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THE PERILS OF PETERKIN



ROBERT LEIGHTON.



**THE
PERILS OF
PETERKIN**

R. LEIGHTON

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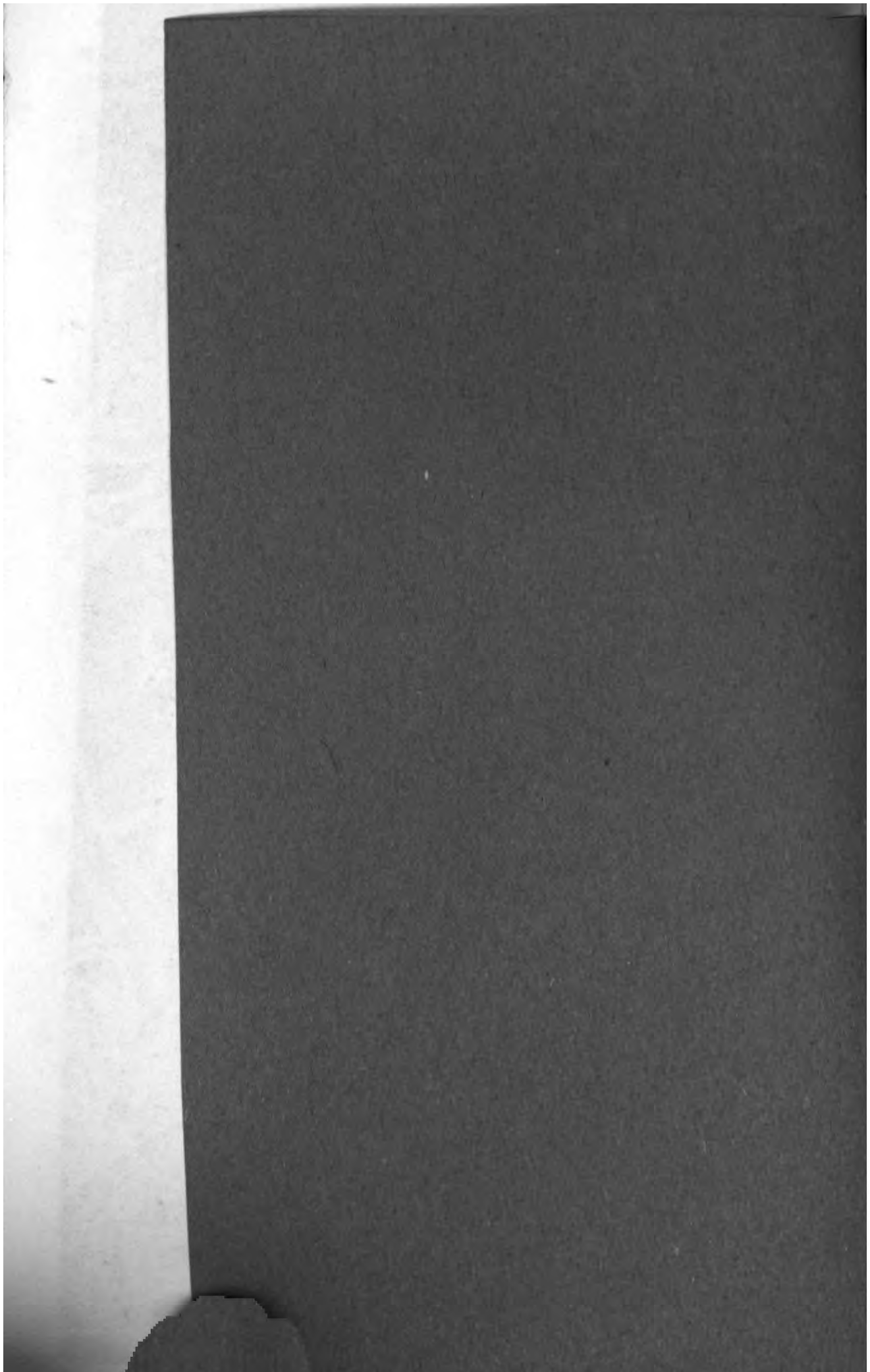
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ROBERT LEIGHTON.

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TREMBLING IN EVERY LIMB, HE SCRAMBLED PAINFULLY OUT OF THE CREEK.—Page 38. [Frontispiece

THE PERILS OF PETERKIN

*A STORY OF ADVENTURE
IN NORTH-WEST CANADA*

BY
ROBERT LEIGHTON

AUTHOR OF
"KIDDIE OF THE CAMP," "COO-EE!" "THE CLEVEREST
CHAP IN THE SCHOOL," ETC.



ILLUSTRATED BY ARTHUR TWIDLE

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TO
GEORGE B. BURGIN
IN RETURN FOR A PAIR OF BEADED MOCCASINS



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THE PERILS OF PETERKIN

CHAPTER I

THE COMING OF PETERKIN

“D’YE hear somethin’, boys — Liza? Listen! D’ye hear somethin’?”

There was a note of uneasiness in Ebenezer Coulter’s voice as he paused with his gnarled, work-worn fingers on one of the draughts-men which he had slowly moved into the line of squares on Jules Cartier’s side of the chequered board. He glanced towards the door as he spoke, and his grim, weather-beaten face was illumined by the light shed by the tallow candle flickering from the neck of the bottle in which it stood on the rough planks of the table. But he saw nothing to explain the sound that had diverted his attention from the game. The door was in deep

shadow at the far end of the long, low room, where the light of neither the candle nor the fire could reach it.

“Sure nobody would be prowlin’ around on a wild, dark night like dis,” said Jules, putting a crown on Ebenezer’s king and moving one of his own pieces on the board.

Ebenezer shook his head in doubt.

“Guess I heard somethin’, though,” he reiterated, drawing with short, sharp puffs at his pipe and watching the bowl until the tobacco began to glow and the smoke came more freely from his bearded lips.

“Reckon it was just that crazy old gate swingin’ on its hinges,” decided Aunt Liza from her corner beside the fire. “It allus creaks that aways, windy nights. It’s just the gate.”

“Unless it’s that blamed old grey wolf again, scoutin’ around for somethin’ to eat,” suggested young Jake Cheverill, glancing upward at the smoked cariboo hams and sides of bacon that hung from the rafters, swaying back and forth as the wind shook the house.

The walls, roof and floor were of rough-hewn logs; the chinks plastered with clay.

The bareness of the walls was broken here and there by coloured pictures from illustrated newspapers. One of them was a portrait of Queen Victoria; but most of them presented scenes of wild Canadian life—encounters with grizzly bears, prairie fires and fierce battles with Indians. Other decorations of the room were an Indian's feathered war-bonnet, tomahawks, bows and arrows, a scalping-knife. The antlers of an elk and the horns of antelopes served less for ornament than as useful pegs upon which the men hung their hats and bandoliers. Near the embayed window there was a rack in which they kept their rifles and revolvers.

Swirling phantoms of snow were now drifting past the dark window panes, leaving tiny wreaths of white in the corners against the glass. It was a boisterous night outside; the wind moaned dismally in the pine-trees, whistled in the keyholes and sent a gritty white powder of frozen sleet under the doors. But all was warm and comfortable within. Thick bearskin rugs and buffalo robes were spread about the floor, a cat lay asleep in the ingle-nook, and a pot of coffee on the hearth

mingled its aroma with the smell of tobacco smoke and the pungent resinous perfume of the burning pine-logs.

“Say, has that grey wolf been leavin’ any of his tracks around here, then?” inquired Aunt Liza in alarm.

Jake rose from his stool and strode into the firelight. He was a boy of about sixteen, but looked almost a man in his rough costume of the North West.

“No, Auntie,” he answered; “can’t say as I’ve seen any sign of him. But I allow it’s ’bout time we expected some of his kind to pay us a call, now that the snow’s come.”

“I’m some glad we’ve gotten through with all the outside work ’fore this storm came along,” remarked Ebenezer; “timber all well stacked, cattle rounded-up and corralled, and fodder for man and beast all stored. Guess we was just in time. Things’ll be closed up now till spring.”

He had finished his game of draughts, and now, as the table was wanted for the laying of supper, he stood up to his full height of six-feet-two and went toward the window to look out at the weather. But as he came

beside the door, he stopped abruptly and, holding up a finger to command silence, stood listening intently.

“Jake!” he called in a cautious whisper which all could hear. “That there grey wolf o’ yours is sniffin’ around right now. Get your gun, boy, and have a shot at him soon as I open the door!”

Aunt Liza was on her feet in an instant and had taken Jake’s rifle from the rack. She slipped a cartridge into the breech and handed the weapon to him as he passed her.

“You sure ’tain’t Indians, Eben?” she questioned her husband.

Ebenezer shook his head.

“Gee! I hope not,” he answered her, raising his hand to the latch. “I wouldn’t just swear; though it’s somethin’ alive, sure as sure.”

Jake was beside him, with his gun ready, his finger on the trigger.

“Wait!” cried Aunt Liza, coming forward with the candle, whose flame she was shielding with her hand. “Stand back a minute and make sure ’fore you shoot!”

Even as she spoke, there came a feeble

rapping of knuckles upon the door. Ebenezer flung the door open, and the gust of wind that came in with a wild swirl of snowflakes blew out the candle flame. But ere the light was extinguished Aunt Liza had caught a glimpse of a wan, pinched face and a small bundle of humanity falling helplessly forward across the threshold.

