to thigh, and exposed a bloody wound.

"Compound fracture," he exclaimed after a brief examination.

Then he looked up. "Where's that chest?" he demanded. "I must cleanse this and bandage it at once."

The cock-sureness of the boy's tone and the sight of the skilful touch of his fingers on the wound galvanized the two miners into action, and in a moment the emergency chest was beside Ross.

"Hot water," was his next command, as he fumbled with the key, "and a small dish"—his eye fell on the table—"that salt cellar, with every grain of salt washed out. Quick!"

The wounded man had recovered consciousness now, and was groaning, and clinching his fists, and rolling his head from side to side in agony.

"Are you a doctor?" asked Steele incredulously.

"My uncle is," Ross returned briefly, "and I'm going to be."

The answer, coupled with a view of the contents of the chest and Ross's manipulation of those contents, brought relief to the men.

He had produced a hypodermic syringe, and with a tiny morphine tablet dissolved in the salt cellar he began operations which lasted the greater part of two hours, and employed every man present.

"Bring in that hen-coop," directed Ross; "we can use that for a double inclined plane to stretch the leg over."

Steele, who had so recently issued orders to a slow and clumsy boy, now quietly obeyed this embryo surgeon. Hillis was holding bandages, while Hank and Andy were doing something which filled their souls with wonder, namely, making long, narrow bags from grain sacks out of which wheat had been hastily dumped.

"By the great horn spoon, what're these fer?" Andy demanded in an undertone, running the big needle deep into his thumb. "Jehoshaphat!"

Hank shook his head helplessly. He plumped a stick of wood into his rusty old stove, and refilled a kettle from a water pail which stood on a box. Steele dragged in the triangular chicken-coop, and laid it beside the wounded man, who was moaning mechanically and drowsily now.

Ross arose, and set a bottle of alcohol on the table. He looked critically at the coop. "The very thing," he muttered with eyes alight. "How fortunate that I fell over it coming in!" Then he paused in thought.

Miners' Camp and Meadow Creek were forgotten. Forgotten were Weimer and the neglected work. A "case" lay before him, a man needing the help that it was life for the boy to give.

When, at last, the belated stage was ready to move on, the men, again in their overcoats, lined up and looked down at the sleeping patient. He lay with the knee of the wounded leg over the peak of the chicken-coop, padded thick and soft with blankets, the leg held secure and motionless between heavy sand-bags. Down the leg from knee to foot on either side ran strips of adhesive plaster with loops protruding below the foot. And attached to the loops was a small bag loaded with stone.

"To reduce the fracture," Ross explained briefly. He was on his knees, measuring the well leg with a tape measure from the haircloth trunk. "See, this leg is longer now because the broken parts of the thigh bone in the other have been driven past each other, and the muscles have contracted, shortening the leg. The weight on the foot will stretch the muscles and allow the ends of the bone to meet again."

"Jehoshaphat!" exclaimed Andy softly. "He's lucky to have you come trailin' down the pike just behind 'im. But see here, fellers," the driver turned to the others; "yer Uncle Samuel will dock me this time sure, fer the mail won't reach Meeteetse in time fer the stage up to Miners' Camp!"

"Miners' Camp!"

The exclamation burst involuntarily from Ross. He arose. The tape measure dropped from his hands. He drew his hand across his wet forehead. He had seen the stage load prepare to go on without a thought that he ought to go also. His one idea had been the care of the nameless man on the blankets.

"Miners' Camp," he repeated; "why, I ought to go on!"

"Not much," cried Hank in lively alarm. "What 'ud I do with him and all that toggery?" jerking his thumb over his shoulder at the chicken-coop.

"Of course," was Ross's decision in a low tone, "I can't desert him—but I ought to go on."

A few moments later, Andy's four bronchos pounded up the hill beyond the stage camp and disappeared, leaving Ross standing beside the window watching. The man on the blankets breathed heavily. A big yellow cat purred around Ross's legs. Hank poked the fire.

"Guess I'll rustle some grub now," the latter said in awkward solicitude. "Ye're all in, ain't ye, Doc?"

Ross turned from the window wearily without replying, and for the first time looked about the cabin.

It was roughly boarded, with a hard dirt floor. In addition to the bench, the only seats were boxes in which "canned goods" had been stored away. A pile of wood lay behind an old stove propped up on boxes in lieu of legs. A cupboard containing some tin cups and thick plates, a few pans and skillets, and a shelf heaped with magazines half a year old completed the furnishings of the room.

Suddenly Ross's eyes lighted on the wounded man's sheepskin coat, which had been cast hurriedly aside on the floor. Lifting it, he stepped to the door, and commenced to shake it energetically. Out of the breast pocket fell a small object. It hit the stone in front of the door with a metallic ring. Ross picked it up, and looked down into the photographed face of a winning girl with smiling eyes, curved lips, and plump cheeks. The picture was a little oval set in a gilt frame. On the back in a girlish hand was written the inscription, "To Lon Weston."

"Weston, huh?" came Hank's voice at Ross's elbow. "I never heard of Lon Weston before. Wonder where he hails from."

Hank glanced speculatively at the sleeper, then took a deep earthenware dish from the cupboard, beat its contents with a spoon, greased a skillet, and set it on the fire.

"Men fergot t' eat," he grumbled, "'n' fergot t' feed the horses. They fergot everything except him. They'll be one hungry lot when they land in Meeteetse."

He raised the smoking skillet, and gave a deft toss, which sent the flapjack spinning into the air, turned it over, and settled it back with the baked side uppermost.

"Nice-looking girl that!" he muttered absently, immediately adding, "Here ye are—flapjacks 'n' coffee!"

Late in the afternoon the injured man aroused himself groaning. He stared at Ross with eyes which gradually cleared as a realization of his environment was borne in on him.

"I say, Doc," he muttered, biting his lips with the pain, "I'm all to the bad, ain't I?"

"Leg's used up for a few days, that's all, Mr. Weston," returned Ross cheerfully.

The man turned his head quickly. His eyes widened and he seemed to forget his pain. For a long moment he lay motionless looking from Ross to Hank, who grinned hospitably at him from the stove.

"Cheer up down there," said Hank in jovial strain, "the worst is yet t' come, fer I'm makin' ye some puddin', and even my mother 'ud say that puddin' ain't one of my strong pints!"

The sick man did not smile. He merely stared at the speaker until Hank disappeared, a water pail in hand, bound for the spring. Then he threw out a hand toward Ross and asked abruptly:

"Where did you get it?"

Ross, turning a flapjack awkwardly, looked inquiringly over his shoulder. "Get what?"

"The name—Weston?"

Ross smiled and then, partly because he was embarrassed and partly because he thought the injured man would be, turned his back before answering, "A picture fell out of your coat and I—we—saw the name written on the back, 'Lon Weston.'"

There was no reply, and presently Ross added, "I put the photo back in your pocket and hung the coat above your head there on the peg. Guess you can reach it."

Still no reply, and Ross, looking around, found his patient with head turned away, eyes closed and lips pressed tightly together in his beard.

Suddenly, in the open doorway appeared a figure that Ross had not seen before. A shaggy head was advanced cautiously within the cabin and the owner peered at Weston curiously. Then, evidently understanding his closed eyes to mean sleep, the stranger backed out precipitately and sat down on the bench outside the door. From this vantage point he peered around the jamb from time to time eyeing Ross and his patient in turn.

"Good-evening," said the former as the stranger showed no signs of speaking.

The shaggy head appeared in the doorway and nodding briefly, was withdrawn, just as Hank, coming with the water, called, "Well, Sheepy, what's the latest word up your way?"

It was Luther, otherwise "Sheepy," the herder whose wagon crowned the adjacent hill. He was Hank's daily caller.

"There ye are, Doc," exclaimed Hank entering with the water. "Puddin' fer Weston, and flapjacks 'n' coffee fer you and me with cabbage 'n' spuds thrown in. Fill up."

It was a menu which was not varied to any great extent in the days which followed, strange days for "Doc Tenderfoot," as Hank called Ross.

"WHAT'S THE LATEST WORD?"

Every night at midnight one of the two stages plying between Cody and Meeteetse stopped at the stage camp for supper and horse feed. Every noon the other stage stopped for dinner on its return trip. Between times, horsemen came and went, occasionally, men from the ranches on Wood River and the Grey Bull, miners "packing" their beds behind them, prospectors going out of the mountains for the winter, and every day during the first week there was Sheepy. Sheepy usually came toward night when his flock had been driven in from the range and rounded up by the faithful shepherd dog near the canvas-topped wagon.

One day, the last of the week, after Ross had had a particularly trying time with his patient, he left the latter asleep, and going outside, sat on the bench in the sunshine watching Hank who was repairing the corral. Presently Sheepy joined him, first refreshing himself, as usual, with a long look at the snoring Weston.

"Once I seen a feller that rode like him and looked like him, only his hair and beard," Sheepy announced finally in a hoarse whisper. "I seen 'im ridin' in ahead of th' stage that night, and I thought 'twas th' other chap."

Ross listened without interest. Sheepy filled a pipe with deliberation and lighted it. Then, clasping a worn knee in both hands he spoke again out of the corner of his mouth.

"That feller had hair light as tow and his face clean of beard, but he rode the same and his eyes was the same. He was a puncher off the cattle ranges. Used to ride past my wagon alone about once a week headin' fer town. Went in the edge of the evenin' always."

"And where were you?" asked Ross still without interest.

"Down in Oklahomy. I was herdin' sheep fer old man Quinn."

Ross looked at Sheepy with new interest. "I heard the men on the train talking about old man Quinn and the sheep that he lost. Were you there at that time?"

Sheepy nodded. "I sartain was. That's two years gone by."

"And did you see what was going on—driving the sheep into the river, I mean?" questioned Ross eagerly.

The sheep-herder shook his grizzled head. "It wa'n't off my range that the sheep was drove, but another feller's called Happy. He seen there was four men done it. It was night—dark night, and they didn't stop to say howdy ner make any introductions. They shot Happy's dog and got away over the bluff with a thousand sheep. They was drunk,

all of 'em, but not too drunk not t' know what they was doin'. Old man Quinn got three of 'em. He's been after the other ever since."

"Do you think he'll be caught?"

Sheepy moved his shoulders helplessly. "Don't know. Old man Quinn he never lets up on a thing. Took 'im two years t' find three. Bet he don't give t'other up."

"Why did they drive the sheep over the bluff?" asked Ross.

Sheepy frowned. "Cattlemen claimed the sheep had crossed the dead line. Cattlemen are always claimin' that, and they push the line further and further in on the sheep and claim more of the range every year. They do here. They did down in Oklahomy. The sheep owners and cattlemen had a row at the big cattle round-up on the North Fork. It was after the round-up, when the cow punchers was feelin' pretty gay and let themselves loose, that them four drove old man Quinn's sheep over the bluff."

There was a pause, and then Sheepy went back to the original subject. "The feller that looked like him and rode like him," jerking his thumb over his shoulder, "used to ride past when I was shakin' grub in my wagon. He used t' go grinnin' mostly and starin' at his hoss' ears. And he alus went with his fixin's on, tan chaps and a red silk 'kerchief 'round his neck and Indian gloves with these here colored gauntlets. Oh, he struck the trail in his good togs all right—bet he went t' see some girl 'r other!"

This was the last information that Ross received from Sheepy for several months. The following morning there arrived from Cody a supply wagon which replenished the sheep-herder's larder, and then, the sheep having eaten the range bare for miles around the dugout, the canvas-topped wagon was attached to the supply wagon and drawn to another hilltop ten miles away. With it went Sheepy only faintly regretting the loss of companionship at the dugout. The seven hundred sheep that his dog rounded up and drove in advance of the wagons were the companions with which he was best acquainted.

"It wouldn't ha' been a bad idee," Hank remarked when the last bleat died away in the distance, "if Sheepy could ha' stayed all winter. He ain't generally long on talk—none of them herders be—but he was some one t' have around, and once in a while his tongue breaks loose."

Ross drew a long breath and thought of Meadow Creek.

In the afternoon Hank resumed his repairs on the corral, leaving Weston asleep and Ross kneeling beside his medicine chest sorting its contents.

The sorting done, the boy arose noiselessly and closed the lid of the chest. Then, turning, he looked down on the head of the sleeper. For the first time he noticed that Weston's hair, thick and unkempt, was dull in color and had a dead look at variance with its evident health. Tiptoeing across the floor he bent over the recumbent man and

gently raising a lock of his hair looked wonderingly at the roots. The sight caused him to utter an exclamation which disturbed the sleeper. He straightened himself and stepped back precipitately.

The hair was tow-colored at the roots.

CHAPTER IV THE FOURTH MAN

ROSS stood motionless until Weston, muttering and turning his head from side to side, gradually came to rest again and fell into a deeper sleep. Then the boy went outside and sat down on the bench.

"It's easy enough to put two and two together," he muttered.

Leaning forward, he dropped his elbows on his knees and taking his head between his hands, proceeded to do some adding satisfactory in its results. He longed for the presence of Sheepy. Now he would question him with interest on the subject of the puncher whose face was free from a beard and whose hair was tow color. He wanted more information on the subject of that cattle round-up and of the process of getting those three guilty cow punchers. Still, he believed that Sheepy had told him enough to make it clear that Weston was the fourth that old man Quinn was after.

"Some one that looked like Weston and rode like him," Ross enumerated the points in the evidence, "only the man in Oklahoma had no beard and his hair was tow color."

What was easier than to grow a beard—the hair was already accounted for—it had been tow-colored before its owner stained it a chestnut brown. And why should he have colored it unless for purposes of disguise? And why a disguise unless he was guilty of a crime such as driving old man Quinn's sheep into the North Fork?

At this point in his reasoning, another fact flashed into the boy's mind—the strange way in which Weston had acted about his name.

"Ha, ha!" exclaimed Ross aloud and then checked his voice. "Probably he didn't want us to know his name, his real name," he thought. "How all that dovetails together. If I could only get hold of Sheepy now!"

On further reflection, however, he decided that Sheepy could throw no more light on the subject. It was evident that the herder did not know the name of the puncher who had ridden alone past his wagon, for he had not connected Weston's name with the other. Nor would Weston, if he were the same puncher, be likely to recognize Sheepy

who, as he himself said, was in his wagon preparing supper when the puncher, his eyes on his horse's ears, passed.

That night, when Ross rolled up in his blankets beside Weston he was sure he was lying beside the fourth cowboy of old man Quinn's search. But in the cold clear dawn he was not so sure. It might have been vanity that had led Weston to stain his hair, tow not being a manly color. Then, too, even if he had been on the North Fork, so were dozens of other cow punchers. As to his name, Weston would naturally have been astonished at perfect strangers addressing him rightly where he believed himself unknown.

Ross, eating his breakfast, and only half listening to Hank, looked down at the prostrate man speculatively, his mind full of suspicion, but not so sure as on the previous day that there was no flaw in his reasoning. He had not had an opportunity, the day before, of speaking to Hank about the matter, and now he decided to keep his suspicions to himself for the present.

His suspicions, however, during the two weeks which followed, were swallowed up in the anxiety that attended this, the first "case" where he had been obliged to assume all responsibility. The care and interruptions to his rest wore on him. Never had one of Aunt Anne's hair mattresses invited sleep as did the blankets laid on the dirt floor when he found time to lie on them. Often he fell asleep sitting on the hard bench, his head on his arms crossed on the table, while Hank was frying flapjacks and boiling thick black coffee.

As for the patient, he accepted Ross's ministrations with but few remarks. As his thigh bone began to knit, he became querulous, and finally passively enduring.

"When you goin' to let me out of this?" he asked on the day when Ross last measured the injured leg.

The boy settled back on his heels. "I have sent for some plaster of Paris," he explained, "and, by the time it gets here, your leg will be healed and ready for a cast. Then you can be taken back to Cody and let the doctor there see you. If it was not for that ugly fracture you would have been out of here before. If you'd only have the Cody doctor to look you over now—"

The man grunted, and worked restlessly at the sand-bag, which, on the outside of his leg, reached his armpit.

"Cody doctor be hanged!" he remarked unaffably. "He don't know half as much as you do."

It was the nearest approach to thanks or praise he had given Ross.

"That Cody doctor ain't worth shucks," confirmed Hank, who occupied a box beside the stove. "He tended a feller that I knew, and let 'im die." The speaker looked from

Ross to his patient with an expression which plainly said that the former could not be guilty of any such charge.

The brown eyes of the patient rolled slowly in their sockets until their gaze could rest on Ross. Then the lids dropped over them. "The Cody doctor be hanged!" he remarked again more affably, and fell asleep.

Ross continued to sit on his heels until his patient commenced to snore. Then he glanced at the occupant of the box seat and asked softly:

"Hank, has Weston ever told you where he came from?"

"Nope," responded Hank absently. "Not where he hails from ner where he's started fer, ner why, ner what fer. That's nothin' though, Doc." Here Hank looked sidewise at Ross. "You'll find, if ye stay in these parts long, that there's lots of men who ain't partin' with every fact they know within ten minutes after ye're introduced to 'em. And you'll find, too, that it ain't always healthy to ask questions. Ye have th' sort of sense who ye can question and who ye can't."

"And this fellow—" Ross jerked his head in the direction of the sleeper.

Hank yawned and reached for the poker and a stick of wood. "I ain't aimin' to inquire fer into his history—unless I could inquire of some one else besides himself, that is. Hello!" he interrupted himself suddenly with the stick held over the stove. "Who's that hikin' over the Creek?"

Ross arose with alacrity and went to the door. The first snow had fallen on the bad lands, but in an hour it had been whisked away by a warm northwest wind, leaving the ground soft and a little stream of water in Dry Creek across which rode a man who proved to be a prospector from the mountains.

"Must have had a bit of snow here," he called as he turned his horse into the corral. "Up t' Miners' Camp it's two inches deep and driftin'."

As this prospector was eating his dinner, he most unexpectedly gave Ross his first news of Weimer. The boy, finding Hank both intelligent and sympathetic, had talked freely concerning his mission in the mountains and his desire to return East at an early date. To the latter subject, in all its details of study and college-attendance, Hank listened and questioned in open interest. But, when Ross touched the subject of Weimer and the McKenzies, the other was non-committal and guarded, as became a landlord who might be called upon any day to serve flapjacks and coffee to all of the parties under discussion.

"I hope," he had observed cautiously on two or three occasions, "that you'll get on all right with Uncle Jake Weimer."

And, although his tone implied a doubt, Ross could not prevail on him to explain it.

But the prospector, who had ridden through from the mountains, and knew nothing of Ross or of his origin, spoke more freely. He had passed along Meadow Creek but a few days before.

"Dutch Weimer," he told Hank as he bolted boiled cabbage and flapjacks, "was settin' at the door of his shack, a-smokin' as though his claims was all patented and secure. He says that Eastern pal of hisn is a-sendin' some one t' help 'im out."

Hank coughed behind his hand, and motioned toward Ross, busy with his patient; but at first the prospector was too intent on his food to notice.

"And there," he observed with a chuckle, "are them two McKenzie boys a-settin' on their claims next door and waitin'." He gave another chuckle. "Curious how that snow-blindness should have touched Dutch Weimer."

Then he saw Hank's restraining gesture, and paused. Glancing down, he met Lon Weston's veiled brown eyes and Ross's wide gray ones; but the prospector had suddenly become as non-committal as Hank himself, nor did Ross's persistent questioning wring from him any further details. He had but passed that way, he assured Ross, had stopped but a moment in front of Weimer's cabin and that was all.

But what he had said was enough to leave Ross troubled, and impatient to start for Meadow Creek and his delayed work.

Finally the plaster of Paris came. The stage from Cody brought it one noon, and Ross's spirits arose at the prospect of release from his unwelcome charge.

"If it wa'n't fer yer Uncle Samuel's long arm of the law, Doc," the stage-driver informed him as he was disposing of potatoes and pork, "I'd leave my stage right here and see ye wind all them stiff rags around that there leg. I'd like t' see th' finish s' long as I seen the beginnin'. But the trouble with bein' stage skinner is, ye've got t' hike along no matter what shows ye come acrost on the trail. Hand them spuds acrost, Doc, will ye? Hank, if ye'd let 'em smell fire a minute 'r two mebbly I could drive my fork int' 'em."

A few minutes later, he arose from the bench, drew the back of his hand across his mouth and addressed Weston. "Wall, I suppose you'll be ready t' be boosted onto the stage when I come back in th' mornin'? S' long."

Scarcely had his four bronchos topped the hill on the further side of Dry Creek before a procession, the like of which Ross had never seen, appeared on the trail the other side of the dugout. It was a pack outfit on horses accompanied by a man and a boy. It slowly rounded the shoulder of the hill behind the corral. The man rode ahead whistling gaily, his sombrero pulled low over his eyes, a purple tie knotted under the turn-over collar of his flannel shirt. His horse's tail was tied to a rope which, in turn, was tied loosely about the neck of the first pack animal. In similar fashion the five bronchos were held together on the trail, and after them came a horse ridden by a boy

about Ross's height. On the pack animals were wooden saddles piled high with supplies for a camp, boxes and bags securely roped to the saddles.

Hank, in the act of clearing the dishes from the bare board table, stopped with a platter of boiled turnip and pork suspended in the air. "By the great horn spoon!" he yelled, "if there don't come Wishin' Wilson! And a pack outfit! Is my eyes a-foolin' me? Doc, look out. Is it a five bronc outfit, or ain't it?"

"It certainly is," confirmed Ross.

He arose from his seat on the floor where he was working in the plaster and stepped to the door. But Hank was before him holding up the platter of food.

"Hey, there, Wishin'! Here's some come-backs hot fer ye! Where'd ye come from? Where ye goin' and what fer and how long and why and all the rest?" Evidently the newcomer was one of the kind that could safely be questioned, for Hank turned himself into a great interrogation point as he set the platter down, and rushing out, pulled the stranger from his horse, shaking him in familiar bear play.

Ross watched while the train filed slowly up to the dugout, bringing the boy's mount to rest in front of the door.

The young rider wore a new brown corduroy suit, and a long fur coat, the skirts of which were drawn up awkwardly above a pair of high riding boots and tucked under the rider's legs. A pair of shining silver spurs adorned the heels of the boots, while a sealskin cap crowned a head covered with closely cropped hair darker than Ross's. His eyes also were darker and his figure, although of the same height, was more slender than Ross's. He was also, apparently, a couple of years younger.

The two boys nodded at each other, Ross with awkward cordiality and interest, the stranger carelessly and with unmistakable condescension. Swinging himself out of the saddle he said pleasantly but commandingly:

"Take my coat inside, please."

He shed his fur coat and pulled off his fur-lined gloves and tossed both into Ross's arms, while Hank, watching the proceeding out of the tail of an amused eye, talked with Wilson.

Ross, biting his lips, backed into the shack and tossed coat and gloves on the end of the table near Weston. The boy, following his moves from the doorway, pointed at the prostrate man, asking in a surprised and subdued voice:

"What ails him?"

"Broke his leg," responded Ross shortly, not relishing the touch of lordliness in the other's manner.

"How did he do it?" demanded the stranger.

"Horse fell on him," answered Ross, and returned abruptly to his work with the plaster.

Weston lay with his blanket drawn up to his chin and one arm thrown over his face and ear, his face turned to the wall. He was breathing regularly as though in sleep, although Ross knew he was wide awake. This was a favorite position with him when Hank was entertaining guests. It saved him the trouble of responding to inquiries, and, as Ross had come to suspect, might also serve to avert a chance recognition.

Presently Wilson approached the dugout, leaving the boy in the corral rubbing down his mount. One arm was thrown in rough affection over Hank's shoulder while the two pulled each other about like two boys at play.

"I tell you, Hank!" Wilson exclaimed at the door, "this is what ye might call God's country, and I always have a feelin' of gettin' home in these parts. But, Jehoshaphat! it didn't look a spell ago as if I'd ever strike the trail to the mountains again. It looked like as if I'd have to throw up my claims and—"

"Sh!" interrupted Hank tiptoeing into the shack. "Guess he's asleep, ain't he?" He explained over his shoulder in a hoarse whisper. "Chap named Weston that come this way three weeks ago and bust his leg out in front, here. Hoss fell on him."

Wilson, who followed at Hank's heels, looked Weston over with friendly but detached interest. "On the mend, is he?" asked the newcomer subduing his voice with difficulty.

Hank forgot to continue his whisper. "You bet!" he exclaimed heartily. "Doc here is a-mendin' him t' beat anything I ever seen from a full sized doctor." He jerked his thumb toward Ross. "Doc's goin' to have him all plastered up and out of here tomorrow."

Wishing looked at Ross with a pleasant nod, stepped over the bench and was about to seat himself at the table when he bethought him suddenly of his riding companion. Leaning forward he looked out of the doorway. Then with a nod he sat down and forgetting that Weston was supposedly sleeping, raised his voice again to its normal high key.

"Fetch on them come-backs, Hank. My pard'll be here in a minute. I need t' git the start of him in eating always, fer he ain't long on grub such as we shake out here. I expect," with an amused chuckle, "that it ain't exactly what he's used to."

Hank slapped his knee and leaned forward. "Say, Wishin', how d'ye come t' be hikin' over the country with Queen Victory's youngest? My eyes! Ain't he a reg'lar ornament t' th' landscape?"

Wishing Wilson laughed softly and then glancing hastily from Ross to Weston, shook his head at Hank. "Less is all right!" he declared cautiously. "He's young yet. Lots of time to learn—more time 'n you and me have, Hank."

Hank set coffee before his guest, asking, "Who is he and where does he hail from?"

Wilson squared himself before the table, both arms resting thereon and began to eat noisily, talking between knife-fuls.

"Luckiest thing for me that ever struck the trail, that young feller is," he began. "I was stranded down in Omaha without a red cent in my pocket and no way of raisin' one. If you'll believe me I couldn't find a man in Omaha with brains enough to believe in them claims of mine, no, not with the ore assay report before their eyes. I tell ye, Hank, times have changed down in Omaha. There wa'n't no grub-stakers waitin' around like there used to be fer prospectors to snatch up—no, not one. And just as I was gettin' plum used up talkin', this young feller, Less Jones, fell onto me outer a clear sky. It was in a hotel where I went t' talk with a drummer, but not t' eat. Why, Hank, yer Uncle Wilson didn't have the price of a hotel dinner handy, and that drummer never treated me! Well, I stood tryin' to persuade him that his salary was burning fer investment in my claims, when in comes Less and lined up 'longside me listenin'. I hadn't any kind of objection to his hearin', but he looked like such a cub that I never paid no attention t' 'im, but when the drummer said a final 'Nix,' Less he stepped up and asked me about the claims, and, t' make a long story short, before the end of the day I was hikin' over town hot footed on the trail of supplies with Less at my heels with an open pocketbook."

"Does he stay up t' the Creek with you?" asked Hank wonderingly.

"Says he will," laughed Wilson. "Says he's wanted for years t' try his luck with quartz!"

"Must 'a' begun wantin' then when he was a baby," remarked Hank succinctly. "Where's his ma and pa?"

Wishing shrugged his shoulders and balanced a quantity of pork and potatoes on the blade of his knife. "Search me! He says there's no one to hinder him doin' what he pleases, and so I take it he's dropped out of some fairy orphanage som'ers where they have gold t' burn. I'm fallin' on his neck more'n I'm askin' him questions that he don't want t' answer. Less is an all right sort, you'll find, but he ain't long on information."

At this point Wishing's garrulity suffered an interruption from the entrance of his young partner.

Leslie Jones walked with the erect bearing that Aunt Anne coveted for Ross. Buttoning his short corduroy jacket over a soft flannel shirt, across the front of which was suspended a large gold chain, he ran his fingers around inside his collar and looked about impatiently.

Ross, attending strictly to his work, did not look up. Hank, sitting on a bench opposite Wilson, spread his elbows yet further apart on the table and indicated a place beside him.

"Set down and fall to, young feller!"

"I'll wash up first," returned Leslie in a tone which had a decided edge. His manner plainly indicated his desire to be waited on.

Hank raised his eyebrows and waved a hand vaguely toward the stove. "There's pans 'n' water. Help yerself. Guess there's a towel hikin' about som'ers in the corner. My dozen best handmade 'uns ain't come in yet from the laundry!"

Every one laughed except Weston and Leslie. The former breathed regularly, apparently unconscious of all that was said and done in the room. The latter flushed, and plunging into the corner tumbled the pans about angrily like a spoiled child, spilling as much water on the floor as he could. Then he sat down beside his partner and asked shortly for some hot coffee, with an emphasis on the adjective.

Hank leisurely pushed the coffee-pot across the table. "Help yerself. This was hot a spell ago and will be again at supper time." Hank's voice having acquired an edge by this time, "Victory's youngest" poured the coffee angrily but wordlessly into his thick cup and ate in silence, listening to Wilson, who was too much occupied with a vision of riches to come to allow such scenes to disturb his equanimity.

"As I told Less," he went on, raising his voice to drown opposition, "we'll leave part of the sticks and the grub up the cañon to the coal claims and then when it comes winter and the mountains are impassable, we'll just strike the trail over from the Creek to the cañon and work the coal till things open up in the spring. That Creek is a mean place to drop into this late."

"What Creek?" asked Ross, suddenly awakening to the conversation.

"Meadow Creek," returned Wishing.

"That's where Doc is bound fer, Wishing'," volunteered Hank. "Doc is come out t' help Jake Weimer."

Wishing surveyed the boy with cordial eyes. "Jake Weimer, hey? We'll be neighbors, then. My claims ain't two miles up the Creek."

"Doc, he's Grant's boy," supplemented Hank. "But I bet my last year's hat that he can't mine it as well as he can doctor."

"Doctor!" exclaimed Leslie Jones curiously. "Are you a doctor?"

"He's fixed him up all right," interrupted Hank pointing to Weston. "Stretched his leg over my best chicken-coop and needled his arm and made 'im walk a chalk line generally. Oh, I tell ye Doc is better than the Cody doctor."

Ross laughed. "I know something about medicine and surgery," he confessed. "I've read and helped my uncle, Dr. Grant. That's all."

"All!" echoed Leslie Jones. His manner was touched with disbelief as he looked from Weston to Ross. "And did you, alone, set a leg?"

Ross sought to change the subject. "Aw—that's not much—when you know how. I'm glad I'm to have neighbors up on Meadow Creek. Hope I don't have to stay there any longer than you do."

"Expect to clean up the title this year, do you?" asked Wilson.

"That's what I came for."

"Well, all I can say now is that you'll be mighty glad you come. I tell ye what, Doc, Meadow Creek is the mining deestrick of the future," whereupon Wishing launched on a glowing account of the future of Meadow Creek claims as he saw the future. His eyes lighted up and he forgot to eat as he told of the wonderful value of the gold and silver that he expected to pull out of the claims he had staked the previous year. He believed so thoroughly in his own vision that even Ross, whose interests were far removed from gold mining, felt a thrill of expectancy as to the outcome of his work in Meadow Creek, while Leslie, whose appetite was slight for the coarse, ill-cooked food, dropped his fork to listen although he must have heard the recital many times before.

Shortly after dinner, the two saddled up and departed in the order in which they had come.

"So long!" yelled Wilson, waving his hat. "We expect t' strike it rich before a month."

"Good luck!" shouted Hank and Ross together, the latter adding, "I'll see you again in a few days."

Hank, stuffing his hands into his pockets, pursed up his lips and whistled shortly as the pack outfit disappeared in a cloud of dust.

"If Wishin' is cal'latin' that he has enough there to last two men all winter he's about as far off in his cal'lations as—well, as Wishin' usually is. Wishin' ain't no lightnin' cal'later on any subject, but he's a mighty likely chap t' have around."

"Judging from the small amount his pard ate to-day he has food enough, I should say," returned Ross, adding hastily, "but then I realize that I know nothing about it."

"Huh!" laughed Hank, "he must know that when that there young chap has been in the mountings a few days he'll eat mulligan 'n' spotted pup 'n' bacon with the best of 'em. His will be a good, lively comin' appetite—but huh! I should hate mightily t' have t' feed 'im. Wonder if Wishin' has packed some bibs along 'n' silk socks 'n' hand-warmers! Huh!"

When Ross reëntered the cabin he found Weston staring out of the doorway, his arm stretched by his side.

"Guess you didn't sleep much," remarked Hank noisily gathering up the dishes.

"All I wanted to," returned Weston shortly.

Hank piled the dishes into a pan and poured boiling water over them. "M-m," he soliloquized, "all the time I was lookin' at him I was thinkin' I'd seen that young Jones before. M-m—where, I wonder?"

No one answered, and he washed dishes in silence while Ross returned to his work and Weston lay staring out-of-doors.

The following day Ross saw his patient depart on the stage headed toward Cody, and prepared to take the next one himself in the opposite direction.

When he assisted Weston out of the door of the dugout, he knew exactly as much about him as when he followed his prostrate figure in at the same door three weeks before—and no more, unless the name be excepted.

Hank watched the stage off with a scowl, and then departed from his usual custom of cautious speech, where possible customers were concerned.

"Guess that feller must 'a' hailed from som'ers beside Wyoming," he grumbled. "Now, a Wyoming chap would 'a' paid his bill, or if he was on the hog's back, he'd owned up and passed his promise. But that there maverick never even said, 'Thank ye,' to you or me; and here you're knocked out of three weeks' work along of him, to say nothin' of the work day and night you've put in on 'im. Well, good riddance; 'tain't no ways likely we'll set eyes on 'im again."

CHAPTER V

A MAN WHO NEEDED BRACING UP

THE road to Miners' Camp from Meeteetse, forty-five miles long, follows the Grey Bull to its junction with Wood River. Thence it wanders along through miles of fertile ranch lands; then, rising among the black foot-hills, up, up, it winds across the precipitous face of Jo-Jo Hill, and plunges among the snow-crowned Shoshones, crowded nearer and yet nearer to Wood River until finally there is but room for the narrow track and the narrow stream at the bottom of the deep cañon.

This was the road which Ross traveled the day following Weston's departure for Cody, and traveled in increasing discomfort. The further they advanced among the mountains, the colder it became, until, finally, Ross was obliged to desert the high seat

beside Bill Travers, the driver, and seek shelter inside the stage, but not until he had learned from Bill that there was no hotel in Miners' Camp.

In talking with Hank he had taken it for granted that there was a lodging house of some description and so had asked no questions on the subject.

"I pack my grub along," Bill assured him carelessly, "'n' roll up in a bunk in a shack that some one 'r other has left. If you've packed yer bed along, stay with me to-night. There's the floor," hospitably, "and I guess I can rustle grub enough fer both. Anyhow, there's two eatin'-houses where you could fill up."

At five in the afternoon the stage crawled through the dusk over a yielding bridge built of hemlock saplings creaking under their coating of ice and snow, and stopped in front of a shack out of whose open door glinted a welcome light. Another light appeared high up on the side of the mountain.

"Hold up there, Bill," was the shout which had brought the stage to a standstill. "Got a cold, hungry young chap inside there, name of Grant? Wishin' Wilson went through yesterday and said he'd be along with you to-day."

Ross recognized the voice as belonging to Steele, and, opening the stage door, answered for himself in the affirmative.

Steele shook hands cordially. "Better get out here, Grant," he invited in an offhand way; "I have some beefsteak ready to fry, and the spuds are bakin' in the oven."

Ross climbed out with as much alacrity as his cold, benumbed limbs would permit. But no sooner was he on the ground than something queer occurred. His legs gave every indication of doubling up under him, while his head felt as large and airy as a balloon. He clutched the wheel, but not until Steele had clutched him.

"Altitude!" exclaimed Steele. "Being a mile and a half above sea-level don't agree with most people just at first."

Ross leaned against the wheel, looking up giddily at the strip of sky corralled between the towering summits of Dundee and Gale's Ridge. It seemed to him that it was the mountains and not the altitude which oppressed him, and bore down upon him, and shut off his breath.

"My baggage," he began hesitatingly to the stage-driver, "where—if there's no hotel—" But Steele interposed. "Lend a hand here, Bill, with these trunks. I want Grant to put up at my hotel to-night, bag and baggage."

Bill grinned, and laid hands on the emergency chest. "He'll git a better layout than at my old shack, I tell ye! Say! Is Uncle Jake in Camp?"

Steele shook his head. "Nope. I'm going to see about packin' Grant over to the Creek myself in a few days," and a great wave of thankfulness surged over Ross.

A few moments later Steele waved his hand around the one room of his little log shack. "This is the only kind of home you'll find up here, Grant, about the same as Weimer has over on the Creek. Things are rough and ready here, without any frills."

As he spoke he glanced at the larger of Ross's trunks.

If Amos Steele understood one subject better than mining operations, that one subject was men. He saw in Ross an overgrown, homesick boy, with a stout but untested "backbone."

"And I wonder," thought Steele, "how far that backbone is going to take him when it gets a healthy development, and—how far is he goin' to develop it?"

Furthermore, Steele concluded, Ross was more accustomed to bending over a book than over a shovel; and he shrugged his shoulders at the thought of the Weimer-Grant claims.

"His backbone can't do everything," he decided, "no matter how stout it grows, especially when Weimer has lost his."

Steele's shack was at the foot of Gale's Ridge. Half-way up the mountainside was another and larger shack, where his miners, thirty in number, ate. Above that was the "bunk-house" where they slept. And yet higher up was the mouth of the tunnel out of which the Gale's Ridge Mining Company expected to pull vast wealth when the Burlington Road had done its part.

"I'd rather bach it," Steele explained to Ross as they sat down to beefsteak and baked potatoes, "than to be with the men. It's pleasanter for me—and," with a jolly laugh, "for them also, I expect."

Ross liked this frank young superintendent who had so kindly taken him in. He felt that he must get his bearings in some way, and Steele was the man to set him right.

Therefore quite early in the evening the boy burst out with:

"Mr. Steele, I've come to the conclusion that I'm the greenest tenderfoot that ever came to Wyoming. Now, you know the ropes here, and I don't. Will you advise me?"

"That is exactly what I've been wanting to do," assented Steele swiftly and heartily. "But I won't do it at all to-night. It'll take you a few days to get over your light-headedness, and until you do the trail around Crosby won't be healthy ridin' for you. Anyway, there's a lot to be done, for Uncle Jake Weimer hasn't laid in any winter supplies yet."

Ross tipped his chair back against the unhewn logs, and thrust his hands into his pockets. Ever since the talkative prospector had passed through the stage camp he had wondered what manner of man Weimer was. But not until he was jolting along in the stage that day did one sentence especially recur to him in all its possible significance.

The prospector had said, "'Curious how that snow-blindness should have touched Dutch Weimer.'"

Therefore, Ross's first question was of the man he had crossed the continent to help.

The answer reached far into the night; and when at last Ross, wrapped in his blankets, lay down in a bunk built against the wall, it was a long time before sleep came, tired as he was.

The following evening, after a full day's work, he sat down beside the little home-made table to write to Dr. Grant and Aunt Anne while Steele washed up the supper dishes.

"I should be worse than helpless, were it not for Steele," he wrote; "and even with him to help me I may as well own up I am in blue funk. Not a man is there to hire; so the programme for the next few months seems to be this: Yours truly has got to put on some muscle, and buckle down to pick and shovel. Where do you think Piersol's 'Histology' is coming in, uncle, or that man Remsen?"