“Mercy me!” she exclaimed in consternation. “As I live, it’s a child—a boy child! Wherever has he come from?”

Her husband caught the bundle up in his arms and carried it within the warmth.

“Lucky you didn’t shoot,” he muttered. “Say, Jake, have a spy around and see if there’s any one else out there. Take a lantern and search well. A little chap like this couldn’t well have found his way here all alone. Bring ’em all in.”

The little chap dropped to his feet and stared about him in bewilderment.

“There isn’t anybody else, sir,” he said in a clear, piping voice which rang very strange to those who heard it then for the first time, so sharp and thin was it compared with the homely Canadian voices to which they were

accustomed. "I came here all alone," he explained. "I saw the light in your window from ever so far away, and I came to it all by myself." He drew a deep breath. "And oh," he added, "I'm so awfully tired and cold and—and hungry."

"Poor little man!" sighed Aunt Liza, taking him by the arm and drawing him into the light and warmth of the fire. "You shall have food in a minute."

His hands were blue with cold and his teeth were chattering. He looked a very miserable object. His cap had fallen to the floor while Ebenezer Coulter carried him, and his brown hair was rough, as if it had not been combed for days. His cheeks were dirty with the clinging, alkali dust of the prairie, and smeared with the marks of recent tears. When Aunt Liza removed his wet overcoat he was seen to be dressed like an English school-boy, in a Norfolk suit of brown tweed, with black knitted stockings and strong laced boots; his linen collar was crushed and dirty.

The men were looking at him wonderingly, as they might have looked at some strange new animal; but none spoke. One of them

put a dipper of water on the fire to boil, another brought some eggs and a jug of milk from the larder, and a third began to carve slices of bread, spreading them thick with butter. All the household became busy, each one anxious to do something to minister to the boy stranger's immediate needs.

"Guess he'd 'preciate some of your pump-kin jam, Ma," said Ebenezer.

"That'll come after the eggs and bacon," nodded Barney Maguire, who had already begun to fry a couple of rashers on the frying-pan.

Jake was on his knees, unlacing the boy's boots that were caked with frozen snow.

"That there pair of Injun moccasins ought to fit him," intimated Aunt Liza, indicating two little buckskin slippers whose bright-coloured beads made them conspicuous on a shelf beyond the fire-place. She had brought a wet pad of flannel, a piece of soap, and a towel, and was proceeding to wash the little fellow's face.

"I thought father might be here," the boy said to her wistfully.

"My! And who might yer father be?"

questioned Ebenezer, filling a mug from the coffee-pot and the milk-jug.

“Don’t you worrit him ’bout that,” recommended Aunt Liza. “Jest wait till he’s gotten a sup of that coffee to warm him. Have you put in the sugar? There, little man!” she said, drying his cheeks, “I guess that’ll do, meantime. Sit you round to the table and start with some bread and butter right now. The eggs and bacon won’t be long.”

He betrayed by the avidity with which he ate that he was ravenously hungry.

“Say, you ain’t a Canadian boy?” conjectured Barney. “I guess you’re English, eh?”

The boy nodded and waited until his mouth was empty before he answered—

“We came from London.”

“Thought so,” said Barney. “I seen the address inside of your cap—place where you bought it, I figger. What’s your name?”

They all listened for his reply.

“It’s Peter—Peter James Beamish. At home, I’m always called Peterkin. Please, is this place far from Vancouver?”

“Vancouver?” repeated Bill. “Good glory, I should just say so! We’re days and days eastward of that den of iniquity. Why? Is that where you’re shapin’ for?”

“Yes—somewhere near there,” said Peterkin. “Father’s going to the gold-diggings. He expects to make his fortune.”

“Yep, that’s what most of ’em expect,” Ebenezer remarked, with a smile. “Where’ve you left him? Is his outfit tramposin’ anyways hereabouts? You said you thought you might find him in this here ranch. Why? Did he reckon on payin’ us a call? Where did you leave him?”

Peterkin had now begun upon his eggs and bacon, and Aunt Liza and the others had seated themselves at the supper table.

“I left him out on the prairie, a long way off—miles and miles, I should think; because I’ve been tramping about every bit of the day, looking for him.”

“Gee!” exclaimed Ebenezer. “Then, in point of fac’, you’re what you might call lost?”

“Yes.” Peterkin did not seem to be greatly disconcerted by the fact. “But he’ll

find me before very long. He's sure to. It was yesterday afternoon that it happened. The waggon had stopped to give the horses a rest, and I strayed away from it, glad to have a bit of a run. I hadn't gone far when I saw a lot of funny little animals like rabbits, only they weren't rabbits, really, and I chased some of them."

"Prairie dogs, likely," interposed Jake. "I guess they didn't intend you to catch 'em."

"I very nearly caught one of them," Peterkin assured him, "only I tripped and fell. That was the worst of it, my falling; because, when I got up again, I couldn't tell which way I ought to go. I couldn't see the waggon, because of the long grass and the ups and downs of the prairie. But I thought I was going all right when I ran on again, expecting every minute to come upon the waggon, or to hear some sound that would tell me where it was. I didn't like to call out, as if I was afraid. I wanted to find the trail; but there was nothing to go by; there was no sun to tell me which was east or west, and the mountains were hidden by clouds."

Ebenezer shook his head.

“Guess you’d oughter have stood still where you was, Peterkin,” he said. “You’d better have waited and let the men find you, ’stead of searchin’ for their outfit on your own account. Even a Injun may get lost on the prairie, though he knows all the signs. But you—a tenderfoot that don’t know nothin’ ’bout findin’ your way—why, you hadn’t a chance; not the ghost of a chance, you hadn’t. You might have mooched around for weeks, and died at last of starvation, buried beneath the snow. And the wolves wouldn’t have left a whole lot of you—except the buttons, may-be, an’ your knife, if you’ve got one.”

“D’you notion you c’d locate that outfit along the trail, Eben, supposin’ you was to go and search for it?” questioned Aunt Liza.

“Of course we’re goin’ ter try,” Ebenezer decided. “But they’ve got a long day’s start, and this yer snow’ll cover all their tracks. Yet ’tain’t a bit o’ use our going out ’fore daylight. Guess I’ll just slip along to Middle Crossing and send word along by the next rider that’s goin’ west.”

“Better ’low me to do that ’stead of you, old man,” suggested Barney Maguire from the far end of the table. “I’m hankerin’ after a lonesome ride; and I c’d drop in and see Bridget, same time.”

“Right you are, then, Barney,” agreed Ebenezer. “My respec’s t’ your sister, if she ain’t asleep ’fore you gets there. You’ll have a tough ride, I guess; and I shouldn’t wonder if you made th’ acquaintance of a wolf or two alongside of Kosh-e-nee Gap.”

After supper, Peterkin watched Barney buckling on his belt, with its brace of loaded revolvers, and donning his close-fitting beaver cap, his sheepskin leggings and winter cloak.

“Is it very far that you are going?” the boy inquired, wondering at so much preparation.

“Far? Well, no,” Barney smiled; “a matter of ten mile there and the same back. Guess I shall be here again ’fore midnight.”

“Say, it’s snowin’ wuss an’ wuss,” reported Jake, entering in a swirl of snow from the stables, where he had been to saddle and fetch a pony. “I reckon it’s comin’ on to a fair blizzard.”

The information did not alarm Barney or deter him. He went out and mounted the waiting pony and rode off as if the journey were a mere excursion of pleasure instead of an undertaking that was full of hazard and danger. He had counted upon being back by midnight; but it was late on the following morning when he returned encrusted with frozen snow, his moustache and eyebrows glistening with ice. He had been battling with the blizzard for twelve long hours and both he and his horse were exhausted. He had brought no news; but he had left word at Middle Crossing that a little boy giving the name of Peter Beamish had taken refuge in Coulter's Ranch, having been lost from an emigrant waggon bound westward; and he had come away satisfied that the fact would soon be known along the trail and that Peterkin would be duly claimed by his father.

But the storm continued for many days and all communication was cut off by the impassable barrier of snow that lay deep upon the land. If Peterkin's father had himself survived the storm, he must surely have come to the very firm belief that his lost son had not been so fortunate, and had failed to dis-

cover the friendly shelter of a homestead in those wilds where homes were so few and so far apart. It was indeed hardly possible to believe otherwise than that the boy had perished of starvation and exposure.

When at last the brown of the faded prairie grass appeared in patches through the melting snow, and it was possible for horsemen to travel, Aunt Liza began half to expect and half to fear that some one would come to the ranch and take Peterkin away from her. She had grown fond of the boy; every day he became more dear to her, giving a new interest to her life, and he was always to be found near her, clinging to her skirts, helping her with the hens and the milking, fetching and carrying for her, watching her cooking or cleaning up, or sitting beside her with the cat at the fireside while she knitted stockings for the men or darned their clothes and listened to his prattle about his school-days in far-away England. He already called her Aunt Liza, as the men did, although there was only one of them who was related to her, and that was Jake Cheverill, her brother's son.

“He's a very long time in finding me, isn't

he, Aunt Liza?" he said to her one afternoon when he stood beside her watching her making dough-nuts for tea.

"Ye-es," she nodded, "quite a long time. I guess he's gone right away without you, Peterkin. Y'see, he couldn't find you; that's how it is, and he's kind of given you up for lost. We shall have to put you in an envelope and stick a postal stamp on you and mail you on to him."