"But that's not the worst. It seems that Weimer isn't as stout in his head as he was before he was stricken with snow-blindness, and, although he is as stout as ever in his muscles, he doesn't take kindly to work any more. Hasn't even taken the winter's supplies of food and dynamite over to Meadow Creek. He's just smoking his pipe in peace because of the man father is sending to help him out! But I can tell you that the peace is all on his side.

"The mountains here are the original packages, all right. They're miles high, and look as if they'd topple over on a fellow with but half an excuse. And then the air—or the lack of it, rather! I've not been able to walk any distance without a cane, so uncertain does this rare air make me in my motions. But Steele says I'll get over that in a day or two. So, day after to-morrow he is going with me to Meadow Creek with the Gale's Ridge Company's horses—we 'pack' over the supplies for the winter, and the emergency chest just as it is; but, Aunt Anne, only a small portion of the contents of my big trunk can go. Over on the Creek Steele can explain to me about the amount of work to be done, for fear Weimer doesn't tell it straight—"

Suddenly Ross stopped. He leaned back and bit his pencil, his eyes narrowing frowningly as he glanced over the letter. Then with a gesture of disdain he caught up the sheets, and tore them into fragments.

Steele paused in the act of placing the dishes in the rough cupboard which was nailed to the logs behind the stove.

"Well, I'd think twice before I tore up a letter—too hard work to write 'em."

"I have thought twice," returned Ross emphatically. "That's why I tore it up. No use piling up all my difficulties on them first thing. Aunt Anne worries enough over my being here, as it is."

"So there's an 'Aunt Anne,' is there?" mused Steele to himself over the dishes. He glanced at the bits of paper in a heap on the table. "Good work she and that doctor uncle have done." He surveyed Ross's clean-cut, clear-eyed face as it bent above a second and brighter letter, one that ignored or made light of the difficulties oppressing the boy.

In order to divert further the attention of the recipients, Ross also wrote divers pieces of information that he had learned from Steele.

"I am trying to ferret out this gold mining business from the beginning," he wrote. "I never got the hang of it before, and, if Mr. Steele wasn't everlasting patient with me, I wouldn't be getting much now, because everything is so new and strange here. I don't half understand the men's lingo, because they have a strange name for everything.... Well, it seems that a gold mine up here is started in some such a way as this: along comes a prospector—quartz crazy, he is called if he's in dead earnest—with a pick and shovel, a hammer and microscope, and a camp outfit. If some one else has provided him with food and the outfit he is 'grub-staked' and his 'pard' is entitled to half of the results of his work. Father, for instance, has grub-staked Weimer for years. This prospector pegs away at the rocks, getting specimens of ore and examining them under his microscope. He goes right past rocks that look to me full of gold they glitter so. No gold in such! But when he finds some common, dull old stone that doesn't show up much to me but has all the earmarks of 'a high value' in gold, then he thinks he has found the outcropping of a good 'lead,' because all the rock that is behind that rock in the same strata is supposed to have that much gold in it or more. So there he 'stakes his claim.' You see I've got the hang of a few of the terms already. First, he drives a stake near the rock and leaves on it a paper with his name and the date and a notice that the land is his for so many feet each way. He can't take possession of more than six hundred feet one way and fifteen hundred the other in one claim, but he can stake off as many other claims right beside this first as he wants to. The staking is easy enough, but the tug of war comes in doing enough work to patent the claims! This means to get a deed of possession from the state. There is where Weimer and I are up against it—on the work side! But guess I'd better not make your heads ache any more with such an accumulation of learned facts. I'll just say good-bye now and continue the headache in my next."

To his father he wrote a different kind of letter, a defense of his delay at Dry Creek.

"I couldn't desert a man in that shape," he wrote, "although I have lost three weeks at exactly the season of the year, I find, when three weeks count for the most. I'm sorry it happened that way, but I shall try to put in good time now and make up. Anyway, I

guess the delay is as broad as it is long, because, if that accident hadn't occurred, I shouldn't have known Steele; and it's his help that's smoothing things out here for me to begin work."

Ross did not know that the way he had conducted himself at Dry Creek was the cause of the very practical interest which Steele was taking in him.

But not all of Steele's influence in Camp had secured a single laborer for Meadow Creek. Ross found that Andy's explanation on the Cody stage held good. No one cared to go any further out of the world than Miners' Camp.

"It's bad enough," one of the Mountain Company's men told Ross, "up here eighty miles from the railroad, with a stage only three times a week in summer and any time it can get through in the winter. But, when it comes to workin' on the Creek, excuse me! Seven mile over Crosby, and the trail shut up half the year. No, I'm goin' to Cody when the Mountain works shuts down."

The Gale's Ridge Company worked all winter; but the Mountain Company dismissed its employees, twenty in number, when the deep snows came.

To the twenty Ross applied in vain. Labor was dear and men scarce "Cody way," and the miners refused to be mewed up over on the Creek for five months at any price.

"You see," Steele explained, "I'd be glad to employ all the twenty during the winter myself; but not many of 'em will ever stay up here in Camp—too much cut off. I shall run short of hands all winter. Of course, when the railroad gets up here, it will be different. They'll be willing to stay then."

Ross checked a groan. "The railroad isn't here, but I am," he observed grimly.

Steele looked at him curiously. "Why don't you strike the trail back East," he asked abruptly, "since you started out without understanding the situation?"

Ross glanced up in surprise. "Why, I never thought of doing that!" he exclaimed, and dropped the subject.

But Steele continued to look him over with a new interest; for the stage the previous evening had brought to Steele a letter from the elder Grant asking for private information concerning the situation Ross, Junior, was encountering. Ross's brief letters from Dry Creek had shown Ross, Senior, that he had no real knowledge of the nature of the difficulties into which he had sent his son.

The morning of the third day, Ross, staggering around uncertainly without a cane, aided Steele in binding the supplies on the wooden saddles of the packhorses. From the Gale's Ridge Company's supply-shack they brought sacks of flour and cornmeal, boxes of canned vegetables and condensed milk, sides of bacon and hams, bags of coffee and tea, all of which Steele with many a twist of the rope and "half-hitch" secured to the clumsy saddles. The trustiest horse carried the emergency chest. On

Ross's own horse, lashed behind his saddle, were his bed blankets and a bundle from the trunk Aunt Anne had packed with such care.

"All ready?" called Steele, one foot in his stirrup.

He looked back at Ross already mounted, bringing up the rear of the string of packhorses, standing in front of the company's store.

"All ready," shouted Ross.

Steele, about to swing himself up, hesitated. He glanced again at Ross. Then, dropping his bridle reins to the ground, he disappeared inside the store, emerging presently with a short rifle and a cartridge belt.

"Ever use a gun?" he asked.

Ross hesitated. "I've practiced target shooting a little, and gone hunting a few times; but," candidly, "I don't amount to shucks with a gun."

Steele grinned, and handed it up. "Take it along," he advised, "and practice some more. It may bring you fresh meat. Sometimes elk and mountain sheep come down to the Creek to drink over there—won't come amiss, anyhow."

Ross accepted the gun; and Steele, going back to the head of the procession, mounted, and led the way up the cañon, which presently broadened until it formed a snow-flecked valley a few rods wide. Here were a dozen shacks, another eating house, and the store of the Mountain Company. The mouth of its tunnel could be seen high on the side of the mountain above the store.

Immediately beyond this valley the cañon was nearly closed by two great peaks. The one on the left was still Dundee; but on the right Gale's Ridge gave place to Crosby, behind which lay Meadow Creek Valley.

Zigzagging across the face of this mountain wound a narrow trail gradually ascending. Up and yet up climbed the horses until Ross clung to his saddle involuntarily while looking down. Soon Wood River became a thread, and the shacks became black doll-houses set in patches of snow.

On the trail the snow lay deep in the hollows, but was swept away wherever the east wind could touch it. But, snow-filled or black, the trail ever ascended. The peak of Dundee opposite, which had seemed from the cañon narrow and remote, stretched out now immense and so near that Ross felt he could hurl a stone across and hit it.

He looked ahead. They were approaching the dizzy shoulder of Crosby. Steele rounded it, and disappeared. One by one the slow packhorses, their loads hitting against the rocks on the inside of the trail, crawled cautiously after, and also disappeared. Then before Ross opened a view of startling grandeur. He was looking out over the top of Gale's Ridge and down across Big Horn Basin, beyond Cody, eighty miles away and into the blue heart of the Big Horn Mountains. The sight

brought with it a pang of homesickness. Eighty miles from a railroad! Eighty difficult, laborious miles! Ross felt helpless and small and decidedly shaky in this strange new world about which he had so much to learn.

Clinching his teeth hard together, he looked up. Above were boulders seemingly glued to the almost upright mountainside. Below—but Ross's head swam, and he turned his eyes to the inside of the trail, and clung to the saddle. Below was a sheer drop of a thousand feet down to the falls of Meadow Creek, which separated Crosby from Gale's Ridge. The mist came up in clouds rolling thick and frosty in the zero air. This was the quarter-mile of trail which cut Meadow Creek Valley off from Wood River Cañon for months during the year.

"Well," laughed Steele as they stopped where the trail widened beyond the dangerous shoulder, "you didn't take a header, did you?"

Ross passed his hand across his forehead. His face was pale. "No, but—I felt every minute that I'd go over."

"You'll get used to that," returned Steele easily. "You see why that trail becomes impassable later, don't you? If it was just the snow on the trail, why, that wouldn't count. You could shovel it off around the shoulder, and go on snow-shoes the rest of the way. But, when the snow lodges up over the shoulder something like ten feet deep, and a chinook or warm wind comes along and loosens it, a footfall or a man calling might start it, and then—" Steele shrugged his shoulders.

"And there is no other way you can get into the Creek valley?" asked Ross.

"No other way with a horse. You can follow the Creek toward its source, they say, a few miles and then across. Hunters go that way sometimes, but on foot; and they have to scramble for it."

On and on they went over a wide trail now beside the clear little Meadow Creek. Ross began to feel giddy again.

"Of course you do," Steele explained the next time they made a stop, "because the Creek is half a mile higher than the cañon. But you get over that in a few days."

"I wonder," exclaimed Ross suddenly, "how Leslie Jones stood that trail?"

"About the same as the average and ordinary mortal," rejoined Steele sarcastically. "But you'll probably have a good many chances of finding out for yourself. You'll be glad to see anybody, even young Jones!"

At last, after threading their way between spurs and over boulders and through valleys, they emerged on the other side of Crosby, and found themselves in a bowl the sides of which were formed by mountains so high and grim that Ross gasped for the breath that he felt the peaks would eventually shut off.

It was a queer and uncomfortable feeling, this which the mountains gave him, a sense of being shut in and overpowered and helpless.

The peaks on all sides were snow-heaped; but the valley, protected as it was, showed patches of black earth. Sage-brush with scrub spruce and hemlock were the only vegetation of the valley visible, but the sides of the mountains showed a good growth of hemlock and pine trees reaching to timber line only a few hundred feet up.

On the left at the foot of Crosby—whose back looked as high to Ross as its face, despite the fact that he was half a mile higher here than in the cañon—two columns of smoke were ascending from two clusters of hemlocks a quarter of a mile apart. Toward these, Steele, drawing in his horse, pointed.

"The first is your layout," he called back over his shoulder, "the other is the McKenzies'!"

"And where is Wilson's?" asked Ross, eagerly.

Steele faced in the opposite direction and indicated a narrow trail that led to the right, disappearing in a forest of scrub pine which filled the ravine between two of the mountains that formed the rim of the bowl. "Follow that trail and you'll reach 'em. But ten to one, before you can do it they'll follow the trail this way and reach you!"

"I hope so!" exclaimed Ross in a heartfelt tone.

A few moments later he was face to face with Weimer.

The latter stood in the doorway of a low log shack, his great hands cupped over large blue goggles through which his eyes showed dimly, the lids screwed together, leaving only slits for the admission of the dreaded glare of light from the snow. His hands were crusted with dirt. His face, bearded to the rim of the goggles, was grimy, and the beard matted. His hair hung uneven and uncombed to his thick rounded shoulders. He wore a colored flannel shirt, a sheepskin coat, and corduroy trousers thrust into the knee-high tops of old shoes.

In response to Steele's greeting and introduction Weimer extended his hand, peered at Ross a moment, and then asked eagerly in a throaty, husky voice of Steele:

"D'ye pack any tobac' over?"

"Lots of it," cried Steele jovially. "Enough for your use and some for you to give to your neighbors."

Immediately Weimer's sagging, middle-aged figure became straight and stiff, and his high forehead wrinkled in a heavy frown.

"Give dem McKenzies anything! Ven I do, it'll be ven my name ain't Shake Veimer."

Steele stepped quickly in front of the older man, and spoke forcefully. "There's one thing, Uncle Jake, that you're givin' 'em as fast as you can, and that's these claims."

"Nein! Nein!" Weimer shouted. "Das ist nicht so!"

His uneven black hair bobbed wildly about his shoulders. He pumped his powerful arms up and down as if the McKenzies were beneath them.

Steele thrust his face near that of the agitated man, and demanded roughly, "How many shots have you put since you were over to Camp to get me to write to young Grant's father? Say, now!"

Weimer's manner became cringing. He backed into the cabin. "If your eyes—" he began, but Steele cut him short.

"You know you've not taken one pound of ore out of your tunnel since. You know you have sat around here waitin' for Grant to send some one to help you out—"

Weimer put up a great hand, and shrank back as a child would have retreated before his mother's upraised slipper. Steele followed him into the cabin, and Ross slowly followed Steele.

"The snow ist come," whimpered Weimer; "und I can't see ven the snow comes, und the tunnel so far ist to valk—"

But Steele cut short his complaints sternly. "Now," he declared, "all your excuses must come to an end. Here is some one to help. Young Grant here is going to put this work through, and you've got to brace up and help him. I should be ashamed to sit down and let a couple of McKenzies take away my claims."

At once Weimer became alert and combative. The McKenzies should not take the claims.

"You see how it is," Steele began as he and Ross were carrying the cases of dynamite "sticks" up the trail to the tunnel in which Weimer was doing the assessment work for the four tracts to which he had laid claim. "Mentally Weimer has become suddenly an old and childish man while retaining all his physical powers. He can do the work of two ordinary men if he can be made to work—and it's up to you to compel him. Otherwise, by the first of next July, at the time when these claims ought to be patented, you will have to forfeit 'em."

Ross's heart sank. "The first of next July," and it was then but the middle of October! He laid the case of sticks down on the ore-dump, and, glancing up at the peaks which held him a prisoner, caught his breath in a gust of rebellion.

At the mouth of the tunnel, some seven feet high and eight wide, was the "dump," to the edge of which ran a rusty track with a "bumper" at the end. The track extended into the tunnel. On it stood a lumbering vehicle, consisting of the trucks of a hand car, on which was fastened a home-made box to carry ore.

"This," explained Steele, "is a remnant of Weimer's better days. There was no way to pack a regular car over here, and he devised this. He was a smart man until last year."

After dinner, which Weimer prepared,—Ross found him always ready to prepare food and eat it,—Steele suggested that they "drop in" on the McKenzies.

"Especially," he added, his eyes scanning Ross's face, "after your meeting Sandy on the way to Cody."

Ross hesitated. "I don't know about that," he objected, surprised that Steele should suggest such a thing. "Wouldn't it be a bit queer for me to call on my 'friends the enemy'?"

Steele laughed, but held strongly to his point. "Not queer at all. There's no object in not being on a speakin'-footing with 'em," he said. "There's nothing to be gained and a lot to be lost by openly recognizing what they're waiting for. You're goin' to get almighty lonesome up here,"—involuntarily Ross swallowed, and turned his face away,— "and that Sandy McKenzie is good company—on the surface. I can't say as much for the other, Waymart, but he'll pass."

The sun was shining warmly when they left Weimer's cabin. The snow above the narrow loam-paved trail was melting and running in rivulets down to the creek. Overhead the spruce boughs met, and laced their green fingers together, sending down a damp, spicy odor.

Near the McKenzie cabin Steele paused and looked up the mountainside. A few rods away the earth was thrown up around some tree stumps whose tops had been recently cut off.

"You see," he explained in a low tone to Ross, "the McKenzies are supposed to be over here working some claims that they staked out last spring. But look there! They haven't got the discovery hole finished yet!"

The "discovery hole," as Ross had learned, must be dug within thirty days after the staking of the claim, and is a name given to the ten feet of development work required by the law of Wyoming. This ten feet of digging may mark either the commencement of a tunnel if the claim is located on the side of a mountain, or, if the claim is on level ground, the hole takes the form of a shaft driven perpendicularly into the earth. With a claim thus staked and developed, the owner may rest secure for one year without further work. Then, in order to hold the claim against any covetous claim "jumper" he must do one hundred dollars' worth of development work a year for five years in order to obtain a patent. If he has staked several adjacent claims, work for all may be done in one shaft or tunnel.

Ross, merely glancing at the incomplete discovery hole, looked at the cabin from which the sound of voices issued. His gaze was doubtful, and his footsteps lagged.

Seeing this, Steele walked on briskly, rapped on the sagging door, threw it open, and brought Ross reluctantly face to face with his "friends the enemy."

CHAPTER VI

THE MEN OF MEADOW CREEK

SANDY MCKENZIE sat before a rough board table on which his elbows lazily rested, supporting half his weight. Sandy needed no gymnasium exercises to teach him relaxation. Before him were the remains of a hearty dinner, the chief dish of which smelled to Ross like beefsteak. From this dish from time to time Sandy forked bits of meat on which he leisurely chewed.

He wore the same garb in which Ross had first seen him; but the corduroy trousers were much the worse for wear and dirt, and it had been weeks since his face had felt a razor. His sandy hair also had increased in length, one thick lock perpetually dangling over his forehead.

Waymart, an older and darker man than Sandy, lay in his bunk smoking, his knees drawn up and his hands clasped around them. Waymart was clean shaven, and his black hair was closely clipped.

Both Sandy and Waymart were surprised to see Ross at their cabin door, but Sandy favored him with a delighted grin. Rising without disturbing the box on which he had been sitting, he straddled across it, and held out a cordial hand.

"Hello, Tenderfoot," he shouted. "I hear they've added Doc to that there name since I see you last."

Waymart crawled slowly out of his bunk. His black eyes met Ross's an instant, and then slid away, the lids drooping. He held out a hand which, although larger than Sandy's, lacked its cordial grip.

"Have some chairs," Sandy invited gayly, kicking forward a couple of boxes. "These here are our second-best plush, upholstered, mahogany affairs. The best are coming from Chicago when the Burlington Road gets into Camp."

There was about Sandy such an air of gay irresponsibility and cordiality that Ross brightened perceptibly. After all, his "friends the enemy" might not be bad neighbors, and he was glad he had allowed Steele to persuade him to come.

Pushing his box away from the red-hot stove, he tipped it up on end, and sat down beside the only window the cabin afforded. Directly outside, hanging to a tree, were the hind quarters of a beef, as Ross supposed at first glance. But, chancing to glance down, he found himself looking at the head of an elk with great branching antlers, a head such as he had seen at "The Irma" in Cody, credited to the marksmanship of Buffalo Bill.

"Last week," he heard Waymart saying to Steele, "we got him over near the Divide."

Ross opened his eyes in astonishment. "A week!" he exclaimed, glancing from the table to the meat hanging uncovered and unprotected outside.

Sandy caught the expression, and slapped his leg gleefully. "Think that there meat ought to be off color by this time, don't ye, Doc? Well, let me tell ye we'll be eatin' on it hangin' just where it is until it's gone; and the last bite will be as good as the first."

Steele explained. "The air up here cures meat, Grant, quite as well as brine. It takes meat a mighty long time to spoil—in fact, if it's properly jerked, it never spoils."

"'Jerked'?" interrogated Ross: but Sandy had launched into an account of their hunt over on the Divide, and no one explained the "jerking" process then.

As Sandy talked, his manner lost its laziness. He became animated, laughing and gesticulating constantly, and occasionally running his fingers through his hair and throwing the stray front lock back among its fellows.

Waymart had lain back in his bunk again, and unceremoniously elevated his knees, between which he glanced at Ross from time to time. He said but little, and smiled less.

The two occupied a cabin similar to Weimer's except that it was cleaner. In one corner was a heap of supplies, boxes of canned goods, and sacks of flour. Seeing Steele's eyes on these, Sandy explained easily:

"Hain't packed over our winter's supplies yet except the sticks. Got a plenty of them, but grub's gettin' pretty low."

"Better hurry up, then," remarked Steele in a careless fashion. "All the horses in Camp will be sent below in a couple of weeks."

By "below" he meant the ranches of Wood River Valley.

Sandy pushed back his front lock. "Time enough," he returned lightly. "Everything can wait except game-huntin'. There's a flock of mountain sheep over on the north side of Crosby, and we're goin' to trail 'em to-morrow." Then he turned hospitably to Ross. "Want to go along?"

Ross shook his head. "I've—I've got to work," he stammered, embarrassed at being obliged to introduce the subject of work on the Weimer-Grant claims.

He might have saved himself all embarrassment, as the subject seemed to have no personal connection with the gay Sandy.

"What," he cried, "in huntin' season? Wall, I've met other tenderfeet constituted like ye; but they soon git over the fit, and so will you, I reckon. Brought a gun?"

"Yes."

"You'll be out with us yet," declared Sandy.

"Sure," came from the bunk in tones of certainty.

Ross said nothing.

"When you bring down your first buck," pursued Sandy, unruffled by the boy's silence, "you'll begin to git the Western fever that ye said ye didn't want." Here Sandy chortled. "Guess ye think ye're enough of a doctor t' cure that fever, but wait and see!"

As he said this, there was in the speaker's manner, or in his blue eyes or sandy-bearded face, a return of that subtle something which had caused Ross to decide that he "partly liked him and partly didn't."

"I expect," said Steele laughingly, "that Doc here will get as quartz crazy as Wishing Wilson is. Of course, you fellows have seen Wishing."

"Wishin' Wilson!" exclaimed Sandy and Waymart in one breath, Sandy adding, "What do ye mean? Whereabouts is Wishin'?"

"Well! Well! How comes it you didn't know?" exclaimed Steele wonderingly. "Wishing is right up here in your midst. He's holding down his claims this minute up yonder," jerking his thumb over his shoulder.

Sandy sat up and threw the lock out of his eyes. "Back to stay?" he asked with his forehead puckering into a scowl.

Steele nodded. "Stay till the trail is shut up."

The scowl on Sandy's forehead deepened. "Thought Wishin' was on the hog's back. Last I knew he was tryin' to sell out to a party in Omaha. When did he come?"

Waymart crawled out of his bunk again and lighted his pipe. "We've been hunting'," he explained, "ye know. Didn't git back 'til yesterday. Place may be full of folks and we none the wiser!"

"I don't think you're crowded up here yet," Steele rejoined. "And Wishing didn't come until—when was it?—only a few days ago, he and his new partner."

"Pardner?" cried Sandy.

"Pardner!" echoed Waymart, holding his pipe in his hand. "What pardner?"

"Young chap," replied Steele, "about Doc's height and—what age should you say, Doc?"

"Probably seventeen," returned Ross. "Not much over," adding, "his name is Jones, Leslie Jones. He's from Omaha."

"Grub stake?" asked Waymart succinctly.

"More than that," answered Steele. "Jones is going to stay and help."

The scowl on Sandy's forehead smoothed itself out. He grinned genially at Ross. "I wonder now," he mused, "if there's enough of us old goats up here in Meadow Greek to round up the kids and take care of 'em!"

"What about the kids taking care of the goats?" laughed Steele. "Sometimes they're bigger hustlers."

Sandy nodded lightly. "This air'll take the hustle out quick enough. Such high mountains as these hain't made fer hustlers."

As Ross was returning with Steele to Weimer's shack, the superintendent glanced at him sidewise.

"I don't believe," he said slowly, "that the McKenzies intend to winter here. Of course, there's no object in their stayin'. We all know they're not here to work their claims, and it isn't necessary to stay in order to watch yours; and they've no winter supplies, nor," thoughtfully, "have they mud-chinked their cabin. You can see daylight anywhere between the logs. No, I don't think they have any intention of staying."

Ross looked around the tiny valley, with its fringe of windy, inaccessible peaks, and thought of the long months ahead of him, shut in among those cruelly cold mountains.

"I hope they stay!" he declared fervently.

An hour later, having talked over the situation with Ross thoroughly, explained the amount of work necessary to be done in the tunnel, and given Weimer large chunks of advice, Steele rode away, driving his packhorses in front of him.

Ross watched him out of sight and then entered the shack whistling to keep his courage up. Inside he surveyed his temporary home with a shiver which stopped the whistle. "Uncle Jake," he suggested, "let's clean house the rest of the day. Willing?"

Weimer, sitting on a box in front of the stove, assented without removing the pipe from his lips. "Ja, clean up all you vant to. I tink your fader was always vantin' to clean mit der house."

"Think of my father's ever cleaning out a cabin like this!" muttered Ross.

He stood helplessly in front of the door looking from the complacently smoking Weimer to the bags and boxes heaped on the floor and then around the dirt-encrusted room. He thought of Aunt Anne and her perfectly kept house with a great throb of homesickness. Then he thought of his father, who had got his "start" under such conditions as these and suddenly threw off his coat.

"It's got to be done," he said aloud, "and I've got to do it!"

"Vat?" asked Weimer stupidly turning his goggles in Ross's direction. Weimer was hugging his knees in a state of blissful content, the smoke from his pipe curling about his head and almost shutting from view the big young man on whose shoulders he had already shifted all burdens connected with the Grant-Weimer claims.

During the remainder of the day Ross worked cleaning up the cabin and packing away their winter supplies. When night came his bunk looked better to him than the supper which Weimer was preparing, and he dropped asleep sitting beside the table waiting for the flapjacks. But, instead of turning in directly after washing the supper dishes, as he had intended, he was forced to keep awake until nine o'clock entertaining the denizens of Meadow Creek Valley.

The McKenzies came over first. Weimer, who, when night approached, had removed his goggles, saw them coming first and raised his voice in protest.

"Ach! dem McKenzies! See here, poy, dey mustn't come mit my cabin. Dey ist after dese claims. Vorstehen sie nicht?"

"Yes, yes, Uncle Jake, I understand," Ross returned soothingly. "But they can't carry the claims away in their pockets to-night, and to-morrow morning we are going to bone down to work at such a rate that they'll come up missing on their calculations altogether."

At the mention of work, Weimer groaned and retiring precipitately to his bunk lay there regarding the doorway hostilely through the smoke from his pipe. The next minute the doorway framed Sandy with Waymart close behind.

"Hello, Doc!" Sandy pushed his cap to the back of his head. "Mart and I, we've started out fer to pay our respects to Wishin' Wilson. Want t' hike along with us?"

Ross shrugged his shoulders and sat down on one end of the table, dish-cloth in hand. "Guess I've had hiking enough for one day, McKenzie. Let's see. It's two miles up there, isn't it?"

"Yep;" Sandy lounged in and sat down on a box. "And by th' same sign it's two miles back. But, gosh, young man, a matter of four mile ain't nothin' in this country!" He surveyed Ross curiously. "How d'ye travel East? In a push cart?"

Ross grinned but flushed. "The trip over from Camp was on rather higher ground than I've ever seen before and it—well—it winded me," frankly. "And this afternoon I've been hoeing out here. So I'm not exactly as fresh as a morning glory to-night."

Waymart came inside and looked around. Ross pushed a box in his direction and, after a moment's hesitation and a civil nod in the direction of the bunk, the older McKenzie sat down and pulled his pipe out of his pocket.

"Ha, ha!" laughed Sandy. "When you're a few months further away from Pennsylvania you'll forgit that a shack needs a hoe, t' say nothin' of a broom." Then he addressed the bunk without looking toward it. "Uncle Jake, have you seen Wishin'?"

"Ja," growled Weimer uncivilly, "dat I have."

"How did he look?" smiled Sandy who seemed to enjoy the other's "grouch."

"Look?" violently. "Vy, how should he look but shust like himself!"

Waymart chuckled, and Sandy was about to reply when footsteps were heard drawing near. Heavy shoes were crunching the stones and pine needles under foot, and voices sounded louder and louder.

"Must be Wilson and Jones," said Ross going to the door.

The room was lighted by two miner's candlesticks driven into the side logs. One candle was near the door, and the light fell on the genial face of Wishing Wilson, who paused in the doorway to wring Ross's hand and shout his greetings at the other occupants of the room, before stepping in and allowing his young partner to enter. When Ross finally held out his hand to Leslie Jones he knew that he was facing a boy as homesick as himself, rather than "Queen Victory's youngest."

Leslie gripped the other's hand as though its owner were a lifelong friend. "How do you make it up here?" he asked in a low tone.

"Don't make it yet," responded Ross. "I just got here to-day. Steele came up with me."

Then he turned to introduce Leslie to the McKenzies and saw a tableau which puzzled him.

Waymart was staring at Leslie with amazed eyes and a lower jaw that slightly sagged. He held his pipe in front of his mouth surprised in the act of adjusting it between his lips. Sandy, rising, came blithely forward, and, in passing Waymart, stumbled and jostled against him. Waymart instantly recovered his lost poise. Lowering his pipe he slouched along behind Sandy and shook hands with Wilson's partner. Wilson himself was over beside Weimer's bunk telling at the top of his voice that he had come to a rock wall in his tunnel, and on the other side there must, without fail, be either a pocket of free gold or a lead that would make the claims among the most valuable in the Shoshones. To this optimistic talk Leslie did not listen with the same absorbing interest he had shown at Sagehen Roost, Ross noticed.

In fact, a week of loneliness, coarse food and hard work had wilted Leslie Jones both physically and mentally. Abject weariness seemed to have robbed him of a part of his absorbing self-esteem. Furthermore, he appeared to Ross to be troubled as well as homesick. He looked at Sandy and Waymart unrecognizingly and sat down on a bench beneath the candle by the stove.

"We shall stay," Ross heard Wishing tell the McKenzies, "till the pass over Crosby threatens. Then we'll hike it below to the coal claims."

"Didn't know you had any," interrupted Sandy. "Where are they?"

"Up Wood River, only about a mile or such a matter from Camp. Fine outcroppin' of coal. Best in the country. When the Burlington gits here they've got t' have coal and I says to myself, 'There's where you come up on top, Wishin', you'll have th' coal t' sell 'em,' me and my pard now," he added with a glance at Jones.

The boy looked at him vaguely, as though he had not heard, and nodded. He sat with one knee thrown over the other, his back pressed against the side logs, his eyes so heavy that the lids kept drooping despite his efforts to keep awake. His hands were blistered, and his new corduroy suit dirty and torn. The air of newness which had characterized him when Ross first met him was gone. His hair had lengthened, and his cheeks revealed hollows. He said but little, being engaged in the absorbing effort to keep awake. Besides, Sandy and Wilson gave no one else a chance to talk. Waymart smoked stolidly staring at the candle above Leslie.

Ross, sitting with his elbows on the table, ceased to struggle against weariness, and, with his head on his arms, fell asleep. He awakened just in time to see his callers depart, whereupon he threw himself, dressed, in his bunk and slept until late the next morning.

During the next few weeks, all days seemed alike to Ross except Sunday. Early each Sunday morning he struck the trail for Miners' Camp, the post-office, and Steele's shack. At first he crept shudderingly over that quarter mile around the shoulder of Crosby. But soon his head lost every sense of giddiness, and his legs regained their accustomed strength, and his heart ceased to beat agitatedly at sight of the thousand-foot fall.

On the third Sunday he came into Steele's shack with a brighter face than he had worn before.

HE STRUCK THE TRAIL

"Things are sort of righting themselves," he reported over a hot elk steak. "I'm getting Weimer down to work in dead earnest," chuckling. "I hold the McKenzie boys before his mind's eye continually, and roll that car out, and dump it so quickly that he has to step lively to get enough ore picked out and blasted out to fill it."

Steele whistled when Ross told him how many cubic feet had been taken out of the Weimer-Grant tunnel during the week. He took from his pocket a paper and pencil, and fell to figuring. Ross pushed aside the empty dishes, and, leaning across the table, looked on with interest. He, too, had figured extensively since work began on Meadow Creek, but only during the last week had the figures satisfied him.

"Why, man alive!" cried Steele after a few moments' silent work, "you'll fetch it, at this rate." He stretched his hand across the table impetuously, and gripped Ross's, adding, "I thought you could never do it—even with a backbone."

Ross's shoulders straightened, and his face flushed boyishly. "We *must* fetch it!"

Steele leaned back, and drummed on the table. "What about the McKenzies? Of course they must know what progress you've made."

"Well," exclaimed Ross, "I hope I can keep 'em so interested guessing that they'll stay all winter. They come over as socially as you please about every evening. Weimer doesn't like it much. He has no use for 'em, but I have, you bet! I'm glad to have 'em around, especially now when I can estimate that at the present rate of speed the tunnel will be ready so we can apply for a patent by June."

To Dr. and Mrs. Grant, Ross wrote: "It's going to be a long pull and a strong pull, but I shall stick to the ship and show father that I can do something else besides setting a bone.

"And what's more and queerer, I'm in danger of getting interested in gold mining for itself. Every time I push our little car out to the end of the dump and unload the ore I wonder how much gold I'm watching roll away down the incline. Aunt Anne, you said in your last that it seems such a waste to throw away the ore. Well, if you were here you'd find it a greater waste of good money to try to get money out of the quartz under present conditions. You see there are only a few dollars' worth of gold in a ton of rock. That ton would have to be 'packed,' as they say here, eighty miles over the roughest of trails to Cody, and there loaded on cars and sent clear to Omaha, our nearest smelter. And I guess you know more than I do about the costly process of crushing ore and extracting gold from it in a smelter. It's not like mining for 'pay dirt,' as the men here call placer mining, where you gather up sand and wash it out yourself and find the particles of gold in the bottom of your pan. This quartz digging is the most expensive kind of mining there is. But when the Burlington gets the branch road up into Miners' the ore can be loaded at the mines and unloaded in Omaha without change of cars. Then we'll dig out the dumps and send them to the smelter, and back will come the gold jingling into our pockets. But whenever I'm moved to give you information I feel small, for I believe, in spite of all you write, that you both know more than I do about it now.

"I haven't had a book in my hand, Uncle Fred. When it comes night, I am too tired to understand the newspapers that I bring over from Miners', to say nothing of delving in histology. I expect I shall forget all I ever knew, but never mind! If I can get those claims patented, and so satisfy father, then next year I'll begin over again to fit myself for college—guess what I knew once will come back when I've studied a little. Anyway, I'm not going to worry about it now."

Ross underscored those last words to convince himself that he was not worrying, and handed the letter over to Bill Travers to be mailed at Meeteetse.

To his father Ross proudly wrote of the week's progress in the tunnel, adding in reply to a rather longer letter than usual, which he found awaiting him in Camp, "No, I have no intention of throwing up the job."

His father had opened the way wide for him to "throw up the job" after receiving the letter he had requested Steele to fill with exact information. That part of the information which stated that Ross must necessarily be shut up in Meadow Creek Valley for months with a more or less weak-headed partner had led to the letter which Ross found awaiting him. But Ross, Junior, was not well enough acquainted with Ross, Senior, to understand that this letter was an invitation for him to return East.

"He thinks I'm just chicken-hearted enough to be ready to cut and run at the first obstacle," was Ross's thought when he read what his father had written. His chin came up, and his eyes narrowed. "I'd stay and work here a year before I'd show the white feather now."

Ever since his last visit to New York, Ross had dwelt with secret pride on the respect and confidence that his father had shown him, and the sensation was so new and pleasant that he had no intention of forfeiting it.

And thus it happened that, with Grant, Senior, and Dr. Grant and Aunt Anne all desiring Ross's presence at home, and with Ross's wishes coinciding exactly with theirs, he remained at the "jumping-off place" into the wilderness.

In his private office on Broadway, Grant, Senior, read and reread, "No, I have no intention of throwing up the job." He twisted uneasily in his swivel-chair. He pulled Steele's last letter out of a pigeonhole, read it, frowned, and replaced it. Then he leaned back and admitted aloud:

"I wish the boy was safely entered in medical college."

But, even as he considered the matter, "the boy" with a small pack on his back, candy and a few apples to eat as a relish with the canned stuff, was plodding through the snow, light and easily brushed aside as yet, over the trail between Miners' Camp and Meadow Creek. And the boy's heart was growing as courageous as his muscles were strong.

CHAPTER VII

HALF-CONFIDENCES

It was dark that night when Ross arrived at the Weimer shack. The candles were lighted, and as he passed the window, he saw Leslie Jones within, sitting on a box on the opposite side of the room. His elbows were on the table, and he was listening to Weimer, or rather, pretending to listen. At a glance, Ross saw that his thoughts were far afield, his eyes being fixed on the speaker with an absent stare. He appeared more unkempt than on the occasion of his first call, and his face was thinner. There was also about him an air of collapse that made him a different person from the overbearing young man who had issued lofty orders at Sagehen Roost.

It was the second time that Ross had seen him since coming into the valley. The week before he had gone with the McKenzies one evening to the Jones claims, but the two boys had exchanged few remarks, both being too tired to talk.

As Ross entered the shack a sudden thought struck him. He stopped in the doorway and greeted Jones with, "See here! Why haven't I thought to get your mail Sundays? You haven't been over to Camp at all, have you?"

Leslie moved uneasily. He picked up his cap and pulled at the rim. "Aw—it's bully of you to think of my mail, but I'm not expecting—why, yes, you might inquire," he added lamely. Then, "What's going on in Camp? I'd like to hear something about people once more," with a wry smile.

Ross unstrapped a pack from his back and threw the contents on the table. Sorting out the week's papers, he tossed them across the table. "'Omaha News.' Want to see it?"

The blood came in an unexpected rush to Leslie's face and his hand trembled as he reached for the papers. Ross watched him as he took them and scanned the headings, column by column. Then he glanced keenly over the advertisements, and without reading further threw the papers aside and rested his elbows despondently on the table.

Weimer, satisfied with the tobacco and candy that Ross had brought, retired to his bunk, dozing and smoking by turns. Ross had seated himself at the table opposite Leslie and reread his letters. Now, as the other cast the papers aside, he looked up and met misery in the eyes leveled at him from beneath his caller's lengthening hair.

"Say!" ejaculated Ross impulsively, "I bet you find it as awful up in this country as I do!"

"Awful!" echoed Leslie. "It's—" A sudden working in his throat stopped him. He turned his face away.

"I wouldn't stay here for all the gold in these mountains if things weren't just as they are," Ross continued sympathetically, "and I presume you're caught in some such way, too, or you'd get out."

Leslie hesitated, nodded and again faced Ross, "How are you caught?" he asked eagerly.

Ross told him briefly about his father's interest in the claims and Weimer's appeal for help that had led to his, Ross's, coming.

As he talked Leslie's eagerness evaporated. He evidently was looking for another sort of explanation, and his response was only half-hearted:

"Then your father sent you. That's bad luck when you want to be in school." He hesitated and added: "It's not every fellow that wants to go to school. I hate it!"

"You do!" exclaimed Ross. "Well, I can't say I waste any love on studying myself, that is, in most studies, but I'm after results. I'm willing to bone down to work because of where the work will take me. The only thing I really like to study is medicine, anatomy and all that sort of thing, you know. But in order to get anywhere in the profession, I have to take a lot of mathematics and language and things that I detest."

Leslie's shoulders came up. "I won't study what I don't like," he declared arrogantly, "and I can't be made to—guess they're finding that out, too!" The last was under his breath.

"Well," Ross began vaguely, "if you want to be a business man it's not necessary to go through college. Our most successful business men—" His voice trailed into silence as he saw that the other was not listening.

There ensued a few moments of quiet. In the bunk Weimer snored gently. A nickel clock suspended on a peg from the side logs ticked loudly. The pine chunks in the sheet-iron stove cracked and snapped cheerfully. Leslie stared dejectedly at the table, while Ross, his forehead knit into a puzzled frown, stared at Leslie. What could have happened, he asked himself, to rob the other in four weeks of his former desire to turn prospector? Homesickness? Perhaps, but Ross decided the trouble lay deeper. If it were mere homesickness, the boy would be haunting Miners' Camp and the post-office or else clearing out of the mountains.

"Where's Wilson?" Ross asked finally.

Leslie aroused himself with difficulty. "He's over at the McKenzies'. I came here."

"How's the tunnel going? Are you making headway?"

This question opened the flood-gates of Leslie's misery. "Headway?" he burst out. "Yes, we're making headway, but toward what, I'd like to know!"

It was an exclamation rather than a question, and the boy brought his clenched fist down violently on the table.

"Why," stammered Ross, "toward getting the claims patented, I suppose. What else did you expect?"

Leslie's excitement subsided. He folded his arms on the table. "I came expecting to find gold," he confessed. "I could hardly wait to get here and now—well, I'm here, that's all, and all my money is spent for supplies."

"But didn't you understand," Ross began, "that the ore up here had to be smelted in order to release the metal, and that we can never pack the ore on horseback over these trails and—"

"No," cried Leslie fiercely, "I didn't understand. I understood that I was coming to work claims that would surely prove a perfect Klondike in a short time—I thought in a few weeks."

"Oh, that's Wilson," broke in Ross. "He's a perfect promoter, Steele tells me, because he believes in things himself so intensely that he makes you see his way in spite of yourself. Steele says he has been quartz crazy for years. Every claim that he stakes holds his everlasting fortune in prospect."

"I've found that out," assented Leslie bitterly, "and yet I can't blame Wilson. I foisted myself on him at Omaha—he didn't get after me. And he has really been square with me. He simply made me believe in his claims as thoroughly as he does, and he believes in them yet, but I don't. You see," Leslie explained, "he keeps expecting to run across a pocket of free gold, and that he says he'll turn over to me so I can get back the money I put into the supplies. I've got to get that money back pretty soon," he added emphatically.

Ross looked at him commiseratingly. "I'm afraid you can't."

For a moment Leslie's lips worked miserably. He took no pains to conceal his emotion from Ross. Finally he burst out, "I must, Grant. I've simply got to have that money back." He held out his hands palms up. They were blistered and sore. "That doesn't matter," he declared. "I'd work 'em to the bone if the work would bring the gold. And a month ago I'd never done an hour's work in my life. I tell you," in a burst of irrepressible confidence, "everything looks different to me to-day from what it did five weeks ago. I wish—I wish I could go back those five weeks—why, I'd almost be willing to go to school—"

Approaching sounds stopped the confidence that Ross was so anxious to hear. The door opened unceremoniously, and the McKenzies entered, accompanied by Wilson. The latter was talking excitedly. With a nod at Ross he finished his speech while helping himself to a seat beside the stove.

"I tell you there's every sign of free gold. Same kind of stun crops out there and in the same layers and at the same angle as when I was working up in Butte. My claims was right next door to a fellow's named Harrison. One mornin' he bust through a wall rock

slam bang right onto two thousand dollars' worth of the prettiest yellow ye ever see. And I tell ye I shouldn't be a mite surprised if our next blast showed us a streak of yellow too."

Sandy laughed unconcernedly. "A streak of yellor in a chap and in a rock mean two different things, I notice. And I've also seen more of the yellor in fellers than in rocks," easily dropping on a box and lighting his pipe.

Young Jones, looking at his partner, brightened visibly, despite the knowledge he had recently acquired of Wilson's optimism. There was about the man such a cock-sureness, such simple sincerity and abiding faith in his own statements that Ross felt that he could not rest content the following day without knowing the result of that next charge of dynamite.

Steele had told him about these "pockets" that occasionally are concealed in the heart of the veins or "leads" along which mining tunnels are driven. They are uncovered unexpectedly by a blast of dynamite. They consist of small quantities of quartz of such richness that it pays to transport the ore to the smelter. But every prospector dreams of uncovering a pocket of "free gold" ore, quartz through which the gold is scattered in visible particles or streaks and can be extracted in its pure state with the aid of a hammer and a knife blade.

"Come down to-morrow night," Ross said in a low tone across the table, "and report."

Leslie nodded, and Ross, going to his emergency chest, brought out a bottle of liquid and a box of salve. "Here," he said abruptly, "better take some care of those hands of yours if you don't want blood poisoning to set in. Soak 'em well in hot water with a teaspoonful of this added"—he shoved the bottle of liquid across the table—"and then rub in this salve. And don't work in the dirt without gloves till those sores are healed."

Humbly and gratefully Leslie took his orders from "Doc Tenderfoot," while the men looked on with interest and many questions.

"Tell ye what," said Sandy heartily, "if I intended t' winter here I'd feel easier about the trail bein' closed. If a stick should go off at the wrong time and blow ye int' pieces, Doc here could put th' pieces together and patch ye up as good as new. Doc's all right!"

"I wish," thought Ross as he saw his guests depart, "that I could say the same about Sandy."

But while he had no faith in the friendly pretensions of Sandy, he dreaded any mention of his leaving the mountains. To feel that he would be left alone with Weimer for months was maddening. If only Wilson and his partner were to remain on the Creek—but they too would go as soon as the trail threatened to become impassable. This careless speech of Sandy's concerning leaving the valley drove all other ideas out of Ross's head that night and persisted in the morning. To feel that Weimer and himself

were the only human beings in Meadow Creek Valley, to know that there was no escape until the sun thawed away the barrier in the spring was a terrifying thought. It was present that day with Ross like a waking nightmare. As he pushed the little car out of the tunnel and dumped it, he looked up at the cold gray peaks with a wild desire to level them and bring Miners' Camp—Cody—Pennsylvania—nearer. So absorbing was this desire that he forgot the promised visit from Leslie and was surprised to see him at the door before he had finished washing the supper dishes.

"You wanted to hear about that promised vein," explained the newcomer, reading Ross's surprise in his face.

"Oh—why, yes! That pocket of free gold!" exclaimed Ross hastily picking up the thread of connection where it had been broken the previous evening by Sandy's reference to leaving the valley. "Did you uncover it?"

"Uncover nothing!" returned Leslie. He sat on the table and swung his feet restlessly, adding despondently, "And what's more, we won't uncover anything in a lifetime up here, either. I've lost all hope—except," he added with a shrug of his shoulders, "just the minute that Wilson is talking."

"I never had any hope," said Ross slowly, "but then, I have never given the ore more than a thought. With me it's simply to get the work done, satisfy my father and—clear out."

"And with me," responded Leslie, "it's the money now—I've got to have the money. Only," he added, "I'll say this—that when I left Omaha there was more in it for me than the money. You see—I'll own up—I was crazy to get out of school and, well—see things and do 'em! If I'd gone to some other place, to Goldfield or even down to Miners' Camp it would be different. But I'm here and all my money's spent."

Continually he came back to that last statement. That fact had evidently swallowed up all the lust for adventure, for "getting out and seeing things"—it was the only thing that young Jones could now see in the situation. Ross wondered why but did not like to ask. Finally he said hesitatingly, "I say, Jones, if you want to get out of here I'll—that is—I have enough on hand to let you have your car-fare back to Omaha."

The blood rushed over Leslie's face. His head came up proudly. "See here, Grant," he exclaimed briskly, sliding off the table and stuffing his hands into his pockets, "it must sound as if I'm a low-down beggar, but I never thought of such a thing as getting hold of your money!"

"And I never thought of it, either," declared Ross quickly. "I've made you the offer on my own hook. Come off your high and mighty perch and talk sense! Take the money and pay it back when you can. I'm a hundred dollars to the good here."

Leslie "came off his perch" instantly and held out his hand repentantly. "Thank you, Grant. That's awfully white of you, but that won't do. It's not car-fare I want, and

Omaha is the last place I want to strike—or next to the last, at least—without—well, a lot more than car-fare." After a moment he repeated, "I tell you it's white of you to offer it, though. It makes a fellow feel as if he'd fallen among friends."

The latter expression reminded Ross of something about which he had not thought in three weeks, namely, the behavior of Waymart McKenzie when he first saw Leslie. With the water still dripping from the dish-pan the boy hung it against the logs, tossed the dish-cloth on top of the pan and rolling down his sleeves, asked:

"Jones, do you know the McKenzies?"

Leslie shook his head. "Before coming here, do you mean?"

Ross nodded.

"No, never saw them before. Why?"

"Oh, nothing," returned Ross carelessly, "only when you came in here the first night I thought they acted as though they'd seen you before, or Waymart did, rather."

The effect of this simple statement was unexpected. Leslie gripped the table excitedly. His face paled and he was obliged to clear his throat before asking: "What made you think that? I didn't—didn't notice anything. I never thought that they—he—"

"It was just a trifle that made me think that," Ross hastened to assure his guest in confusion. "Just a little byplay when Waymart first saw you. Nothing to—"

"Tell me exactly what it was," commanded Leslie, and all the boy's imperiousness leaped to the front. "I want to know all that you saw."

Ross related the incident haltingly. "Sandy didn't act as though he had ever seen you before. It was only Waymart," he said consolingly, but it was plain to be seen that the other was not consoled.

"It's possible, very possible that they may have seen me—I wouldn't have noticed them," he muttered, "if they were—that is, father hired any number of men—they might all see me and I not notice them."

"Maybe I can find out," offered Ross promptly. "I'll ask them."

"No, no!" hastily; "don't bother with the matter."

Leslie crossed the room, threw open the door and stood staring across the valley at the McKenzie shack. When next he spoke he did not look around:

"It will be just as well, Grant, if you don't mention me to 'em until—" There ensued a long pause. Then, "until I talk with you again."

Just before he left he asked abruptly, "Do you bring the Omaha papers back with you every Sunday?"

"I can," replied Ross, "if you want 'em. But, see here, Jones, why don't you go over to Camp with me next Sunday?"

Leslie hesitated. "Guess I will. Good-night."

A few steps from the door he turned back. "See here, Grant, don't wait for me Sunday. If I go I'll be here by eight o'clock. But if I don't go, I should like to see the Omaha papers."

"All right, I'll fetch them," returned Ross.

Sunday morning he postponed his start for Miners' Camp until past eight o'clock, hoping that Leslie would come, but no Leslie appeared. Sandy did, however. He came freshly shaved and combed, with a new kerchief knotted about his neck.

"Want some good company over t' Camp?" he inquired jocularly. "If ye do, here it is, fer I'm goin' out."

"Going to stay long or just for the day?" asked Ross.

"Oh, I dunno how long," carelessly. "I've got t' see Cody again. Little old town couldn't fetch it if I didn't hang around it about once in so often."

"Is Waymart going?"

"Nope, Mart will hold the cabin and claims down here. Mart don't like t' hit th' trail as often as I do. He's fer his pipe and a soft bunk and a good meal. Mart 'ud be a failure as one of these here globe-trotters. He's what ye could call domestic in his tastes. The only thing he lacks," here Sandy chuckled at his own wit, "is a blamed thing to be domestic about!"

As they were making their way cautiously around the shoulder of Crosby, Sandy asked suddenly, "Why don't that young Jones go t' Camp ever on Sunday? Guess they don't work Sundays up t' th' Wilson claims. I should think he'd be as wild as you be t' git over this side of Crosby where there's a post-office and newspapers and things."

"I don't know," returned Ross in a general denial of knowledge of all Sandy had said.

"I wonder about that young feller now," pursued Sandy affably.

"So do I!" thought Ross. He said nothing.

"I wonder how he come t' drop out of nowhere with money enough t' grub-stake the two of 'em fer six months—and then have nothin' further t' draw on!"

Sandy, walking now shoulder to shoulder with Ross, looked at him keenly.

"Don't know anything about it," returned Ross shortly, but he could not rid himself of the insinuation in Sandy's words.

When he returned that night to Meadow Creek, Ross was disappointed at finding Wilson awaiting him as well as Leslie. He had hoped that Leslie would come for the papers alone and would continue the conversation of his previous visit.

In a loud and jovial voice Wilson informed Doc that his pard had started out in good shape that morning to go over to Camp and had then backed out.

"Must have got clean over here," Wilson added.

Leslie gathered up the newspapers which Ross had brought and fitted them together without meeting Ross's eyes. "I found I was too tired to go on," was all the explanation he made. "I slept pretty much all day and am going to turn in early to-night."

Ross nodded speechlessly, wondering how much Sandy's going had to do with Leslie's staying. Would the latter avoid the McKenzies now that he knew they had seemed to recognize him, and why? Before the evening was far spent Ross began to suspect that Leslie would like to avoid him also, if it were possible. The boy looked more despondent than ever, but he shielded his despondency behind a proud reserve that shut Ross out, much to the latter's disappointment.

"Perhaps," Ross told himself, "if I hadn't been such an idiot as to offer him money, he wouldn't act so offish now. I never had any more tact than a goat, anyhow! Wish I had minded my own business and let him do all the talking!"

"Vas ist de matter mit dot poy?" Weimer asked as soon as the door closed on their visitors. "He vas such a talker oder time he vas here und now he talks nict at all."

"Guess he's homesick."

Weimer rubbed his great hands together thoughtfully. "Und sick of de mountains, I tink," he added shrewdly. "Ven dot poy come here he fooled himself!"

The last of the week saw Sandy's return. He came strolling along the trail one night just as the sunlight was fading from the tops of the mountains. He was whistling, apparently in high spirits. Stopping at the door of Weimer's shack he paused to call:

"Hi, in there, Grant! I saw your friend Leonard at Cody. I set you up in fine shape t' 'im. 'No grass,' says I, 'will turn t' hay while he's gittin' things done.'"

Ross laughed. Despite the fact that he knew Sandy's praise covered an abyss of insincerity, it was pleasant, none the less.

After the supper dishes were washed, he decided to visit the McKenzies. "Want to go along, Uncle Weimer?" he asked, well knowing what the reply would be.

"Go mit dem McKenzies?" gesticulated Weimer. "Ven I do it vill pe ven my legs von't carry me away from dem!"

Ross laughed. "Well, Uncle Weimer, my legs seem to want to carry me where I can get the Cody news. I want to hear about Mr. Leonard. Perhaps he has heard from father more recently than I."

There was no moon that night, and the sky had become suddenly overcast so that Ross faced a dense darkness pierced only by the candle-light from the window of the McKenzie shack. He stumbled toward this, feeling his way so slowly along the narrow trail that he unwittingly approached the cabin silently and surprised an altercation within. Sandy's voice was raised in vehement assertion and Waymart's lower rumble in protest. As he was groping for the door, he heard Sandy say:

"I tell ye, Mart, wild hosses won't drag 'im up here s' long as that young feller is in these mountings, and we may want 'im here."

Then Waymart's response, "Well, what be ye aimin' to do about it? Don't bite off more'n ye can swaller. Ye do that too often. He'll be out of here in a few weeks. What's eatin' ye? 'Let well enough alone.'"

"Yes," scornfully from Sandy. "Ye maverick! They won't go till we—"

Ross, his hand on the door, had stubbed his toe against a stone.

"Sh," came Sandy's warning in lowered tones. "What's that?"

There was a step across the floor. Ross instinctively fell back into the darkness and slipped behind a tree. The door was jerked open and Sandy's figure appeared. An instant he looked out and then turning back, said disgustedly, "Nobody, but guess we don't need t' yell loud enough t' be heard up t' Wilson's."

CHAPTER VIII

ROSS'S "HIRED MAN"

As the door closed on Sandy, Ross beat a hasty retreat. His first thought was that the brothers were discussing him. The fact that they were in the valley to watch the progress of work on the Weimer-Grant claims and that they were interested in his being there and not anxious to have him remain, all aided in the interpretation of the McKenzies' speeches.

"But who on earth is it that won't come as long as I am here and why not?" he asked himself as he stumbled back in the direction of the light in Weimer's cabin.

"Vat's you pack for alreddy?" demanded Weimer from his bunk as Ross opened the door. "Ist dem McKenzies mit Wilson, hein?"

"No," returned Ross, "but I decided that I am tired enough to turn in instead of going visiting," and he forthwith "turned in," but did not go to sleep immediately.

Truth to tell, he was uneasy. He felt that Sandy, behind that good-natured, friendly exterior, was full of schemes. The McKenzies wanted the claims, and Ross had unexpectedly interposed himself between them and their desires. Therefore, their schemes must include him. What was on foot now?

He tossed restlessly in his bunk assailed with qualms of fear that he tried to conceal from himself. "Ah, what you afraid of?" he asked himself disgustedly. "They won't shoot you nor yet tie you hand and foot and throw you over the Crosby trail. As Steele says, I haven't a thing to fear personally from 'em. That's not their way. Go to sleep."

This command he issued to himself in an angry mutter and at once scrambled up in his bunk wider awake than ever. His mental horizon unexpectedly cleared. "Of course he's the one they meant and not me!" he exclaimed aloud.

"Vat's dat you say?" asked Weimer sleepily. "Hein?"

"A waking nightmare," returned Ross and lay down again.

Of course it was Leslie. "'He's to be here only a few weeks,'" Waymart had said. "'Let well enough alone.'" He, Ross, expected to winter in the valley, and the McKenzies knew it. Yes, they were referring to Leslie. That calmed Ross, but deepened the mystery.

The following morning he thought over the situation while he was at work. It was a blind enough situation, but he felt that he ought to repeat to Leslie the scraps of conversation that he had overheard. They might mean much to the boy, and in spite of his reserve and his overbearing manners Ross liked Leslie.

At noon he ate dinner hastily, and telling Weimer that he would be back in an hour, set out for the upper claims. Snow had fallen the night before and the trail had filled, making walking tiresome, for Ross had not yet accustomed himself to the use of snow-shoes. With his hands in his pockets and his cap drawn down over his eyes he plunged through the drifts in the teeth of a sharp east wind. Up the side of the mountains he struggled, through the pass between two peaks where Meadow Creek had cut a channel and into a hollow sheltered from the wind and exposed to the sun.

"Hello, Grant!" A voice greeted him from the upper side of the trail.

Ross pushed his cap back and looked up. In the sunshine, his back against a warm rock, his feet buried in the dry loam and pine needles, sat Leslie Jones. He had eaten his dinner and wandered along the trail until he had found a warm spot in which to spend the noon hour. Ross promptly climbed the steep mountainside and dropped down beside him.

"The McKenzies say," began Leslie curiously, "that you don't stop work long enough to eat and sleep. Yet here you are two miles from home in the middle of the day."

"It's because of what the McKenzies have said that I'm here now," Ross returned swiftly. "It may not be worth a picayune to you, and then again, maybe, it will be," and he related the events of the previous evening.

Leslie bent a troubled face over a stick that he was idly whittling. "Are you sure, Grant, that they meant me? I haven't an idea who they are nor who could be so afraid of me that he wouldn't come up here with me here. I don't know of a soul that's afraid of me, but," with a short, mirthless laugh, "I do know of some one that I'm afraid of. It's not the McKenzies, although they might—if they know me—"

Suddenly he flung the stick from him and faced Ross impulsively. "Grant, did you ever do something that you'd give anything you possessed to undo—and that you'd just *got* to undo?"

Ross, startled at the sudden change in his companion, at the latter's intensity and evident unhappiness, merely shook his head awkwardly, avoiding the misery-filled eyes. He turned away and began piling up stones, bits of shining quartz that had been thrown, at some time, out of a discovery hole above them.

Presently Leslie regained his self-possession. "I say, Grant," he began again abruptly, "to tell you the truth, I have started to go over to see you half a dozen times within a week and got this far every time. I'm going to ask a favor of you."

"All right," said Ross with a gruffness that did not conceal his sympathy. "Fire ahead!"

"The other day you—you offered me money," Leslie began with difficulty.

"Yes, and I do to-day," Ross interrupted.

Leslie shook his head. "Hold on till I get to it. I can't take your money—not that way. But the other day I heard the McKenzies tell Wilson that you tried to hire men in Miners' Camp. Will you hire me?"

"Will I!" Ross leaped to his feet. He grabbed his cap and tossed it in the air and then fell to pommeling Leslie in pure exuberance of joy. "Hire you? I wish there were half a dozen of you to hire! Bully for you! But—"

His exuberance died out. He replaced his cap and looked down on the other, his lips pursed ready for a whistle.

"Well?"

"See here!" Ross burst out. "What about Wilson?"

"That's all right," Leslie answered quickly. "I told him a couple of days ago that I'd got to get money. I told him I'd leave him the grub, of course. I agreed to furnish it,

and I'll stick to my word," doggedly, "but I must also light out and earn some money. And all I can do is to work with my hands. I—well, I've always hated to make my head work, and I've never had to do any other kind until now. You'll find I'm soft yet, but I'll do my best."

The boy spoke humbly.

Ross sent his cap spinning into the air once more. "I'll risk you! You're not as soft as you were six weeks ago! Not by half! When can you come?"

Leslie considered. "Wilson says he'll go below to the coal claims in a couple of weeks. I'll talk it over with him and let you know."

"Come to-morrow, if you can," Ross shouted back as he slid down to the trail.

Work went easily for a few days in view of Leslie's coming. The thought of his companionship robbed the prospective loneliness of Meadow Creek Valley of its terrors. He whistled and sang about the shack as he hunted up the material out of which to make a third bunk. He was hammering away on this the second evening after his talk with Leslie, when the McKenzies dropped in. They had been over on the Divide hunting and had been out of Ross's sight and mind since his talk with Leslie. Not until Sandy pushed the door open unceremoniously and walked in did Ross recall the comments that had so disturbed him and wondered once more to whom they had referred, himself or Leslie, and what the reference meant.

"Hello, Grant!" Sandy exclaimed, stopping abruptly just inside the door. "What's up? Why another bunk? Goin' t' take boarders? Any relations droppin' in t' attend our festivities up here?"

Ross looked over his shoulder laughingly. "Nope. Give another guess."

Sandy came nearer. Waymart shut the door and sat down beside the stove. Weimer turned his back on "dem darned McKenzies," and put on his goggles that he might not be tormented by a view of their faces. It was a never-ending source of vexation to him that they came sociably to his shack.

"I haven't any more guesses in stock," declared Sandy, but the smile on his face was succeeded by a frown and he bit his red beard restlessly.

"Hired man is coming to-morrow," Ross formed him as the hammer sent another nail home in the side wall.

"Hired man!" exploded Sandy. "Where the deuce will you get a hired man?"

"Right here in the valley," exulted Ross. "Leslie Jones."

"Leslie Jones!" repeated Sandy.

"Leslie Jones," muttered Waymart.

"By and by," Ross confessed, "when all you fellows go below, it will seem a little more livable up here to have a third one around. I'd pay a man wages just to stay here to say nothing of working for me."

Neither Sandy nor Waymart made any comment. Sandy stood watching the work in silence, while Waymart allowed his pipe to go out. Then both departed. They said they were going up to see Wilson, but Ross noticed that they returned to their own cabin instead.

"Something doesn't seem to please our friends the enemy," he chuckled after their departure. "They see the Weimer-Grant claims getting further and further from their reach."

"Ve vill peat dem McKenzies yet," gloated Weimer rubbing his hands gently on his knees. "Ven dot oder poy comes de work vill run und jump!"

Ross did not see the McKenzies again until Leslie was occupying the third bunk, Wilson having, good-naturedly, sent him down within a week after the boys had completed their bargain.

"Clear out if ye want to," Wilson had said kindly. "It's white of ye t' leave the grub. I hain't a cent t' pay fer it. There's a fortune in these claims of mine, but it's too late t' dig it out this year. Next summer—" and he was launched on the glowing prospects for the next season.

Leslie entered on his task with a grim determination which seemed foreign to his disposition.

"I don't want you to get sick of your bargain the first week," he said one day in answer to Ross's remonstrance when he refused to stop work on account of a bruise on his wrist. "You open up that little emergency chest and I can go on digging just the same. I don't want any delayed wages in mine!"

With the advent of Leslie, life fell into pleasanter grooves in Weimer's cabin. Despite the anxiety ever present with the newcomer, and despite his natural reserve, Ross's exuberance of spirits caused by his presence and work affected him, and after the supper dishes were washed, the two boys wrestled, chaffed each other or talked, Ross about his father and uncle and aunt, Leslie about his school life in Omaha.

"It's a boys' school," he explained one day, "a military academy. I've had to go there ever since I was knee high to a grasshopper. Discipline is fierce. I hate it, and this year I made up my mind I'd not stand it, so I'm here."

"And wish," ventured Ross, "that you were back in school again."

"Yes—almost," Leslie began impulsively and then paused, adding quietly, "Lots of things I wish, and wish 'em hard."

The following evening after supper, Weimer tumbled into his bunk at once and began snoring. The two boys washed the dishes, in silence at first. Outside, snow was falling heavily. Through the drifting flakes the McKenzies' light shone fitfully. The brothers had been away again hunting and had just returned.

As Leslie set the dishes on their shelf above the stove he glanced uneasily out of the window. He had not seen the McKenzies for some time. Ever since they had crossed the valley that noon on their snow-shoes, their hunting trophies on their shoulders, he had watched their cabin with that same air of uneasy abstraction.

"Ross," he broke out at last, "I've got to tell you something. I hate like a dog to tell it, but it's got to break loose some time and it may as well be right now."

He turned from the shelf, glanced at the snoring Weimer, lowered his voice, and, standing beside the stove, worked restlessly at the damper in the pipe. Ross, without looking at him, slowly scrubbed the dish-pan and then the table.

"It's like this," Leslie began. "When I met Wilson I had five hundred dollars in my pocket and a grouch against my father. Always before then, father had sent the Academy a check to pay for the semester—you have to pay there in advance for half the year—but this year he had business on hand that couldn't be interrupted and so he called me into his office in a great hurry the morning I left home and handed over the check to me. It was made out to me and it was for five hundred dollars. That's the price of the half year, you see. Dad handed it over and just said, 'Here, pay your own bill,' and got out. That's about all that's ever between us, anyway. Well, I went up to Omaha. We'd had it out about school all summer. I was bound not to go this year, and he swore that I should go and go through college if he had to rope me and tie me and take me himself, as he put it! Father is a whirlwind of a man. But I was bound not to go, and the money let me out. I took the check and cashed it at the bank and went to the 'Hill House,' where I met Wilson. I reasoned that the money was mine because it was to be spent on me. You see, Ross, I was mad enough to reason anything my way that I wanted."

Leslie turned the damper absently, sending smoke in gusts into the room, but neither boy noticed it. Ross wiped out his dish-pan, hung it on its nail, and sitting down on a box, took his chin between his hands and stared at the fire.

"I thought," Leslie went on, "that I'd invest that money and surprise dad. Well," grimly, "he's probably as surprised by this time as I am. You've heard Wilson tell about my meeting him and agreeing to go with him. I spent the entire five hundred on our outfit and car-fare in the expectation that in six weeks I could write to dad and tell him what a success I'd made of it! I had six weeks' grace."

Ross looked up inquiringly. "What do you mean?"

"Father and I never have corresponded extensively, but he always looks sharply after my reports. The first report goes out from the Academy in six weeks after school opens. I reckoned from what Wilson said that we'd strike it rich up here in a month more or less, and so about the time father would be looking into the reason why no report was sent from the Academy, he'd be receiving one from me up here and, you know, Ross, 'nothing succeeds as well as success,' and success of this sort would get dad right under the collar. Well, he probably knows by this time that I've turned up missing at school, and he has not received a letter from Meadow Creek telling about the discovery of free gold!"

Leslie gave the damper a final twist and sat down on a pile of fire-wood. "Ross," he exclaimed violently, "I am about seven ways an everlasting fool!"

Ross grinned cheerfully. "Aunt Anne always says that to find out that you're a fool 'is the best cure for the disease of foolishness.' So you see you're headed toward the cure already."

Leslie shook his head. "There's that money, Ross. It wasn't mine, and you know it and I know it. I can't face dad again without it in my hand. Why, I wouldn't see him until I'd earned it for—well, wild horses wouldn't drag me," he concluded passionately. "I tell you, Ross, I've let myself in for a heap of trouble. I know father."

"Now that he finds out you've skipped, Leslie, won't he be hunting you up?"

Leslie stirred uneasily and turning stretched up and looked in the direction of the McKenzies. "That's what I'm expecting, or else he'll not think me worth while. I tell you, Ross, I've made dad no end of trouble both at home and in school. Things look sort of different up here. I've—well—I've never been up against it before."

"Are you going to send your father word?"

"Send him word before I get back that five hundred!" cried Leslie aghast. "You don't know dad. I can't face him without it. Not much."

"But he'd see that you feel different—" Ross began.

"You don't know dad," Leslie cut in harshly. "With the men it's just the same. It's 'stand and deliver' or get out, and he'd treat me just the same."

The coming of the McKenzies put an end to further conversation. They came to announce their departure on the morrow.

"Any little thing you'd like us t' git fer you?" Sandy asked the boys lazily. "Want us t' bring ye any biled shirts or one of these here coats with long handled tails? If you fellers lay out t' stay here all winter ye better lay in a stock of society rags, 'n' dancin' shoes."

"About the most useful dancing shoes we'll need will be snow-shoes, I guess," Ross retorted.

Leslie, from the wood-pile, said little but watched the brothers closely. Neither paid more than a passing attention to him, concentrating their remarks on Ross. They left early and went up the Creek with the intention of paying a farewell call on Wilson.

"I don't believe," said Leslie the following morning as he watched them take the trail leading over Crosby, "that they have ever seen me before. They don't act as though they have, do they?"

"Haven't seen a sign of it since that first night," declared Ross, "and yet what I overheard, you know—"

"Must have referred to you," returned Leslie with conviction.

The next three days passed quietly enough. The inhabitants of Weimer's cabin heard an occasional blast from Wilson's claims, but did not see Wilson. Steadily the two boys worked and steadily Ross held Weimer to his labors. Usually it was Weimer who got the meals, either Ross or Leslie leading him down to the shack, in case the sun shone, about half-past eleven. In three-quarters of an hour the boys would leave work and sit down to a substantial meal of hot bread, potatoes and all sorts of canned meats and vegetables. But the third day after the McKenzies' departure it chanced that when eleven o'clock came, Weimer and Leslie were in the far end of the tunnel drilling the "cut in" holes for a new blast, and Ross, pushing the little car back into the tunnel, sang out:

"Hey, you fellows, keep on and I'll go down and shake up the grub this time."

He ran down the trail to the cabin, and soon had a roaring fire in the heater. A kettle of beans had been left simmering on the back of the stove. This Ross pulled forward, and then, delving among the canned goods, he proceeded to set out various edibles, all the while whistling cheerfully.

"M-m, tomatoes," he interrupted himself to mutter, "we haven't had tomatoes in two days. And corn—sweet corn. Guess Weimer has overlooked the corn entirely. We'll have corn. Soup! Jiminy! We haven't had soup in an age. Vegetable. That means a little of everything, and that taken boiling hot. Here goes soup."

"Whoa!" came a deep voice from the trail outside the door, then the voice was raised, "Hello! Who's t' home?"

Ross stepped to the door and faced a middle aged man, clad in leather "chaps" and short fur coat. A fur cap was drawn down over his ears and his hands were encased in huge fur gloves. He sat easily on a gray horse and was leading another, a mottled brown and white. As Ross appeared, he drew off one glove and slipped the hand carelessly under the tail of his coat at the same time squaring about in his saddle so that he faced the doorway.

Ross, in his shirt sleeves, stepped out and greeted the newcomer hospitably. "Hello! Come in to dinner."

"Had mine down in Miners' Camp," returned the other with a backward jerk of his head.

He touched his mount with his spur and came close to Ross. The brown and white horse pulled back obstinately on the leading rope. The animal was saddled.

"Are you the young chap that's workin' for Weimer?"

"Yes."

"All right." The stranger withdrew his hand from the tail of his coat. It held a gun. "No monkey-shines now! You're the boy I'm after. I'm the sheriff of Big Horn County, and I have a warrant here for your arrest. Your father is honin' to meet up with you and settle a little account of money taken in Omaha."

CHAPTER IX

SURPRISES

FOR a moment Ross was stunned. His hands fell nervelessly at his side, and he stared up at the stranger with expressionless eyes. Then, as the situation dawned on him, his eyes suddenly narrowed and into them leaped a light that caused the other to move the gun suggestively and say warningly:

"No monkeying allowed, understand. Swallow a bite right now and climb up here on this other horse."

Ross looked over his shoulder speculatively. From his position he could see the mouth of the tunnel on the mountainside behind the cabin. The mouth showed up black and empty and from its depth came the muffled sound of the hand drills wielded by Weimer and Leslie. The trail leading over the mountain to Miners' Camp was screened from the mouth of the tunnel by hemlocks. It could be seen only from the end of the dump. Ross thought fast.

"All right," he said finally. "I'll go with you now—and quietly. There's no objection, I suppose, to my leaving a note for—Weimer?"

No doubt existed in his mind as to the legality of the warrant and the seriousness of purpose in the man before him; therefore, he asked no further questions. Moreover, he wished above all things to avoid question and get off before Leslie appeared on the scene.

"Leave a note, yes, or see 'im," assented the sheriff. "I'm willin'. Where is he?"

"At work," hastily. "I'll just leave a note."

The sheriff dismounted, dropped his bridle reins beside his horse's head, hitched the second animal's rope about the pommel of his saddle, and followed Ross into the shack, repeating, "Where at work?"

"In the tunnel," mumbled Ross. "I would rather write a line than call him."

He picked up some cold biscuits left over from breakfast and stuffed them into his pockets. Then, drawing a box up to the table, he sat down with paper and pencil to write a note. To his confusion, the sheriff stood over him looking on. He moistened the point of his pencil slowly. What on earth could he say that would make Leslie understand and yet not give the situation away to the sheriff? To gain time he gnawed on one of Weimer's hard biscuits.

"Where is my—father?" he asked finally, stumbling guiltily over the word.

The sheriff spat out of the doorway and twirled his gun impatiently. "You'll see 'im before I leave you, all right," was his ambiguous reply. "And the sooner that is the better it'll suit me. Git busy, young man, with that pencil. I don't aim to go int' winter quarters here. We've got to go on to Cody."

Ross bit his lips and laid the biscuit aside. His eyes narrowed until they were mere slits. Grasping his pencil with a firmness he was far from feeling he began to write without preface.

"The sheriff is here arresting me for stealing money from my father in Omaha. He is taking me to him in Cody now. I don't know when I can get back. Keep the work going sure, and don't worry. I think I will be able—"

He paused and moistened the pencil again, then crossed out the last sentence and substituted:

"I shall try to reason with him and make him see that he had better let me keep on doing what I am doing and earn the money to pay him back."

Another instant Ross paused and thought. Then he added the singular explanation which he believed would make the foregoing more lucid to Leslie:

"As I write the sheriff is standing over me," and then bethought himself just in time to avoid signing his name.

"Huh!" grunted the sheriff reading the last sentence. "So he is; and now hustle!"

Ross hustled most willingly. Seizing his top-coat and cap he was ready in a few moments for the perilous journey over the Crosby trail. Silently he mounted the brown and white horse, all the time glancing anxiously at the mouth of the tunnel. He rode in

front of the sheriff and slyly urged his horse forward until the intervening trees hid the mouth of the tunnel from which still issued the steady grind and thud of the drills.

It was not until the two horses were cautiously feeling their way down the perilous trail, and Ross saw far below him the shacks of Miners' Camp that some of the difficulties of his sudden venture began to present themselves to him. His decision had been made so hurriedly that he had had no time to think all around the subject of the arrest and his own action. It had seemed to him outrageous that a father should arrest his own son even though that boy had done wrong. Ross revolted at the idea.

"I don't wonder," he thought, "that Less is afraid of his father. But his fear wouldn't sit so hard on his temper but what there'd be no end of explosions, and then where would they both get to?"

It was the thought of this state of affairs that had led Ross to the impulsive determination to go to that father and ask for a few months of grace for the son. In this, as he acknowledged to himself, he had a mixed motive and part of the mixture was not unselfish.

"If he'll only let Leslie stay and help me through the winter and earn the money," was his thought, "if I can make him see that Leslie's no quitter, and that he knows he has made a big mistake and is willing to bone down and undo it—if I can only make him see!"

It was here that Ross's misgivings began. He knew he was no talker and evidently, as Leslie said, the father was a man of violent temper.

"I'll probably have my little trip under arrest for nothing," Ross told himself as they reached the foot of Crosby. "Mr. Jones will blow my head off and send back for Leslie. Queer father not to come himself instead of sending a sheriff and a warrant and so disgrace his own son!"

As to who was responsible for notifying the father of the whereabouts of his son, Ross did not for a moment doubt. Sandy's trip to Cody and the departure a few days before of both brothers answered that question to his satisfaction.

At the foot of Crosby the trail of horsemen turned into the wagon trail leading past Gale's Ridge. On foot approaching them was a man whom Ross had met often in Steele's shack, and the sight of him awoke the boy with a shock to another phase of the situation that he had not, so far, had time to consider. Of course, it would not be possible for him to reach Cody and Mr. Jones without betraying his identity to the sheriff! There were the men of Gale's Ridge, the hotel at Meeteetse, and above all, there was Sagehen Roost and Hank. He turned in his saddle. It was a waste of time to go on. He might as well own up and let the sheriff go back after Leslie.

"I was foolish to think of coming!" he muttered aloud and reined in his horse.

The sheriff, coming on behind with his head bent, looked up questioningly and rode alongside. The two had not exchanged a word since leaving the Creek, the sheriff being silent by nature and Ross by choice. At that instant, the footman passed them. On the sheriff he bestowed an unrecognizing nod, on Ross a broad and cordial grin.

"Hello, there, Doc!" he greeted and passed on.

The sheriff glanced in surprise from the man to Ross. The latter drew a deep breath, and squaring about on his saddle shook the bridle reins. "That's a nickname they've given me," he muttered and rode on.

The sheriff nodded and fell back, leaving Ross determined to play the game as far as he was able. He had forgotten that he was known from Cody to Meeteetse as "Doc Tenderfoot." In a few moments they had passed through camp and, rounding the shoulder of old Dundee, settled down to the eighteen mile ride to the half-way house between Miners' Camp and Meeteetse. This house, as Ross knew, had changed hands since his arrival in the mountains, and the change would lessen the chances that he would be recognized there. As it turned out, the sheriff was not recognized either, the family being newcomers in Wyoming, and the two ate in silence, the sheriff introducing neither himself nor Ross.

"Luck is with me so far," Ross thought as they saddled and rode away from the ranch, "but how can I ever get past Meeteetse and Sagehen Roost?"

The moon shone brilliantly, and they pushed ahead rapidly, Ross exulting over the sheriff's determination to get on to Meeteetse that night. They rode as silently as before, Ross in advance. The black hills met the trail on either side, and beside the trail flowed the shallow waters of Wood River until it merged into the Grey Bull. Half-way to Meeteetse, the sheriff's horse stumbled and limped thereafter, necessitating a slower pace, so that it was nearly midnight before they drew rein in front of the "Weller House."