"But you don't know his address," Peterkin innocently objected.

"No. That's just where the pull comes in. And Vancouver isn't just a village; I guess it's pretty near's big as Montreal or T'ronto. So there's no use thinkin' of findin' him by the mail. I'm some sorry, Peterkin, that you didn't bring your trunk along with you. You'll soon be needin' more clothes. Guess I shall have to fix you up with some of my own makin', and you'll thread the needles for me, eh?"

"Yes, of course I'll thread the needles. But you needn't be sorry about the trunk, because I didn't have one. My other clothes were in father's box, which wasn't very big.

We'd only the one box between us, you know, because we're quite poor. That's why we had to come out to Canada as emigrants."

Aunt Liza smiled.

"Lots of very good folks are poor, Peterkin," she said. "What was your poppa's line of business 'fore he decided to come out to the Rocky Mountains? You never told me that."

Peterkin moved uneasily on his feet.

"He hadn't any business that I know of," he responded awkwardly. "Once he was in an office in the City—a clerk, I think. And while he was there he—well, he did something that he oughtn't to have done, and he was sent to prison."

"Oh, it was that away, was it?" Aunt Liza tried not to look surprised.

"Mother died while he was in prison," Peterkin went on. "And when he came out again, after three years, he couldn't get any work, and Uncle William lent him the money to come out to Canada and begin a new life."

"I see," Aunt Liza nodded as she proceeded with her dough-nuts. "Three years is a considerable time. He must have been

quite a stranger to you when he came home, eh?" She did not ask Peterkin what the offence was which merited so severe a punishment, but only went on with her work, quietly thinking. What she had just learned did not alter her feelings towards Peterkin. It was no fault of his that he happened to be the son of a convicted criminal. But the fact certainly lessened her desire that he should be restored to the charge of a father who had so disgraced himself.

Peterkin noticed her sudden silence.

"Perhaps I oughtn't to have told you," he said. "You think less of me now that you know that my father has been in penal servitude."

"It don't make a cent's difference, Peterkin," she assured him. "So long as you're a good boy, and act straight, never tell a lie, and do nothin' to other folks as you wouldn't like 'em to do to you, we shall allus look upon you as one of the fam'ly."

And so it was that Peterkin remained as an inmate of Coulter's Ranch.

CHAPTER II

EBEN'S YALLER DOG

PETERKIN was only ten years of age when he came out west to Alberta, and for three or four years thereafter he was occupied in adapting himself to his new mode of life and in learning the secrets of the prairie and the forest. He went to a school at Sand Springs, some nine miles distant from the ranch, riding there and back every day on a broncho pony which Ebenezer gave to him for his own especial use; and there he quickly picked up the ways and habits of the Canadian boys and girls, becoming as one of them in their classes and in their games. Having been well drilled at a Board school in London, he excelled most of his companions in lessons, as he was at first excelled by them in outdoor sports and accomplishments of skill and physical dexterity.

To begin with, he was weak and flabby;

but the healthy life of the open plains, with wholesome food and vigorous exercise of his limbs soon made him sturdy, and agile as the rest of them, and he grew tall and straight and brown, and all the energies of his advancing boyhood were dedicated to making himself fit and worthy. He became the best base-ball player in the school, and the best swimmer; he could run like a greyhound and fight like a wild-cat, at need, and he learned to ride even the wildest pony barebacked.

The conditions of his life on the rolling prairie and among the wild solitudes of the Rocky Mountains required that he should sharpen his natural faculties to the keenest point. His senses were naturally sharp, but his eyesight, his hearing and his sense of smell were made doubly alert by exercise in avoiding the multitude of dangers that constantly menaced him. He was compelled by necessity to be an observer, to notice every little sign, to remember it, to reason, and to judge and calculate.

Coulter's Ranch at Willow Bend was on the old trail that crossed the plains between Regina and Fort McLeod. The front windows looked out over a wide stretch of

trackless prairie; from the back, you could see the serried peaks of the Porcupine Range of the Rocky Mountains, and it was not very far from the frontier of the Blood Indian Reserve, where the Redskins still lived in their wigwams and carried on their savage tribal customs regardless of the advance of civilisation.

Often on his lonely ride to and from school, Peterkin had seen detached bands of mounted warriors and braves travelling in the distance with their troops of ponies, and their squaws and children and dogs; and sometimes he had got a nearer view of them when they came along the trail to barter their beaver skins and other furs at the white man's market at Fort McLeod. He had heard many a thrilling tale of their wars against their paleface neighbours, of their raids upon the homes of innocent settlers, and of their going out upon the warpath; and many of his school companions were not too young to tell him of their own experiences of peril and escape from Indian cruelty. Some of their games were in the form of mimic battles with Indians, when they would take opposing sides, all mounted on ponies and each armed

with his toy tomahawk and long bow and his wooden scalping-knife, and the conflict was as carefully planned and regulated as a game of football or cricket. Often, too, they would engage in scouting practice, which involved serious hard work and discomfort; for a scouting game would sometimes last for many days, during which they exercised their skill in tracking their pretended enemies over the mountain wilds, across wide stretches of prairie or through darksome forest and gloomy cañon, where actual danger lurked.

These holiday excursions were a valuable part of Peterkin's education. He and his fellows would camp out for weeks at a time in their home-made tepees, hunting and cooking their own food and doing everything for themselves, depending wholly upon the resources of nature which lay ready to hand. Thus they trained their faculties of sight and hearing, became learned in woodcraft, wise in weather lore, and gained skill in all the arts that go to the making of a good scout.

But this was merely the probation period of Peterkin's life. When he had turned fourteen his school-days were left behind, and play gave place to the serious occupa-

tions of the ranch, to the duties of attending to the horses, the cattle and sheep, and to the hard work of seed time and harvest. Peterkin was hardly recognisable now as an English boy. He had lost the sharp, clipping voice of the London streets, and he spoke like a Western cowboy, with a nasal drawl; his face had become hardened and brown, and he had abandoned his English fashion of dress for a buckskin jacket and fur chapps and a wide slouched hat. He wore long spurs on his heels and carried a revolver in the pocket hanging from his belt. He was considered a good shot with the revolver, as with the rifle, as he had often proved when the grizzly bears came down from the north or when he could get aim at a mountain goat or quick-footed antelope. Ebenezer made it a rule that Peterkin was never to go out of camp unarmed; so he always took a gun and cartridges with him, even when he went upon so peaceful a mission as to mind the sheep on the upland pastures, or when he went up the creeks trapping beaver.

He was very different now from the helpless little boy who had lost his way upon the

prairie. It was not easy for him to lose himself. He had developed a marvellous skill in finding his way and in reading the signs that mutely spoke to him in the movements of the clouds, the positions of the stars, the swaying of the prairie grass, a footmark or a broken twig. Ebenezer was never afraid of his missing his way, and even Aunt Liza was seldom anxious if he was absent unexpectedly long, although occasionally he came home with an account of escape from the danger of marauding wolf or prowling Redskin.

“You ought ter have a dog, Peterkin,” Aunt Liza advised him. “A dog would watch while you’re asleep.”

“Yes,” he admitted, “I’d be a heap more comfortable with a dog.” But he never succeeded in getting one until one day when quite unexpectedly Ebenezer brought one home.

When Eben introduced the strange-looking animal as an inhabitant of the camp, there was a considerable diversity of opinion as to its breed. Ebenezer had been away for twelve days on a solitary trapping expedition up Willow Creek, and when he returned with his pony loaded with beaver pelts, Aunt Liza

had waved her hand to him in welcome from the cabbage patch, where Peterkin was helping her in the work of weeding.

"Say, what's that he's gotten along with him?" she exclaimed.

"Looks like a dawg," declared Peterkin.

They went forward to meet him, as did Jake and Barney.

"Brought in a dawg, old man?" observed Barney, watching the animal go up to a pail of water which he had just set down for Ebenezer's tired pony. "Say, he's a yaller dawg."

"Yep," said Ebenezer, dismounting. "I allow he's yaller—same colour as gold. Guess he's as good as gold, all through."

"He wouldn't look any uglier if he'd a longer tail," smiled Peterkin. "What's his breed?"

"There you puzzle me," returned Ebenezer. "I'm tryin' ter figger it out."

He knew plenty about prairie ponies, mustangs and bronchos; he could tell you all you wanted to know about domesticated cattle, poultry or sheep; but his knowledge of dogs was limited.

Jules Cartier, who had once been in the

far north-west, beyond the Rockies, where dogs are used for draught work, suggested that the newcomer was "one of them huskies." Jake Cheverill disagreed and declared that it was a Chesapeake Bay dog, while Peterkin made out that there was something of the collie in its composition. Perhaps Barney Maguire made the nearest shot towards a satisfactory identification when, out of the depths of his Hibernian wisdom, he gave his verdict that it was "just a dog."

"Yep," agreed Ebenezer, contemplating the new member of the household with hospitable pride. "I allow you're 'bout right, Barney. Guess we'll leave it at that. He's just a dog—a yaller dog."

Peterkin snapped his fingers invitingly, and the cur loped towards him, wagging its stump of a tail with apparent appreciation of the boy's friendly advances.

"You got a notion what you're goin' ter call him, boss?" Peterkin inquired. "He'll need a name, sure."