To Ross's relief, the place was dark with the exception of a single lamp in the office. Even the barroom was deserted. Ross left the sheriff to register for both, and then followed the sleepy clerk down to a lunch of cold "come-backs" which that individual "rustled" from the kitchen himself.

"If fortune will favor me as well to-morrow as it did to-day," Ross thought as he listened to the sheriff's first snores, "I'll be next to Jones by this time to-morrow night and try to do some talking for Leslie!"

He knew that his roommate was no wiser concerning him than when they started from Meadow Creek, and he most heartily desired a continuation of that ignorance.

In the morning the two were up early and down to breakfast. Ross looked about apprehensively for some one who had seen him on his way into the mountains. He slunk into the dining-room in the wake of the bulkier sheriff and pushing himself

unobtrusively into a corner seat bent low over his plate as befitted a young man under arrest. But no sooner was he seated than the proprietor of the house spied him from the other end of the dining-room, and with never a suspicion that he was talking to the sheriff's prisoner, strode across the room. He slapped the sheriff familiarly on the shoulder:

"What the dickens are you doing up this way? Why don't ye stay in Basin where ye belong?"

Then he grasped Ross's hand cordially:

"Bless us if here ain't Doc back again. Got them claims cleaned up yet, Doc?"

Ross, encountering the puzzled eyes of the sheriff, quaked. "No, we haven't yet," he muttered and glancing toward the dining-room door, exclaimed in sudden inspiration, "Wonder if that man is motioning to you?"

The proprietor looked around. Several men were in the hall outside the dining-room. "I'll go and see," he exclaimed.

The sheriff continued to look at Ross. "Bluff!" he announced briefly and understandingly.

The blood flooded Ross's face guiltily. "It was," he confessed, adding quickly, "Say, don't give my arrest away where I'm known, will you?"

His request and confusion satisfied the sheriff. The puzzled expression died out of his face. "All right," he assented and fell on his breakfast.

The proprietor did not see Ross again until he was riding away. Then he ran out of the barroom bareheaded and called, "Steele's in Cody, Doc. He said you was pannin' out more like an old prospector than a tenderfoot."

The sheriff rode up beside his prisoner with a quick inquiry: "How long have ye worked for Weimer?"

"Long enough to be sick of it and want to quit," returned Ross gruffly, giving his horse a quick slap that set the animal to loping. It was no part of his plan to hold any unnecessary conversation with the sheriff that day.

"I guess," the latter called as he came galloping after, "that you'll quit now all right, all right!"

Ross made no reply, but took care to keep well in advance of his captor. Although his plan had, so far, succeeded, he was far from feeling triumphant because of a distressing sense of guilt at the deception he was obliged to practice. Nor was he able to dispel this sense by the knowledge that he was acting for the good of all concerned.

"I may be only messing things up more than they are already," he thought dejectedly as they approached Sagehen Roost. "What under the sun led me to think I was equal to such a job, anyway?"

Then, suddenly, his eyes narrowed, his chin raised itself determinedly and he turned his attention to the half-way house and the loquacious Hank. How could he ever get past Hank and remain Leslie Jones in the sheriff's eyes? If only he could get a moment's speech with Hank alone. But the sheriff was ever at his elbow. They had made good time from Meeteetse, and so approached Dry Creek and Sagehen Roost a full hour ahead of the stage from Cody. This fact gave Ross courage. With the stage-driver eliminated he had only Hank to deal with.

"Hello, Hank!" shouted the sheriff as they dismounted in front of the corral. "Shake us up some grub right away, will ye?"

Hank appeared at the door. Ross dodged behind the sheriff's horse, and stooping over noted the approach of Hank's legs. When they had borne their owner to the corral gate he straightened up and saying loudly: "Hello, Hank!" scratched the flank of the horse sharply with a pin he had found under the lapel of his coat.

"Wall, if there ain't Doc Tenderfoot!" shouted Hank, but got no further.

The horse leaped forward, and, as the sheriff sprang for its head, Ross managed to get Hank's ear for an instant:

"Don't give me away, Hank. Talk to him and let me alone—understand—no names called. Don't talk to me nor about me."

Hank stared his amazement, helped the sheriff catch his mount, scratched his head until Ross's words had soaked in, and then obeyed them so literally that when, half an hour later, Ross leaped to his horse's back, he was still Leslie Jones to the taciturn sheriff, and Hank, tongue-tied for once, was left standing beside the corral gate with a multitude of questions unasked.

Ross's spirits arose. They were on the home stretch now to Cody. There was not a house on the way and only the stage to meet. Ross, forgetting his rôle as a shamefaced prisoner, began to whistle and plan what he should say to Leslie's father. His buoyancy was checked only when he chanced to look over his shoulder and discovered the sheriff looking at him not only with the puzzled air which he had worn at Meeteetse, but, Ross thought, with suspicion also.

"I never seen a sober man arrested that took arrest as you do," the sheriff declared riding to Ross's side. "Think this is a little picnic, don't ye?"

"I'm trying to think just how it will turn out," answered the boy seriously. "There's the Cody stage, isn't it?"

The sheriff reined his horse back, and, with a flourish, the four horses swept past with Andy's foot jammed hard on the brake and Andy's whip cracking over the wheelers' heads. Just in the nick of time he recognized Ross.

"Hi, there!" he shouted. "Doc, where's yer patient? And how is he?"

Then, before any answer could be returned, the stage was beyond reach of Ross's voice, disappearing in a cloud of dust.

"What patient does he mean?" asked the sheriff.

"It's a fellow I helped when I first came out here," answered Ross frankly. He was afraid of the sheriff's suspicions. "He was hurt in front of Sagehen Roost, and as I know something about surgery I—helped—to fix him up."

The sheriff studied his horse's ears. A look of perplexity overspread his face. "I heard of that down in Basin. But it seems to me that was before you come." He looked hard at Ross. "The McKenzies said—" He stopped suddenly, and bit his lips.

Ross seized this pause to mutter, "It's not so long ago," and forged ahead on the trail, taking good care to keep ahead until the lights of Cody and the odor of the Shoshone River—"Stinking Water"—smote their senses together through the gathering darkness of the early December night. Then the sheriff, straightening in his saddle, said in a voice of authority:

"Come back here. We'll ride neck and neck now."

Ross fell back, and asked his first question, and no sooner was it out than he bit his lips savagely in vexation at his own thoughtlessness.

"Is Mr. Jones stopping at 'The Irma'?"

"Who?" exploded the sheriff.

"Mr. Jones," murmured Ross in confusion.

The sheriff looked the boy over silently but intently in the moonlight. The blood surged into Ross's face, and, despite the chill of the night wind, the perspiration broke out on his forehead.

"Huh!" was the only response to his question. "Jones!"

Then, with their horses neck to neck the two rode over the bridge together and for the second time entered the town to which Buffalo Bill has given his name, Cody. On the other side of the bridge, near the dust-deep road, stood a tent. The flap was fastened back, and, within, seated about a rough table, sat four men playing cards. When the sound of horses' hoofs reached the players, one of them arose and came to the tent's opening.

It was Sandy McKenzie.

The sheriff, still regarding Ross, did not look toward the tent, while Ross, excited over the prospect of meeting Leslie's father, and confused by his recent misspeech, scarcely bestowed a moment's thought on Sandy, whom he had known was in Cody and believed to be the instigator of the arrest. He glanced, however, within the tent as they passed and recognized Waymart. The man sitting next, his back to the open flap, his face bent over the cards in his hand, one leg stretched out under the table, looked strangely familiar to the boy, but he was too preoccupied to give him any attention. The fourth man, his face turned toward the riders, was a stranger.

A moment later, a man took the horses in front of "The Irma," and the sheriff with his prisoner walked into the lobby and up to the desk. Picking up the pen, the sheriff thrust it into Ross's hand.

"Register for yourself," he commanded briefly.

Ross hesitated, glanced at the waiting clerk, glanced at the suspicious face of the sheriff and then, with a shaking hand, wrote: "Ross Grant, Junior," and laid the pen down.

The sheriff drew the register toward him with a slowly purpling face.

"That's my name," declared Ross. He spoke defensively, yet with a ring of exultation in his voice. "You haven't asked me for it before."

The blood dropped out of the sheriff's face. The shivers ran down Ross's spine at the anger in his face.

"What does this mean, you cub!" the sheriff demanded furiously.

"It means that I want to talk to Leslie Jones' father before he sees Leslie," announced Ross boldly, "so I came with you. There was nothing to prevent my coming."

A hand fell on the sheriff's shoulder. Sandy McKenzie stood at Ross's elbow. Sandy's face wore a curiously baffled expression, but he nodded to Ross in much his usual nonchalant manner.

"Hello, Doc, you here? Didn't expect to see you. How'd you leave Leslie Jones?"

There was an emphasis on the last name which Ross did not notice. Neither did he notice the shrewd observation in the questioner's eyes.

"I left him busy," the boy returned glibly, "and so did the sheriff!"

Once more the blood rushed into the sheriff's face, and in unselected language he had begun to tell Ross what he thought of him, when Sandy succeeded in drawing him aside and leading him into the barroom, followed by Waymart and a group that the conversation had attracted.

After they had disappeared, Ross turned to the clerk. "Is Mr. Jones stopping here?" he asked confidently.

"Nope," responded the clerk, leaning an elbow on the ledger. "What was it you put over the sheriff?"

"Not here!" Ross exclaimed, not hearing the question. "Did you understand the name? I want to see Mr. Jones." In his anxiety he raised his voice.

The clerk grinned. "There ain't no man here by the name of Jones."

"But there must be," Ross insisted stupidly. "There's got to be! This is the only hotel in town, isn't it?"

"Yep," grinned the clerk. "It's the original Waldorf-Astory all right. Where does this here Jones hail from?"

"Omaha." There was unlimited dismay in Ross's tone.

"Hain't got any one from Omaha here, and hain't had this winter."

Ross pulled the register toward him and began to scan the names. Instantly he exclaimed, "Bully! Steele. I'd forgotten him. I'll see—"

"Not this trip!" the clerk interrupted lazily. "Ye must 'a' met Steele. He went back on the stage to-night."

"Leonard, then. He's here, isn't he?"

"Nope," replied the clerk nonchalantly. "He's in Basin. Home's there, ye know."

Baffled, perplexed, Ross turned again to the register. The clerk had told the truth. There had been no guest entered from Omaha or any place further away than Montana in weeks. "See here," he exclaimed finally, "do you know anything about Leslie Jones, that went over to Meadow Creek with a man named Wilson a few weeks ago?"

The clerk leisurely turned the pages until he arrived at the entry sought. "Here they be," he pushed the book across the counter. "Wilson and Jones. They stayed here most a week. Knew Wilson and remember Jones when he was here."

"And hasn't his father been here?" asked Ross eagerly. "Not at any time?"

"Nope."

"Haven't you—haven't you heard from him at any time or—or known about him? I've got to see the father," Ross burst out in irrepressible confidence born of his distraction. "I've stopped work and come all the way down from the Shoshones to talk with Jones."

"Can't help it. Don't know anything about any Jones except this young one."

At this point the clerk was called into the dining-room. He left Ross standing beside the desk staring at the register, confused and helpless.

"And right here I got the big head over the way I had managed," he told himself in humiliation, "and at the very last minute gave the whole thing away!"

Why couldn't he have had the sense to play the game far enough to see the end—and Leslie's father, he asked himself miserably. Now he had simply made a fool of himself and angered the sheriff and had not benefited Leslie. The sheriff would probably turn about and go back after the right boy. With this thought Ross straightened his shoulders determinedly and turned toward the barroom. As there was nothing to be gained by silence he was going to ask questions. As he turned, a man slid into the hotel in advance of him—the man with the oddly familiar back.

The sheriff, Sandy and Waymart were standing together, and toward them Ross made his way through clouds of tobacco smoke and past groups of cowboys, railroad men and prospectors.

"Hi, Doc!" called Sandy gaily. "Hump along here and be sociable. What'll you have? It's on me. Anybody," admiringly, "that's smart enough t' fool the sheriff of Big Horn County can have anything on me they'll take."

The sheriff turned his back on Sandy and scowled. He did not glance at his late prisoner.

"I don't want anything," declared Ross shortly. He planted himself resolutely in front of Sandy. "But I'd like to know where Leslie Jones' father is?"

Sandy smiled easily, while the scowl faded from the sheriff's face.

"I ain't no city directory, Doc," responded Sandy, "and what's more, I ain't knowin' of any Leslie Jones! His end name ain't any more Jones than yours is. He's fooled ye mighty bad—see?"

The blood rushed to Ross's face. "N-not Jones?" he stammered. "Not Jones! What is it then?"

"Why, Doc, if he don't want ye t' know I ain't got a call t' tell ye. Be reasonable." Sandy spoke with maddening pleasantry and condescension. "A feller's name is his own, and if he wants t' keep it kinda fresh and unused I ain't the one t' dig it up 'n' let it get covered with dust. Better go back t' Meadow Creek and have it out with Leslie."

Ten minutes later, Ross, with a hot and angry face, was back in the lobby. His indignation burned against Leslie, who had, unconsciously, helped to put him in the hole in which he found himself. The subdued laugh which had marked his retreat from the barroom rang long in his ears. The sheriff's laugh was the loudest.

"Arrest will serve him right!" muttered Ross as he entered the dining-room. "There isn't a reason on earth why he shouldn't have told me his right name when he told me the rest."

Angrily Ross ate his supper, glowering down at his plate and not noticing the entrance of the McKenzies with the sheriff.

After supper he went up to his room. The door was unlocked, the key having been long since lost. A single electric bulb swinging over the dresser was alight. Under the bulb lay a sealed and soiled envelope. Ross picked it up and turning it over came on the direction, "Doc Tenderfoot," in a sprawling and carefully careless hand. Wonderingly he opened the envelope. Within was a note written with a lead pencil on the back of a yellow advertising sheet. It ran:

"Leslie's name is Quinn, not Jones. His father is A. B. Quinn, North Bend, Okla., or 14 Castle Street, Omaha. He is in Omaha now waiting for Leslie. Sheriff is to send him there. Mum is the word about this note—to him or Leslie or the McKenzies. If I did not know you were on the square you would not get it to be mum about."

CHAPTER X

A NEWCOMER ON MEADOW CREEK

"'OLD man Quinn!'" Ross cried aloud. "'Old man Quinn' and the sheep war. And Leslie is his son!"

It all came back, the story he had almost forgotten in the stress of events on Meadow Creek, the conversation on the train, old Sheepy's tale and, at last, his suspicions concerning Lon Weston with his dyed hair. And when his memory brought Lon into mental view, Ross's face lit up with a sudden flash of intelligence.

"It was Weston that I saw in the tent, and it was Weston that went into the barroom ahead of me!"

He laid the note on the dresser and, bending under the electric light, studied it. There was nothing to show who had written it except the caution at the end. That might have emanated from Waymart, but the language was better than he would have used. Ross felt that it was Lon Weston who had written that message. Of course, if such was the case, and Lon was the fourth whom old man Quinn was looking for, that warning not to give the unsigned writer away would be accounted for. It might, in some way, be the clew that would lead to Lon's detection. Ross now recalled how Lon had lain with one arm over his face all the time that Wilson and Leslie had been at the stage camp. He could not now recall whether or not the injured man's name had been spoken in Leslie's presence. But he did remember that Leslie had said of the McKenzies that perhaps they were men at some time in his father's employ, in which case he might not know them, but that they would probably recognize him.

"Then if he had heard Weston's name it might not mean anything to Leslie," Ross concluded.

He wondered why Lon had not made himself known that evening and wondered how he came to know the McKenzies. In fact, he sat on the side of his bed wondering about a dozen things until midnight, and then went to bed undecided what to do now that he had Quinn's address in his possession. His resentment kindled against Leslie whenever he thought of the latter's deception about his name. And the probabilities were that a letter from him, Ross, would not move the father to clemency.

In this undecided state of mind, Ross strolled into the lobby the following morning, considering how he could best kill time until the stage started for Meeteetse that evening. As he was standing in front of a window, his hands deep in his pockets, the sheriff and Sandy rode past, followed by Waymart. Neither the sheriff nor Waymart looked his way. But Sandy did, and, grinning, raised his hand in a graceful salute. Ross, nodding, felt his anger at Sandy dying. Distrust him as he must, Ross could not dislike him. In this strange state of mind, however, the boy was by no means alone throughout the length and breadth of Big Horn County.

"They're going now after the right chap," thought Ross, and a wave of sympathy for Leslie began to wash away his resentment.

In the end, he spent the greater part of the day composing a letter to old man Quinn, wherein he set forth Leslie's position, prospects and altered feelings in bald statements containing but few adjectives. In explaining who the writer was he gave a brief account of his connection with the sheriff. Between the acts of composing, tearing up, and rewriting the composition, he searched Cody for Lon Weston, but could not find him.

When, that evening, he climbed into the stage behind Andy, he had sent the letter to Leslie's father and had not caught a glimpse of Weston.

At the stage camp he was the butt of much congratulation and derision from the hilarious Hank. "Say, you made the sheriff mad as a hornet, but he had t' own up ye cheated 'im out of a year's growth. Sandy set the hull thing out in good shape. But why didn't ye stick t' yer job instid of layin' down 'n' kickin' up yer heels before the time?"

"Because I'm no good, Hank, this side of the Mississippi River," returned Ross in humility of spirit. "Don't knock me—you can't get ahead of me in that respect! I've kicked myself all over Cody to-day."

The following morning, at Meeteetse, he joined Bill Travers and the Miners' Camp stage and started on the all day's journey into the mountains. At noon, he began looking for the sheriff and Leslie. He had calculated that they would meet the stage at the half-way ranch and there he would tell Leslie what he had written his father. But

no Leslie appeared. All the afternoon during the stage's progress into the mountains, Ross looked for the sheriff and his prisoner, but he looked in vain.

At six o'clock, Bill Travers dropped his one passenger in front of Steele's shack, and Ross, climbing Gale's Ridge, opened the door on the superintendent in the act of sitting down to supper.

"Hello, there!" cried Steele grasping the boy's chilled hand. "Here's the best elk steak you ever planted your teeth in. Draw up and tell me what you've been up to, skylarking off to Cody with the sheriff."

Ross followed directions, and soon was giving Steele the entire story of his capture and failure.

Steele, forgetting to eat, alternated between amusement and amazement. "By George, I don't wonder that sheriff was mad! You see, Doc, he's new to the business of being sheriff. You were his first arrest."

"Probably if he were not so new he wouldn't have been so easily fooled."

"I can't say," retorted Steele, "that he was easily fooled. Strikes me you were about as slow with him as greased lightning."

Ross flushed at the praise. It was balm to his wounds in his self-esteem.

Early the following morning, he started for Meadow Creek, and at the upper camp learned something for which he was unprepared and which was a source of temporary satisfaction to him.

Leslie had disappeared.

Until noon Ross lingered in camp watching the sheriff and Sandy pass and repass in their search for the runaway. Finally, just before noon, he saw them on snow-shoes striking out up Wood River cañon into the uninhabited wilderness beyond. Then he slowly mounted the dizzy trail leading to Weimer's shack and the interrupted work.

"It must have been my note that warned him," Ross thought as he watched the figures toiling up Wood River cañon. "I hope they have the chase of their lives," he said aloud, "and then I can patronize Sandy and stroke him down as he did me at 'The Irma'—provided I dare!"

He found Weimer sitting beside the fire smoking and growling over the absence of both his assistants.

"Dot poy," he explained, "read dot paper you wrote and den vat does he do, hein? He says notings, aber he takes some tings and out he goes und leaves me mit der vork und mit mine eyes, und dey so pad!"

This was the extent of the information he was able to give Ross concerning Leslie. Many grievances he had against the sheriff and "dem McKenzies" that had ransacked

the premises and had ridden to and fro, over to Wilson's and round the mountains searching for traces of Leslie.

As it turned out, they might have found a trace of him had they searched more thoroughly, for the following day, Ross, diving into the pocket of his slicker for some nails that he carried there, came on a folded note pinned in the bottom of the pocket.

BESIDE THE DYNAMITE BOX

"All I understand from your letter," ran the note, "is that it has given me a chance to make my getaway. It was a mighty white thing of you to do, and I appreciate it, though I know I haven't acted that way. You've probably found out what my name is by this time. I didn't tell you, because I was so dead ashamed about the whole matter that I hated to face myself and disgrace the name. But I never thought father would do such a thing as he has, and so I shall clear out and stay cleared until he has stopped hunting. I know where I'm going, and you'll see me in Meadow Creek after father goes back and has given me up.—LESLIE JONES QUINN."

Ross, standing on the dump beside the dynamite box, a hammer in one hand, read the letter. At once all his remaining resentment against Leslie disappeared. "I guess I would have done the same about the name in his place," he concluded.

Pinning the note in his pocket again for safe keeping he repaired the dynamite box. Then he entered the tunnel, where Weimer was once more at work drilling for a blast.

"Uncle Jake," he asked, "when did Leslie leave, what time in the day?"

"It was not day, it was night," growled Weimer wrestling with the drill. "He went away in the darkness."

"That accounts," said Ross, "for his not having been seen in camp."

He felt certain that Leslie would take refuge in the shack up Wood River cañon where Wilson had stored some of the supplies in preparation for the winter's work on the coal claims. In this case he would be discovered, for it was in that direction that the sheriff and Sandy had gone as Ross was climbing the Crosby trail. Therefore, it was with anxiety that the boy looked for the return of the McKenzies.

Darkness had fallen when he left the tunnel that night, and as he emerged from the trees that clustered about the dump, he saw a light in the McKenzie cabin. Without waiting for his supper, he crossed the little valley and rapped on the door.

"Hello, Doc," came Sandy's voice from within. "Haul up the latch-string and show yerself. Comin' to crow over us, ain't ye?" he continued as Ross entered. "Well, that ye can, fer we can't find hide nor hair of Leslie, and the sheriff has hit the trail to Basin about as mad as they make 'em over the whole thing!"

Here Sandy threw his head back and laughed as amusedly as though the entire affair were a joke of his own manufacture. He did not seem to harbor the least resentment

against Ross for having blocked the wheels of his game. Rather, he applauded the blocking frankly, while Waymart smoked stolidly beside the table and said nothing.

"That little note that you left for Less is what done the business," Sandy went on cheerfully reviewing the situation. "The sheriff had forgot that note 'til we got up here and the bird wa'n't t' be found in the hand ner the bush neither. That was a neat little trick, Doc, almost as neat as the way ye come it over the sheriff on the trail to Cody. Guess he'll not fergit ye fer a spell! Mart, don't be s' stingy with that weed. Hand over some. My pipe is about as empty as the sheriff's head."

"Why did you do it, Sandy?" Ross burst out. "What made you send word to Leslie's father that he was here?"

Sandy composedly filled his pipe and lighted it. "It was cruelty t' little children not t', Doc. The very idee of Leslie Jones leavin' his pa and—"

"His name isn't Jones, and you know it, and I know it!" interrupted Ross. He could not keep the ring of triumph from his tone. "He is Leslie Quinn."

Sandy's hand traveled slowly to his pipe. "Is he? How'd you find out?" he asked quickly.

"Easily enough," said Ross carelessly, "when you know how."

Both Waymart and Sandy regarded the boy intently. "Been back here then, has he?" they asked in one breath.

Ross arose. "It would be cruelty to little children' to tell you!" he quoted boldly and opened the door.

Waymart gave an exclamation and sprang to his feet. His hands were clenched. But Sandy, kicking him under the table, guffawed.

"Give and take, Mart," he exclaimed. "I'm willin' t' chew my own words, and if I am willin' there ain't no kick comin' from you!"

The following day Ross wrote another letter to Leslie's father and enclosed the note he had found pinned in his pocket. This letter he entrusted to Wilson to mail in Cody, for Wilson was going to Butte for a few weeks before beginning his winter's work on his coal claims. He stopped at noon to bid Weimer and Ross good-bye.

"Nothin' would hire me t' stay over here all winter," were his last words to Ross.

Although the latter had seen but little of the prospector, his departure made the valley seem lonelier than ever, and caused Ross to cling desperately to the idea of the McKenzies remaining. As the days passed, and more snow fell, the brothers began to get decidedly uneasy. They accounted for their uneasiness to Ross by telling him they were in need of supplies and saw no way of getting any over from Miners' Camp. Sandy was the informant, as usual, while Waymart's eyebrows were lifted in

momentary surprise. By that time every horse in Miners' Camp had been sent "below." There was but little grass on the mountains during the brief summer; and through the winter, which occupied nine months of the year, every ounce of fodder must be packed over the difficult road from the ranches.

"I don't see," quoth Sandy unconvincingly, "but what we'll have to strike the trail. Hain't no way, as I can see, to pack grub over except on our backs, and that's too slow."

For a moment there was silence in Weimer's cabin. The wind moaned and wailed among the hemlocks, and whistled savagely past the cabin. In his bunk Weimer snored. Above them came the cry of the coyotes, like a child's long-drawn scream of pain and fear. The terror of loneliness among those overhanging mountains gripped at the boy's throat. For a moment he could not speak.

Then, "If you could get provisions over easily, would you stay longer?"

Sandy crossed his legs restfully. "Sure," he answered readily.

That week, therefore, Ross used his spare time—and some time which he ought not to have spared—in making a sled. It was, when finished, a crude but efficient affair, the runners being surmounted by a double-decked box. This vehicle he exhibited one day to the McKenzies as the prospective conveyor of their supplies over the mountains.

Sandy stood in front of the shack, his hands in his pockets, his cap pushed well back on his head and the front lock of hair falling over his forehead.

"Doc, you're the stuff!" he cried warmly. "There's an idee or two floatin' around in yer tenderfoot brain, ain't there?"

Tied to both front and rear of the sled were ropes, two in front, one behind. Those in front differed in length.

"See?" explained Ross. "Two can't walk abreast on the trail, but still it's easier for each one to pull on his own rope. That's the reason I made 'em of different lengths. Then one of us behind can hold the sled from slipping off the trail with the rear rope. In this way we can bring up a big load of supplies."

Sandy removed his cap, and pushed back his hair.

"Doc, where was you raised? Guess I'll go back t' the same place, and be raised over agin. It might pay." His tone expressed an admiration that was almost genuine.

Waymart said nothing. He scarcely glanced at the sled, but turned away scowling up toward the tunnel where, as he had informed himself, Ross and Weimer were doing an amazingly good piece of work.

As they started back toward their own shack, Ross heard Waymart say angrily to Sandy, "Are you goin' to take the use of that sled?"

And Sandy's answer, "For sure, now! What's eatin' you, Mart? Doc's got a good head on 'im."

"Entirely too good fer us, mebby!" growled Waymart; and Ross smiled in satisfaction, thinking they referred to his work in the tunnel.

Just before supper, the door of Weimer's shack unceremoniously opened, and Waymart's arm was thrust in. "Here," his voice said roughly, "take this here elk steak."

Ross relieved the arm of its burden, and the door closed sharply. It was a sirloin steak, the juiciest and most tender in the animal which the brothers had brought into the valley the day before. Sandy had often brought them venison before, but never Waymart; and Ross was pleased.

"While Sandy is entertaining," Ross had told Steele, "and Waymart seldom says two sentences at one sitting, and next to never meets my eye, yet, if it came right down to a choice, I believe I'd rather travel along with Waymart than with Sandy."

"Your choice is all right," Steele had replied. "If Waymart would cut loose from Sandy, he'd earn an honest living. It's Sandy that's the head, though. It's Sandy that plans; Waymart furnishes the feet and arms. Sandy's good company, but I wouldn't trust him with my pocketbook around the corner. Not," Steele added, "that he'd steal it in such a way that the law could touch him. No, he'd have the pocketbook, but it 'ud leave him free to look any jury in the eye and to shake hands with me afterward."

The new sled made its first journey down into Miners' Camp one Sunday in December two weeks after Ross had ridden down with the sheriff. Waymart went ahead with one of the leading-ropes over his shoulder, and Sandy behind, steadying the empty vehicle around the shoulder of Crosby. Waymart led because he was the heaviest, and there was a deep fall of snow to contend against except around the shoulder, where, fortunately, the wind had swept the mountain clean.

As the trail broadened beyond, Waymart paused to survey the low-hanging clouds. Ross, in the rear, stopped and studied the mountains which Nature had in ages past taken in her gigantic hands and flung into the cañon between Dundee and Crosby, compelling Wood River to crawl and worm and wind and cut its way deep and narrow down into Miners' Camp.

"I wonder," exclaimed Ross suddenly to Sandy, "what is beyond that conglomeration of peaks."

"Wood River cañon still, clean over on top of the Divide, and you can follow it on horseback right through. Part of the time up there," waving his hand toward the jumble of mountains which seemingly ended the cañon, "it's pretty rocky trailin', especially in winter, but it can be done."

Sandy rested one foot on the edge of the sled. Waymart glued his eyes on the Camp far below. From various projecting stovepipes volumes of smoke were curling straight up in the windless air. From the tunnel of the Mountain Company almost opposite them came a succession of blasts which stirred the echoes between Dundee and Crosby. The Mountain Company were no respecters of Sunday. They were also working day and night in view of the near shut-down of the works.

But Ross's gaze was seeking to penetrate further toward the source of Wood River. "Any one living beyond there?" he asked.

Sandy grinned. "Elk, mountain-sheep, coyotes, bears, and timber wolves."

"But no people?"

"Nope. There ain't a man livin' 'twixt here and the Yellowstone Park—now. Last summer a few prospectors sort of strolled up Wood River a few dozen miles, but they hiked it out, I tell ye, when snow come."

"I wish," Ross said impulsively, "that I could go over there exploring."

Waymart lifted his eyes the fraction of a moment, and encountered Sandy's. A peculiar expression passed between them. Then Waymart's gaze fell again on the Camp, and Sandy replied carelessly to Ross:

"After you git the work done in your tunnel better strike some of these trails, but not in winter. They ain't safe, especially for a tenderfoot."

"But in the summer," returned Ross absently, "I don't expect to be here."

"Oh—that so?" and Sandy gave the sled a careless push.

Waymart drew the rope over his shoulder, and once more the trio descended the trail.

At the upper camp Ross left the brothers to purchase their supplies while he visited the post-office and Steele. At the former place he found a note to himself from Leslie's father and a bulkier letter addressed to Leslie in his care. Mr. Quinn had received both of Ross's letters, he wrote, the last with the enclosure from Leslie. He had taken the steps necessary to recall the warrant, which, he explained, had seemed to him the "surest and quickest way of fetching the boy home," and would allow Leslie to return to Ross as his note indicated that he desired. On his return Ross was to give up the letter put in his care. Mr. Quinn closed his communication with thanks to Ross for the trouble he had been to, also, for his assurance that Leslie was boning down to work!

Two weeks had elapsed since Leslie disappeared. Nothing had been seen of him nor heard of him in either the upper or lower camps, and Ross returned to Meadow Creek troubled in spirit.

"I'm afraid," he told himself as he helped the McKenzies haul their supplies up the trail, "that I've made even a bigger mess of it all the way around than I thought at first."

Steele, from his doorway, watched Ross out of sight that afternoon, with a pleased smile on his bearded lips. He was a tanned and freckled Ross now. Sun and wind and work in the open for two months had left their marks on the boy. He stood straighter, walked more firmly, and had laid on pounds of muscle.

"He's put himself through good and plenty, as well as holding Uncle Jake's nose to the grindstone," concluded Steele, turning back into the cabin. On the making of the sled he had commented but briefly to Ross, realizing how much the presence of the McKenzies meant to the boy. To himself he thought, however:

"That Sandy McKenzie! How he does manage to make other folks do his work!"

During the week which followed, a stranger passed through Miners' Camp. He was seen by only one man, "Society Bill," who belonged to the Gale's Ridge outfit.

"He asked the way to the Meader Creek trail," Society Bill told Steele. "Now, I wonder if he's a new one of them McKenzies. I never set my two eyes on 'im before."

"Horseback?" asked Steele.

"Yep. Decent sort of bronc he rode. Told me to tell Bill Travers to drive it down below to-morrow if it got down this far."

"That looks as if he knew what he was about, and intended to stay," mused Steele.

Early the following morning the "decent sort of broncho," with its bridle reins tied to the pommel of the saddle, was discovered in front of Steele's shack, pawing the snow in an ineffectual attempt to get a breakfast. Bill Travers, returning with the stage, according to request, drove the beast ahead of him down to the first ranch, and, taking off saddle and bridle, turned it into a large corral with dozens of other horses to winter. In the spring one by one the owners would straggle along, identify their horses and saddles, pay their bills, and depart for the mountains.

The owner of the ranch pitched the saddle under a shed, and thought no more about the transaction. Bill Travers, whirling his whip over the backs of his four stage horses, gave the stranger and his horse no more thought. Society Bill, having disseminated his news among the other miners, presently forgot it. But Amos Steele neither forgot nor ceased to speculate.

"Who is he, and what is he doing on the Creek?" Steele asked himself.

The first part of the question Ross answered the following Sunday. He could scarcely wait to open the door before announcing:

"Lon Weston is over on the Creek. He is cousin to the McKenzies!"

CHAPTER XI

MEADOW CREEK VALLEY MISSES LESLIE

ROSS could scarcely believe the evidence of his own senses when he saw Lon Weston riding along the trail below the dump. The boy had pushed the car with its load of ore out to the bumper and dumped it before he saw the horseman in the sheepskin coat, the hairy chaps, and a fur cap drawn over forehead and ears. The horse shied at the chunks of ore rolling almost to its feet, and Weston looked up.

"Hello, there!" shouted Ross. "What on earth are you doing here?"

Weston drew in his horse. "Hello, Doc!" he returned with gruff pleasantness without answering the question.

"Doc" slipped and slid down the snowy path to the trail, and held out a cordial hand.

"How's your leg?"

"All right." Weston gripped the extended hand heartily. "Almost as good 's new."

His brown eyes above his heavy stubby beard held a pleasanter expression than Ross had seen in them while nursing their owner. They were deep eyes, capable of mirroring accurately the varied moods of the man looking out of them.

"I didn't recognize you in Cody three weeks ago," Ross was beginning when Weston interrupted him.

Leaning down from his saddle he met the boy's eyes steadily. "Remember," he said slowly and meaningly, "that you didn't see me—nor hear from me—in Cody."

"All right," agreed Ross, embarrassed by the fixity of the other's stare. "I'll forget it hereafter, but I want to thank—"

"Cut it out," commanded Weston briefly, straightening again in the saddle.

"At least," invited Ross, "you'll come to dinner with me. Uncle Jake is frying ham and onions. Smell 'em? I got some onions and half a dozen apples over at Camp Sunday." His voice could not have been more eager had he been relating the finding of free gold. "Come on in, and have some."

Weston's eyes slipped away from Ross's in a way which reminded the latter of Waymart's, and rested on the smoke from the cabin a quarter of a mile away.

"Guess not, to-day. Thank you just the same. The boys are probably rustlin' grub this minute and they'll be expectin' me. See you again."

Ross stood motionless, looking after him. Weston rode sitting straight, unlike the usual careless forward droop of the cow puncher. He was a well-built man, although his shoulders were rather narrow. But the only characteristic that Ross noticed was the grip of the left knee against the horse. For the strength of that grip he was responsible, but it was a responsibility which Lon did not seem to recognize.

Suddenly the boy realized the newcomer's words. So Sandy and Waymart were expecting him, but had said nothing about it to Ross. And when Ross had told them about Lon Weston at the stage camp they had made no sign that they knew him. That was strange.

He turned slowly toward the cabin, where Weimer was frying ham and onions and boiling coffee. Opening the cabin door he was met by a white gust of steam mingled with savory smoke. He propped the door open, and brought in an armful of wood.

Weimer, in his shirt-sleeves, was bending his head over a little stove, which offered barely room for a small kettle and a skillet with a coffee-pot sandwiched in between. A sheet-iron oven stood on the floor, the top answering for a sideboard. When Weimer made biscuits and sour dough bread, the oven was placed on top of the stove.

Ross threw his wood down on the hard dirt floor, and put a stick into the stove by way of the wide front door. The pine instantly blazed up, showing a wide crack which zigzagged across the side of the old stove.

"Uncle Jake,"—Ross sat back on one heel, and looked up at his partner whose blinking eyes were in the gloom of the cabin unprotected now by goggles,—"Uncle Jake, a stranger has just come into Meadow Creek City on the Limited."

Weimer chuckled. Before the advent of his youthful "pard" the old man—Ross always thought of him as old despite his black hair and great strength—had not laughed in months.

"He stopped at the second station," pursued Ross.

Weimer's face instantly darkened. "At the McKenzies'? One of dem consarned gang, he ist?"

"That's what I want to know. It's Lon Weston, the fellow I told you I took care of at the stage camp."

Weimer dumped ham and onions into an agateware basin, and set it on the table. "I don't know him, I don't. But he comes to der McKenzies, hein? Und after all dose days you spen' mit him!" Uncle Jack frowned heavily, and, sitting down, helped himself to boiled "spuds."

"I tink I knew all dem consarned gang, but dere ist no Veston mit 'em."

Ross dragged to the little bare board table a box marked in big letters, "Ruford's Canned Tomatoes, The Yellow Brand," and, turning the box on end, straddled it opposite Weimer.

Weimer, eating and drinking noisily, found time to ask vindictively, "Ist he for more medicine come mit you?"

Ross shook his head, and bent over his plate.

The plate was tin. The cup out of which he drank his coffee was also tin. His knife and fork were steel, and his spoon was pewter. The place of the lacking milk pitcher was usurped by a tin can of condensed milk with the top bent back and the milk dried all over the sides. But Ross ate—how he ate! Potatoes followed ham, and coffee followed potatoes, and onions followed both, and then he began all over again. Never had eating been such serious work with him. But never, also, had his muscles been so firm and hard. As for a pickaxe, it was coming to feel no heavier than the baseball bat which he had always rather scorned.

"I wonder," he began after a pause, "what Lon's up to here, anyway."

The question started Weimer on his favorite topic, the claim jumpers and the injustice of the mining laws. He could not talk fast enough in English, and so dropped into his native German.

Ross, accustomed to his tirades, cleared away the dishes, pushed the table back against the dirt chinked logs, and lay down on the blankets of his bunk for a few moments, his eyes glued on the little nickel clock.

He broke into the other's scolding monologue. "In ten minutes we must go back to work."

Weimer scowled darkly. His lids, red and swollen, almost obscured his pale-blue eyes. "Mine eyes ist too pad to-day," he declared. "I vill not to go out in de sun again."

A few weeks before, this oft-repeated declaration had alarmed Ross. Now he made no reply. But, when the hands of the nickel clock indicated one, he arose and put on his oiled jumper and oilskin cap.

"Come, Uncle Jake," he said in a strong, decided tone. "Here are your goggles. Get busy, or the McKenzie outfit will have our claims in spite of us. Now, when there are three to watch instead of two, we must show the mettle we're made of."

Moved by the magic statement, ever new and ever powerful, that the claims might be jumped, Uncle Jake, forgetting that in substance he had made the same objection to work twice a day for weeks and that Ross had overcome his objections in substantially the same way, "got busy." And presently Ross led him out, his eyes not only securely goggled, but covered as well with a black cloth which he pressed fearfully against the goggles.

The snow was Weimer's evil genius. He lived in dread of the sight of it. Without assistance he would not move a dozen paces away from the cabin after the sun had risen on Meadow Creek Valley. But the fear of the light had made as great an impression on his mind as the light itself had made on his eyes, and he had fallen into the habit, before Ross came, of staying in his cabin during cloudy days, lest, if he ventured out, the sun might break through the clouds.

The old partner and the young went up the steep trail to the tunnel, Ross leading Weimer up over the side of the dump and into the mouth of the tunnel. In the shelter of its gloom the latter removed his goggles; and, stumbling along over the chunks of ore lying beside the narrow track, he reached the end of the short tunnel which had been blasted from the solid rock. Lighting a fresh candle, he set it in its socket at the end of a sharply pointed iron, a miner's candlestick, and, jabbing the point into a crevice, leisurely surveyed the wall before him. Behind him the little empty car filled the tunnel with sound as Ross pushed it rattling and jolting over the rusty rails.

"Ready to drill for another shot, ain't we?" Ross asked. He pushed the car back out of the way. "Got to hustle to get it done this afternoon, too."

Under the stimulus of Ross's presence and hustle the older man fell to work valiantly, but it was slow work. Down in Miners' Camp machinery performed the task which Weimer was doing laboriously with the aid of a hand drill. Before him, at the end of the tunnel, was a seamed and uneven wall of rock a little higher than his head and a little broader than his reach had he extended his arms on either side. In this wall he patiently drilled three sets of holes, into which the "sticks" were placed for the next "shot," as the explosion of dynamite was called. In mining terms the old man was "putting a shot." Near the top of the wall he made three holes. Half-way down were two more, long and inclined toward each other at the top. These were the "cut-in holes." Lastly, at the foot of the wall were three large holes called "lifters." The contents of the top holes and the cut-ins were set off first, splintering and cracking the rock. Then the lifters were exploded, actually lifting the loosened mass above it and hurling it into the tunnel.

When quiet reigned again, and Ross had loaded his hand car with the débris, he pushed it out on the dump again through the moist, freezing atmosphere of the tunnel. There was water everywhere. Near the mouth of the tunnel it was frozen on the sides and the top, and carpeted the floor with slush. Further in it was unfrozen, oozing out of the sides, dripping from the roof, running along the track. It covered the oiled garments of the men at work. It put out their candles. It made muck of the quartz dust on the floor. It often destroyed the lighted fuses.

There was something maddening to Ross in its incessant drip and drizzle, and he always emerged on the dump with a feeling of relief, especially when the sun shone as it did that day in dazzling brightness.

He dumped the car, and was about to push it back when his eyes fell on Weston's horse journeying on the back trail riderless.

"That means," thought Ross, "that he's going to stay. Why?"

A feeling of relief was mixed with uneasiness. The relief was caused by this further link in the chain of evidence that when the trail to Miners' Camp was closed it would not close on Weimer and him alone. The uneasiness had to do with the mission of the McKenzie outfit in Meadow Creek Valley. Why were they reinforced by Weston?

"Oh!" exclaimed Ross aloud in sudden disgust with himself. "He's come to hunt, of course! His gun was strapped on behind. I never thought of that. If he belongs to the McKenzie outfit, he'd rather hunt than eat."

It seemed to him that the "outfit" bore him not the slightest grudge or ill will. Sandy, indeed, seemed openly to like him, Waymart tolerated him with a surly good humor, while Weston—here Ross knit his brow—Weston baffled him completely; still, considering the incident of the note in Cody, the boy looked on him as a friend albeit one who evidently did not care to pose in that capacity before the McKenzies.

From his position Ross could look down and across on the claims of the McKenzies and almost into the "discovery hole" in which they were supposed to be working. Waymart was leisurely drilling a hole in the rock to receive a stick of dynamite when Sandy came out of the cabin and walked rapidly toward him.

The two talked together a moment, and then Weston joined them. In a moment the three fell apart, and appeared to be talking excitedly. Presently Waymart dropped the discussion, and turning his back walked away a few steps with his hands in his pockets and stood in a listening attitude. Ross watched with absorbing interest. Even at that distance he could see that the discussion between the other two was not amiable. The scene lasted but a few moments, and then all three descended to the cabin together.

That evening after supper, Ross washed the day's dishes, brought in wood, and put the room to rights, while Weimer alternately smoked and snored in his bunk. The room was dimly lighted by candles in candlesticks thrust into logs. Ross, so tired and sleepy he could scarcely keep his eyes open, hung up the dish-pan on its nail beside the stove, and looked longingly toward the emergency chest pushed beneath his bunk. Not one word had he mastered of the contents of the books he had stowed away there with such high hopes.

"I don't believe the McKenzies are coming over," he told Weimer, as he filled the stove and wound up the clock. "It's too late for them."

Weimer made no reply. His pipe had fallen on his chest, and his hair-encircled mouth was wide open in a vacuous sleep. At that moment the rising wind beat the snow against the window, and Ross uttered an exclamation. He had forgotten to shut the

tool-house door, and, fearing that with the wind in the south the little log house would be filled with snow before morning, he went back up the trail to the tunnel. Climbing noiselessly over the soft snow, he arrived at the ore dump, and was making for the tool house across the mouth of the tunnel when a light flickered in his path.

Startled, he looked into the tunnel, and saw three figures at the end silhouetted against the dim candle-light.

"Lon, Sandy and Waymart," he muttered.

There was no danger of his being discovered, so dark was the night. Therefore, he sat down on his heels beside the tool house, and watched, puzzled at first to understand the movements of the men.

"Oh," he muttered suddenly, "they're measuring to see how fast the work is going."

With a tape line the men were estimating the cubic feet of rock excavated by Ross and Weimer.

Ross hugged his knees, and exulted. His "friends the enemy" might measure all they chose, he thought; and every length of the tape line would reveal to them the futility of waiting to jump the Weimer-Grant claims.

Presently the three started out of the tunnel. Ross, seeking a hiding-place, found it behind a clump of low spruce trees at the right of the tunnel's mouth. The intruders blew out their candles as they came out on the dump.

"At this rate," Ross heard Waymart say, "they're solid on these here claims."

But, although he strained his ears, he could hear nothing more. After a brief wait the last sound of twigs breaking under their shoes died away; and Ross, leaving his hiding-place, shut the tool-house door and went back to the cabin.

He found Weimer awake and whistling in his bunk. Ross paused at the door, regarding him curiously. It was the first time he had ever heard the old man make this cheerful sound, although Steele had said he used to be called Whistling Weimer as well as Dutch Weimer.

"Hello, Uncle Jake!" cried Ross. "Feeling pretty gay, aren't you?"

Weimer stopped in the middle of his tune, and blinked at Ross. "Nein," he denied, "I ain't feelin' gay. If your eyes vas—"

Ross interrupted. "Now, see here, Uncle Jake; you know your eyes are better since I've taken to doctoring them."

The last few weeks had certainly improved the old man. His eyes were better, owing to a cooling lotion which Ross had dropped under the lids twice a day. Weimer's mind was clearer because his growing confidence in his young partner had quieted his fears.

Ross's cheerfulness was also contagious. Nor did the cleanliness on which the boy insisted lower Weimer's vitality. Soap became a known quantity to him.

All these favorable circumstances reacted on Weimer's work. He was becoming more and more efficient, and Ross's spirits had risen as the days passed; and he saw the growing intelligence manifested by the other in regard to operations in the tunnel. This change for the better in Uncle Jake had not passed unnoticed by the McKenzies.

Ross said nothing to the old man about the scene he had just witnessed in the tunnel. It would do no good, and would only inflame the other's wrath. Therefore, he snuffed the candles, repeating mechanically:

"Don't believe the McKenzies are coming over to-night."

But at that moment footsteps sounded outside the door. The snow creaked under the pressure of shoes, and Sandy and Waymart entered.

Sandy was as gay and talkative as ever, but not Waymart. He sat down on a box, leaned back against the logs, turned up his coat collar to protect himself from the icy wind, which sought out the dirt-chinked crevices, and, pulling a mouth-organ from his pocket, began to play. Nor did he stop until Sandy rose to go. A sombre figure he made back among the shadows, his eyes resting vacantly on the floor at his feet. One leg was crossed over the other, the toe moving in time to the discordant music. Waymart's thoughts did not seem to be cheerful companions.

But Sandy had drawn a box close up beside the roaring fire, and sat with his elbows on his knees and a pipe in his mouth. He paid no attention to Weimer nor to his musical brother, but told Ross yarns of the gold-fields of Montana and Nevada, tales concerning other men, Ross noticed; Sandy never talked about himself.

The evening passed and the men rose to depart without having mentioned the newcomer; and Ross, with the thought of their previous reticence concerning him in mind, waited for them to speak first.

It was Sandy who spoke, but not until his hand was on the door and Waymart stood outside the cabin. Then he said carelessly, as though Ross had never seen Weston before, and as though the coming of a relative was an every-day event in Meadow Creek Valley:

"Cousin hiked it over the mountain to-day. We're goin' t' strike th' trail over t' the Divide to-morrow, huntin'. He's great on game."

"So," thought Ross, "I'm right. It's hunting that has brought him here."

The next morning at daylight, Ross, eating breakfast, chanced to glance out of the dirty west window. Up near the summit of Soapweed Ledge, which met Crosby at right angles, he saw three figures advancing single file. Each carried a gun, and had a small pack and snow-shoes strapped on his back.

"Uncle Jake," asked Ross suddenly, "have you ever been over to the Divide?"

Weimer shook his head. "No, I stay home and attend to pizness."

"Haven't you ever crossed that mountain?" Ross indicated Soapweed Ledge.

"Yes."

"What's beyond?"

"More mountains," answered Weimer vaguely, "und peyond dem more und more."

It was a week before the hunters returned, a long lonely week for Ross. Each morning he told himself hopefully that before night Leslie might return, but, to his increasing dismay, no Leslie came.

"Can it be that an accident has happened to him, somewhere, alone, or has he changed his mind about coming and gone back home?"

Ross asked himself this question as he stood at the mouth of the tunnel one morning staring in the direction of Soapweed Ledge. A heavy snowstorm had set in that morning, and in the afternoon the falling snow shrouded the Ledge in a white veil out of which the three men now emerged, moving slowly across the little valley. Their snow-shoes were on their feet, and in place of the light packs with which they had started their shoulders were bent under loads of venison.

The McKenzies had returned.

That evening Waymart appeared at Weimer's door with a goodly portion of meat, at which Ross looked dubiously.

"You've given us so much already," he hesitated.

Waymart interrupted. "Jerk it," he directed briefly. "Jerked meat makes a good stew when ye can't git no fresh meat." He turned sharply to Weimer in his bunk. "See here, Uncle Jake, have ye forgot how t' jerk venison?"

Weimer crawled out of his bunk, scowling. "Vell, I haf nicht dat. I guess I jerk him so gud as anypody."

"Get about it then!" retorted Waymart with rough kindness. "Here's a meat knife to shred it up with."

He laid a large, sharp knife on the table, and cut Ross's thanks short by an abrupt departure.

Weimer, grumbling at the interruption to his rest, cut the meat in long, thin strips, which, he told Ross, were to be nailed to the outside of the shack after the storm had passed. But in the morning, Ross, objecting to a process which brought the meat into contact with the dirty logs, stretched a cord between two trees, and over it, in the sunshine, folded the strips clothespin fashion, leaving them for the air to cure and dry.

For two or three days the McKenzies did not visit their neighbors. Ross saw them outside their shack occasionally, and something in the air and attitudes spoke, even at that distance, of disagreement.

One evening at six o'clock Weimer stumbled out of the tunnel alone and down the path, the darkness robbing the snow of its terrors. A few moments later, Ross, having laid the dry sticks in the drilled holes in the end wall of the tunnel, lighted the fuses, and, candle in hand, made for the mouth.

He came out on Lon Weston sitting on a stump which projected above the dump.

"Hello, Doc," greeted Lon Weston.

"Hello, Weston." Ross was so astonished to see him there that he nearly forgot to count the explosions that just then thundered in the tunnel behind him.

"One, two, three, four, five." That accounted for the five sticks.

He leaned against the tool house, and looked at Lon through the dusk. Lon's cap was pulled down over his eyes. His sheepskin collar was turned up, meeting the cap. All that was visible of his face was a bit of beard protruding around the stem of the pipe. But the voice sounded a more amiable note than it ever had in the stage camp, although his manner revealed an uneasy embarrassment.

"Well, Doc, how d'ye like minin'?"

"I don't like it at all," replied Ross honestly.

"Seems t' like you all right," returned Lon. "You're in better flesh and color than you was down on Dry Creek."

"So are you," retorted Ross, laughing.

Lon made no reply. He moved restlessly.

"Done any studyin' in that pile o' books ye had along?" he asked abruptly after a time.

"No." Ross's tone was crisp. "Haven't studied a word." The subject was a tender one with him.

There ensued a pause. Ross opened the door of the tool house, and threw in his pick and shovel. He hitched the legs of his high rubber boots nearer his body; and then, as Lon made no move toward going, he swung his numbed hands briskly.

"I thought," Lon began again in a constrained and hesitating way, "that you was mighty anxious about those books. I thought your goin' to some college or other depended on your gettin' outside of those books."

Ross struck his hands rapidly together. "I can't study," he answered briefly. "I get too tired working."

Weston arose and faced toward the cabin of the McKenzies.

"Another storm comin'," he announced. "Get here day after to-morrow."

"That's Christmas," muttered Ross. His heart contracted sharply, and a homesick pang assailed him. In his ignorance, before leaving home, he had set Christmas as the date of his return.

CHAPTER XII

A CALAMITY BEFALLS ROSS

ROSS was writing to Dr. and Mrs. Grant. He bent over the rough table under the light of two candles stuck into the logs above his head. Weimer slept in his bunk the sound and noisy sleep of a tired laborer.

"At the rate we're going at present," Ross wrote, "we'll finish work by the middle of May.... We have at least one thing to be thankful for in our tunnel. We're not obliged to timber it. Of course, blasting through solid rock isn't easy nor fast work, but I guess in the long run we get along faster than we would through dirt. In this case, you see we should be obliged to snake logs down from the mountainside and build side walls and roof in the tunnel for our own safety. How's 'snaking' for you, Aunt Anne? First time I heard it I hadn't an idea what it meant, but it covers the process of cutting down trees and getting them to their destination. Tell you what! We speak some language up here. The King's English isn't always in it, but then every one understands, and I have fallen into using it as easily as a fish takes to water. And I am getting hardened to the work and the weather. I wouldn't mind the whole thing so much now if only the way to Miners' Camp would remain open. But any day it may become practically impassable, and then I cannot hear from you nor you from me for months. That—as I look ahead—is the tough part of it, being cooped up here with only five of us; and how the McKenzies can remain without laying in more provisions I don't see. They have meat enough, but that's all. With this letter I'm taking another over to Camp for Leslie's father. I ought to have sent him word before that Leslie hasn't been seen nor heard of since he disappeared, but every day I've looked for him back—the whole affair worries me a lot—I should think as soon as he gets my letter, old man Quinn would come and hunt Leslie up himself."

At this point there was the sound of laughter outside, and Ross laid aside his pencil and pad.

"Sandy," he muttered, listening.

To his surprise it was not Sandy whom the opening door revealed, but Lon and Waymart, both in unprecedented high spirits.

"We left Sandy snorin'," Waymart volunteered. "He and Uncle Jake ought to bunk in together. Lon, show Ross how Sandy talks in his sleep."

Weston sat down, leaned his head back against the logs, gave one or two passes through his hair, which left it arranged like Sandy's with a lock falling over his forehead; and in an instant, although Weston was dark and Sandy fair, an excellent imitation of the latter mumbled and talked and snored against the logs. Weston accurately and easily imitated the voice and manner of Sandy with his laugh and every facial characteristic. Even Weimer rolled over in his bunk and laughed. Next, Weston, carried out of himself by an appreciative audience, imitated Waymart, the sheep-herder at Dry Creek, and finally Ross himself, and did it all with amazing success.

Ross, convulsed with laughter, rocked back and forth on his box. It was the first real fun he had encountered since leaving Pennsylvania. It did not seem possible that this Weston was the same half-sullen, wholly silent man whom he had nursed at the stage camp.

Ross sat opposite the window in front of which Weston was performing; and finally, just as Waymart had called for an imitation of Weimer, the boy, glancing up, encountered Sandy's face outside the dirty pane. It remained there but an instant while Sandy took the measure of the performer, but that instant was enough to show Ross the full expression of which he had caught glimpses before, and which revealed the side of his character that Sandy usually concealed. His blue eyes glinted angrily. His thin lips, tightly closed, wore a cruel expression, while every feature clearly showed a malignant disapproval of Weston's methods of entertainment.

The laugh died in Ross's throat; but the next instant the door swung open and Sandy entered, gay and careless—except as to eyes. They still glinted.

"Thought ye'd shook me, didn't ye?" he asked with a grin. "Wall, this racket would bring a feller up from his grave, to say nothin' of a little snooze."

He pushed a box over on its side, and sat astride it; and at once the atmosphere in the cabin changed, and became frigid, despite the newcomer's gaiety. Weston slunk back to his seat, and all Ross's urging proved ineffectual to draw him out of his shell again. Waymart's face also lost its good humor.

Presently the three left together.

Weimer, wide awake, moved around the shack.

"Dat Veston!" he chuckled. "How many kinds of beoples ist he? I could shut mine eyes and tink he vas dem all."

The next day was Sunday, and early in the morning in the teeth of a mild wind and threatened storm Ross was off for Miners' Camp. As far as the shoulder around Crosby he went on snow-shoes. Arrived at the shoulder, and, making use of the long,

sharp spike which he carried, he picked his way cautiously forward, pushing through the deep snow in the trail with his feet and knees, the spike set on the outer edge to prevent his slipping. Again and again a ledge of overhanging snow would break away and fall on him; and, light even as the snow yet was, its weight dropping on his shoulders caused him to stagger. The snow-shoes also became a burden, for they were a useless encumbrance until he reached the foot of the mountain and struck out for Steele's shack over two miles of snow already five feet deep.

When he reached Gale's Ridge, he was almost exhausted, not only from pushing through the snow on the trail, but from the unaccustomed effort of walking on snow-shoes. Already he was dreading the most difficult task of all—the return journey.

Steele met him with a manifest uneasiness.

"Grant, your trips down to Camp this season are numbered," he cautioned as they sat down to an early dinner. "An old trailer could creep around the shoulder of Crosby for a little while yet, but neither you nor I could do it in safety. The snow's gettin' so almighty deep now, and blowin' up in ledges on the shoulder—you probably got a ducking coming over?" His tone arose inquiringly.

Ross nodded. "Several times a lot of snow dropped on me; once I almost lost my balance."

Steele moved uneasily. "That's the trouble with that trail even before there's danger of a regular avalanche. You're likely to get swept over when you least expect it, and going back is worse than coming."

Directly after dinner Ross commenced to bind on his snow-shoes for an early departure, having filled his pockets with candy for Weimer. His heart was heavy, and he had a queer, choky sensation as he looked around the little shack, which he might not see again in months.

Steele was adjusting the straps on his own snow-shoes.

"Going up the cañon with me, are you?" asked Ross.

Steele nodded, and got into his top-coat. "A little way," he answered briefly.

Although it was only one o'clock in the afternoon, twilight had fallen. The clouds rolled up the cañon so low that they hung almost within reach of the men's hands, although not much snow was yet falling. An indescribable gloom filled the cañon, the gloom of utter isolation and loneliness. Not a breath of wind was stirring; not a movement of a tree was audible. Everywhere were the deep snow, the silent trees, the great white hulks of the mountains; and over all the clouds glowered sullenly.

Nature had erected sudden and impenetrable barriers in all directions, and Ross felt as though he were striving against them all.

In silence the two traveled the distance which lay between Gale's Ridge and the upper end of Miners' Camp, which was at present a deserted end. When they passed out of sight of the eating house on Gale's Ridge, they left behind them every sign of life. The Mountain Company had shut down two weeks before. A few men had gone to Steele, but the majority had betaken themselves "below." Their shacks stood as the owners had left them, with their stoves, their crude furniture, and in some cases provisions, intact.

The stage was due now only once a week, and the post-office had been removed to Steele's cabin. The former postmaster had gone to work on a ranch on the Grey Bull, leaving the post-office doors wide open, the snow filling the cabin and banking up against the letter boxes.

"By April," said Steele, "you can't see even the roof of a single one of these places down here next the river. They'll all be plumb covered with snow."

Steele did not stop, as Ross supposed he would, at the foot of Crosby, but started up the trail.

"Where are you going?" demanded the boy.

The superintendent went on. His reply came back muffled by the heavy air. "Around the shoulder of this little hill."

Nor could any protest from Ross restrain him.

As they began the ascent, Ross found the moisture hanging in drops to his clothing, while his face felt as though it were being bathed in ice-water. At the same time the clouds settled all about them.

"This is literally walking with our heads in the clouds," muttered Steele grimly. "And this is the weather that'll pack the snow in this trail with a crust as hard as earth—ugh!"

They ascended the trail laboriously, Steele in the lead, Ross lagging behind, leg-weary, and heavy-hearted at the thought of the months to come. Around the shoulder of the mountain they cautiously felt their way, the thick clouds about them seeming to press back the banks of snow above.

Once on the safe trail beyond the shoulder Steele turned, and held out his hand without a word. Also wordless, Ross gripped it. Then the older man took the back trail, and disappeared.

The boy stood where the other left him, staring into the clouds which hid the shoulder. As he stood, a slight breeze touched his cheek and died away. He buckled his snowshoes on again, and faced Meadow Creek Valley. As he did so, the breeze came again. Presently it turned into a wind, and the clouds retreated hastily up the mountainside. Great flakes of snow filled the air. Faster and faster they came swirling down until the air was thick with a storm which cut sharply against Ross's face. He hurried on, and in

an hour was beyond the reach of the storm in Weimer's shack, drying his wet coat and cap.

He found his old partner half wild with anxiety.

"If you did not come pack to-night," he cried, "I thought you would never! A plizzard ist now."

So rejoiced was Uncle Jake at Ross's return that he sat near the fire and waxed garrulous while the wind lashed the trees and drove the snow outside; and Ross, the other side of the stove, shivered and listened listlessly.

"What ails you, hein?" Weimer finally demanded.

And Ross, with a lump in his throat of which he was not ashamed, told him.

"Ach!" exclaimed Weimer disgustedly. He snapped his thumb and finger together. "I vas here dree vinters alone mit no one near. Py day I vorked. Py night dem volves howl und cayotes; but," consolingly, "dey can't git in, und dey vant nicht to git in."

Then for the first time he went on to relate to Ross in his quaint and broken English many stories of those lonely winters in this solitary valley, which had then held him as its only inhabitant.

"No wonder," thought Ross, listening to the fury of the storm, "that the old man's mind was ready to give away under the additional trial of an attack of snow-blindness."

The blizzard continued in unabated fury all the next day. Neither Weimer nor Ross visited the tunnel. They remained housed, watching the snow gradually pile itself around the little shack until the two small windows were obscured, and they were obliged to resort to candle-light.

But during the night the wind changed, and the following morning the sun rose in a brilliantly blue sky. Directly after an early breakfast Ross started to shovel a way out of the cabin. He dug the snow away from the door and windows, and then turned his attention to the trail leading to the tunnel. Here he found that the wind had favored him, sweeping the path clean and filling up the hollows. In the valley the snow lay seven feet deep.

Ross worked his way to the ore-dump, at the base of which he paused to look down on the McKenzies. Their cabin was also released from the snow as to door and window. The snow was also tramped and shoveled around the discovery hole, but no one was in sight, and Ross had turned again to his task when a yell caused him again to face the McKenzie cabin.

Sandy was gesticulating frantically while he advanced rapidly on snow-shoes, dodging the trees as he came diagonally across the mountainside. He came on, talking at the top of his voice, but all Ross could catch was "sticks" and "thief" and "trail."

Sandy was plainly excited. His neckerchief was knotted under one ear; his coat was buttoned up awry; his cap was on with one ear-flap dangling, and the other held fast by the rim of the cap. His ears and nose were scarlet, the thermometer registering, that morning, thirty below zero.

"Our dynamite is gone," Sandy yelled when he was near enough to make Ross understand. "Gone—stolen."

Ross stared at him stupidly. "Who is there to take it?"

"Some one," panted Sandy with an oath, "must have come up the trail Sunday and taken the stuff, thinkin' that it 'ud storm right off and shut up the trail so none of us 'ud be such fools as t' go over t' Camp after more. That's the way I've figured it out, and I lay ye I'm right."

"When did you find out the sticks were gone?" asked Ross with an interest which did not as yet reach beyond Sandy.

"A few minutes ago," gasped Sandy. "I come as fast as I could to see if your—"

Ross cut him short with a loud exclamation, and without waiting to hear the end of the sentence turned and plunged up over the dump, ploughing and fighting his way through the snow as though it were a thing of life.

Sandy picked up the wooden shovel which the boy had cast away, and followed out of breath, but still talking.

"You know we kept the sticks in a box under a hemlock right above the hole, and—"

Ross, unheeding, floundered across the dump, and began to dig wildly at the tool-house door, only the upper part of which was visible. With set teeth he dug, forgetting Sandy, forgetting the shovel, his common sense swallowed up in a panic of fear.

Weimer had always kept the dynamite sticks in a box, a large double boarded and heavily lidded affair which was set in the corner of the tool chest furthest from the door.

At first Ross had raised the lid of this box with chills creeping down his spine. His hair had stirred under his cap when he first saw Weimer stuff the sticks carelessly into his pocket and enter the tunnel. But familiarity with the use of the sticks had robbed them of their terror, although Ross was always cautious in the handling.

"Hold on, Doc." Sandy's voice at his elbow finally brought the frantic boy to his senses. "Ye can't do nothin' with yer hands. Stand aside there, and I'll shovel the snow away from the door."

Ross stood back, unconscious of the nip of the cold on his nose and cheeks, and watched Sandy shoveling with a will, the while talking consolingly.

"I don't believe the thieves have come anigh ye; don't look so, anyway. It's likely some one who's a grudge against some of us. There's plenty holds grudges agin Lon. Wisht he'd stayed in the valley—here ye be! Ketch a holt of this side of the door. Now, one, two, three!"

The door yielded to their combined efforts, and Ross rushed in with Sandy at his heels. His fingers were so numbed he could scarcely raise the lid of the dynamite box. A film seemed to cover his eyes, and in the light which entered grudgingly only by way of the door he could see nothing. He bent his head further over the box, but it was Sandy's voice which confirmed his worst fears.

"Not a stick left. They've made a clean sweep of Medder Creek Valley!"

The film cleared from Ross's eyes, but not from his brain. The box was empty—the box which had contained the stuff absolutely necessary to the work in the tunnel.

Ross glanced up and met Sandy's eyes. Sandy's eyes looked steadily and guilelessly into Ross's, and Sandy's face expressed all the sympathy and commiseration of which Ross stood in need.

The boy sat down on the edge of the box. "What shall I do?" he asked, his thoughts in a whirl.

"Do about th' same as we've got t'—git out!" quoth Sandy with a lugubrious shake of his head. "Here we got Lon up here t' help push our work, and now we're up a stump; for ye know"—here Sandy's eyes held Ross's while he spoke slowly—"there's no use thinkin' about gittin' any over from Camp. No one 'ud be crazy enough to resk packin' a load of sticks around the shoulder this time of year."

Ross shivered as he thought of the shoulder under its body of snow.

"When are you going?" he asked.

"To-morrow," answered Sandy promptly. "We'll start then, but we'll have to shovel through. You'll have t' lead Weimer, won't ye?"

Ross swallowed twice before he answered. "Yes, I suppose so."

"We'll help ye." Sandy's tones were good-natured and soothing. He seemed suddenly to have lost all regret at the disappearance of his store of dynamite. "We'll break open the trail, and then we can rope ourselves together around the shoulder. That's safer."

"All right," Ross heard himself say in an unnatural voice. He could not in an instant adjust himself to this radical uprooting of his plans.

"It'll be a ticklish job," Sandy continued, "t' break through around the shoulder without bringin' down the hull side of old Crosby on us, includin' a few rocks; but every day now we put it off is so much the worse."

He turned to go. "Then we'll pick ye up in the mornin'; will we?"

"Why—I suppose so," returned Ross. "There doesn't seem to be anything else to do."

"Better not load up much," warned Sandy; "and don't give Uncle Jake a load at all. All we're goin' to try to pack over is a little venison."

Then Sandy disappeared, and Ross suddenly recovered from his mental numbness. It was the sting of anger which aroused him. So confused and disappointed had he been, and so well had Sandy played his part, that the true solution of the theft did not dawn on the boy until the other's departure. Then he stopped short on the downward trail and uttered an exclamation, his hands clinching inside his mittens, and his eyes narrowing and flashing.

Of course, it was Sandy's own brain which had planned the matter and Sandy's own henchmen who had made off with the sticks. They had taken this way of stopping the progress of work in the tunnel. They had waited until no more dynamite could be brought over the trail, calculating that when the time came for the claims to be patented one half year's work would be undone, and then!

Ross started blindly down the path. He would go over to the Camp with the McKenzies. He would go down to Meeteetse with them—no officer of the law could be found nearer, and there he would put them all under arrest. Here he stopped again. Arrest them on what evidence? Face to face with this question, he was obliged to acknowledge the neatness of the scheme which had for its first point the theft of their own sticks. Could he prove that no one had come over the trail after he reached the valley? And could he prove that the dynamite had not been taken by this mythical some one?

Ross thought of what Steele had said concerning trusting Sandy with his pocketbook. Sandy would have the contents of the purse, Steele said, but he'd take care to get them in such a way that he could shake hands afterward with the owner, as well as face any jury.

"And Steele," Ross muttered, drawing a long breath, "was right."

The news of the loss seemed to jar Weimer back into a semblance of his former intelligence. Instead of ranting as Ross expected he would he sat down and talked over the situation reasonably with his young partner. It was Weimer, in fact, who restored something like hope to Ross.

He objected to leaving the valley with the McKenzies. He had been over that valley and the surrounding mountains inch by inch, he told Ross. Let that "consarned gang" be gone. They two would stay and bring the dynamite to light. Then he told of place after place on the mountain which would make excellent hiding-places for the sticks. There were many caves, and some of them dry. Weimer reasoned the "gang" would cache the sticks in a dry place for their own future use.

Temporarily the old partner and the young changed places, and, as Ross listened, he became stout of heart once more.

"Of course," he exclaimed, "if dynamite can't be carried up the trail, neither can it be taken back into Camp. It's got to be somewhere around here; and, if we hunt for it a month, we can still get the work done in time."

"Vy didn't I tink of dem sticks?" Weimer asked angrily. "I might know dem consarned gang pe up to somet'ing ven dey see our vork it vas gettin' fast! Vy didn't I tink?"

Ross, having lapsed into his own thoughts, made no reply; and Weimer arose from the box where he had been sitting, and crawled into his bunk.

Ross paced the floor slowly, his arms folded behind him. Ross's fighting blood was up. Before this he had looked at his work as the result of his father's request. It was not to his liking, and the only actual pleasure he took in it was the prospect of finishing it. He had believed before the theft of the sticks that he would welcome anything which really necessitated his leaving Meadow Creek Valley, although he would accept nothing less than necessity.

But this theft seemed suddenly to have made the work his own and the failure to accomplish it a personal defeat. Instead of rejoicing over the prospect of leaving Meadow Creek Valley he welcomed eagerly Weimer's suggestion that they stay and hunt for the dynamite, even though the hunt meant that, dynamite or no dynamite, they must be shut up in the valley for months to come.

Suddenly a new fear caused him to scramble hastily into his coat, cap, and mittens.

"I'm going to fetch the tools down," he explained grimly. "I'm not going to risk having some one make off with them!"

"Dat ist so," assented Weimer. "Ve vill need dose tools; ve vill. Dose McKenzie gang vill see. I can find dose sticks, und I know I can."

None of the McKenzies came over that evening, to Ross's relief, for the events of the day had brought a new fear of that outfit. Sandy's good-natured neighborliness had deceived him. Now for the first time he realized that they were actual enemies, ready to stoop to any means within the law to baffle him.

It was scarcely daylight the following morning, although breakfast in the Weimer cabin had been disposed of, before there was heard a tramp of feet outside through the creaking snow, and Sandy with a heavy pack on his back appeared at the door.

"All ready t' strike the trail?" he asked, putting his head inside the shack.

There was an instant's silence, during which Sandy's face changed as he looked quickly from Ross to Weimer. The latter sat beside the table, his head resting on his hand, his elbow on the boards.

Ross answered, "We can't get ready to go so quickly."

For a moment Sandy's face was the face which had appeared at the window the night Weston was indulging in mimicry, but for a moment only. Then he rallied and assumed an air of concerned astonishment.

"What? Not ready? Why, man alive, yer chance may be gone if ye wait another day. Uncle Jake, you ought to know that, if Doc here don't. Why, we're afraid we can't come it even by ropin' together. Better hustle up and come."

Both Weimer and Ross sat still, and after a little further parley Waymart called angrily:

"Hike along here, Sandy. Guess they know what they want t' do better 'n you do. Make tracks here!"

The three "made tracks," while Ross stood and watched them out of sight.

But after they had gone the boy, uneasy lest they should return to do the tunnel some damage, climbed the trail and entered the tool house. The house was fastened between two trees which grew at one side of the dump, the side furthest from the trail across the mountain toward Miners' Camp.

Ross had entered aimlessly after assuring himself that the door at the mouth of the tunnel had not been opened. He stood silently looking out of a crack down on the mass of snow which glistened at the foot of the dump, when he was startled by seeing Sandy on snow-shoes creep around the dump and look up.

Only a glance upward did Sandy give, and then, turning, disappeared. Yet his face had appeared anxious before that upward glance, while afterward there was on it a satisfied smile.

The hours that followed were anxious ones for the two remaining in Meadow Creek Valley. They began a hunt for the dynamite as soon as the McKenzies had disappeared. Starting at the McKenzie shack and discovery hole they widened the search in a circle which finally included the valley and the sides of the adjoining mountains, with a single important omission; it did not occur to either of them to examine their own premises further than to assure themselves that neither tool house nor tunnel had suffered any damage from their "friends the enemy."

At four o'clock came the first signs of dusk and, discouraged, the partners moved slowly across the valley. Half-way across, Ross chanced to glance up at the stovepipe projecting from the roof of their shack.

"A fire!" he shouted. "Look there, Uncle Jake! Some one has built up the fire!"

At that instant the door swung open and Leslie Quinn stood in the doorway.

CHAPTER XIII

THE SEARCH

OVER fried bacon, sour dough bread and varied "canned goods," Leslie told his story to an interested and excited audience of two. The day of Ross's arrest he had shouldered a pack of stuff selected from the trunk which still stood under the new third bunk, waited until twilight so that he could not be seen on the trail, and then, on snow-shoes, had made his way over Crosby and up Wood River cañon to Wilson's cabin on the coal claims.

"You see," he said, a flush sweeping over his face, "I supposed father was at Cody, and I wouldn't have faced him without that five hundred dollars for all the gold that may be in these mountains, and, besides, the way he had taken to get even with me—well, I don't need to say how it cuts!" Here Leslie bent over his plate in shame. "Although—I—well, of course, I deserve it, but I didn't think he'd go as far as that."

"Hold on, Less!" Ross jumped up from the table so suddenly that the box on which he had been sitting was knocked over. "Here's a letter to you in my care. It has been here so long I had forgotten it."

He pulled the emergency chest from under his bunk and produced both of Mr. Quinn's letters—the one to himself and the one yet unopened.

"There you are!" he exclaimed, tossing both across the table. "I take it from what your father says in mine that he thought of the arrest not as a punishment, but as the way in which he could be sure of getting his hands on you quickly in Omaha."

Eagerly Leslie read both letters, his troubled face lighting and softening. "You're right," he said finally in a low tone. "I guess dad is—is more all right than—than I used to think. I've been no end of an idiot, frankly."

He folded his letter and slipped it into his slicker pocket while Weimer urged:

"You was mit dot shack, und dey found you not, hein?"

"But I want to hear about Ross's—"

"No, no," interrupted Ross. "Finish out your story first. Mine will look like thirty cents at the end of yours. I'm not exactly proud of myself."

"Wilson's shack," prompted Weimer, pushing his plate back and planting both elbows on the table.

Leslie continued his story in a new exuberance of spirits, occasionally fingering the letter in his pocket. He had foreseen that Wilson's shack would be searched, and so,

trusting to the drifting snow to conceal his trail, he had, during the night, packed provisions into one of the many deserted shacks in the upper camp. He had selected one overlooking the trail up Crosby. It had two rooms, one behind the other, the back room having an outside door and but one small window. Leaving the first room undisturbed, he had stowed his provisions in the back room, which also contained a bunk.

"I can tell you that it was hard sledding for me until after the sheriff and the McKenzies came and went that day," he continued ruefully. "I had brought along my blankets, but I didn't dare light a fire, and I nearly froze and nearly starved on cold canned stuff. But after the sheriff had gone back—you see I could watch the camp from the back room window—and the McKenzies had passed the shack on the trail over here, I hung blankets over the windows and had a fire nights when the smoke wouldn't be seen. I could cook at night and early in the morning and so got along fairly well. But I expected them all back again for another search, so mornings I used to vacate the outside room and leave it the same as it had been."

"Why didn't you come over sooner?" asked Ross.

"Don't you see that I couldn't," demanded Leslie, "so long as the McKenzies were here? I knew, though, that they had told Wilson that they were not going to stay all winter. They told him they would go to Cody as soon as they thought the Crosby trail was getting dangerous. So I watched that trail like a cat for them to go and for my chance to get here."

"Wilson he vent out," interrupted Weimer.

"Yes, Uncle Jake, I saw him go, but I lay low. I was afraid of the consequences of being seen. I had no idea that father had been put off. I was sure he would come on himself, and I knew that if father once struck my trail he'd unearth me. He never gives up."

"Then, this morning—" prompted Ross.

"Yes, this morning when I saw the McKenzies coming down the trail bag and baggage, I humped myself to get ready to get over here before their tracks got filled up. I knew that if they could get one way I could get the other way to-day, but maybe not to-morrow. And I tell you what," here Leslie arose and stretched out his arms, "I've been living these weeks as close and cramped a prisoner as I ever want to be. I could get out nights a little because the camp came to be about deserted, but I was cooped up all day in the shack."

Far into the night the boys talked, while Weimer alternately listened and dozed. When Ross was well launched on the story of his arrest he became at once embarrassed, wondering how he was going to evade the matter of Lon Weston and the note. He finally compromised by ending the story of his capture in a partial account of his

conversation with Sandy in the barroom of "The Irma," and Leslie, taking it for granted that his father's name and address came from Sandy, did not ask embarrassing questions.

"It's as I suspected, then," he added slowly. "The McKenzies were probably employed on the ranches around home at some time. The cowboys and sheep-herders are always coming into the town, and probably they all knew me by sight, while I didn't know them one from another."

Ross checked the question which arose to his lips concerning the fourth man that Mr. Quinn was after, and shortly after, the boys tumbled into their bunks, Ross with a feeling of deep relief that the third bunk would be occupied during the winter.

"I didn't do so badly in Cody after all, as it has all turned out," he thought comfortably as he fell asleep.

He was only half awakened a few moments later by an exclamation from the third bunk, and heard Leslie say, "By the way, Ross, who was—" then the question, "Are you asleep?"

Ross, without replying, sank into a deeper sleep, and Leslie said no more. Weimer was already snoring.