"Why, cert'nly," nodded Ebenezer, "I've been kind of ponderin' over it days past. Most appropriate name I've struck up t' now is George Washin'ton. Fits him like a

glove! he's that honest, truthful, sagacious an' peaceable. Just a model of gentlemanly propriety, he is."

"Gee!" exclaimed Peterkin, "and d'you figure he's goin' ter hang around while you're wrestlin' with a mile-long, high-falutin' name like that? George Washington? Chew! That's a mouthful!"

Ebenezer Coulter seemed to recognise the practical inconvenience of so long a name.

"'Tain't just fixed," he announced, "I'm ready t' alter it if any of you boys c'n strike on a better one."

Peterkin caught the dog's muzzle in his hand and opened its jaws to examine its teeth. Satisfied with his inspection, he drew back, and meditatively contemplated the ill-favoured animal from a distance.

"How'd Kosh-e-nee do?" he suggested. "Kosh, for short, 'ud be kind of easy t' call when you want him t' hustle along."

"Kosh-e-nee?" repeated Jules Cartier; "why, that's Injun for wolf. D'you make out that the tike's gotten a strain of the coyote in him?"

Peterkin nodded.

"Sure," he decided. "He's half wolf.

Look at him! Look at his slantin' eyes; look at his fangs, his ears, his shape! He's just a Injun mongrel dog, that's what he is. An' you c'n see by how his coat's rasped down 'bout the shoulders that he's been used in harness."

"Peterkin's right," said Aunt Liza. "He's allus right."

"You've not enlightened us yet 'bout how you picked him up, Uncle," Jake reminded the boss. "Did some trampoosin' enemy plant him on ter you?"

"Matter of fact, 'twas him as picked up me," Ebenezer explained, leaning his shoulder against the tie-post and taking out his pipe. "It was just this aways. Bein' kind of lonesome in that dug-out where I've been livin' the last two weeks, I fell fairly ill from sheer solitooode. An' one night, smokin' a quiet pipe 'fore turnin' in, I says t' myself I says, 'Eben, ole man,' I says, 'you ain't what you used ter be. Association with th' boys up at th' camp has clean spoiled you for livin' alone. What you're hankerin' after,' I says, 'is a pardner to talk to. You'd oughter have a dog,' I says; 'a dog's what you want.' Wal, no sooner'd I struck that

notion, but I started wishin' and wishin' for one. I wanted a dog. And I wished that hard, seemed ter me that th' wish was taken note of by Providence; for, nex' mornin', sure enough, when I awoke, thar was this yer yaller dog a lyin' alongside o' me, asleep on the buffalo robe, with his nose snoozled in th' ashes of the las' night's wood fire. How he came there, I can't just tell. But there he was, an' here he is."

"I calculate that dog'd been scoutin' around for food a while back, 'fore he located some in your dug-out," conjectured Peterkin.

"I allow he'd disposed of a considerable chunk of my buffalo meat," admitted Ebenezer. "He was still some hungry when he woke, and wolfed a chunk more. Since then, he's hung on and follered me around same as a shadder."

The old man smiled to himself in satisfaction as he saw Peterkin fondling the dog's ragged ears. He took this as a good augury of welcome.

"Guess he'll be well worth his keep," he ventured to predict. "He'll be some use as a watch to scare tramps and prowlin' Injuns, likewise wolves and grizzlies. And I notion

he might come in kind of handy now and again roundin' up the sheep, eh? Say, Peterkin, d'you reckon you could afford to give him a bit of trainin' in that direction?"

Peterkin looked at the dog critically, from a new point of view.

"He c'n hardly be wuss t' train than a buckin' broncho," he responded. "Guess I'll have a try."

He applied himself at once to the training of Kosh. He had more patience than any of the men, and, as they all knew, he had a strange, almost magnetic power over all animals. He had taught the family cat to perform many tricks, and every pony in the corral knew his voice and would come obediently to his call. Even the cattle and sheep would obey him.

Kosh seemed to take to him from the first: but the dog's readiness to make friends with any stranger who snapped a finger to him was a fault to which Peterkin seriously objected. He was of opinion that a good watch-dog ought to show more reserve. But if Kosh was too free with strangers, he at least possessed some compensating merits.

At fetching and carrying he was perfect;

he was clever, too, at retrieving game, and was almost a genius in following on a line of scent and putting up a jack-rabbit or a partridge; and if it took a long time to induce him to make the twenty-foot dive from the rocks of Grizzly Notch, this was only due to his dislike of entering cold water.

Having drilled him into obedience in small things, Peterkin at length took him out among the sheep in the pastures that stretched for leagues across the wilds; and here Kosh exhibited astonishing intelligence. He even learned to distinguish Coulter's flock from Turley's, and could separate them without a mistake.

Martialling his woolly charges into battalions, he would drive them steadily into a narrow defile and let them go through one by one, so that Peterkin, seated on his pony, might count them as they passed, and assure himself that their number was complete. And if any were missing, Kosh would range the hills and valleys in diligent search, never resting until he brought the wanderers home.

Thus Coulter's "yaller dog" gained a reputation for himself. He was accounted

the best sheep-dog between Regina and Fort McLeod. Ebenezer was proud of him, and would listen to no word against him. But Peterkin, not yet convinced, was reluctant to pronounce a final judgment upon the dog's still dubious character.

"I allow th' dog's clever—real clever," he acknowledged; "but I ain't just sure he's honest."

"Git!" exclaimed Ebenezer. "Thar's not a honester, faithfuller dog this side of the Rockies!"

On a certain afternoon Peterkin had been down to the creek fishing, and as he crossed the trail into the bridle-path leading through the trees up to the camp, he observed a chestnut horse hitched to a broken branch of one of the pines, where it nibbled the fresh grass. In passing, he noticed that the horse was breathing heavily, and that its coat was damp with perspiration and covered with white prairie dust.

When he came in sight of the verandah, he saw a stranger sitting on one of the lower steps, with an empty glass in his hand and a pipe in his mouth. He was staring down between his dusty top-boots, and his face

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was hidden by the rim of his wide hat. What especially interested Peterkin was the fact that Kosh lay at the man's feet, looking up into his face with evident familiarity and listening to his coaxing whispers.

"Looks most as if that there yaller dog an' you knew one another, stranger," said Peterkin, somewhat pointedly when he came up with the man.

The stranger put his empty glass on a corner of the step and rose to his feet.

"Can't say we've ever met before," he responded evasively. "He's some friendly, though," he added, as Kosh sniffed at his hand.

"A heap too friendly to be any good," rejoined Peterkin, laying his fishing-rod on the grass and glancing at the stranger disapprovingly. He had seen the man's black bearded face now, and recognised him as a desperado known along the trail by the name of Nick Gurney, who lived with two or three half-breed companions of doubtful character in a log cabin among the Porcupine Mountains. Peterkin had seen him once before, coming out of Simester's saloon at Fort McLeod, and had heard that he was pro-

specting for gold, that he kept sheep, and was particularly handy with his six-shooter.

"I see you've come from way east of Middle Crossing," Peterkin remarked. "Did you hear anythin' of the man that was shot in Toby Richardson's saloon there, las' Friday?"

Nick Gurney looked at him sharply from under frowning brows.

"Reckon you'd best ask some one who's been there later than me," he growled. "I've not been anyways near Middle Crossin' for months."

"Oh?" Peterkin glanced down at the man's boots. "I notioned you had. By the sort of dust you and your pony have collected, I'd an idea you'd come along from there right now. You couldn't very well have gotten that same white dust anywhere else."

Peterkin carried his string of newly-caught fish within doors. When he returned to take up his rod, he found Nick Gurney and Ebenezer Coulter together discussing a deal in sheep.

"No," Ebenezer was saying, "'tain't comin' off. I've gotten a better market."

"All right, then," returned Gurney. "In that case, I'll quit. So long, boss."

As he strode away, Kosh followed at his heels.

"Kosh!" called Peterkin. "Come 'way back here."

The dog stopped and looked round over his shoulder as if hesitating, then continued on his way, overtaking Nick Gurney among the trees. Gurney turned and spoke to him. Peterkin was not near enough to hear what he said; but the dog looked up at Nick pleadingly for a moment, and then slowly and guiltily crawled back and crouched at Peterkin's feet.

Peterkin spoke to him in stern reproof.

"Jes' you make tracks t' your kennel, you ill-favoured, disobejient tike," he cried, "an' if I ketch you again makin' up to a stranger an' not comin' when I call you, guess you'll know the feel of a whip!"

Kosh was a model of obedience and docility for the rest of that evening, and when Peterkin let him loose for the night he was wholly forgiven.

"Say, Peterkin," remarked Jake Cheverill at breakfast the next morning, "you're some

silent. I've not heard a chirp from you since sunrise. Anythin' up?"

Peterkin slowly stirred his coffee, watching the liquid whirl round in his cup.

"I've been thinkin'," he responded.

"Peterkin's a rare hand at thinkin'," observed Aunt Liza. "What's yer problem, this time, Peterkin?"

"It's that yaller dog," said Peterkin. "I don't calculate there's been any rain in the night; just a heavy dew, that's all. Kosh ain't the one to go cavortin' into the well; and he couldn't climb out again, if he did. No one's been considerate enough to treat him to a wash. And yet that dog's wet—wet to the skin. I'm some puzzled t' know just how it came about."

"'Twouldn't be a serious delinquency if he'd been havin' a swim in the creek, would it, Peterkin?" questioned Barney. "You'd forgive him that, eh?"