The following morning Ross tumbled out at daybreak and built a roaring fire in the old cracked heater. He glanced at the third bunk and began whistling cheerfully. Perhaps they could find the dynamite now that there was a second with sound eyes to aid in the search and a sound brain to help plan. If only the sticks could be found the early spring would see the work completed and the claims patented.

The first thing Weimer did when he arose was to go to the door and survey sky and mountains with practiced eye, as he sniffed the bracing air. The sky was overcast and lowering, while a sharp wind drove the snow in eddies and drifts through the valley.

"Der vill pe a pig storm mit us," he prophesied; "it ist on its vay. It vill get here in dree, four days."

"Hear that, Less?" shouted Ross at the new bunk. "You turn out and we'll be off. We've got to unearth that dynamite before any more snow piles up here around us."

Leslie left his bunk with a bound. "I'm good for it. How's breakfast? When I filled up last night I thought I'd never need anything more and here I am as hollow as a drum!"

At the breakfast table, he suddenly bethought himself of the question he had meant to ask the previous night. "I say, Doc," he exclaimed, "who was the third man with the McKenzies yesterday? My cabin wasn't near enough the trail so that I could see."

Ross hesitated and Weimer answered, "Dot vas a cousin of the McKenzies, name of Lon Veston."

There was a clatter and a fall as knife and fork slipped out of Leslie's hands. "Lon Weston!" he ejaculated. "Lon Weston here? A cousin of the McKenzies?"

"Know him?" asked Ross.

Leslie picked up his fork. "Know Lon? Well, I should say so. He's made trouble enough at home—" He bit his lips suddenly and stopped, adding, "He was foreman on a ranch near North Bend for a couple of years. He—he used to come to our house a good deal."

In a flash Ross recalled the photo that had dropped out of Weston's pocket at Sagehen Roost, the pretty girl face, and instantly he knew why Hank had said of Leslie when he rode away with Wilson, "Seems as if I'd seen that there young feller before."

"Yes, they are surely brother and sister," Ross decided, his gaze fixed critically on Leslie's downcast face. "They look tremendously alike."

"Veston, he vas de man dot Doc here mended," Weimer volunteered. "Doc vas at Dry Creek mit Veston."

Leslie glanced quickly across the table. "Not the man who was there when I passed through—the day I was with Wilson—not that one, Ross?"

"The same," nodded Ross. "He's the Lon Weston that I know."

"Then he isn't the Lon Weston that I know," said Leslie with conviction and also relief. "That man at Dry Creek had dark hair, while the ranch foreman had hair as light almost as Sandy's. Not the same at all."

And because of the note at "The Irma," Ross did not contradict Leslie, did not tell him that Weston's hair was still light beneath its dye of chestnut brown.

"But some day," he thought, "I can ask him about the fourth man that his father is after, and so find out about Weston in a roundabout way."

But the search for the dynamite soon proved so strenuous that all thought of the crime committed on the North Fork faded from Ross's mind. Day after day the boys continued the search while Weimer stayed in the cabin "rustling grub" and giving suggestions. The theft of the sticks seemed to have shocked the man into something of his former mental keenness and industry. Not once did Ross have to urge him to his household tasks. When the boys tramped into the cabin at noon or long after darkness had fallen, they found a hearty appetizing meal prepared, the cook even going to the length of objecting to their washing the dishes.

"If you dem sticks find," he would say, "Ich vill stay mit dese dishes."

"Uncle Jake," exclaimed Ross at noon the third day of the hunt, "I'm discouraged. We have poked into every spot for miles around where such a lot of dynamite could be hidden—and then have gone again."

"I'm almost ready to believe," declared Leslie, "that the boys had the sticks in their packs when they left."

Weimer shook his head. "No, never would dose poys pe so foolish. Dose sticks are here, hein? Somewhere in Meadow Creek Valley ve vill find dem," but the old man's voice broke on the declaration.

"Of course it couldn't be that the McKenzies carried them away," affirmed Ross. "If there had been six men of them they couldn't have carried away all the dynamite that we had and Wilson had and they had. In fact they couldn't have carried it all very far that night and in the teeth of the awful storm that howled among these peaks. I believe with Uncle Jake that the stuff is in this valley."

"You see, Uncle Jake," Ross began after a pause, "we have gone on the supposition that they chose a spot under the cover of rocks or in hollow trees, some place where the dynamite would be kept dry. Now, it may be that they have dug a hole in the snow and ice, and buried it in the open, and the snow has drifted over its grave."

"Maype! maype!" Weimer ejaculated. "Put, if dey haf, our goose, it ist cooked."

He pushed the box on which he sat back against the wall.

Ross opened the cabin door, and looked out. The weather had grown warmer. The blanket of clouds which had hovered over the earth for days had lifted and the snow lay dazzling in the strong light. When he closed the door, Weimer had donned his blue goggles.

"Where's your big storm, Uncle Jake?" asked Ross.

"Comin', comin'," answered Uncle Jake confidently. "It vill pe on us py mornin'. Dis light it vill not last."

Ross sat down and took his head in his hands, his elbows on his knees.

"Every fall of snow," he thought, "makes our work so much more hopeless."

Presently Weimer broke the silence. "Vell," he began meditatively, "ve haf t'ings to eat fer de vinter, anyvay," and Ross understood the circle around which Uncle Jake's thoughts had been winding.

"Yes, it's Meadow Creek for us now, whether the dynamite is found or not." Ross's voice was grim. "We went over on the trail as far as the shoulder of Crosby to-day and whew! Uncle Jake, it was a sight to see. The wind has packed the snow into that trail until it hangs over the gorge in great masses and curls."

"Looks," added Leslie, "as though a thousand tons or so might sweep down over the shoulder any minute. The trail is closed all right as far as I'm concerned. If I hadn't come in the McKenzies' footprints that morning I wouldn't have come at all."

After dinner the boys fastened on their snow-shoes outside the door and then looked questioningly at each other.

"Well—where to now?" asked Leslie despondently.

"Sure enough—where?" returned Ross equally despondent.

Weimer had offered no suggestions, and the boys were at the end of their resources.

"We've hunted every place," said Ross absently, adjusting a buckle on the strap of his snow-shoe, "except our own premises here."

No sooner had he heard his own voice speaking these careless words than their possible significance struck him. He sprang up with kindling eyes. "Less, do you hear?" he shouted, his thoughts in advance of his tongue. "There's where it may be, and maybe that was the reason why Sandy came back and looked. Hurry! Hurry up!"

"What are you talking about?" yelled Leslie as Ross raced awkwardly around the cabin on his snow-shoes.

Weimer opened the door and peered out through his colored goggles. "Has dot poy gone crazy?" he asked.

Leslie, without pausing to answer, hurried after Ross. "Where to?" he yelled.

"The tool house," returned Ross over his shoulder. "It's fastened between two trees, and hangs out over the foot of the dump! See?"

But, instead of taking the trail to the tunnel, Ross struck across the mounds and hillocks and drifts of snow that blocked the trail leading to Miners' Camp. Through the tangle of pines and hemlocks he led the way until he stopped at the foot of the snow-heaped dump and looked up at the tool house, one side of which rested on the dump, while the opposite side was fastened to sturdy hemlocks whose trunks arose from the débris heaped about them from the tunnel. The tool house was now a shapeless white form, while the dump was buried beneath tons of snow.

"It was here," Ross explained breathlessly, "that Sandy stood. I was looking out at the McKenzies from a crack up in the house. He came back and looked up under the house and then grinned and went back to the others. They had started to leave, you know. Now why did he want to look under that house?"

"That's it!" cried Leslie with excited conviction. "They had cached the stuff under the house and he wanted to make sure that their trail could not be seen. Ross, the sticks are up under there, high and dry."

"You bet!" shouted Ross turning in his tracks. "We'll get shovels and dig for it. And, Less, if we find the cache, we'll let off one blast around here outside of the tunnel that 'ill show them, if they're still over in Camp, that we ain't dead yet."

"Nor dumb and stupid, either!" cried Leslie delightedly as he legged it rapidly over the snow.

In the door of the shack they found Weimer still standing, shielding his eyes with one hand and calling questions into space. The boys, appearing, stopped to answer, not only satisfying the old man but receiving a valuable suggestion.

"Vat for you dig mit all dot vork? It vill dake you poys a day und a half to git up unter dot shack. Vy not go in und raise dot floor und find dem sticks unter?"

Leslie tossed up his cap. "Three cheers for Uncle Jake!" he shouted. "That's the very thing to do. We'll get around to that signal blast sooner. Come on, Ross!"

It was Leslie who led this time, axe in hand, while Ross followed with hammer and shovel. The trail to the tunnel had been unused for days and was so deeply drifted that the boys had difficulty in getting up to the dump even with the aid of the shovel. Once on top they were obliged to shovel their way slowly into the tool house.

"Now," exclaimed Ross when they were fairly in, "now for work with these floor boards!"

Leslie, with many grunts, fell to clearing away the snow from the floor, while Ross pulled the big box in which the dynamite had been stored from the center of the shack into one corner.

"See here, Ross," cried Leslie excitedly as he bent to the last shovelful of snow. "We don't need axe nor hammer. The McKenzies have done the work for us. The floor has been taken up and just laid back again without being spiked down. That box held the planks down pretty firmly, you see."

The floor consisted of halves of tree trunks, flat above and rounded on the under side. Eagerly Ross and Leslie raised the central plank and both cried out simultaneously, for the dynamite filled the space beneath up to the level of the floor.

"And to think!" muttered Ross, "that I have not thought of this before—didn't think of it when I saw Sandy peering up here."

Leslie sat back on his heels and mopped his face. "Pretty cute of 'em to think of a thing like this," he conceded. "I should have taken the sticks as far away as I could have carried them had I been doing it, and considered that the farther I went the better for my plans."

"It's Sandy," declared Ross. "Steele has told me a dozen times that he's the brains of the clan."

It did not take the trio long to restore the dynamite to its box, for Ross, going down to the cabin, led a delighted Weimer through the sunshine up to the tool house, and Weimer willingly devoted his great strength to the task.

"And," insisted Leslie when their task was completed, "now for putting the shot that shall tell Miners' Camp that we're livelier than ever over here."

As long as the trail was closed and the McKenzies could not return, the boys reasoned, it would be a lark to inform them in this way of the failure of their project.

"Even if they have gone on to Cody," suggested Ross, "Bill Travers might get the news to 'em by way of the stages."

"But you see," ruefully from Leslie, "probably there's no one except themselves that knows of our plight. They may not have told any one of the theft of the sticks."

"Well, we'll set off a blast that will tell every one that they're found, anyway!" retorted Ross. "And we'll do it in the morning before the storm comes on," for the brilliancy of the sunlight had long been dimmed by heavy banks of clouds rolling in from the northwest.

Weimer entered into the project with the abandon of a child, and it was he who suggested the location of the "shot."

"Nicht on Crosby," he said shaking his head. "Dot might upset dot tunnel. Put it mit Soapweed Ledge und see vat comes."

The boys did not ask what Weimer meant. Anything they did not understand they laid to his "Dutch lingo," but they immediately adopted the suggestion concerning Soapweed Ledge, and in the morning carried enough sticks across the valley to plant a respectable "mine," as Ross called it, beneath one of the huge rocks which jutted out from the side of the mountain that bounded the valley on the north. This mountain rose four thousand feet above Meadow Creek, its head lost in the snow clouds that now threatened to submerge the valley. On the face of the mountain lay a great body of snow, especially heavy above the timber-line, which here, because of the great elevation of the valley itself, was only a few hundred feet above the base of any mountain.

Weimer, lured out of the shack by the dimness of the light and the enjoyment of the undertaking, went with the boys and did his share in the "packing" of the sticks unurged. It was he who, with an accession of unusual keenness, planted the charge in a shallow cave with a mass of rock perilously overhanging the entrance.

"Ve vant ein noise," he chuckled, "ein pig racket. It shall pe heard in Miners'."

A few moments later they had the noise, all they had planned for, and then a noise that no one had foreseen save Weimer, and he had not explained his expectations.

While the long fuse was burning, the three spectators had retreated to the middle of the valley and faced about expectantly. There came a fearful detonation which awakened the echoes on every hand and the vast rock with a dozen of its neighbors

was lifted like lumps of clay and hurled into the valley amid a cloud of snow and ice. Some of the fragments landed almost at the feet of the spectators.

The echoes had not died away before Weimer, yelling, "Ve may not pe out of de vay far," turned and made his clumsy but rapid way on snow-shoes further from the scene of the explosion. The boys were following him blindly and excitedly when, in the clouds fairly over their heads, came a sound that neither had ever heard before, a wrenching, grinding, tearing sound which caused Ross's hair to stir under his cap.

"Can th-that be thunder?" he stammered running.

Weimer looked over his shoulder at the mountain. "You haf neber an avalanche seen, hein!" he cried, and stopping, faced the other way again.

Down into view below the low hanging clouds it swept its terrible way, that avalanche which the trembling of the mountain had caused, the work of the dynamite. With a swift overwhelming rush it crumbled the rocks and, uprooting great trees, bore them easily on its bosom. Into the valley it debouched, carrying with it the wreckage from the mountainside.

Ross and Leslie looked at each other with white faces when the roar and grind and rush finally ceased.

"Suppose," suggested Ross huskily, "we had set that blast off on old Crosby."

Both boys looked at the mountain overhanging the tunnel above their shack, and Ross shivered.

"It would have been good-bye to the tunnel and the shack and us too, I guess," muttered Leslie.

"I told you," declared Weimer, "vat vould happen, hein? I told you last night. Now ein avalanche you haf seen."

Neither boy contradicted his first statement. With the last they agreed rather breathlessly, for an avalanche they surely had seen!

"I hope," said Ross carelessly as they entered their shack, "that the McKenzies are still in Miners' and that they heard that blast!"

CHAPTER XIV

A PERILOUS JOURNEY

THE following morning the three inhabitants of Meadow Creek Valley began work again in the tunnel. The air was filled with a smother of snow which fell

unaccompanied by wind. When, the following day, the sky cleared, over the path of the avalanche and over the ruins of Soapweed Ledge lay a concealing blanket of snow three feet deep.

"Whew!" shivered Ross as he led the goggled Weimer over the snow to the tunnel that morning. "Wish we had a thermometer up here. This is some cold. Must be minus zero by a long way."

"Mine nose ist my thermometer," complained Weimer, rubbing that whitening member. "Aber dis weather it holds nicht. Anoder snow falls in dree, four days."

The third day proved the truth of this prophecy. The atmosphere became many degrees warmer and the sky lowering.

"More snow," sighed Leslie, looking over the silent, white sheeted valley with homesick eyes.

"Und den more," added Weimer complacently. "More und more till June."

That noon it chanced that Weimer, being afflicted with a headache, left the tunnel early. A little later, Ross, pushing the little car out to the dump, called back to Leslie at work with the drill:

"Guess I'll go down and rustle the grub for Uncle Jake. That headache of his is genuine."

"All right," assented Leslie, "I'll be down in half an hour or so. I want to put this shot before I go."

Ross found Weimer in a state of great excitement, the headache forgotten. He stood at the door of the shack, peering up toward the tunnel, both hands shielding his blinking eyes.

"Who vas dot man?" he demanded in a high, eager voice.

"What man, Uncle Jake?" Ross stopped short, staring at Weimer as though he were bereft of his senses.

"I see him!" declared Weimer. "He vas shust startin' up dot trail py de tunnel. I see his pack. He vore ein pag on it. He vore ein cap mit goggles. I see him."

Ross looked up the mountainside incredulously. "Why, Uncle Jake, I just left the tunnel and there was no one there but Leslie. I guess," jocosely, "your headache has made you 'see things at night,' hasn't it? No one can get into the valley now, you know."

Excitedly protesting and expostulating, half in English and half in German, Uncle Jake retreated inside the door, and taking up his position beside one of the little windows watched the trail to the tunnel while Ross, smiling at his partner's hallucination, built up the fire, cheerfully banging the covers of the stove as he filled

the fire-box with dry pine sticks. In the midst of this racket there entered the sound of crunching footsteps on the side opposite the shack from that occupied by Weimer.

"Hein!" yelled the latter springing up. "Was sagen sie? It ist somepody!"

A rap thundered on the door, and it was thrust open at the same time unceremoniously, while a low, gruff voice inquired abruptly:

"Is there a young doctor here?"

A man a little above medium height stood on the threshold. He wore buckskin trousers and a buckskin coat over a heavy sweater, giving him a bulky appearance. He had on snow-shoes, and strapped over his shoulder, a large leather game pouch sagged. Behind smoked goggles his eyes were blinking, like Weimer's, almost closed. His head and ears were covered with a shaggy fur cap, which met his turned-up coat collar. His face was smooth above a fringe of black stubby whiskers, which ran from ear to ear under the chin. His voice, though gruff, was not unpleasant as he explained.

"Of course 'twas a month and more ago since they told me over t' Red Lodge that—" His eyes fell on Ross. "You're him they call Doc Tenderfoot, ain't ye?"

"Why—yes," answered Ross. There was a pause between the two words caused by the speaker's amazement at seeing a man drop in from—where?

"Come in," invited Weimer, "und set down."

"Don't care if I do," assented the stranger.

He unbuckled his snow-shoes, and, leaving them outside, entered the shack. Turning down his coat collar, he loosened his cap, pushing it back on his head, thereby revealing the ends of short black hair.

"Haf you peen up to dat tunnel, hein?" demanded Weimer with a triumphant glance at Ross.

The stranger nodded, "Yep. Didn't see no signs of livin' here and I did see some signs up t' the mouth of the tunnel, but I didn't see no good way of gittin' up t' it. When I got there I was over t' other side of the dump and when I got up on top of it I heard voices down here, so down here I put agin!"

"Did you come up from Miners' Camp?" asked Ross eagerly.

The stranger shook his head. "No, I live toward the Divide on—" The stranger interrupted himself to ask, "Know the country over there, do you?"

Weimer shook his head. "Only py hearsay."

"Well, we located on Sagewood Run, my pal and me, and—"

"Didn't know dere vas a soul livin' in dem parts," exclaimed Weimer.

"Me and my pal," returned the stranger. "We hain't got no neighbor near enough to throw kisses to, that's sartain. You're the nighest."

"Prospector?" asked Weimer.

"Coal," returned the stranger. "We're tryin' to hold down half a dozen claims."

He turned from Weimer, and changed the subject in his queer, abrupt way.

"Pard's sick-hurt. Guess he'll pass up his checks afore long if he don't git help."

He squinted through his goggles at Ross. "Over t' Red Lodge they said you fixed up a feller down in Dry Creek good's new. So I come after ye fer a couple of days."

Instantly Weimer became alarmed. "Ross, he can't go und leave us, hein! When the sun pe shinin', I can't get 'round. Ross, he must pe here to work. He can't go mit you."

Ross drew a long, perplexed breath, and said nothing. The stranger looked attentively at Weimer for the first time.

"Got a touch of the sun, too, have ye?" he asked.

Weimer removed his goggles, and pressed his hands over his eyes. "Yah, dot I has, a touch und more dan a touch. Ross here, he ain't leavin' us to go mit you."

Still Ross stood silent. The stranger made no response to Weimer's protestations, but, bending forward, regarded him closely.

"What?" he burst out. "Are you Dutch Weimer?"

"Dot ist vat dey call me," assented Weimer, turning his bloodshot eyes on the stranger.

The latter persisted in an incredulous voice, "The Dutch Weimer who used to run a miners' supply store down in Butte?"

"Dot same," assented Weimer. "Und who might you pe?"

The stranger grinned, a one-sided grin which sent his right cheek up under the smoked goggles. "Well, Uncle Jake, do you remember a little black-headed rascal that uster hang his chin on the edge of yer counter about once a day and get a nickel's worth of candy?"

Weimer wrinkled his brow in perplexity. "Dere vas so many plack-heads," he muttered, scratching his head.

The stranger grinned delightedly, and again his right cheek was pushed up under the goggles. "Of course there was. I wa'n't the only calf running around loose, I know. Well, do you remember Marvin Miller?"

"Hein!" cried Weimer. He held out his hand impulsively. "Und are you Marvin Miller's poy?"

"The same," declared the stranger, grasping the hand. "And didn't you have a younger pard by the name of Grant?"

"Yah!" Weimer fairly shouted. "Dot I did, and he's my pard yet."

"Uster git his eyes about shut, and tighten his lips, when things didn't go to suit 'im," grinned Marvin Miller's son.

"That's my father all right!" cried Ross.

The stranger drew back and whistled. "Your dad!" he exclaimed. "Sho, now; that's not so?"

"It ist so," Weimer broke in. "His fader sends him to help me mit der vork in dese claims, und den dis consarned gang of McKenzies go and pack off der sticks—" and Weimer was launched on an account of their troubles, feeling perfectly at home with the man who as a boy had hung over his counter in the old days when he was merchant and not prospector.

Ross, too, felt his heart warm toward the man who had known his father; and for an instant the present faded, and he was back East again among the old familiar surroundings. He was being looked over by the father who "got his eyes about shut" when the son did not please him; he was being affectionately scolded by Aunt Anne and advised by Dr. Grant—but the thought of the doctor brought Ross up sharply against the purpose of the stranger's visit.

A sick partner, Miller had said: but he, Ross, also had a sick partner, although the sickness was more of the mind than the body; and that partner objected to his going. What should he do? His training with his uncle would leave him no choice if he had only himself to consult in the matter. He was better than no doctor at all, and he was called on for help; therefore he must obey the call. But there was Weimer, who had learned to depend on him, and who, he feared, might relapse during his absence, however brief, into his former irresponsible state, for Leslie was, of course, a stranger to the methods which Ross had been obliged to employ to keep Weimer busy. Nor was Leslie, who had acted under Wilson's direction, accustomed to going ahead with the work as Ross had been obliged to do. But if the trip would occupy only a couple of days—well, he could not refuse to go.

Here he became conscious that Miller was addressing him, and that Uncle Jake was leaning eagerly toward him.

"If Doc here is willin'," Miller was saying, "we might go into cahoots this way: If my pard needs 'im longer than a day 'r two, I'll come along back and buckle down t' work here 'n' help you out while he's there a-nussin'—"

"Yah, yah!" consented Weimer eagerly. "Den he may mit you go. You could do more vork dan Doc. You come pack und mit us vork."

Ross, relieved, turned to the peg where hung his cap. "I'll go up to the tunnel and get Leslie, Uncle Jake, and you take hold of the dinner."

"Leslie," repeated Miller carelessly. "Who's he?"

Ross, leaving Weimer to relate Leslie's history, hurried up to the tunnel. He wanted to see Leslie alone and give him numerous suggestions and directions beyond the reach of Weimer's ears.

"Of course, Less," he ended as the two finally started toward the shack together, "even if I do have to stay, and Miller comes back, he won't know how to manage Uncle Jake in case he has a relapse into the state that I found him in. And Miller looks like a strong willing fellow to work, so guess we won't lose anything by my going. Anyway I've got to go, for he says his partner is in a bad way." Miller's partner, it seemed, had been caught under a log they were "snaking" down to the cabin. His arm was crushed and in bad shape.

"Some way, Ross," Leslie burst out uneasily, "I mightily hate to have you go. I'll be deadly lonesome up here without you even for a couple of days."

"But if I'm not back then this Miller will be," returned Ross hopefully, "and he shows up rather agreeably."

After a hasty dinner, Ross selected from his chest all that he considered would be required. Some of the articles Miller put into his game pouch, Ross making up a bundle himself to bind on his own back and so divide the load. At one o'clock they started, with Weimer and Leslie standing in the doorway, the former urging them on with many expressions of hope for a speedy return that they might get ahead of "dose consarned gang."

Ross walked after Miller easily. Those past few days on the mountainsides had accustomed him to the use of snow-shoes. Almost in silence they crossed the valley and began the ascent of what remained of Soapweed Ledge.

During the last hour the light had faded, and snow began to fill the air. From the base of the ledge the cabin on the other valley was barely visible, and Ross could scarcely make out the figures standing in front of the door.

Suddenly Miller turned with an exclamation. "There! I forgot something that I wanted t' tell Uncle Jake. Wait here a minute, will ye? It'll not take me long t' go back."

He walked rapidly over the snow across the valley, and disappeared into the cabin. Five minutes passed. He reappeared, and made his way more slowly back again.

"All right," he shouted from the foot of the ledge. "Turn to the right, and go along above them rocks. That's the trail."

At the top of the mountain Miller again took the lead. He had shifted the pouch to the front, and eased its weight with one hand. Ross noticed that it seemed much heavier than when he entered the cabin, but thought nothing further of the matter.

Half an hour later he was on totally unfamiliar ground among a labyrinth of "sugar loaf" peaks which they skirted and climbed, Miller pushing on steadily and without words.

"Hold yer wind," he directed Ross; "ye'll have need of it before we reach camp."

The sky and earth were nearly blotted out now by the falling snow. Ross could see scarcely a dozen paces ahead. He could not tell whether they were headed east or west, north or south. They twisted and turned and turned again. The boy became leg-weary; but Miller pressed on, seemingly unexhausted, the heavy game pouch dragging at his shoulder.

"We—we can't reach there to-night, can we?" Ross gasped at last.

Miller turned his head but did not pause. "Yep," he answered, "about dark."

Again in silence they went on.

Finally, at five o'clock, they began to climb the gentle slope of a mountain which seemed to have no summit. Here for the first time his guide stopped to allow Ross to rest. Then he advanced slowly, step by step, prodding the snow deeply at the left of the blind trail he was following.

"What's the matter?" Ross called the first time he saw Miller taking measure of the snow in this way.

"Gorge somewhere here," Miller had replied. "Wind's filled it up even from bank t' bank. If we sh' step off—why, there's a hundred feet or so below made up of spruces and snow. I don't want t' go down int' no such landscape."

Ross involuntarily hugged the upper side of the mountain. He longed for their journey's end. As they neared the top, the wind became active, cutting their faces and forcing Ross to turn his back and gasp for breath.

Then came the descent, the storm thickening about them. Occasionally Miller threw a direction or a warning over his shoulder, which always caused Ross's heart to leap fearfully.

"Don't go outside my tracks here. There's a flat rock on the down side that ends in a ledge. Not a pretty slide t' take," he shouted once.

Again it was: "Be careful ahead here under that rock. Brace toward the inside of the trail. We may get a few pounds of snow on our heads."

For half an hour longer they tramped on steadily. Ross ached in every muscle. His feet were beginning to cramp. They almost refused to raise the snow-shoes and push them forward. Miller slackened his speed when he saw that Ross was nearly played out.

"A few minutes more, and we're there," he explained. "Keep up your courage."

And at that moment Ross thought he had need of courage. They had been descending the mountain gradually above timber-line, zigzagging back and forth across the face in such a way as would enable them to use their snow-shoes to the best advantage. Now the storm lightened just enough to enable Ross to see they were traveling along the edge of a cliff with an overhanging fringe of trees, and the cliff appeared to the boy to be the jumping off place into space. Right and left as far as the falling snow permitted him to see the cliff extended. Above was the white bulk of the mountain; below was nothing but storm.

Along this cliff Miller had walked slowly, pausing occasionally to look up into the trees. Finally he gave a grunt of satisfaction, and, throwing his staff and the heavy pouch on the rock, took from the snow-laden branches of a pine a coil of slender new rope.

"Nerves good?" he asked jokingly.

"For what?" was Ross's startled response.

Miller explained. Ross saw that for the first time the colored goggles were no longer astride the other's nose. His cap was drawn down over his eyes, however, and his coat collar was turned up so that not much of his face was visible save his nose.

"If it was summer," began Miller, busying himself with the rope, "we could get around this here little rock. But now there's nothin' t' do but go over it, because the mountain on each side shelves down so steep now we couldn't git down on snow-shoes or off 'em to save our necks. We'd bring down a load of snow on our heads if we should try."

As he talked, he knotted the rope securely around a tree standing near the edge of the rock. "Right here the cliff slopes so I can just slide you down," Miller's gruff voice ran on in jerks, "and then I can slide after ye. But I take it you ain't used to mountains and this sort of game, and so I guess ye'd better hitch the end round yer waist."

He tossed the end of the rope to Ross. "Take off yer shoes, and pack 'em in your hand," he directed when with numb, trembling fingers the boy had knotted the rope. "Forty feet down," Miller continued, "you'll come to a ledge. Stop there, and free the line."

A moment more, snow-shoes in hand, Ross was on his back sliding down an almost perpendicular wall, his hair doing its best to raise his cap from his head. Slowly he was let down, down, so far as he could see, into space. Then suddenly, just as he had

closed his eyes in dizzy terror, his feet struck snow into which he sank to his knees, and the rope above slackened.

The ledge had stopped him, but it seemed to Ross but an insecure footing hung between heaven and earth. It was a mere path across the face of the cliff not more than three feet wide at the widest part.

Ross untied the end; and then, as he felt it jerked from behind him, he covered his eyes with his hand and stood shivering, crowding back against the cliff.

It was the work of a moment only for Miller to slide down the rope and stand beside him.

"Hug the cliff," directed Ross's conductor shortly, "and follow me. No, don't put on your shoes. I'll break the trail fer ye."

Slowly they crawled across the face of the cliff, the ledge leading downward. At the base they were in a winding cañon scarcely twenty yards wide. Here they buckled on their snow-shoes again.

"If," said Miller, bending over the straps, "we see it's best fer you t' stay a few days with my pard and let me go back and help Uncle Jake, I wouldn't do much investigatin' of the premises around here if I was you."

Ross shuddered, and looked up at the face of the cliff, obscured now not only by the storm, but by the coming darkness.

"No investigating for me!" he exclaimed forcefully.

Then they began the tramp up the cañon, the shadow from the wooded mountains deepening every moment. Finally, Miller made a sharp turn around a group of seven spruces standing at the foot of a peak, and cautiously approached a log shack that stood half buried in the snow, and had as its corner posts four tall trees. The snow was shoveled away from the door and window, and a light smoke arose from the joint of stovepipe projecting from the roof.

At the door Miller stopped and listened. "Guess he's asleep," he whispered. "Take off yer shoes out here."

Ross stooped, and unbuckled his snow-shoes.

"Guess the fire must be low," whispered Miller. "Wisht you'd go round the corner there, and load up with wood while I go in and see what he's up to. But don't come in till I tell ye to. I'll sort of prepare him to see ye."

Ross did as he was bidden. He found the path to the pile of pine chunks partly broken; but, with his numb fingers incased in huge mittens, it was not easy work to dig out the wood frozen under its covering of snow. But finally, his arms full, he staggered

around the corner of the shack, and stood again in front of the door. So busy had he been at the wood-pile that he had not thought of listening for sounds within the shack.

Now, as he stood in the dusk before the door, he was surprised at the stillness within, and also by the fact that the window beyond the door showed no light. With a growing but vague uneasiness he waited, chilled to the bone by the wind, which had begun to suck through the cañon and whistle along the sides of the mountains.

The few moments during which he waited seemed to him like years. Then he raised the wooden latch softly, and opened the door. Darkness and silence greeted him.

"Mr. Miller," he whispered.

No reply.

"Miller!" His voice rose sharply.

The wind soughed through the branches over his head; and a sharp flurry of snow, forerunner of the blizzard, assailed him, while from the open door came a whiff of warmth.

Ross dropped the wood outside, and, stepping within the shack, closed the door, and groped his way toward the stove, from the front of which came a faint glow.

Pulling off his mittens, he held his hands over the heat, at the same time holding his breath that he might hear the breathing of the sick man. But all he heard was the beating of the blood in his own ears.

Working some life into his fingers, he tore open the front of his fur-lined coat, and, pulling a match out of his pocket, lighted it, and held it above his head. In the further corner of the cabin was a bunk, from beneath the blankets of which the straw protruded. Trembling so that he could scarcely walk, Ross started across the floor. Half-way to the bunk his match burned out. He retreated to the stove, and lit another. This time he succeeded in reaching the bunk. Several blankets were spread over a foundation of straw. Otherwise the bunk was empty.

A panic seized Ross. "Miller!" he shouted, "Miller!"

The wind howled through the cañon. The trees above the shack swayed and grated their interlocked branches together.

Striking a third match, Ross observed a candle stuck into a hole in a piece of wood which lay on the table. He lighted it, and sank into a chair beside the table.

What had happened? Where was Miller? Where was the sick partner?

Ross took off his cap, and laid it on the table. In bewilderment he ran his fingers through his hair.

Suddenly his eyes fell on something in the shadow beside the door. He went to it. It was the heavily loaded game pouch. Evidently Miller had opened the door, dropped that inside, and vanished into the night.

Ross was reaching for the pouch when another thought struck him so forcibly that he jerked himself to a standing posture with a loud exclamation. Hastily opening the door, he stopped and, throwing the wood about, peered through the darkness, searching the open space where he had parted from Miller.

His snow-shoes were gone.

CHAPTER XV

A NEW CAMP

THE disappearance of the snow-shoes, instead of proving to Ross that he had been hoaxed, at first, only deepened his bewilderment. Finally, the idea found lodgment in his brain that Miller's partner had wandered off in the storm delirious, and Miller, having found him gone, had followed, forgetting Ross. The boy was too confused to weigh the probabilities of such forgetfulness, especially in view of the missing snow-shoes. Therefore, the moment the idea occurred to him he acted on it, hurrying out into the storm with the intention of going to Miller's assistance.

But, without snow-shoes, he found himself helpless. He had not gone a dozen yards from the door before he sank half-way to his waist in the snow. Scrambling hastily back again, he ran around the cabin where the snow was not so deep, and struggled up the mountainside.

"Miller!" he shouted desperately. "Miller, where are you?"

Here and there among the trees he plunged frantically until the fear that he could not find his way to the shack drove him back.

He filled the stove with wood, snuffed the candle mechanically, and looked about him. Then for the first time he realized that there was but one bunk.

"If two men lived here, there would be two bunks," he said slowly; and then came the conviction that Miller had decoyed him here and deserted him, taking the snow-shoes along. But Ross's brain was too numb to pursue the thought. Exhausted by his long tramp and by his fruitless battle with the snow, he filled the stove with chunks, closed the draughts, and, without stopping to blow out the candle, rolled into the bunk, and was asleep before he had pulled all the blankets over him.

When he awoke, the shack was filled with a light, which, although exceedingly dim, was unmistakably daylight. Outside, the snow was piled to the top of the window. The candle was burned out and the fire low. Ross crawled out stiffly, every muscle aching and sore. Filling the stove, he looked at his watch. Twelve o'clock! He had slept away the morning.

Outside the blizzard raged in unabated fury, but so sheltered was the shack by scrub hemlocks and banks of snow roof-high, that but little wind found its way through the mud-chinked log walls.

Standing over the fire, Ross looked at the dark outlines of the one bunk, and considered his situation. His heart sank when he thought of the miles which Miller and he had put between themselves and Meadow Creek Valley.

And who was Miller?

Ross's suspicions, of course, had fastened to the McKenzies. But why had they considered it necessary to have him marooned so far from Meadow Creek? How did they know that the dynamite had been found? When they left Meadow Creek—

"Oh!" cried Ross aloud at this point. He brought the stove poker down vigorously on top of the stove. "That blast under Soapweed Ledge! I wanted 'em to hear it—guess they didn't fail!" Ruefully he turned from the stove. He was certainly paying for his little triumph.

But who was Miller?

The lack of wood in the cabin soon turned his attention from the answer to the necessity for immediate action. He found a large wooden snow-shovel behind the stove; and, opening the door cautiously in order to prevent a mass of snow from following it, he cleared away a space in front of the door and the two windows, and shoveled his way to the wood-pile.

It was not until he was struggling around the corner of the shack with an armful of wood that he realized that his weakness and tremors were due not only to anxiety, but to hunger; and with that realization came a fear which nearly induced another panic. Was there food in the cabin? So great had been his absorption that he had not noticed the contents of the shack beyond those things which he had required for immediate use.

Throwing the armful of wood down beside the stove, he proceeded to make a hurried search, the results of which quieted his fears. The cabin was as well stocked with provisions as Weimer's. A portion of these supplies, the canned milk, vegetables, and fruits, he found in boxes beneath the bunk. Sacks of flour and meal were suspended from the roof logs to protect them from the "pack" rats. Having investigated these provisions, Ross opened a second door at the back of the shack, supposing it led out-of-doors. But he was agreeably surprised to find it led to a little lean-to of logs, where

were suspended a large ham, strips of bacon, jerked meat, and quantities of fresh venison all frozen. The door protected these from the heat inside the shack, while the logs, unchinked, gave protection from timber wolves and coyotes, but not from the snow, which had sifted in over everything.

Ross at once set about getting breakfast. He found every necessary cooking utensil at hand. The cabin was—as such cabins go—completely furnished and, it appeared, must have been inhabited not long ago by a stout man; for in a box at the head of the bunk he found some clothing much too large for him or for the man who had brought him there.

"But," he thought, as he sat down to venison steak and flapjacks, "whoever owns the cabin, Miller must have gone from here to Meadow Creek, because there was a fire here last night when I came in; and it was a fire fixed to keep some hours, too."

As he finished eating, his eyes fell on the game pouch still bulging beside the door. He had not looked inside. With a piece of steak balanced on his fork he crossed the floor. Then:

"Books!" he cried aloud. "*My books!*"

The fork fell from his hand. He dropped to his knees and emptied the pouch. Besides the appliances which he had given to Miller to carry there were all his books, the medical text-books which he had left in the emergency chest in Weimer's shack. He could scarcely believe his eyes. He sat back on his heels, and stared.

"Weston!" he finally shouted. "Miller is Weston!"

Suddenly rising, his eyes narrowed and his lips compressed, he kicked the game pouch across the floor in a gust of anger caused by an illumination of certain circumstances which explained the events of the previous day.

"I'm slow," he muttered between clinched teeth. "Any one can get the better of me."

He recalled Weston's imitation of different people the night he and Waymart had come to Weimer's together and Sandy's displeasure at the exhibition. Sitting down in an armchair beside the table—the only chair in the shack—he followed his chain of evidence link by link. The conversation which he had overheard between Waymart and Sandy the night of the latter's return from Cody was fully explained—the some one whose assistance they might need in Meadow Creek Valley, but who would not come unless some one else had left.

"Weston would not come with Leslie there for fear he'd be recognized," thought Ross. "Therefore, Sandy took steps to remove Leslie and—yes—in spite of the mess I made of it, I blocked the game!"

Then, despite his anxiety, Ross grinned. Of course the McKenzies had not expected Leslie to return any more than they had expected the dynamite to be found. But after

hearing his signal of discovery they had sent Weston, the skilful impersonator, to maroon him here—where? Ross dropped forward his head on the table and groaned.

"They brought me here to get rid of me entirely," he finished; "and I came voluntarily!"

Presently he picked up the pouch, intending to hang it on a nail in the logs beside the door. It was not quite empty; and, lifting the flap he looked in. At the bottom lay a few wads of newspaper. Ross concluded that the pouch had been stuffed with these when Weston came to Weimer's. Then, when he went back after the books, he had thrown out the paper, the presence of which had prevented his companion from noticing much difference in the pouch after the books were put into it. Ross picked up one of the pieces, and glanced at it listlessly. It was a page of the Cody "Gazette." He dropped it back into the pouch.

"I wonder what he told Uncle Jake and Leslie when he got the books," thought Ross, hanging up the bag.

Leslie was the only comfort the situation held for him, and this merely came from the knowledge that Weimer was not alone. For, of course, Weston having seen the boy in Meadow Creek would return and block the work somehow, probably steal the dynamite again, and convey it farther than the tool house.

Here Ross started up in a sort of frenzy, and, putting on his top-coat and cap, rushed out-of-doors. He would find a way out. There must be a way, for Miller had gone back—Ross felt sure he had returned—and if Miller had he could! He would save the claims yet. The first plunge into the snow, waist-deep now, with the whip-lash of the blizzard in his face, brought him to his senses.

"This is folly," he thought as he dropped once more into the chair beside the table, "when I have no idea where I am."

But, even if he did know, his snow-shoes were gone; and without them he could not safely venture—nor with them, either, he decided, recalling with a sick shudder the snow-filled ravines against which Miller had warned him—*Miller*, indeed!

His bitterness came back with a rush. After all he had done for Weston this was the final reward. Weston had shaved his beard, recolored his hair and the fringe of whiskers left beneath his chin, covered his deep brown eyes with goggles, and brought his benefactor of Dry Creek here to spend months in this deadly loneliness! That was the thanks he gave "Doc Tenderfoot" for saving his life.

That night the storm ceased and a warm wind arose. The next morning Ross again shoveled out the doorway, window, and wood-pile. The sky was clear, but the sun did not swing over the towering peak which rose almost perpendicular, opposite the cabin, until ten o'clock. But, when it did show its face, it looked down on a bewildering mass of snow. Ross gazed longingly down the cañon, which wound like a serpent

between the overhanging mountains. Down there not half a mile away a ledge ran diagonally across the face of a cliff; and Ross felt impelled to go to the foot of that cliff, and find out whether or not the rope still dangled from its summit. But well he knew that even so short a journey would be impossible without the aid of snow-shoes. However, if the warm wind continued and the sky remained unclouded, perhaps in a day or two there would be a crust on the snow of sufficient strength to bear his weight. Then he would investigate.

Meanwhile he tried to force himself calmly to the business of living and planning. He was there. So far as he could see there was no escape. He would make the best and the most of the months of his banishment. When he arrived at this conclusion, he found himself relenting a trifle toward Weston on account of the books. It had been no light load to pack across the mountains on a tramp which had lasted many hours.

"Perhaps Weston has a piece of heart, after all," Ross mused the following morning, "but so thoroughly is he under Sandy's control that he dare not show it."

Before him on the table lay Piersol's "Histology," although he was totally unable to focus his scattered thoughts on the contents. He was anxiously watching the weather. The warm wind had continued, but the sky was lowering. Another storm was brewing. Finally Ross left Piersol and going to the door, looked out anxiously over the cañon.

"The snow is settling finely," he decided, "and if the cold comes before the storm the crust will hold me up."

He went back to the armchair and began drumming nervously on the arms. He wondered how it had chanced to be packed so far over the narrow trails. A chair, a "store chair," that is, was an uncommon sight among the mountains. From which point had it been brought, Cody or Red Lodge? The latter, he knew, was more than one hundred miles from the Shoshones, while Cody was but eighty.

However, nearness depended not so much on miles as on accessibility, and for the thousandth time Ross wondered where he was.

He could not reason from the memory of the tortuous windings of that stormy afternoon's journey, with no view of the sun's face to guide him; but his strong impression was that he was many miles northwest of Meadow Creek, with at least three chains of peaks between him and Weimer.

Then he fell to wondering again about the shack. Did it belong to one of the McKenzie relatives? Who had given it over to his use for the winter? He suspected that, while the furnishings and the clothing had been left there by the owner, the McKenzies had planned for his winter's residence, and had partially, at least, stocked his larder, as the owner would not be likely to desert such a supply of meat, especially the fresh venison. Perhaps the venison was due to Weston's forethought. Ross liked to think that Weston had done all that he dared do for the comfort of "Doc Tenderfoot."

"He's a bigger man," mused "Doc"; "and yet he seems more than half afraid of Sandy. Wonder what the trouble is."

That night the wind changed, the temperature dropped, and the next morning snow began to fall, lightly, however. Again and again Ross went out for trial trips on the fast freezing crust, but not until afternoon did he venture on the journey to the cliff.

The shack stood among the trees on the mountainside about ten feet above the level of the cañon. Taking with him a long pole with a sharpened end, which he found in the shack, Ross slid from tree to tree until he gained the level of the cañon. Then, hugging the foot of the mountain closely, that he might judge of the lay of the land by the trees, and so avoid the dreaded creeks and gorges, he turned down the cañon toward the cliff.

It was difficult walking, the crust being smooth and slippery. Several times one foot broke through, and each time Ross's heart seemed to rise in his throat when he considered that he was walking on a body of snow deeper than he was high. The cañon had no distinguishing features. It might have been any one of a dozen located among the Shoshones, and all of them unfamiliar to the young man lost in their midst. On either side, the mountains, dreary and lonely and lifeless, arose precipitately. It was windless in the cañon, but on top of the mountains a white, cold cloud of snow played perpetually.

But Ross's eyes were eagerly searching the mountain at the left for the cliff; and presently he recognized it despite the curtain of snow drifting across its face. There it was, stretching up until his neck ached in the effort to scan the top, where in an unbroken line along the edge hung a great body of snow, the undisturbed accumulations of the last blizzard. The steep side of the cliff, however, was bare, and Ross failed to discover a rope dangling over its surface.

THE SNOW HID IT FROM VIEW

He thought he had not expected to see it there, and so could not account for the sinking of his heart when he found it gone. For a few moments he stood looking down the cañon hemmed in by its great mountain barriers. He fully realized the fact that he was a prisoner within those barriers, perfectly helpless until released by the brief summer.

With bent head he turned his back to the cliff and cautiously retraced his steps while a wildly whirling "squall" suddenly caught him in its clutches. He had gone but a short distance before a sound in the rear caused him to wheel about and listen sharply. Only a smother of snow, swirling up the cañon, met his eyes and a blast of the rising wind his ears. Hesitating, he struggled back a few steps and turned his face up toward the cliff. The snow hid it from view. He stood listening again, and, presently, the sound,

above him and a little in advance, again mingled with the roar of the wind. Ross broke into a run, panting through the storm, breaking through the crust, struggling to his feet and tumbling on again. It was certainly the call of a human voice, although no words were distinguishable because of the noise of the wind.

Ross, obsessed by one idea, raised his voice: "Miller–Weston!" he yelled frantically. "I'm here–below here! Where are you?"

But the wind swooped down on him, seized his words and bore them down the cañon. Then it suddenly died away, and again the snow fell quietly, mistily, and Ross, looking up, saw, as in a nightmare, a rope dangling across the face of the cliff. In bewildered joyousness he pressed his hand against his eyes and looked again.

"It's there!" he cried, "but it certainly wasn't ten minutes ago. That's the queerest–I know I saw straight before—"

He opened his lips to call again, but the call was checked by the discovery of a man half-way down the cliff, creeping along on what looked to be a thread of snow fastened diagonally across the dark surface of the rock, but which Ross at once recognized as the narrow ledge he himself had trod only three days before. Slowly the figure was progressing, its feet kicking away the snow lodged on the ledge, its hands clinging to the bare face of the cliff. Then, faintly into the lull of the storm a nervous voice floated down to Ross from the thread-like path.

"I'm almost down, I guess, Miller. Hope I can get to the cabin before another squall strikes us."

Then, from the top of the cliff, the barely distinguishable words behind the veil of falling snow, "All right. Remember you'll find Doc not half a mile straight ahead. The cabin's on the right, as I've told ye. It's above a bunch of seven spruces. Ye won't need yer snow-shoes–crust'll hold down there."

Ross waited to hear no more. "Leslie!" he yelled joyously. "Ho, Leslie! I'm down here. Come on! Hurray for that rope again!"

But even as the hurray ascended the side of the cliff, so did the rope. Snakily, jerkily, the knotted end traveled upward until it disappeared in the cloud of snow that hid the mountain tops.

From this cloud came a faint and far-away voice: "Good luck t' ye! Tell Doc ye're in the same boat as he is. He'll savvy!"

CHAPTER XVI

THE INGRATITUDE OF WESTON

THE presence of Leslie without snow-shoes, the disappearance of the rope, and Weston's voice caused Ross to "savvy" immediately in impotent anger and bitter disappointment. But not until the two boys had reached the cabin and Leslie was warming himself beside the hot stove, did he fully comprehend the trick that had been played on him.

"Weston!" he exclaimed stupidly in answer to Ross's explanation. "Why, this isn't the man you told about at Sagehen Roost—it's the Miller that you went away with. I saw that Weston fellow, you know. They're not the same!"

"It's evident that when you've seen Weston you've seen any number of men that he cares to imitate. This Miller is Weston, the McKenzies' cousin and the man you—" Here Ross checked himself, as Leslie had not yet connected the dark-haired Weston with the light-haired Oklahoma man of the same name.

Finally, after supper, Leslie recovered from his bewilderment sufficiently to tell connectedly the story of the days that had intervened between Ross's departure from Meadow Creek and his own.

"Begin at the beginning," urged Ross finally, putting a pine chunk in the stove and snuffing the candle.

He had seated the newcomer in the armchair beside the fire, while he sat on an overturned box in front of the stove door and within reach of a heap of wood. On the table at his elbow lay the gun which Steele had insisted on adding to his equipment the day he arrived in Meadow Creek and which he had not since touched. Leslie had brought it strapped across his shoulders and with it all the ammunition which Steele had provided. This was another proof of Weston's strangely curious good will that continued to puzzle Ross. How the unsuspecting Leslie was prevailed on to bring the limited arsenal was a part of the story which Ross was demanding. While the storm raged outside and the dim candle-light flickered and cast long uncanny shadows within, and the pine chunk flamed and cracked cheerily filling the room with a warmth grateful to the chilled narrator, Leslie complied with the request to "begin at the beginning."

"I'd no sooner seen your back, Ross, as you followed Miller out of the door, than I had an awfully uncomfortable feeling of responsibility. By the time the storm had swallowed you two up, the whole outfit there at Weimer's was sitting hard on my shoulders. We watched you out of sight, Uncle Jake and I, and then we went back into the cabin and, Ross, if that cabin seems to Uncle Jake now as-well-as-when you left—"

Leslie paused and stared at the candle. Ross drew his seat nearer the stove and cleared his throat.

"Uncle Jake has stayed there a lot in the winter all alone, you must remember. He was telling me about it not long ago, how the—"

Above the cabin, through the roaring and soughing of the wind among the spruce, came the long drawn yelling, harassed, pitiful cry of a coyote. From the cañon the cry was answered. Again and again the two human-like voices wailed despairingly at each other while the boys involuntarily drew nearer together and Ross laid a caressing hand on the gun and finished his speech:

"That's exactly what Uncle Jake told me—how the coyotes and wolves prowled around, and he didn't mind them nor the loneliness at all."

Leslie nodded. "I noticed that he didn't seem to mind your being away in the same way I did. He just took to his pipe and his bunk and seemed settled for a rest until you got back again. That didn't add any to my restfulness, I can tell you, for what could I do up in the tunnel without him? I rustled around a bit trying to decide what to do when the door opened and there was Miller again, or Weston rather. I was as surprised as they make 'em until he said:

"'Say, young feller, Doc he sent me back t' round up a book on medicine that he may need. It'll be layin' round loose som'ers, maybe in that hair covered chist of hisn.'"

Leslie went on to say that when he had opened Ross's emergency chest Weston professed to have forgotten the name of the book he had been directed to fetch, and, consequently, had taken all the books, stuffing them carelessly into his game pouch. Then the storm had again swallowed him up.

"After he went away," said Leslie, "I got to thinking pretty strongly about the dynamite. If it was so easy for one man to get into the valley from the land only knew where, why couldn't the McKenzies make their way back and spirit the dynamite off for good and all? We'd gone and touched off that charge under Soapweed Ledge to make 'em understand that we had it again, you know."

"Yes, I know!" affirmed Ross grimly. "Geese that we were!"

"Well, those sticks got on my nerves, and I made up my mind to fasten them up if such a thing were possible. So I put on my snow-shoes and began to rattle around in the storm to see what I could do. I thought no one could come up into the tool house from under because of the mass of snow all around, and because the dynamite box was so heavy with all of your and our and the McKenzies' sticks in it that it held the floor boards down with a vengeance. But I wasn't taking any chances after seeing what our 'friends the enemy' were capable of doing, so I got all the spike nails that Weimer had and nailed down the floor. Then I plowed through the storm up to Wilson's shack, shoveled my way in, collected all the tools that could be used to pry

or hammer with and brought 'em back to our tool house. And with them, Ross, I brought a great padlock and chain that I recollected seeing up there rusty and unused. I oiled it and put a bar across the tool-house door and padlocked it. And if I do say it, it would cost a man some time and strength and racket to get into that shack. It would also take some tools, and there's none in the valley except what are behind that locked door, for before night came I had raided the McKenzie cabin and brought over all their tools. Then," continued Leslie, "I went to sleep feeling some better."

"I'll bet you," cried Ross eagerly, "that it's because you fastened up the dynamite that you're here! I do believe that when Weston went back it would have been easier to cache that if he could have got it than to have brought you here."

"I don't know, Ross." Leslie gave a short laugh. "It was easy enough to get me here, as easy as to get you. I—but you want the story as it comes."

"Every word of it. Go on. The next day—"

The next day, Leslie continued, so furious a blizzard was raging that he didn't work in the tunnel but spent the time keeping open the trails to the dump, the wood-pile and the spring. But the second day, the sky having cleared, he tried his best to get Weimer to work.

"Ich vill vork mit Doc," was Uncle Jake's declaration of independence, "mit you, nein!"

"You can imagine, Ross, how much work I did alone, not used to going ahead with the blasting. When I came down at noon the old fellow had dished up a capital dinner. He washed the dishes, but not one step would he budge to the tunnel. Said that you were likely to drop in any time that day and he'd stay in and watch for you. Said it would be work enough for him to do to fill you up after your long tramp through the snow! He simply boiled over with ready excuses. When I went up to the tunnel I left him with his goggles on, swinging open the door about once in two minutes for a look over on Soapweed Ledge. You know it was clear that day and—"

Here Leslie suddenly paused and sat up with a jerk. He gripped the arms of the chair and gave a startled exclamation.

"See here, Ross, that clearness business has reminded me of something that I noticed in the morning, and, because I thought it couldn't be true, I paid but little attention. But now I know—well, this is what it was: when I reached the dump I glanced across the valley at the McKenzie shack. It seemed completely buried in snow except the roof and the chimney stovepipe, and at first I imagined that I saw heat coming out of that stovepipe! You know how, after a hot fire, the heat will crinkle the air above a chimney and no smoke in sight?"

"That's so!" exclaimed Ross. "And you think—"

"At the time I thought it was a mere notion of mine, but now I believe I saw correctly, and that Weston was there waiting to dispose of my case."

"That's the idea," agreed Ross excitedly. "There all the time after he left me, probably. He had likely got him a hot breakfast before you were up and then let the fire die."

Leslie nodded. "Same as I did when I was hiding down in Miners' Camp. But, anyway, I didn't investigate and forgot all about that chimney until this minute."

Here Leslie broke off to ask abruptly, "Another thing, Ross, right here before I forget. The day you left, you remember Uncle Jake was sick and you went down to get dinner and left me in the tunnel?"

"Yes."

"Well, only a few minutes after you left I looked out and you, as I supposed then, stood in the mouth of the tunnel—"

"Nope, 'twas Weston," interrupted Ross. "He said he went up there first. He came to the shack from that direction."

"Then he got a squint at the work and the dynamite and your assistant right then! I thought it was queer I didn't get an answer when I yelled to know if you had dinner ready. But just as I spoke, the figure took a sneak, and I supposed you had just stopped a bit to look things over."

"Weston was attending to that, evidently," retorted Ross promptly. "But now let's see—you've brought the happenings up to to-day, haven't you?"

"Not quite," Leslie answered. "I'll be there in a minute, though. Yesterday I got as uneasy as Weimer over your not getting back, and Miller, or Weston, I mean, not coming as he promised. I confess I was in a blue funk by afternoon, and I saw things were shaping for another storm. I went slipping and sliding out beside the dump a dozen times where I could look over to Soapweed Ledge while Uncle Jake tramped around outside the shack continually watching for you."

"Poor Uncle Jake!" muttered Ross stirring uneasily.

"Well, that brings me to to-day," Leslie began after a pause. "I was down beside the dump looking for you about eleven o'clock this morning when I saw him coming over the Ledge—Weston, I mean. Same goggles, same cap drawn down over his ears, same outfit except the game pouch. I noticed as soon as he came near that the pouch was gone. Tell you what, Ross, I made tracks down the trail, got my snow-shoes on and went to meet him. I would have hurried to meet a Hottentot! Uncle Jake stayed behind jabbering in German, and fairly dancing up and down in his excitement because you had not come with Weston."

Ross, his elbows on his knees and his chin in his palms, staring at Leslie, saw in a flash the latter as he had appeared at Sagehen Roost, overbearing and dictatorial. Then

he saw him running across the lonely valley of Meadow Creek eager to meet any one on a fraternal footing.

"Weston must have left his shack and made a long trip behind it up the mountain and around over the summit to have come in on the Ledge; don't you think so?" asked Ross. "He probably didn't want to run any risk of being seen."

Leslie assented and went on with his story. He had gone to meet Weston with a demand as to Ross's whereabouts and return.

"Don't ye worry none about Doc," Weston declared heartily. "He's fixin' things fine over our way. Doc's all right!"

"So he is," Leslie agreed, "and for that reason we want him right here, Uncle Jake and I!"

"Wall," Weston drawled good-naturedly, "he says the same about you even t' wantin' ye where he is now for a day."

"What do you mean?" Leslie asked.

The two had been walking back toward the shack and the frantic Weimer, and Weston did not explain until he had assured Uncle Jake of Ross's safety and health, and was seated beside the stove.

"Not once while he was there," Leslie told Ross, "not even when he was eating dinner, did he take off his cap—merely pushed it back a little. Uncle Jake urged him to shed it, but he just grinned and said he had a bald spot on the top of his head, and had got into the habit of wearing his cap all the time to keep that spot warm. Said he guessed he wouldn't 'bust into that habit now.' I thought he was an odd Dick to get into such a habit, and with a fur cap, too, but it was all so plausible, Ross, everything he said was said with such an air of truth, that I didn't once suspect."

"No more did I," confessed Ross.

"And then, of course, I was awfully interested in what he had to tell, and ask me to do. He told a clever lie, Ross. He said that you had brought down an elk with his gun and wanted me to come back with him and the sled you had made to help the McKenzies haul supplies, and help pack the venison over the mountains for our winter meat. It was all the more clever because I knew that meat was all we needed to make our winter's supplies good. The story hit Uncle Jake in the right spot, too. He hurried up dinner for us to be gone before the big snow came. Weston thought we could reach his cabin that night and make it back again to-morrow morning with the elk meat. He said it would be a pretty good pull for the three of us, but as there was a good crust we could make it with that sled. Why, Doc, there wasn't a suspicion of deceit in his manner. He said you had fixed his pard up all right and would leave some stuff for

him, and so didn't need to stay any longer. So I went up to the tool house and got the sled out and we started—"

"The gun," interrupted Ross. "Did you think of the gun?"

"Not much I didn't! That was Weston. Just as we were starting off he turned back and said:

"'See here, young feller. Doc said as how ye was t' bring his gun along and mebbly he could bring down a mountain sheep as we come back. They is a lot of them animals over with us.'"

So the two had turned back and Leslie strapped Ross's gun across his shoulders. He carried the ammunition. Weston insisted on taking all of it along as he and his partner had run short, and Ross had promised them a share of his! Then they had started out, and, screened by the veil of gently falling snow, entered on the same tortuous, winding, upward trail that Ross and Weston had taken a few days previously.

"And all the way," Leslie continued, "whenever the trail let us walk together, he was telling me a long yarn about the day you and he had spent chasing that elk whose meat we were going after. I listened, Ross, with my mouth opened half the time, and wished a dozen times, if I did once, that I had been with you.

"Well, as the afternoon passed, the storm became heavier, and part of the way we couldn't see a dozen feet before us, and finally I think Weston himself was uncertain of our way although he said he wasn't. It must have been about four o'clock when we came to the head of the ledge. Weston searched and groped along until he came to a tree where a rope was already tied.

"'It's the one I used fer Doc and me,'" he explained and slung it over the cliff.

"He had been hauling the sled along, while all I had to carry was the gun and ammunition. Now he said that I had better leave my snow-shoes on top of the cliff and tie the end of the rope around my waist and he would let me down to the ledge. That I was to kick clear of snow and then go up the cañon and get you to come down and help heave the sled over and get it down to the cañon. He said you would know better than I how to do that. He kept giving me directions about where to find the cabin, for the snow had thickened until we couldn't see the ledge, to say nothing of the cañon. You see, Ross, I'll confess I was too nervous about going over into space attached to that rope to think that his proceeding was queer. I just didn't question a thing, but shut my eyes and went over. It didn't occur to me to wonder why my snow-shoes, instead of that gun, weren't tied on my shoulders. Well, I struck the ledge and untied the rope and felt my way along that ticklish shelf until the squall lifted and then—you know the rest. If I live to be a hundred I'll never forget how I felt when that rope was drawn up and he yelled down that I was to tell you I was in the same boat that you were!"

It was late and Leslie was too tired to talk longer. Ross gave him the bunk and, waiting only long enough to fill the stove with wood, close the draughts and blow out the candles, wrapped up in a blanket and lay down beside the stove, his coat for a pillow. He did not fall asleep at once, but lay staring up at the flicker of firelight dancing about on the mud-chinked logs overhead.

After all his planning and working, he thought, his mission in the mountains was doomed to failure. The claims would pass into the McKenzies' hands, and, besides, he would have missed one year of the preparation for the work he had chosen. He rolled over and half groaned.

"Awake, Ross?" came from the bunk. "I'm so tired I haven't dropped off yet and, besides—say, Ross, here I am and there's dad waiting for me to turn up with that missing five hundred—and then your claims—we're not exactly in luck, are we? I feel as though I'd like to get my hands on that Weston-Miller fellow's throat."

"There's one thing I can do, though—study," muttered Ross. "That I've got to hold myself to."

Conversation languished then, and both boys fell asleep, Ross's last thought being of Weimer watching for their return in the lonely valley of Meadow Creek.

By daylight the following morning the two were up, full of plans for living and doing during the long months of their imprisonment.

"There are some nails, but no hammer," said Ross. "But we can drive 'em with a stick of wood and fix up another bunk out of these two boxes. They're the longest, and I think they'll fill the bill for my five feet ten. Then we'll divide the straw and the blankets, and by keeping up the fire all night, I guess we won't freeze to death."

On the floor in the corner back of the stove they built the bunk. There were not nails enough nor were the boxes strong enough to allow of making a substantial bunk such as the owner of the shack had built against the side logs.

Until the bunk was completed, Leslie, while working docilely enough under the older boy's direction, regarded the more comfortable bunk as his permanent possession. He had never been taught to be unselfish. He had from his motherless childhood demanded what he wished and received it until the question arose of his continued attendance in school. There he had taken the course he wished and was now paying for it dearly. It was not until he was dividing the straw in his bunk and had come across Ross's watch and pocketbook that the idea smote him hard that the other had vacated the easier bunk in a wordless generosity that he, Leslie, had never practiced, and that he had not even thanked the bunk's former occupant.

"See here, Ross," he began brusquely, "you needn't think that you're going to rest your old bones in the new bunk all the time, for you ain't! I shall try it myself half the time."

"Week and week about, then," Ross agreed. "And this brings us up against a calendar. I brought my watch, thank fortune! But what about a calendar? I want to be sure that I know when the 4th of July gets here, for Steele says you'd never know it except by the calendar, there's so much snow."

"Snow!" groaned Leslie. "Snow! There's never a time when there isn't snow in these mountains, it seems. Well, I know what day to-morrow is, and—have you a pencil?"

Ross slapped the breast pocket of his slicker. "Yep, a long one. And there's one in the pockets of the trousers you'll find in that box," nodding toward the repository of the shack owner's clothing. "Guess we will keep a record of the days up on the side logs. I know how many in each month when I say that old jingle, 'Thirty days hath September,' etc."

But the need of a calendar was not so pressing as the need of wood. The few days that Ross had spent in the shack had caused an alarming shrinkage in the pile of chunks already cut; and Ross, commencing to shovel his way to the nearest pine tree, now ran across a number of logs which had been "snaked" down the mountainside before the snow came, and lay ready for the axe and saw.

"I guess if Aunt Anne were here, she'd not complain that I took no exercise," he muttered grimly, shouldering a short cross cut saw.

While he sawed Leslie got dinner. After dinner Leslie took his turn at the saw and axe while Ross considered the matter of the calendar. Looking about the shack, his glance fell on Weston's game pouch. He had hung it on a peg driven between two side logs and had forgotten it.

"The very thing!" he exclaimed aloud. "We can mark the days on the margin of the old newspapers that are in the bottom of that pouch."

Taking the bag down he dumped the crushed papers out on the table, and sitting down, began to smooth them out, glancing over the contents idly. He found nothing which interested him until he reached the last wad. When he spread this out, he found, stuck to the newspaper by candle-drippings, a scrap of coarse note paper which at once riveted his attention. It contained only the latter part of one sentence and the first part of another.

"—come and help us out, and no fooling about it, either. If you back out I will turn you over to old man Quinn—"

Over and over Ross read these words. They were few and short, but to him now they were the intelligible index to a whole volume. The scrap was stuck to a "Gazette" bearing a date which was just previous to Weston's appearance in Meadow Creek. There was no name to show that Sandy had written the letter, but Ross knew Weston had escaped from Oklahoma. No doubt Sandy possessed the knowledge that compelled his obedience.

Ross drew a long breath. "Strange what parts of two sentences may tell a fellow!"

"Tell a fellow what?" demanded Leslie's curious voice at his elbow. A hand came over his shoulder and pinned the paper down to the table while Leslie read the contents aloud.

"'Old man Quinn,'" he finished excitedly. "Why, that is my father, but—Lon Weston—say, what does that mean, Ross?"

CHAPTER XVII

A RANDOM SHOT

FOR an instant Ross made no reply. He sat with his back to the door and had not heard Leslie enter. Turning slowly he looked up with puzzled eyes.

"Less, there's something that I've not told you before—because—I guess because I've thought it wasn't fair to tell. But after Weston has brought us away off here and dumped us in this wilderness—even if he has done it out of fear of Sandy—well, it seems to me that about now he has forfeited all right to my silence."

Leslie fell back in astonishment, the scraps of the letter still in his hand. "Doc, are you getting lunny? What are you talking about?"

Ross laughed ruefully. "Just thinking out loud, that's all. Now I'll get right down to business about Weston. You said you knew a fellow in Oklahoma by his name—Lon Weston."

Leslie pursed his lips incredulously. "Yes, but as I said, our Lon Weston had light hair and didn't murder the King's English like this man, and he hadn't a husky voice."

"Just so!" cried Ross triumphantly. "Neither does this Lon Weston murder the English language when he is talking like himself, nor has he a husky voice naturally nor has he dark hair! It's colored dark—near the roots, as I found out, it's light."

"Jiminy crickstones!" cried Leslie excitedly. "If that's true, it's one on me! Come to think of it, Weston was forever imitating folks, but I never have seen him in such a serious imitation as this. How do you know all about him, anyway?"

From this Ross proceeded to tell what he knew except Weston's connection with the note laid under the electric bulb in the bedroom of "The Irma." That much he felt himself pledged not to relate, but its omission, really, in no way detracted from the proof of Weston's identity. Furthermore, Ross, concerned only with that identity, began his recital with Sheepy's talk about Weston forgetting the photograph which had revealed the injured man's name.

"You can see," Ross concluded, "by putting together all the evidence, that he is the fourth man your father is after, and that Sandy has come it over him completely, knowing that he is the fourth. The more I think of it the more I'm convinced of Sandy's power. Sandy holds this cudgel over his head and makes him do the dirty work. But, no matter how big the cudgel is, he had no business to play this low-down trick on us."

"Wait till we get out of here!" declared Leslie wrathfully, "and I'll make him pay for his trick!" Suddenly his face lighted. "Ross, see here! Dad has been hunting for that fourth man for two years, and if I can go to him and tell him who it is and set him on the right track, well—I'll stand in better with dad, that's all! The five hundred that I can't begin to earn until next summer won't be in it beside that information!"

Then, as suddenly as it had come, the light died out of the boy's face. He sat down on the table and rubbed his forehead in perplexity.

"But, Ross, there's another side to this. For me to do that would knock things endwise with Sue."

"Sue," repeated Ross, "who is Sue?"

"I've got a sister," explained Leslie. "She's four or five years older. She keeps house for us. She's an awfully good girl, Sue is, although," turning his head shamefacedly away, "she'd be surprised to hear me say so, for we, dad and I, have made her a lot of trouble. Dad's as up and down with her as with me and I—say, Ross, I've been a nuisance at home!"

Leslie choked. He looked slowly around the cramped, dirty, ill-lighted room, so unlike the neat, pleasant home presided over by Sue, and swallowed hard. Ross industriously made notches in the edge of the table with his pocket-knife.

Finally Leslie, clearing his throat, continued, "I guess all this serves me about right. I know I ought to be kicked—and I am being—in a way. Well, it's always been up to Sue to put up with us both, and she has. And then three years ago Lon Weston came. You see, Ross, dad is a sheep owner, and North Bend is on the edge of the range between sheep and cattle, and that always means war. About three miles away is a cattle ranch, and Peck, the owner, and dad are always by the ears. It was at Peck's that Lon was foreman, and he used to come over to North Bend to see my sister whenever dad would let 'em, but things were never very smooth for 'em. Of course, I didn't see much of him because I was off at school most of the year. I was away when the cattlemen had their big round-up two years ago in the fall. After each had cut out his own bunch of cattle and shipped 'em, a lot of the boys went on a drunk and dad lost his sheep. Naturally he went up in the air at the loss and was at the throat of every cattle owner and cowboy for miles around. And, first thing, of course he came down on Sue about Lon's coming to the house and forbid 'er to see him again, not because he suspected Lon, but just because he was Peck's foreman and a cowboy.

"Well, Lon cleared out right off and Sue cried herself sick. She never said anything, but I've guessed that Lon never has written to 'er and I'm afraid she's foolish enough," tolerantly, "to think a lot of him.

"But I never suspected that Lon was in the bunch that sent dad's sheep over, and I know that no one else around the ranch suspects it, because of Lon's coming to see Sue right along. Still—there were times when he was a pretty rough customer, and—it's a mixed up mess, ain't it, Ross, along with Sue?"

Ross had been leaning forward on the table listening eagerly. Two or three times he had started to interrupt, and had checked himself with difficulty. Now he burst out:

"I had forgotten the girl's photo in Lon's pocket, Leslie. I know now it's Sue's picture, because it looks like you. It fell out of his pocket at Sagehen Roost, and both Hank and I saw it, and then, when you came, you puzzled Hank because he thought he had seen you before!"

"The very idea!" exclaimed Leslie indignantly when Ross had told him about the name on the photograph. "How dare he carry my sister's picture around with him after doing dad such a dirty trick. Oh, I have it in for him all right! I don't wonder the McKenzies knew they had to get rid of me before they could make Lon come over to Meadow Creek! I see now! I presume he thinks that dad has been on his track these two years. I wonder if Sandy and Waymart were with Peck at the same time Lon was?"

For a long time the boys talked over the affair in all its bearings, and as the long lonely days passed, they recalled every incident that had occurred since they left Oklahoma and Pennsylvania. Their conversations mostly took place in the evening by the light of one dim candle, or in the darkness relieved only by the flicker of the firelight, as candles were not plenty. It was at that dreary time between day and night with the wind and the coyotes howling outside that the homesickness that they could fight successfully in daylight had its inning.

"But what if I were here alone!" Ross exclaimed periodically.

His gratitude at having Leslie there softened his anger at Weston, although he knew that the bringing of Leslie had been no philanthropic move on Weston's part.

Soon, however, the boys settled to a routine of work, exercise and study planned by Ross and acquiesced in by Leslie, all, at first, save the study. In that Ross began with no thought of aid from the other or partnership with him until one day when he sat with a book on anatomy before him industriously absorbing the pages. Presently, turning his book over on its face, he resolutely closed his eyes against the outer world, and his ears against Leslie's lively whistle, mentally reviewing the facts he had been conning. Suddenly Leslie, who had been lying in the bunk, came over to the table and, picking up the text-book, lazily bade Ross think aloud.

"It's so deadly lonely, Ross, with you poring over those dull books," complained Leslie, "that I'd rather hear you recite than not to hear anything at all!"

From this trifling beginning, a student partnership grew up. At first the task meant to Leslie only a form of passing the time away, of hearing a human voice instead of the crackle of the fire and the sough of the wind. Then, gradually, his interest in the subject of anatomy was awakened. He began to look at himself with a new interest.

"I say, Ross," he burst out one day when he was frying bacon, "I never have thought of myself before as being made up of parts that must work together smoothly—and I never considered how they must work and that some one or other must know just how they ought to work so that he can put 'em together if they fall out of place. Now, about that femur, and ball and socket joint at the hip here—"

Immediately Ross plunged into a lively description which soon led both boys to the books for proof and illustration, and Leslie's interest grew. From being merely the holder of the book while Ross recited and explained what he had studied, Leslie, the "hater" of studies, began to study also, at first, in a fitful way, and then more steadily as Ross proved himself an enthusiastic teacher.

Neither, however, became so absorbed in his studies as to become reconciled to his enforced residence above the seven spruces. Day after day they ventured out and up and down the cañon, or up the side of the mountain on the side of which their shack was located, but no discoveries resulted. The absence of snow-shoes made travel impossible except on top of a strong crust, and even then a realization of a constantly increasing danger resulted in making such trips shorter and shorter. The danger was this: blizzard succeeded blizzard until the willows, ten feet tall, which grew thickly in the cañon, were completely concealed, also the scrub hemlocks and quaking asp on the mountainside. The tops of the bushes, lashed by the wind until they became finally snow covered, formed each a dangerous hollow under a crust thinner and weaker than the surrounding surface. This painful discovery was made by Leslie.

One bright day, leaving Ross to cut off the branches of a tree that he had felled for fire-wood, Leslie took the gun and started down the cañon on a tour of exploration.

"The crust is stout enough to hold up an ox, Doc," he declared, bringing the butt of the gun down on it hard, "and I'm going out to see what there is to see—and shoot."

"Shoot!" echoed Ross, poising the axe in air. "I'd like to see something shootable up here beside coyotes, and we never see them—only hear 'em!" and the axe descended with a thud.

Leslie laughed, shouldered the gun and tramped briskly down the cañon, while Ross wielded the axe and, whistling cheerfully, thought of the progress he was making in his studies.

Presently, he rested on his axe handle and chafed his cheeks and nose briskly with the shaggy mittens he had found in the box of clothing left in the shack. "I don't want any more frost bites in mine!" he muttered. He had had several experiences of the kind that winter, the altitude being so great that he did not realize the intense cold until nose or cheek or ear had become frost nipped.

He was resuming his axe when a faint sound traveled up the cañon on the wings of a slow south wind. Ross straightened himself and listened. Again came the wind and the sound. With the axe in his hand he slipped and slid down the mountainside until he stood in the cañon below the seven spruce trees. There he paused long enough to distinguish in the sound the faint muffled cry, "Ross!" and "Help!"

"Coming!" yelled Ross frantically. "Where are you?"

He did not await a reply but, slipping unsteadily along the icy crust, he hurried down the cañon in the general direction of Leslie's voice, yelling intermittently, "Coming—here I am! Where are you, Less?"

As he came to the cliff over which he had been lowered into the cañon, he heard Leslie's voice again, still curiously muffled, although evidently only a little way in advance. It seemed to rise from beneath the ground.

"Hold on, Ross. Don't come fast. I've fallen through among the willows."

Cautiously Ross advanced toward the voice, testing the strength of the crust at every step until it gave under the stamping of his heel. Then he stopped and found himself looking down a section of shelving crust into a hole filled with loose snow, willow tops—and Leslie.

"Great guns!" cried Ross. "What are you doing in there?"

Leslie attempted to respond nonchalantly, but his face was nearly as white as the bed of snow he was occupying, and his teeth chattered with cold and fright.

"I've been flopping around here for half an hour yelling," he explained jerkily, "and have only managed to sink deeper and break off more crust and more willow tops."

"Rub your nose and face the next thing you do," advised Ross immediately, "or you'll be a mass of frost bite."

He rubbed his own nose meditatively. Then grasping the axe he cried cheerfully, "Hold the fort a while longer down there, Less, and relief will arrive. See here! I hadn't finished the wood and I ran off with the axe. Now I'll skiddoo and cut a pole and help you out. And don't forget to rub your face!"

Laboriously and fearfully—lest he meet with Leslie's fate—Ross climbed the side of the mountain until he stood among the branches of a sturdy spruce, the depth of snow raising him to that height. Cutting and trimming a long limb, he dragged it back to the cañon. Projecting one end over the hole he sat hard on the other. Then Leslie, by

jumping and seizing the projecting end, and bracing against the sloping sheet of crust, climbed, breathless but relieved, to the surface of the snow.

"I tell you what, Ross," he said emphatically as they made their way gingerly back to the shack, "I've done all the research work I want to in this cañon!" He shivered and slapped his hands smartly together. "Without snow-shoes we are helpless here, and the McKenzies know it!"

To make snow-shoes without boards or small nails or a hammer was impossible to workmen of their inexperience. They broke up some boxes and put in all their spare time for days experimenting, but to no purpose.

"Even if we did succeed, Less," Ross comforted himself one day as he looked gloomily at their latest failure, "we couldn't escape from here. We have no idea where we are, whether we are nearer Red Lodge or Cody or Timbuctoo. We would merely start out and leave a half-way comfortable certainty for a mighty ticklish uncertainty."

"That's right," agreed Leslie, "and we couldn't pack enough food on our backs to last many days, nor can we tell when a storm is coming."

In fact, storms were the order of the day. By the middle of February immense masses of snow curled out over the cliffs on the side of the mountain opposite the shack waiting for the warm chinooks of spring to send them hurtling down into the cañon. Fortunately, the mountain above the shack was lower than its neighbors, and the face, heavily wooded, sloped back more gently until it reached a great elevation.

"The trees here prove that there have been no snowslides within the memory of this generation, at any rate," Ross broke out one day as they were sawing the branches from a spruce on the mountainside above the shack. "Now, if the shack were on the other side—"

"But it wouldn't be built on the other side," interrupted Leslie. "No cabin builder would do such a thing unless he built when he first struck this country as young and green as we were!"

Ross laughed and started the branch he had trimmed down the mountainside on the crust. It skidded along rapidly until it wedged itself into a great snow bank which had drifted from the shack to the trees on either side, and through which the boys had tunneled. With the last branch sent home in this convenient fashion, Ross shouldered the axe and picked up the saw, while Leslie took the gun from a near-by branch where it had been slung, and followed down the mountainside.

With the increase in the depth of the snow, the coyotes and gray wolves had grown bolder, and without the gun the boys never went now outside of their dooryard, as they called the spaces they had cleared around the shack. So far, however, the coyotes had only skulked near the strongly built lean-to, attracted by the smell of the meat,

while the wolves contented themselves by howling at night from the rocks far above the cabin, and being answered from the mountainside opposite.