"Never knew that dog to go into water of his own accord," pursued Peterkin. "I figure he's been up to mischief. He's lookin' kind of guilty 'bout the eyes, too."

It was Sunday morning, and, according to custom, Peterkin and Ebenezer went to

meeting at Beacon Corner. After meeting, while Ebenezer was gossiping with the sheriff and others, Peterkin was getting the two ponies ready for the ride home, when Sam Turley approached him. Sam was a boy of his own age, one of his class-mates at school.

“I’m wishin’ you’d been along at Ash Hollow this mornin’, Peterkin,” said Sam. “Guess you’d have helped us some. You’re good at trackin’. Maybe you could have gotten on the trail of the timber wolf that was among our sheep durin’ the night. Killed three of ’em, he did, the skulkin’ brute.”

“Oh!” said Peterkin, keenly interested in the disaster. “That’s bad—real bad. Guess you’d be wise to set a trap for that timber wolf, else lie in wait for him with your gun. Where was that bloodhound of yours? Didn’t he give tongue, any?”

“Reckon he kep’ the whole household awake with his barkin’ an’ howlin’,” returned Sam. “He made the dismallest row you ever heard. But onfort’nately, he was chained up.”

“I’d let him range loose,” advised Peter-

kin. "Give Trojan a chance, he'd tackle any timber wolf."

On the following night there was heavy rain, and it was only to be expected that Kosh should bear traces of having been out in the wet when Jake went to give him some breakfast. Kosh was more sleepy than hungry, and he neglected the food. Jake casually noticed that there was a red stain on one side of the dog's face, and he concluded that Kosh had received a scratch in pushing his way through the cactus scrub in the dark.

Later in the morning Peterkin was in front of the cabin exercising his skill with the lariat, seeing how many times in succession he could throw the running noose over the tie-post and switch it free at the full stretch of the long line, when he heard the sound of a horse's hoofs.

He kept up his exercise until the horse appeared in the clearing, when, with an adroit movement of the hand, he made the lasso shoot out and fall with its open loop over the rider's red sun-bonnet, pinioning her arms to her sides.

The rider was Jess Turley. She laugh-

ingly wriggled out of the coils of the lasso and dismounted.

"How do, Peterkin? Where's the boss?" she demanded to know.

"Way back in the cabbage patch," Peterkin told her. "Are you wantin' him?"

"Why, yes," said Jess, assuming an air of gravity. "I'm wantin' him right now. I'm wantin' him to shoot that yaller dog of his."

"What?" cried Peterkin in astonishment. "You that's so fond of brute beasts—you want Ebenezer Coulter to shoot his dog? Say, you're askin' a lot. Eben's real fond of that dog. So'm I; so're we all."

"Dare say," nodded Jess, hitching her bridle to the tie-post. "But that dog's got to be shot. I mean it, sure, that I'm goin' to assist at his fun'ral inside another hour."

Peterkin thrust his hands into his side-pockets and stood looking at the girl from under his bent brows.

"If you'd come here in a neighbourly way to say your farmstead was on fire or attacked by Redskins, and that you wanted some of our boys to trot along and help you," he said slowly, "I calculate you'd get what you want,

Miss Turley; we'd risk our lives for you, slick. But if you notion that Eben Coulter's the man t' put a bullet into a innocent dumb animal without knowin' why, you're mistook."

"Innocent?" repeated Jess, with contempt. "D'you know what that yaller dog's been an' done? He's been along at our ranch, worryin' the sheep."

Peterkin started forward.

"Eh?" he exclaimed in quick concern; "worryin' your sheep?—our yaller dog? You don't say!"

"Sure," nodded Jess. "Las' night, an' the night before, he was prowlin' around, chasin' an' killin'. He's killed seven of them—maybe more. He's just got to be shot."

Peterkin drew his hands from his pockets and began slowly and meditatively to coil up his lasso.

"Say, are you certain sure it wasn't a timber wolf that done it?" he questioned, fixing his eyes upon the girl, as she adjusted her sun-bonnet over her head of dark hair. "What makes you say it was Kosh? Anybody see him do it?"

"Our Mary Anne heard the dog's bark," declared Jess.

"Well, but Kosh don't monopolise th' power of barkin', you know," objected Peterkin. "And if you've gotten no more proof than that——" He paused abruptly. "Just wait," he said. "I'll say nothin' more until I've had a look at the dog himself."

He whistled, and presently Kosh appeared, lazily stretching himself in a shaft of sunshine. Peterkin repeated his whistle and the dog strode towards him, vigorously agitating his stump of a tail.

"If he's done what you say, Jess," said Peterkin, "I reckon we ought to find some signs on him. I don't just see how he c'd help havin' stains about his mouth, d'you?"

The dog sidled up to him. He held it by an ear, and went down on his knees. Jess Turley bent over him.

"No," she decided repentently. "There's no blood on him. Guess he's innocent."

"Th' rain may have washed it off," suggested Peterkin, turning up the dog's chin and industriously examining its neck. "No," he added, "I see no sign. Wait! What's this?"

He caught hold of a thread of woolly hair.

“This looks some suspicious, eh? ’Tisn’t his own hair, you c’n see. It’s sheep’s wool. And yet,” he demurred, “it’s hardly a proof, and it wouldn’t do to condemn him on the strength of it. He may have got it innocently, ’specially as he sleeps on a sheep-skin rug.”

Jess looked perplexed.

“Has he ever worried any of your own sheep, Peterkin?” she inquired.

Peterkin shook his head.

“Never that I know,” he answered. “If he had done, course I’d be willin’ to believe in your suspicions of him now.”

“Guess our Mary Anne made a mistake ’bout hearin’ him bark,” said Jess. “’Tisn’t likely a dog ’uld bark any, and frighten the sheep he wanted to kill, is it, Peterkin?”

“I’d say not,” agreed Peterkin. “I notion he’d work quiet and stealthy, same as a Injun, or any other huntin’ animal. And Kosh ain’t what you’d call a barker, best of times.”

Jess drew back, and went towards her pony. Peterkin accompanied her to help her

to mount, if she should need his help, which she didn't.

"D'you still want Eben Coulter to shoot that dog?" he asked. "Ain't you goin' t' attend his funeral?"

"No," she answered, lightly leaping astride her saddle and taking the bridle into her strong sun-browned fingers. "I don't b'lieve he'd hurt a mouse."

At the mid-day meal, Peterkin told his house-mates of Jess Turley's visit.

"Say, I was main afraid I should find a smear of blood on that dog's jowl," he said.

Jake looked across at him queerly.

"An' didn't you?" he asked, with a knowing wink.

Peterkin flushed in swift resentment at the question.

"D'you reckon I'd tell an untruth?" he retorted warmly.

It was Jake's turn to grow red.

"Well, no, Peterkin; no, I don't," he returned apologetically. "I ax your pardon. I'm certain sure you never saw any trace of blood 'bout the dog. But I did," he added. "I did—early this mornin' when I went to give him a feed. Thar was a red stain

alongside his jaw. Guess it had wore off 'fore you looked at him along with Jess."

"Gee!" exclaimed Ebenezer. "Is that so? Then the dog's guilty!"

"Looks like it," said Peterkin. "Say, I think I ought to ride along to Turley's, and tell them that we ain't so sure of Kosh, after all."

"Better stay where you are, an' keep a eye on the dog," suggested Aunt Liza.

Kosh was carefully tied up with a stout rope the next night, and Peterkin went to sleep assuring himself that, if there were any more sheep-worrying, the guilt could certainly not be laid to the blame of the yellow dog.

In the middle of the night he awoke. It seemed to him that he had heard a shrill whistle, coming from afar; but it was not repeated, and Kosh did not bark.

Peterkin got out of bed and went to the window. Looking out into the moonlight, he saw the dog sitting on his haunches, faithfully on the watch, at the full length of the rope. He tapped on the window-pane, and Kosh stood up, wagging his stump.

At earliest dawn, while the rest of the

household were still asleep, Peterkin was up and dressed. He lighted the fire, and then let himself out, closing the door behind him silently. He intended to ride along to Ash Hollow and to take Kosh with him. Going round to the side of the homestead, however, he was astonished to find that the dog was no longer there.

"Queer!" he muttered to himself. "Guess that rope wasn't strong enough!"

He picked up the loose end of the rope and examined it. The strands were not broken: there were no teeth marks. How, then, had Kosh escaped? Peterkin well remembered how securely he had tied the knots, and it was clear to him now that they had been loosened by human fingers. He glanced at the ground and saw all around him the impressions of a man's boots on the soft moist earth.

"Seems to me that dog's workin' along with a two-legged pardner," he reflected. "Wonder who it c'n be! Guess I might as well find out."

CHAPTER III

CAUGHT IN THE ACT

BARELY more than a quarter of an hour later Peterkin was mounted on his pony, following on the tracks of a horse and a dog across the dewy grassland at the rear of the farmstead. He carried his lariat at the pommel of his saddle, and there was a loaded revolver in his pouch. He rode quickly, knowing that the warmth of the sun would soon disperse the dew; but the double track was now so distinct that he could follow it at a gallop. It led him north-west towards the blue foot-hills, whose upper slopes were already tipped with the rosy glow of sunrise.

As he rode, he thought of the whistle that he had vaguely heard in the middle of the night. He had believed that it was but the cry of a curlew or the squeaking of a loose gate on its rusty hinges; but now it occurred to him that it was some man who had been

whistling to the dog to come to him—some man who was surely known to Kosh, and whose presence had caused no alarm. Peterkin supposed that, as Kosh had not responded to the call, the loiterer had dismounted and crept cautiously up to the side of the house and liberated him by untying the rope. This, indeed, was the only possible explanation of the occurrence. Peterkin had discovered the place where the horse had waited. It was all obvious. Yet who could the man be who was so well known to Kosh that the dog would answer to his call and follow him as he was following him now?

That Kosh was following him willingly, and without being led, was proved by the circumstance that, as the track showed, he had more than once crossed from side to side of the horse's trail, and that at one place he had made a detour round a hillock. Moreover, in spite of the yellow dog's dislike of water, he had crossed the creek at Buffalo Ford.

From this point the trail trended northward in the direction of Ash Hollow and Eben Coulter's upland pastures. Peterkin began

to feel the exhilaration of one who knows that he has struck a true scent. As he came in sight of Turley's, nestling in a green valley among the hills, he halted. The sun glistened on the windows of the homestead far away. There was no smoke as yet from the kitchen chimney. He could see the ponies grazing in the corrals, the cattle browsing in the enclosed fields, and over the hillsides the sheep wandered peaceful and undisturbed. All was silent, and there was no sign of the yellow dog or of the horseman whom the dog had followed.

Peterkin was perplexed. He had expected that it was here that he would come upon the guilty marauders whom he had been pursuing, and he had hardly troubled to keep strictly to their track. By this time the dew had disappeared under the sun's growing warmth, and the trail on the grass was indistinct, excepting in sheltered places. But he could find it still in the stretches of loose sand turned up by the galloping feet of horse and dog, and again he followed it.

He had ceased to concern himself with Turley's flock. It was Eben Coulter's

mountain pastures that now occupied his thoughts. For a moment or two he questioned if, after all, the disappearance of Kosh had anything to do with sheep. It was quite possible that Kosh himself was the object of the stranger's nocturnal visit to Coulter's Ranch. Peterkin did not distress himself greatly at the idea that the dog had been stolen. There was no need for him to trouble, so long as the sheep were safe.

He climbed to the ridge of one of the hills, which gave him a view of a wide stretch of the pastures. There he halted. His sharp eyes searched the hills and dales, his keen ears were alert to catch the sounds of bleating. But there was not a sheep to be seen, nor a sound to be heard.

What had become of the flock? He searched in every direction, but there was not a living thing in sight, saving a few birds. Presently, however, miles away to the northwest, he discerned a moving whirl of dust rising like a faint cloud of smoke from over the shoulder of a hill. He watched it, wondering and intently listening, and after a while as the dust drifted there came to him

from the same direction the sharp crack of a whip, followed by a dog's excited bark, which he recognised as the bark of Kosh.

The cloud of dust continued to move slowly upward, growing more dense, until suddenly in its midst Peterkin distinguished a vast flock of bleating sheep, driven and guarded by four horsemen.

"'Bout the boldest thing I've ever heard of, stealin' a whole flock of sheep!" Peterkin muttered to himself in astonishment. And urging his pony forward, he galloped off in pursuit.

His way lay through White Eagle Gulch, and as he rode he made conjectures as to the probable intentions of the sheep-stealers. He knew that there was an Indian village somewhere among the Porcupine Mountains, and that a flock of sheep might be easily and profitably exchanged for their value in horses and buffalo robes. Once the flock got into possession of the Redskins, the rightful owners might seek in vain to recover their property.

By passing through White Eagle Gulch, Peterkin hoped to head off the thieves. He

did not reflect with any anxiety that he was only one small boy against four or five desperate men. He never thought of personal danger. What he wanted was to identify the thieves, and trust to riding back to Middle Crossing in time to summon help.

He rattled at mad speed through the ravines where the ground was level, but husbanded his pony's strength in the steeper places. At the mouth of White Eagle Gulch he drew rein and listened. He could hear the bleating of the flock, the pattering of their feet, the shouts of the men, the sharp bark of the dog. The sounds came from beyond a long, low hill. He drew into the ambush of a bluff and waited, watching, knowing that they must pass within range of his sight.

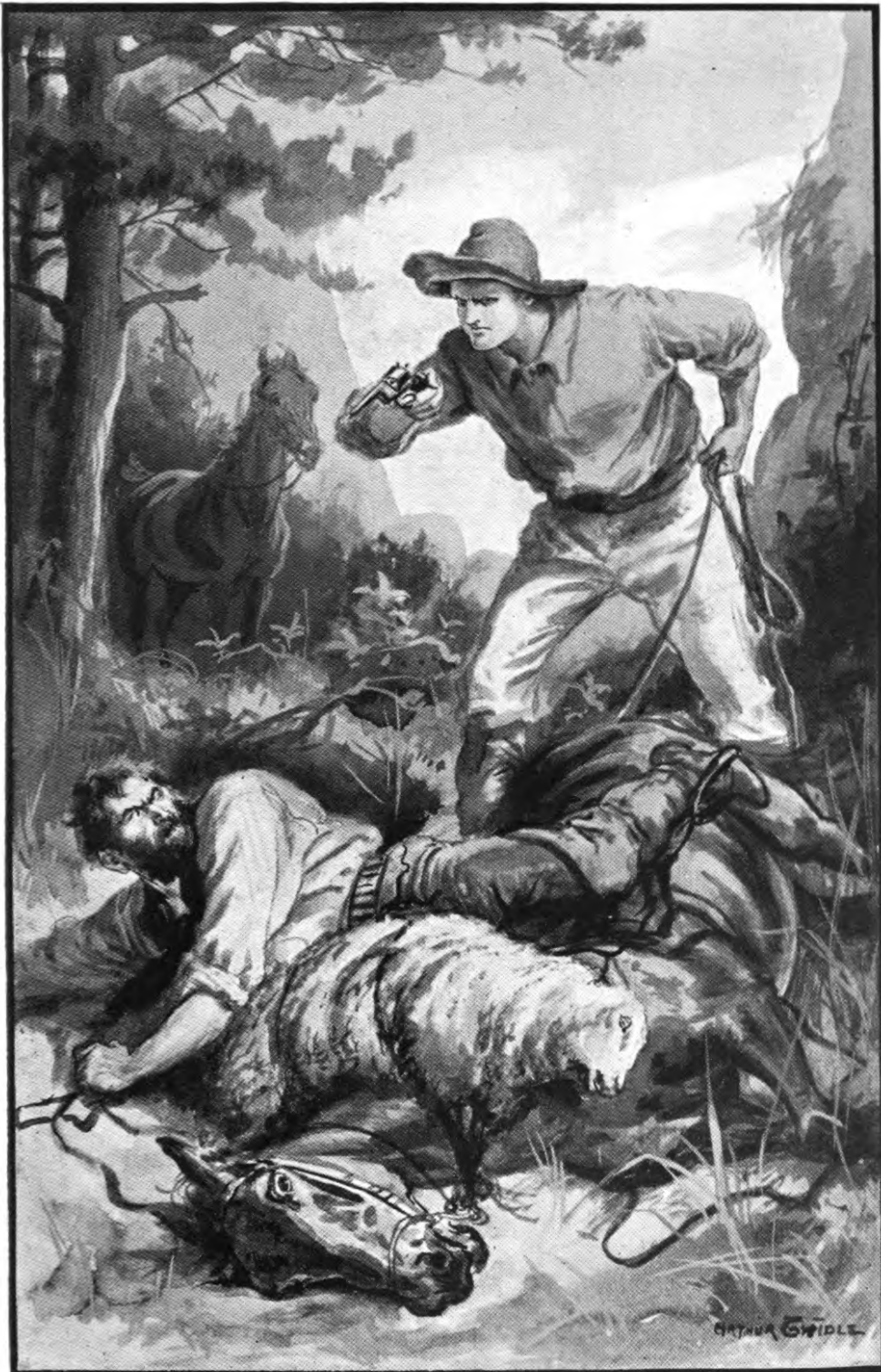
Suddenly he detected the clatter of a horse's hoofs behind him in the gulch, and turning sharply, he saw a horseman riding towards him. One glance was enough for Peterkin. He recognised the chestnut horse as the same one that he had seen a few days before at Willow Bend. The rider was Nick Gurney, and in front of him, across the

saddle, he carried a sheep whose feet were secured with a rope and upon whose woolly side the Coulter brand was plainly visible.

Concealing himself and his mount behind a boulder, Peterkin allowed the rider to come level with him, the while he gathered his lasso ready to throw. Just at the well-measured moment he dashed out from his ambush. Gurney's horse reared and started off with a noisy clatter of hoofs on the loose stones. But Peterkin was ready.

With an adroit swing of his right arm he flung his coiled lasso into the air. The wide loop opened and dropped clean over the horse's head and the rider's body. There was a violent jerk at Peterkin's end of the rope as the running noose tightened, and in an instant the escaping rider with his horse and the sheep fell heavily to the ground in a struggling, tangled heap.

Tightening his lariat, Peterkin rode up to them; Gurney tried to seize his revolver, but his arm was broken, and, almost before he could move, Peterkin stood over him with his own little pistol levelled at the bridge of Gurney's scarred and bleeding nose.



“PETERKIN STOOD OVER HIM WITH HIS OWN PISTOL LEVELLED.”