"I have always heard that the gray wolf is a coward," commented Leslie as the two entered the shack. "We have not had a glimpse of one yet."

"Uncle Jake said they are far more afraid of people than sensible people are afraid of them," returned Ross, "but I'd rather not be called sensible than to meet one face to face!"

That night the boys turned in early, tired with their exertions at the wood-pile. About midnight they were both awakened by a mysterious noise. Leslie, in the wall bunk, came up on his elbow before he was fairly awake. Ross, on the floor, sat up instantly, whispering sharply:

"Leslie, is that you?"

"What?" asked Leslie bewildered. "Is it you? What was that?"

Before Ross could reply again, the noise was repeated. It came from above their heads, a soft padding and crunching on the roof logs. Suddenly there was added a whining sound and a scratching at the side and then an increase in the crunching on the roof.

"Wolves!" cried Ross and Leslie simultaneously.

"They smell the meat in the lean-to," added Leslie.

"Tell you what, Less," said Ross, "I'm glad we're inside a stockade. I'll put my trust in logs rather than boards with those fellows around."

Ross's voice was decidedly husky, Leslie was glad to note. His own was almost beyond control while cold chills ran up and down his spine. He grunted assent and tried to yawn aloud but was unsuccessful.

Then, as the soft padding and eager sniffing continued, he found his voice in a frightened quaver, "Ross, can they get into the window, do you think?"

"Or break into the door?" added Ross equally uncertain as to tone. "One thing I know, Less, they're afraid of fire."

At that both boys came out of their bunks and began to fill the stove with wood. But at these sounds from below, the wolves departed hastily and put in the remainder of the night howling from the side of the mountain a safe distance away.

"Guess Uncle Jake is right. They seem as afraid of us as we are of them!" exclaimed Leslie, lighting a candle and setting it in the window. Then he turned on Ross with a sheepish grin. "Say, Doc, is my hair standing straight up?"

Ross passed his hand over his own. "I don't see it stand, but if it feels like mine it won't lie down again in a week. To-morrow, Less, we'll let studies go by the board and have that window and the door barricaded. Then, if a wolf or two chance to stumble against them we can turn over and laugh in our sleep."

There was no more sleep in the shack that night, however, and before daylight the boys were up planning the proposed barricade. They finally hit on two cross poles for the door, fitted into crudely carved stanchions nailed to either side. These bars were removed by day, but when night came, it was with a feeling of relief that the boys dropped the bars into their stanchions and knew the device could foil any wolf that prowled about the mountains. The window, also, was similarly barricaded.

But, secure behind these protections, the boys soon became accustomed to their midnight visitors, and even began to look eagerly for them during the day, Leslie being a fair shot.

"I would like to get a skin or two, Ross," he said one evening. "Sue would like 'em as rugs, you bet!"

It was after supper, and the boys, having washed the dishes, had blown out the candle and were sitting beside the stove. The draft in front was open, and the blazing chunks within sent a cheerful glow dancing past the window and flickering on the bunk and the side wall beyond. Outside, the wind souged among the branches of the seven spruces, whipping them savagely. It was densely dark, darker than it would be an hour later when the moon swung over the tops of the mountain opposite the shack. There had been no storm for several days, but severe cold, so that on top of a strong crust a light snow drifted about continually.

"I'm satisfied to leave the skin on the brutes if they'll agree to leave mine on me!" laughed Ross in answer to Leslie. "Guess you're a better sport, Less, than I am."

Leslie shook his head. "Aw, I'm no sport," he disclaimed in a pleased tone. "If I ever think I am I shall remember the first night the wolves came."

He was rubbing his head reminiscently when, suddenly, there came an unexpected sound from the neighborhood of the window. There was a thump against the outer logs, followed by the splinter of glass and the inward rush of cold air. This was immediately succeeded by a hasty scraping noise in the midst of which Leslie sprang to his feet shouting:

"Wolves! Quick, Ross, the door!"

While Leslie sprang to the gun hung on pegs against the logs near the door, Ross fumbled at the door fastenings and, in a moment, both boys were out in front in the clearing that they had shoveled in front of the door and window. The sound was rapidly retreating down the side of the slope toward the seven spruces. Eagerly the boys ran toward the spruces, which, in the darkness, merely made a darker spot below

them. From the midst of the trees came the scratching sound on the crust. Throwing the gun to his shoulder Leslie excitedly fired again and again in the direction of the rapidly receding sounds.

"There!" he exclaimed when the chambers of the gun were emptied. "Of course I haven't hit anything, but I have the satisfaction of knowing I've shot at a wolf, at least!"

CHAPTER XVIII

A HUMILIATING DISCOVERY

RETURNING to the cabin, the boys excitedly split up a box and, binding the dry splinters together, thrust one end into the stove. A moment later, Ross, brandishing this improvised torch, and followed by Leslie, bearing the gun in hands none too steady, ran down to the seven spruces.

This group of trees, full grown and broad limbed, interlocked their branches at the foot of the mountain in the path of the high winds which roared through the cañon as through a funnel between the high mountains. The trunks formed a windbreak for the storms that left their load of snow heaped to the branches on the upper side at the expense of the lower side where the crust was swept as clear of loose snow as though by a broom.

Here, in the shadow of these trees, Leslie, despite his earnest protest to the contrary, half expected to see a wolf dead or wounded, but no wolf appeared. Lowering the torch, the boys made their way warily around the trees and the drifts heaped to leeward. The pile of snow had not been disturbed, nor did they discover any tracks.

"Less, I'm not satisfied," exclaimed Ross finally. "Something broke that window and something ran down here. There's enough loose snow over this crust to show traces if—"

Here the speaker hastily interposed his body between a gust of wind and the flaring torch.

"That's true," asserted Leslie, "but the snow is so light that this wind has probably moved every particle of it since that window was broken, and this crust is too hard to show a track."

Ross uttered a sudden exclamation and plunged forward, the torch's head flaming against the crust.

"Quick, Less, see here!"

Leslie sprang forward and bent over the torch. "Blood!" he shouted. "I did hit him for sure! There is a—no, see here, Ross, here are some more drops, a neat little collection! I must have hit hard. Oh, we can track him now easily!"

The telltale drops were scattered on the glistening face of the crust just below the trees. There was one splash of red and a few inches further along scattering drops. Sweeping the crust with the torch the boys cautiously crossed the cañon taking care to test the crust with the heels of their shoes as they advanced. But, to their disappointment, no more blood appeared, and no further signs of life. Slowly they zigzagged back and forth, searching and listening, but to no purpose.

"He got away all right," said Leslie in a voice of deep chagrin. "Guess, after all, I must only have scratched him."

"Yes, but it's queer that a scratch would have produced that much blood and not another drop," returned Ross puzzled. "Such a wound would keep on bleeding for a few moments at least. We ought to find more traces right around here."

Convinced of the soundness of this reasoning, Leslie urged another search. Stopping long enough to make a fresh torch they returned to the blood spots and with them as a center carefully enlarged the circle of their search until they had again covered the surface, inch by inch, for yards around.

"He must have stopped and licked the wound clean right here and then streaked it for the mountains," said Leslie at last.

Ross shook his head obstinately. "I don't believe it. With your shots pattering around him he'd likely streak it for the mountains and attend to his wounds later—only in that case there would be more blood."

Discouraged and cold, the searchers returned to the cabin. Nailing a box cover over the window, and barring the door again, they went to bed.

The following morning dawned bright and still in the Cañon of the Seven Spruces as the boys had named their home. Tired out with the excitement and exertion of the previous night they overslept, and not until the sun had appeared above the eastern peaks were they ready for a further examination of the neighborhood of the blood spots. They searched as they had the previous evening and with no better results, until noon. Then the unexpected happened!

They had given up the hunt disgustedly and were returning to the shack for dinner, when passing to windward of the seven spruces, Leslie chanced to pause beside the trunk of the outermost sentinel in the group. Ross, in advance, turned and, simultaneously, the gaze of both boys fell on another evidence that Leslie's gun had drawn blood the night before. Half of each tree trunk was covered with snow and on the white envelope of the spruce beside which they stood appeared four red streaks

lying parallel and a couple of inches away around the curve of the trunk a faint red blotch. The second of the four streaks contained the deepest stain.

"I say, Ross!" cried Leslie.

"Less, here you are again!" ejaculated Ross.

For an instant they both stared at the tree trunk motionless. Then Ross, with a sudden narrowing of his eyes and upward tilt of his square chin, strode forward, drew off his mitten and extended his arm. The marks were shoulder high. Leslie gave an exclamation as Ross grasped the trunk, his four fingers covering the four streaks of blood, his thumb pressed on the fainter blotch. Then his hand fell to his side.

"A man!" gasped Leslie. His face turned white. "Ross, did I shoot a man?"

"That would account for things," said Ross slowly. He looked back. Only a few feet intervened between the tree and the blood on the crust. "If you hurt his hand—and he steadied himself here at this tree, and then ran on—perhaps before he realized that he was hurt—and then staunched the flow in his mittens or on his clothes—anywhere—"

"It was Sandy!" exclaimed Leslie. His voice was weak, also his knees.

"Or Weston," added Ross and scowled.

"He—they were looking in the window—" began Leslie.

"And slipped and fell against the glass," added Ross.

Only one more proof was needed to convince them that Leslie had drawn human blood, and that proof they found where they had not thought to look previously—beneath the window. There, in the loose snow blown against the side of the shack, was the blurred impression of a snow-shoe.

"I believe," said Ross with conviction that night as they sat beside the fire with their door barred and the window securely shuttered, "I believe, Less, that it was Sandy and perhaps Waymart, coming to see if Weston had done his duty by us."

"But where did they come from?" questioned Leslie. "Where are we? Can they get over to Meadow Creek and from there here? Or is there another way of getting here?"

It was months before that persistent question was answered, months of a dull routine wherein the boys turned with more and more zeal to their studies. Nights now, behind their barred door and shuttered window, they listened, not for wolves, but for the return of their human caller, but he did not come again. Day after day they looked sharply for prints of snow-shoes, but looked in vain. Gradually as the spring advanced, the wolves and coyotes retreated until the boys no longer carried the gun on their wood-cutting excursions.

"I guess Sue will not see a wolf skin this year," Leslie complained in March. "Even in that I have failed."

Ross, standing over the stove frying bacon, glanced over his shoulder. "Brace up, Less," he gibed. "There's one thing you haven't failed in, nor I either. We've got outside of more anatomy and physiology and—"

"That's so," Leslie interrupted brightening. "I've found out what I want to do—after I've made my peace with father," soberly. "I guess he'll not make any objections to a doctor in the family. It strikes me," lugubriously, "that he'll be pleased to find out that I want to be anything!"

March gave place to April, finally; but in the mountains April showers do not have the effect they are popularly supposed to have elsewhere, the showers being great downfalls of snow alternating with thaws which threatened to turn the entire cañon into a river and brought to their ears daily the thunder of the snowslides. By the first of May the tops of the tallest willows began to appear, but the boys knew that the roots would not be visible for six weeks yet, so long does winter linger among the Shoshones. On the mountainside above timber-line boulders began to push aside their dense white covering.

But with the softening of the great body of snow, the inhabitants of the cañon became more closely confined than ever. It was well that the hot sun did away with the necessity for a fire during the day, because the boys were able to cut and shovel their way only to the nearest trees.

"Things are getting worse instead of better," said Leslie gloomily one day when May was two weeks old.

The boys sat in the doorway in the red glow of a warm sunset. At their feet, only a few yards away, the narrow cañon was transformed into a river choked with ice and snow and mud flowing sluggishly among the willows. For weeks the boys had looked in vain for the subsidence of the water. On the steep slope of the mountain opposite lay a mass of wet heavy snow waiting for its turn to come to plunge into the cañon.

Ross, his eyes on this slope, gave a rueful laugh. "Less, if only we had such a charge of dynamite now as we set off under Soapweed Ledge we might have a little fun across there."

"Fun!" echoed Leslie miserably. "Never connect that piece of foolishness with the word 'fun.' If it hadn't been for that shot we probably would have been in Meadow Creek Valley now hard at work."

Ross gazed gloomily up the river-like cañon. He wondered whether the trail from Miners' Camp to Meadow Creek was clear yet, and whether the McKenzies had returned to the valley; for in three weeks Weimer's fifth year of work on the claims would close. He chafed with impatience at the delay necessitated by that slowly moving stream. With the cañon clear, the boys had determined to start out and follow its windings until they came to—Somewhere.

Late one afternoon of that same week Ross sat studying beneath the window while Leslie was out trying to force a path to a fine spruce tree that promised good firewood. The sun had long since hidden his face behind the mountain against which the cabin rested, but his rays turned the snow on the peaks opposite to gold. The day had been warm. The door stood open, and the fire was almost out. Near the doorway, and only a few feet from a solid bank of ice, blossomed a profusion of forget-me-nots and yellow wild asters. The breeze which rocked their petals was the breeze of summer that, nevertheless, carried the tang of the ice and snow over which it passed.

Suddenly Ross, deep in his book, heard a sound, the crunching of the pine cones and boughs with which the ground was strewn. A moment later a shadow moved across his book. He sprang to his feet, the book falling to the floor, and confronted a man in the doorway.

The man was middle-aged, large, and stoop-shouldered. His face was burned and bearded and furrowed, but astonishment was stamped on every feature and furrow.

"Hello!" he greeted Ross, as one familiar with his surroundings greets a stranger.

He stepped inside with that air of assurance which proclaims ownership. His eyes left Ross, and swept the shack.

"What—" he began, and suddenly stopped, his gaze traveling back curiously to the boy. "What—" he began again, but got no further.

Ross was the first one to complete a question, and it was an eager one.

"Where did you come from?"

"Cody," returned the stranger, reciprocating with "And you?"

"Meadow Creek."

"Meadow Creek!" in surprise. "Is the trail open now?"

Ross shook his head. "I don't know. I came last January."

"January!" The stranger stared, and stuffed his hands into his pockets. "Do ye mean t' tell me ye've been here sence January?"

"Ever since then."

Briefly but excitedly Ross told the story of his coming.

The stranger, listening, leaned back against the door-post. Successively he removed his cap, scratched his head, and contracted his bushy eyebrows. When Ross finished he was grinning in grim humor.

"Young man," he began slowly, "this here is Wood River cañon. Ye're only seven miles from Miners' Camp. Ye could 'a' hoofed it down t' Gale's Ridge in two hours on top of any crust that would 'a' held ye up."

Stepping to the door Ross raised a chagrined voice, "Leslie, ho, Less! Come here!"

The boy's unexpected and welcome visitor was Terry Brown, the owner of several adjacent coal claims. He had gone out of the mountains the first of December, his preparations for departure consisting merely in closing the door of his shack. He had expected to open it in June on the same furnishings and provisions which he had left.

"I see how it was," Brown began as the three talked things over that evening. "That 'ere Weston waits fer a storm a-purpose. Then he takes ye a pretty chase around and up and among them little peaks over at the head waters of Meadow Creek until he gits ye so mixed up that ye don't know east from west. Then he slides ye over the cliff, and lands ye in here; and you, thinkin' ye're miles away from ye don't know where, with a heap o' danger spots between ye and anywheres, jest naturally sets down here and behaves yerself. It was the only sensible thing to do," added Brown approvingly.

"But in the face of the facts it doesn't look sensible now!" Ross burst out.

"No," meditatively, "but without knowin' any of the facts, and with no way t' know 'em, you acted with sense, plain hoss sense. But that 'ere Weston, he sure done you dirt, all right."

Ross's fists doubled involuntarily. Seeing this, Brown's voice changed.

"Better fergit it, son. Chuck the hull matter. Ye've lost and they've won; and, if what I hear of the McKenzies is true, it won't do ye no good t' keep thinkin' of this. And when ye git down t' Camp I wouldn't tell the first man I seen about this, nuther—"

"Because," Leslie broke in hotly, "they'd laugh at us for staying here so near Camp all winter."

Brown made no reply, but a slow grin expressed his opinion.

"I say, Less," Ross broke out, "we don't look any bigger to ourselves than we did when we found out what that blast under the Ledge had done for us, do we?"

But Leslie did not hear. He sat with his elbows on his knees scowling down at the floor. "If we're that near Camp," he reasoned, "it was surely one of the McKenzies that came up to see if we were here yet that night that I fired. He chose a night, you remember, when the snow was light and the crust icy. No tracks left for us to follow."

Their visitor asked for no explanation to this. He was studying Ross's face intently as the boy sat leaning forward, his hands clasped around his knees.

"I say!" the older man broke out suddenly. "Ye look almighty like a feller that rode up in the stage from Meeteetse yisterday—almighty like 'im. They was two of 'em. They got out at Amos Steele's."

"Where did they come from?" asked Ross absently.

"I dunno. Sheepy Luther said they was Easterners."

"Sheepy Luther!" exclaimed Ross. "I know Sheepy. His wagon set on the hill just back of the stage camp when I was there with Weston."

"Is that so? Wall, Sheepy is down on his luck. He's too old t' chase sheep, and last winter he lost five hundred or thereabouts; so he got his walkin' papers. He come up yisterday. Stopped at Steele's t' try t' git a job with the Gale's Ridge Company. Steele may take 'im on to wrangle the hosses, but he can't do more'n a boy's work. He's done fer; only he don't know it."

In the pause which followed Brown again studied Ross. "This feller," he began again suddenly, "was a bigger man than ye be; but I vum, ye're alike even t' the way ye squint up yer eyes and mouth, 'n'—"

Ross came to his feet alertly, his interest at last aroused.

"His name?" he demanded eagerly.

Brown shook his head. "Didn't hear no names except the front ones. They called each other 'Ross' 'n' 'Fred.'"

"Uncle Fred and father!" shouted Ross excitedly. "They came up yesterday, you say, and stopped at Gale's Ridge!"

CHAPTER XIX

AN UNEXPECTED VICTORY

THE boy's first feeling of joy was immediately succeeded by a deep chagrin. Probably his father had come on to complete the legal process for securing a clear title to the claims, and had brought Dr. Grant with him, and Ross must confront them with news of failure rather than victory. He winced when he thought of the expression of disappointment which he felt sure would sweep over his father's face, especially when his father learned that the way to failure had lain in part through the boy's exercise of his medical knowledge.

"There's my snow-shoes," he heard Brown saying, and the words brought him out of his reverie back to the present at once. "To-morrer ye better hoof it down t' Camp and meet up with yer relation."

"That's right, Ross," urged Leslie. "I'll stay here until you can bring more shoes back. In that case," cheerfully, "you see I'll get the better bargain because you'll have to take the brunt—" he paused abruptly.

"Yes, the brunt of the ridicule," added Ross grimly. "We may as well look the thing squarely in the face. I'm pretty hot inside, and I shall probably boil over at sight of the

McKenzies, but—they've made us ridiculous instead of laying themselves open to prosecution."

"Except Weston," Leslie burst out significantly. "Wait till I get hold of father!"

According to the plans laid, Ross set out the following morning on the snow-shoes. Following Brown's directions, to keep to the side of the mountain, he threaded the windings of the cañon on reluctant feet, past the cliff whose dark face mocked him, over the treacherous rotting ice and packed snow, and finally emerged into the broader portion of the cañon which contained Miners' Camp.

The cabins, deserted the previous December, were inhabited again. The sound of the woodchopper was in the air; and, as Ross came into Camp, a dull reverberating boom from the heart of Dundee told that the Mountain Company's mining operations were resumed.

But so intent was he on the thought of meeting his father and uncle that these sights and sounds did not fill him with the joy he had imagined they would give. He even failed to notice a man standing in the doorway of a shack, scanning Crosby, on whose steep face the snow still hung in loosening masses.

Toward the shack came Bill Travers, the stage-driver between Meeteetse and Miners' Camp.

"Wall, beat me," cried the man in the doorway, "if here ain't Doc!"

Ross flashed around and faced Sandy McKenzie.

Sandy's hands were rammed into his pockets; but his sun-burned face was smiling an unruffled welcome, and his voice rang pleasantly.

"How," Sandy inquired, "did ye get over here from Medder Creek?"

Ross instantly "boiled over" as he had feared he should, and said the very thing he had not intended to say. "You know how I got here! You know where I came from!"

The stage-driver, joined by a second man, came nearer and paused. Sandy pushed his hands yet deeper into his pockets, and looked amazingly innocent.

"Me!" he drawled. "What d'ye mean?"

At the insolent tone Ross's blood boiled. It hummed through his ears, deafening him to the sound of his own voice. What he said he never could recall beyond the general knowledge that he accused Sandy of the theft of the dynamite and of his own and Leslie's abduction across the mountains.

And, when he paused to catch his breath and steady his voice, Sandy was looking him over with an amused grin which maddened him.

"Now, ain't that a likely story?" he inquired. "Kept ye a prisoner fer six months not five miles from Camp on a trail that can be follered at any time in the year! Ha, ha!"

Bill Travers grinned faintly. The other man turned away with the corners of his mouth twitching, while Sandy went on:

"And as fer Weston, he went to Missouri the day after we left Medder Creek, and there he is now fer all I've heard." Again Sandy's laugh rang out as he added: "That story won't hold water. Why didn't ye make up a—"

Here Waymart appeared in the doorway of the shack. He scowled at Ross, but his peremptory words were aimed at Sandy:

"See here! If we're goin' t' send that bundle down by Grasshopper we've got t' make lively tracks in here, and ye ought t' know it!"

"Keep yer hair on tight, Mart," laughed Sandy.

He turned, nevertheless, toward the door. As he did so, he mechanically withdrew his hands from his pockets and Ross saw something which at once arrested his attention. The middle finger of Sandy's right hand was gone! In a flash, memory showed Ross the four blood streaks on the trunk of the spruce with the second streak the deepest in color.

YOU'VE PAID FOR IT.

With his anger still burning he snatched off his glove and held up his right hand triumphantly, the middle finger projecting. "Well, anyway," he cried, "Leslie ain't a bad shot. We may never prove that you put us in that hole, but you've paid for it, nevertheless!"

Sandy involuntarily doubled his right hand into a fist. He caught his under lip between his teeth and sent Ross a black look as, wordlessly, he entered the shack and slammed the door behind him, leaving Ross to tell the story of Leslie's shot to two interested and excited men.

"That accounts fer it," confirmed Bill Travers. "Sandy and Waymart they come up from Cody along in February and when they clumb int' th' stage goin' back, Sandy's hand was tied up. Next thing I knowed when they come up with me t' other day, that finger was off clean to the hand, but Sandy hain't never spoken of it."

Ross, leaving Bill to talk the matter over with his companions, went on rapidly now down the cañon, his eyes narrowed and his chin protruding doggedly. One disagreeable scene was ended, and he was, perhaps, facing another.

"I ought to be sorry that Sandy lost a finger but—hanged if I am!" he burst out loud. He was anxious to have Leslie know the result of his random shot.

Rounding a shoulder of Gale's Ridge, he came in sight of Steele's shack. Steele sat in the doorway. Beside him, leaning against the logs of the shack's side, was a man in shirt-sleeves and cap, beneath which a rim of woolly gray hair projected.

Facing Steele were two well dressed men, one in a tall silk hat, which appeared incongruous against its background of log shack and pine tree. Ross, with narrowed eyes and compressed lips, plodded on.

"I've done my best," he muttered defensively. "It's all a fellow can do; but, when that best is failure, why, it's not much consolation."

Then he raised his head, squared his shoulders, and doggedly faced the four in front of Steele's cabin.

Ross Grant, Senior, had not come West to look after his claims, but after his son, with whom he felt he had but just begun an acquaintance. He had no difficulty in getting Dr. Grant to accompany him, reinforced as he was by an anxious Aunt Anne. It was true that both Ross and Steele had written that all communications with the former would be shut off for months. But, when the hot days of June came and brought no letter from the boy, as Aunt Anne said, "something must be done."

That something was represented in the persons of the Grant brothers in Miners' Camp.

After the first greetings, tinged with amazement on the part of the four, Ross backed up against a spruce, and, facing the others, proceeded to answer the questions with which they bombarded him.

In half an hour they were in possession of the main facts in his life during the last six months.

"The McKenzies all through," commented Steele finally; "but—prove it!"

"I've got to prove it!" declared Ross violently; "I shall!"

"Ross,"—Dr. Grant's comment carried with it the pride and honor of his profession,—"if you're called upon to attend the sick, you must go. That's the duty of a physician, even before he receives his diploma. You did right."

"I felt that way myself, uncle," returned Ross quietly. "As soon as Weimer opened the way, I never thought of not going, so long as there was no regular doctor within reach."

Ross Grant, Senior, looked his son over. There was no expression of disapproval on his face as he took the measure of this full-blooded, broad-shouldered, erect young man whose muscles had been hardened by wind and sun and work in the open.

Having completed his survey, Ross, Senior, smiled. "Well, my boy," he remarked characteristically, "it took three good sized men to down you two boys, didn't it? And

it must have cost them a heap of thinking into the bargain. Shake, Ross; I'm proud of you!"

And Ross, bewildered, shook hands with his father, his cheeks reddening with pleasure.

"I—I never thought of it in that way before," he stammered. "But—that doesn't save the claims, and the fifth year is up next week, and Uncle Jake—"

"Don't you worry about Uncle Jake," interrupted his father meaningly. "We may lose the claims, but Uncle Jake will be provided for."

"The first thing to do," interpolated Steele, "is to root him out of Meadow Creek Valley. I've never known the snow to hang so late to the side of Crosby."

That very night it ceased to "hang." At midnight every one in the shack was awakened. There was a cracking of trees, a long steady rush, and then a mighty and prolonged roar as the snow, under the influence of a swift warm wind, swept down the side of old Crosby, and took the thousand-foot plunge into the ravine at the foot of the falls. The roar echoed against the sides of Dundee and Spar and Sniffle, starting other though lesser slides until the cañon was filled with the confusion of sound.

The following morning, Steele, after investigation, found the trail around the shoulder of Crosby swept clean, and at once proposed that they follow it to Meadow Creek. Ross objected to starting until Leslie reached them. Steele had sent Society Bill up the cañon the previous evening with snow-shoes for the boy. But neither Society Bill nor Leslie had appeared. Ross's objections were, therefore, overruled by the older men.

"Leave word in the upper camp for him to follow us when he comes," Steele suggested, "and we'll start right away. We shall have to foot it, too, for no horse can make it yet."

The sheep-herder, who had shared Steele's hospitality over night, shouldered his blankets, observing that he was going over with them to see his friend Weimer, and find out what was "doin' on the Creek."

There were others of the same mind also, as the party from Steele's shack found when they reached the foot of Crosby. Just ahead of them, so engrossed in their climbing that they did not look back, were Sandy and Waymart.

Slowly, to accommodate the older Grants, the party moved up the trail, slippery with mud and snow, their way obstructed by rocks and tree trunks.

Sandy and Waymart, ahead, were obliged to move slowly also; for to their lot fell the removal of any obstacles too large to surmount, and the snow and landslide of the previous night had left many such. Around the shoulder, however, the trail was intact, the mountain being so steep at this point that the slide had leaped clear of the trail and projected itself headlong into the gorge below.

An hour later Ross called back to his father and uncle, who were puffing along, breathless and tired and dizzy: "We'll be in sight of the dump in ten minutes. It's just around the spur of the mountain there."

Then, unable to restrain his impatience and anxiety longer, he ran on ahead of Steele, keeping a short distance between himself and the McKenzies. The McKenzies, however, seemed no more anxious to enjoy his society than he did to enjoy theirs. Sandy, for once, omitted his usual pleasantries, an omission easy to account for whenever Ross thought of the missing middle finger of his right hand.

Hearing footsteps behind him, Ross glanced around. Steele had left the others, and was following on a run. The McKenzies pushed on without looking back, and neither Steele nor Ross spoke.

In silence, then, the four approached the spur. But before they reached the dump that silence was most unexpectedly broken. Out of the open mouth of the tunnel rolled a volume of sound, then another and another.

Ross in his surprise, his head thrown back as he scanned the dump, nearly fell over a mass of newly mined ore which blocked the main trail.

Then he caught a glimpse of Weimer shielding his eyes from the sun with both hands, waiting for the effects of the explosions in the tunnel to subside. And, leaning against the tool house, his hands in his pockets, his head bent forward, was another man, the sight of whom caused a great illumination in Ross's mind.

"Weston!" he shouted. "Weston!"

The two men on the dump came to the edge, and looked over. The McKenzies on the trail ahead halted. The Grants with the sheep-herder drew nearer.

Weimer, squinting, recognized Ross. He took off his cap, and waved it as wildly as a boy.

"The vork," he yelled, "ist done! It ist done dese two veeks. Me und Miller here, ve ist vorkin' now joost for de fun!"

Weston gave one glance at Sandy and Waymart, and without speaking went back to the tunnel.

Ross was after him with a bound, scrambling up over the dump, followed by the others, who were infected by his excitement. He ran to Weston with both hands outstretched.

"Weston," he shouted, "you did this!"

"Veston!" exclaimed Uncle Jake. "Dot ist Miller. He has been mit me all der spring."

"I told him," muttered Weston, extending his hand to Ross, but turning away shamefacedly, "that you two boys had taken my place with my sick pard, while I was to stay by him."

Ross pumped the big hand up and down.

"Father," he cried excitedly, "he has saved our claims."

Weston tried to liberate his hand. He stole a glance at Sandy and Waymart, who had stopped just beyond the dump.

"Doc here"—he spoke to the group who surrounded him—"saved me first. I had that little business to pay for, but"—his tone sank to a mutter—"I thought I could pay it and git away to Missouri before Sandy found out what I was up to here—"

He was interrupted by Sandy's voice from the trail, and the voice was harsh and vengeful. "Better come over to our shack, Lon. I want a little talk with ye about old man Quinn. He's wantin' t' see ye powerful bad."

At the name the sheep-herder, who had been standing stupidly staring at Weston, woke up.

"Old man Quinn," he began. "A feller in Cody told me—" but no one was paying any attention to him.

Sandy and Waymart moved on slowly toward their cabin, talking and gesticulating excitedly, evidently in disagreement.

For the present no one undeceived Weimer in regard to Miller.

"He come pack in all dot storm," Weimer exulted, "und mit me vas."

Weston looked away, but Steele cried, "Good work, man," clapping him warmly on the shoulder. Then he added boyishly: "I'm hungry as a bear! Got any grub left?"

"Yes," answered Weston quietly, "plenty. Come on down all of you, and I'll rustle some flapjacks and coffee."

They started down the trail, Weston and Ross in advance. At the mention of "old man Quinn" Ross's elation had subsided. He looked at Weston out of the corner of his eye. The other's eyes were downcast and his face pale beneath its sunburn. His hair was of a peculiar color, light at the roots and dark at the ends. He had evidently forgotten to bring his hair dye to Meadow Creek.

The older man spoke first. His voice was low and his words halting. "I had to take you across the mountain and leave you there," he explained briefly. "Sandy was behind the cabin when we got there. I couldn't fool 'im about you, but I did about myself; and, if you all had put off comin' over a day longer, I could have got away out of Sandy's reach."

As he spoke, Weston's hand involuntarily crept up to his breast pocket. It fell again, however, as he added in a mutter as though to himself: "And Less—I had to take 'im over too—for my own good. But it's all up now and I've got to face it out."

Just behind them came the sheep-herder, his thoughts reverting to a subject on which he had tried once to speak. Now he saw an opportunity.

"Ye must 'a' known of old man Quinn then," he called to Weston. "Didn't ye?"

Weston stumbled. He caught himself, but the movement saved him from the necessity of an answer.

"Wall," the sheep-herder went on, almost running in order to keep up with the pace Weston had set, "I met Happy in Cody t' other day, and Happy said old man Quinn had pinched the fourth puncher that druv his sheep—"

"What?" shouted Weston. He swung around so suddenly that the sheep-herder ran full tilt against him.

"What?" Weston shouted again. He seized the amazed and terrified Sheepy, and held him by the arms in a vise that made the man wince. "Say that again."

"S-say what?" faltered Sheepy.

"What about the fourth? Tell me!"

With every word Weston, his eyes ablaze, his lips drawn back over strong white teeth, gave the old sheep-herder a convulsive shake.

"W-why," the old man quavered, "Happy, he said that a feller down in Oklahomy, name of Burns, went and give himself up to old man Quinn. He said he was the feller the old man was after—that he was the fourth who done the business with the sheep. But because he owned up the jedge give 'im only six months—"

Weston suddenly pushed the sheep-herder from him, his face working convulsively. "Then I wasn't in it!" he cried. "Sandy said I was, but I wasn't!"

Offering no further explanation to his astonished hearers, he turned toward the McKenzie shack on a run; and for a couple of hours they saw no more of him.

It was a busy time for Ross, who promptly took Weston's place "rustling grub." But, as he worked, his thoughts wonderingly circled around Weston's strange actions. The fourth man was found and it was not Weston—yet Weston, it would appear, had believed himself to be the guilty party! It was too deep a puzzle for Ross. As the boy worked he kept a watchful eye on the trail for Leslie. Surely the latter would come down to Camp that morning and receive the word Ross had left him at the post-office.

Steele, who had stayed behind long enough to examine the tunnel, confirmed Weimer's statement that more than enough work had been done to cover the

requirements of the law. Weimer, jubilant, sat and talked to his old-time "pard," whose voice answered him, but whose satisfied gaze followed Ross.

But it was to the man who had stood in the place of a father to him that Ross's eyes turned most frequently. Dr. Grant sat, appropriately, on the emergency chest, looking affectionately at his energetic nephew.

Suddenly Ross picked up a tin cup full of water from the table, and held it out at arm's length toward his uncle.

Dr. Grant smiled. "All right, Ross," he said quietly.

Ross, Senior, looked from one to the other inquiringly. Ross, Junior, answered; but he turned his back on his father, and spoke hesitatingly. "I was showing uncle, father, that my hand is still steady enough to be the hand of a first class—surgeon."

Promptly and heartily came the unexpected response from the elder Grant. "I'm glad of that, Ross, for I shall look to see you as successful in your profession as you have been in my business," and he turned at once to Weimer, and went on speaking.

"Suppose," he was saying, "as long as you want to stay here, you get your friend"—he indicated the sheep-herder—"to come and live with you. I'm going to buy out Ross's interest in the shares, and I'll look to you to keep 'em in good shape—you and your friend—until we get a chance to sell well. Of course," he added carelessly, "I'll grub-stake you and more, both of you."

Sheepy's eyes lighted, and Weimer grinned and slapped his knee. They were the only signs necessary to complete the bargain.

After dinner, as Ross arose from the table, he saw Leslie hurrying down the trail. Ross went to meet him.

"Hello, Ross!" Leslie called in a voice which he tried to make matter-of-fact, but which bubbled over with jubilation. "I stopped in at the post-office and got your word and a letter from dad. It's only a month old! He thinks we're mewed up over here, you know, working your claims. And he says he and Sue want me to come home as soon as I get this letter. He says if I'm willing to work he'll give me better wages than I can get anywhere else! He doesn't know yet," here Leslie grinned broadly, "that I want to do now the very thing he has fought all my life to make me do—go to school. That doctor business has sort of sunk in. But say, Ross, here's a thing that bothers me." Leslie pulled the letter from his pocket and read:

"'A few days ago I got hold of the fourth man that ran my sheep off into the river two years ago. The fellow came and gave himself up to me.'"

The reader looked up tentatively. "Ross, if it was Weston dad would have said—"

Ross's hand descended on the other's shoulder in a mighty whack as he shouted: "It isn't Weston. Now you listen and give me an inning on the talk!"

For half an hour they stood outside the shack while Ross got his inning—Sandy's hand, the work, Weston's strange actions were all reviewed hurriedly and listened to excitedly. Then, seeing Weston approaching, the boys went inside.

Weston crossed the valley slowly, looking down at something which he held in the palm of his hand, something in a small gilt frame that he slipped into his breast pocket when he entered the shack.

Completely absorbed in his own thoughts—cheerful thoughts too, apparently—he went directly to his bunk, and began gathering his few possessions together not noticing that the group had been augmented by Leslie.

"I guess," he explained abstractedly, "that I'll go on at once—I'm going to Oklahoma and not Missouri." Then he looked over his shoulder at the sheep-herder, adding abstractedly: "Waymart says I ain't the fourth, and never was. He's been makin' up his mind to tell me this good while."

The blank expression on the sheep-herder's face brought Weston back to a sense of his surroundings.

"I forgot," he muttered turning to Ross, who stood beside the bunk, "that you may not know about this Quinn business."

Leslie stepped forward quickly, but paused as he saw Weston was oblivious of his presence.

"I know a good deal about it," exclaimed Ross impulsively, "and I wish I knew the rest—your part of it."

Weston leaned against the bunk, his back toward the silent room, his eyes downcast. He made the explanation with visible reluctance.

"You see, Doc, I used to drink; and when I had two or three glasses down, I'd go out of my head; and when I had come to myself again I wouldn't know a blooming thing that had happened while I was drunk. But all the time I could ride straight and talk straight and shoot straight."

He paused to moisten his lips. Leslie came a step nearer.

"Well," Weston continued, "to make a long story short, I was foreman on a cattle ranch in Oklahoma two years ago. Sandy and Mart came around wanting a job, and I gave 'em one on the same ranch. Then came the big round-up at North Fork—and there was trouble between the sheep and cattle men."

Weston hesitated and looked down. He raised his hand to his breast pocket and let it fall at his side.

"The night the round-up ended most of us—got drunk."

He paused, shook himself impatiently, and hurried on: "I didn't go with the rest intending to drink—but I did, what with treating and all that. And when I come to myself, Sandy told me I was one of the men who had done the job on the Quinn sheep. And, knowing what I am when drunk, I believed him and cleared out with him and Mart over the Texas line, and—" his hand traveled to his hair completing the sentence.

"I see!" exclaimed Ross excitedly; "and since then Sandy has held that over you."

Weston nodded. "I was sick of drink, but I got sick of it too late, you see. I'd put a lasso round my own neck just when I most wanted to be free."

His hand again wandered toward his breast pocket.

"But now," he added, "I am free."

He lifted his head proudly and turning, was aware for the first time of Leslie's presence. As the hands of the two met Ross strode across the room and began speaking loudly and at random to the others, leaving Sue's lover and Sue's brother to talk alone.

Presently, however, unable to restrain the question longer, Ross turned again on Weston.

"Sandy stole our sticks, didn't he?" he demanded, "and planned the whole thing to get rid of me?"

Weston turned slowly back to his bunk. For a moment he fumbled among the blankets in silence. Then he faced about again resolutely.

"Say, Doc, you have your claims here secure, haven't you, and Sandy has lost 'em?"

"Yes, thanks to you."

"And you've got outside of enough of those books so you can go to college next year, eh?"

"Yes, again thanks to you!"

"And," here Weston glanced at Leslie, "Sandy has dropped a finger somewhere in the game."

Leslie could not restrain a look of exultation. "Yes."

"Well, then, let this thing drop, will you? Sandy hain't all to the bad. He's pulled me out of as many holes as he's chucked me into; and I—well, I—say, Doc, call it square, will you?"

Ross glanced from his father to his uncle and then at Steele. A glance satisfied him. Stepping forward, he extended his hand.

"It's square, Weston, and I'll let everything go except—I can't forget that you've pulled me out of a pretty big hole—the worst one I ever dropped into."

Freeditorial 