"Guess I caught you that time, Nick," Peterkin said calmly, as he squinted along the shining barrel of his weapon and twitched at the trigger. "Seems this here game of yours ain't goin' to be played as you expected, eh?"

Glaring at the boy with brutal malignity, Gurney only groaned.

"'Fraid you're hurt some," said Peterkin; "but I'd no time t' choose a softer place for you to drop on."

The fallen horse staggered to rise, but its knees were bleeding, and it failed. Very dexterously Peterkin bound Gurney's arms to his sides, pulled him away, took possession of his knife and revolver, and left him lying helpless on his back, while he turned to release the sheep and help the horse to his feet.

In the meantime the bleating flock had been coming nearer and nearer in a cloud of dust. Peterkin remounted his pony and waited, with a revolver in each hand. When the first of the sheep appeared in sight, he advanced towards the half-breed who rode in front of them.

“Say, Billy,” he called out, leaning forward in his seat, and pointing his pistol at the man’s head, “you’re drivin’ them sheep th’ wrong way. Nick Gurney’s decided not to take ’em any further, an’ you’ve got ter drive ’em back, see?”

The man demurred, but the sight of Peterkin’s threatening firearm decided him, and he rode back to the rear of the drove to consult with his comrades. Peterkin whistled, and Eben Coulter’s yellow dog ran up to him.

With sign and word Peterkin ordered the dog to head off the flock and turn them back. Kosh sullenly obeyed, and, after a lot of trouble, the sheep were turned. But the four half-breed horsemen gave no assistance in the work. Believing that Peterkin was not alone, they had been discreet enough to sheer off. Peterkin returned for his prisoner. Helping Nick Gurney to his saddle, he tied the man’s feet beneath the girth and led him away.

An hour later the inhabitants of Lavender Ranch witnessed the great flock being driven past their doors. Among them was Sheriff

Dutcher, to whom Peterkin delivered up his prisoner.

“Guess you’ll find his four pardners way back among the Porcupine Hills,” said Peterkin. “An’ if you’ll lend me a couple of boys to help get these sheep back to the pastures, I’ll be obliged. As for that yaller dog——” he added with contempt.

“I’d shoot him,” recommended the sheriff. “A dog like that’s wuss’n useless. He’s just a sinner past all redemption.”

Peterkin shook his head.

“I’ll not quit tryin’ ter put a bit of honesty into him for all that,” he said, as he turned away.

Peterkin seriously thought that he could train the dog into better habits, but Kosh was too old a hand at cunning and deception to yield to discipline, and, just as Peterkin was beginning to believe he was succeeding, Kosh broke out again worse than ever, and the worrying of sheep was resumed.

One moonlight night when the dog had stolen off, Peterkin followed on his tracks and came upon him suddenly on one of Turley’s meadows with his fangs tearing at

the throat of a ewe that he had killed. Peterkin might have shot him there and then, but his sense of honour and fairness extended to animals, and he shrank from the thought of hurting the dog without warning him and giving him a chance of escape.

“Kosh!” he called, “Kosh!”

The dog turned swiftly and showed his fangs in a wicked snarl that came from lips dripping with the dead ewe’s innocent blood. His cruel eyes gleamed like coals of fire in the moonlight.

“You low-down, treacherous, double-distilled brute!” cried Peterkin accusingly. “You all-fired cur!”

The dog crawled slowly towards him, apparently with penitence; but his short tail was sticking out motionless, the bristles of his back were raised, and his reddened lips were drawn in a nasty snarl.

“No,” pursued Peterkin, mistaking the dog’s attitude, “don’t you crawl to me for forgiveness. You ain’t goin’ to get any.”

Suddenly the dog bounded forward, and, with a savage, wolf-like growl of defiant challenge, leapt at Peterkin’s bare throat. His

jaws snapped like a steel trap. His forefeet were on Peterkin's shoulders; his whole weight, added to the impetus of his spring, bore the boy backward. Peterkin fell, rolled over, kicking and struggling desperately to free himself. Together they fought wildly, fiercely, for the mastery; but the dog was uppermost, and Peterkin's shoulder was seized and shaken in a fearful vice-like grip. With an effort he writhed himself over, managed to get his right hand free and push the cold muzzle of his revolver between the biting jaws.

He pulled the trigger twice. Kosh rolled back dead.

Peterkin rose slowly to his feet, wiping his pistol, looking down with contempt.

"You ain't even wuth buryin'," he panted. "I'll leave you for the crows—you *yaller* dog!"

CHAPTER IV

PETERKIN'S GRIZZLY

WITH his hand on the latch, Ebenezer Coulter kicked the toes of his stout boots against the doorstep to clean them of the snow. The appetising flavour of hot coffee and fried bacon met him as he entered the living-room. Barney Maguire followed him within.

“Ah! somethin' like comfort, this is, after a long, cold ride,” said Barney, dropping his cape on the nearest chair and approaching the blazing fire of pine-logs where Aunt Liza was engaged with the frying-pan. She moved aside to admit him into the warmth.

“Peterkin come in yet?” questioned Ebenezer.

For answer, Aunt Liza glanced round to the far corner of the room, and at the same time Peterkin spoke from behind the open door of the gun-cupboard.

"Mornin', boss. Mornin', Barney. Any news?"

Barney seated himself in front of the fire and proceeded to divest himself of his spurs and leggings.

"No, Peterkin," he answered, "barrin' that Tim Harrison, 'long at Middle Crossing, is bad with toothache, an' Joe Dutcher's white mare's dead at last, an' Jess Turley's gone east to Regina."

Peterkin emerged from the cupboard, carrying a rifle, which he was industriously cleaning with an oily rag.

"That ain't news, Barney," he said lightly; "not any of it."

"No use tellin' Peterkin anythin'," put in Aunt Liza. "I reckon Peterkin's got a kind of private wire laid on somewheres, an' gets track of things 'most as soon's they happen. Knows everythin', he does."

"Don't just see how he c'd have gotten track of Tim Harrison's toothache, though," objected Barney, struggling with an obstinate buckle. "Nor 'bout Jess Turley, neither. Anybody tell you, Peterkin?"

"Well, no," admitted Peterkin. "But,

you see, I was along at the store in Middle Crossing yesterday, when Tim's missis was in buyin' a bottle of that creosote mixture, and I reckoned Tim's tooth was bad again. 'Longside the trail, 's I went by Ash Hollow, I sighted a Saratoga trunk waitin' ready for the east-bound coach, and I guessed Jess was shapin' to go along with it. Jess has been threatenin' months back to pay a visit to her aunt in Regina. As for Joe Dutcher's white mare—well, everybody but himself made sure she was past curin', and, as neither Joe nor the horse doctor 'tended meetin' Sunday, I calculated as that mare wasn't likely to last over night."

Eben Coulter had seated himself at the head of the table.

"Air you 'ntendin' ter lay that there gun aside an' come to your breakfast, Peterkin?" he inquired.

"No, boss, I ain't," Peterkin answered, reaching for his hat. "I'd breakfast a good hour since, same time as Aunt Liza."

"Say, 're you goin' out, then?" questioned Jake. "What's on?"

Peterkin strode to the window-shelf to fill his bandolier with cartridges.

"Nothing much, Jake," he responded. "I was down at the beaver traps at sunrise. They were all empty; but 's I was crossin' alongside the ten-acre patch, I sighted the trail of a grizzly, and I've a notion I'd like to make that grizzly's acquaintance. You ain't free to come along, are you, Jake? Guess there's a chance of some sport."

"You bet," agreed Jake. "I'll come, sure."

"A bear foolin' around our ranch!" exclaimed Ebenezer. "My!"

"Well, I ain't just certain positive," said Peterkin guardedly. "I didn't see him. But it wasn't the trail of a prairie pony, or a Red Injun, or a jack-rabbit. Guess it was just a bear. I'm wantin' to make sure."

Aunt Liza was occupied in filling his haversack with food.

"Reckon you'll need a heap more'n this if the two of you 're goin'!" she ruminated.

"Why, there's 'nough for us both for a week!" objected Jake. "You allus give us

too much, Auntie. We shall be back home 'fore nightfall, eh, Peterkin?"

"Supposin' we're not home 'fore sundown," said Peterkin, "you c'n allow that that grizzly has made tracks. We shall not come home without the bearskin, anyway."

"That goes 'thout sayin'," observed Eben, blowing into his mug of hot coffee. "But I wouldn't foller on that trail quite so far as the Pacific Slope. Keep this side of the Rocky Mountains."

"You bet," said Peterkin. "Come along, Jake!"

The two boys wasted no time in the work of saddling their ponies. The bridle-path was slippery with frozen snow, and they did not mount until they got down to the level trail. Then they rode westward across the plain, breathing the cool, bracing air of the winter morning, and feeling only as one can feel roaming over the prairies of the Far West, well armed and well mounted on a fleet, sure-footed steed.

They had had many a hunting adventure together, these two boys. Jake was the elder by four or five years, and he had the greater

skill as a rider and as a hunter, but this was Peterkin's adventure to-day, and because Peterkin had been the first to discover the bear's tracks, Jake was content to let him take the lead in everything. Beyond the first ford they struck out for the foothills of the Porcupine Range. There was little use as yet in searching for the grizzly's trail. Peterkin had seen which direction the animal had taken, and he was following that direction now, knowing that he would be able to pick up the trail when he reached the rising land. Occasionally, as they rode at a hand gallop, side by side, they scared a flock of sage hens or startled a jack-rabbit. Antelopes and deer were often in sight, the snow having driven them from the hills to seek food on Eben Coulter's wide sheep pastures; but these were not the kind of game that the boys were seeking this morning, and they passed them by and rode onward to the mountains.

The farther they rode, the rougher and wilder became the country, and they knew that they were approaching the winter haunts of the bear. They came to a place where one had wallowed in a drift of snow.

"Say, he ain't just a cub," decided Jake. "Look at the size of his footmarks! Guess he's a full-grown grizzly! Say, I don't mind how long we hunt him. I'm ready to spend days over this pic-nic if only we can take back his skin."

They followed the trail through a deep defile and out upon a stony plain where Old Man Creek streamed blue amid the whiteness of big boulders and patches of snow. Here they wandered for a time, keeping always in the bear's deviating tracks.

At about two o'clock in the afternoon, their steeds having become tired and themselves weary and hungry, they dismounted, loosened their saddles and hobbled their ponies where there was grass. Jake then built a little fire to boil water in a dipper that they had brought, and made coffee.

"Good thing we brought our blankets along with us, Peterkin," said Jake, taking out his pipe. "Guess we shall have to camp out to-night, 'less you've a notion of goin' home without that bearskin."

Peterkin shook his head.

"No," he said, "I ain't hankerin' to go

home without what we came for. We shall get good shelter from the night wind, back of one of these bluffs. And I don't calc'late that bear's so very far off, by the way our ponies are behavin'. Soon's you've finished your pipe, we'll douse the fire and quit. We can look for a campin'-ground while we're scoutin' after the grizzly."

They had put out the fire and were about to resume their tracking, when they were both startled by hearing a horse whinnying some little distance away up the stream. Peterkin caught at his pony to keep her from answering. He supposed that the strange horse might belong to some trappers, as he assumed that there were no bands of roaming Indians outside their reservations at this time of the year. He was certain, however, that the owner of the horse could not be far away, and he was anxious to discover who their neighbour might be before revealing himself.

"Say, Jake, if you'll hang around here with the ponies an' things, I'll slip out and have a spy round."

"Guess it's just a wild cayuse," said Jake.

“But go along an’ have a look. I’ll wait here until you come back.”

Peterkin tightened his pony’s girth, and leaving Jake in charge, took his gun and went off on a scouting expedition up the stream.

He had hardly gone four hundred yards when, in a bend of the river, he came upon the hoof-marks of two horses. To his surprise they were not shod. Could they be Indian ponies?

He began to be a little anxious. By the fact that the two had been going side by side, close together, he judged that they had carried men, that they had been guided, and were not loosely wandering at their own wills. And, if the riders had been Redskins, then it was not unlikely that they were members of a band, and only temporarily separated from their companions.

Then he tried to console himself with the reflection that white men often enough ride unshod ponies. Even Eben Coulter had three or four mustangs that had not yet been shod.

The trail led him onward round a mass of boulders, divided from the creek by a piece

of level, stony ground. Peterkin cautiously crept to the boulders, and looked over them through a narrow crevice. But instantly he drew back.

In that instant he had seen two Indians, scarcely a score of yards away from him.

They had dismounted, and were coming in his direction. One of them wore the war-bonnet of a chief, the other had the headdress of a warrior, and beyond them, apparently waiting for the pair, he had seen about a score of mounted braves.

What was to be done? There was not a moment to spare. There was no time for him to run back to Jake. And he had left his trail in the thin crust of snow! They could not fail to find it, and, following it, to discover him, however he should endeavour to hide.

Hardly pausing to reflect, he made for the river, wading in up to his knees. From boulder to boulder he waded, bending low, so that his head and shoulders might not be seen.

Suddenly the water deepened, and he only saved himself from falling by standing up-

right, balancing himself by the weight of his gun. To go further meant that he must cross the deep pool and wet both his rifle and his revolver.

Very silently he thrust the larger weapon in between two rocks, and pushed his revolver under his buckskin coat, high up, so that it rested on his shoulder, held there among the folds of his muffler. Then, still hidden by the rocks and stones, he crept cautiously on. The icy cold water reached to his armpits, seeming to penetrate to his very bones. But he gained the shelter of a large rock and stood pressing his back against it, waiting and listening.

Presently he heard the hoofs of horses stepping among loose stones. Then this sound ceased, and in its stead came the softer padding of moccasined feet. The two Indians were coming nearer and nearer. They were following upon his trail. One of them coughed. The other grunted suspiciously and spoke. Peterkin heard the words; they were spoken in the tongue of the Blackfeet, which he understood.

“Ugh! It is the trail of the paleface

scout. We must follow him. Not well will it be for the sons of the plains if he escape."

Peterkin had been in danger from Indians before; but never, that he could remember, in such peril from them as now, nor so far from possible help. He dared not move, dared hardly breathe, lest they should discover him.

As they came yet nearer, stepping from boulder to boulder, busily searching, he shivered, his teeth chattered, the ice-cold water was like a knife against his chest; his knees trembled under him, his ankles were painfully cramped with the tension from his feet held insecurely on a round stone, and his hands were numb.

In his trepidation he heard one of the Indians breathing wheezily; he heard one of them slip on a boulder, just above his head, and then sit down, knocking the stock of his gun on the rock. From under the rim of his hat, Peterkin could see the shining muzzle of the gun, and above it a dirty hand pointing outward across the river. He saw the toe of a moccasin, richly ornamented with coloured beads, sullied by mud and snow.

“Wough!” grunted the one who was pointing. “He has crossed the water. See, Crouching Panther! He hides behind yonder rock!”

Crouching Panther! Peterkin knew the name. It was the name of one of the war-chiefs of the Blackfeet, a chief renowned for his cruelty to his paleface enemies.

“The eyes of my brother are dim,” returned Crouching Panther, in contradiction. “The thing that he sees is a bear. Come, let us go forth and kill him! and it may be that we shall also get upon the trail of the paleface scout.”

Peterkin then heard them move away, and he drew a deep breath of relief. Had they remained a moment longer, he must have betrayed himself, for the cramp in his ankles had crept up the calves of his legs to the tendons of his knees, and his numbed fingers were losing their hold upon the rock. His brain reeled; he felt sick and faint. His legs gave way under him, and the cold water bubbled about his lips.

Trembling in every limb, he scrambled painfully out of the creek to see the two

Indians mounted on their mustangs, wading across the stream, followed by their band of braves. For a long time he sat rubbing his cramped knees and wringing the wet out of his dripping clothes. His teeth were chattering like castanets, his feet were like lumps of ice. But soon his young blood asserted its vigour, tingling through his veins, and he crept to the place where he had hidden his gun. He caught it up and, waiting for a while to assure himself that he was safe from observation, started off at a staggering run to find Jake and the ponies. When he saw them waiting under the trees he slackened his pace to a walk. The knuckles of his left hand had been rasped against a rough stone and were bleeding. He was trying to adjust a piece of torn skin in its place when Jake came up to him.

"Guess you'd best tie a bit of rag around your fingers, case you get frost in them cuts," Jake recommended. "Let's have a look." He took Peterkin's hand in his own and looked at it. "My!" he exclaimed in astonishment. "Where've you been to get *that?*"

"Why, it's only a scratch," said Peterkin.

“Yes, I know,” Jake nodded; “but ’tain’t the scratch I’m lookin’ at. I’m takin’ stock of all them little shiny specks ’mong the dirt on your hand. D’you see them, Peterkin? Say, I’m figgerin’ they’re gold—yes, real gold. And I calculate there’s heaps more where that dirt came from.”

“Gold!” exclaimed Peterkin. “.Say, we’re in luck if it is!”

“You bet,” said Jake, looking wise. “Let’s get home right now and bring along the boys to stake out a claim and get to work. You’ll be able to locate it again, won’t you?”

“Yep,” nodded Peterkin. “But we ain’t goin’ away without our bear, are we?”

“Git!” cried Jake. “As if a grizzly’s wuth anythin’ alongside a reef of gold!”

CHAPTER V

LONE PINE GULCH

BEFORE mounting Peterkin warmed his hands and cheeks against his pony's soft velvety muzzle, and while he was thus engaged he heard three shots fired in quick succession.

"Guess that's the Injuns after our grizzly," he conjectured. "We'd best wait a bit until they've quitted. Let's have something to eat."

They led their ponies farther in among the trees and there in the shelter they ate the rest of their food with some cold coffee. This made Peterkin feel warmer, and as the sun had already set behind the hills and dusk was falling he suggested to Jake that they should search for a camping-place for the night and delay their return to the ranch until daylight.

Jake agreed, and they rode into a dark

ravine where they could hope to light a fire without fear of being discovered by any prowling Redskins. Peterkin's clothes were wet and he wanted to dry them.

At the far end of the ravine they came into an open valley through which a narrow stream ran, bordered by dwarf cottonwood-trees and thick bush. This seemed a suitable refuge, and they were riding towards a sheltered hollow when Peterkin suddenly drew rein. The pungent smell of burning pine wood had reached him, brought by the east wind.

Jake sniffed the air also.

"Injuns!" he decided. "'Tain't safe here. Let's go on."

Presently, beyond the trees, they discovered a thin film of smoke in the distance and the flickering glow of firelight. They turned northward then, and as they mounted to the shoulder of a low hill they looked back, and saw about a dozen teepees and as many fires.

"We've left our trail behind us in the snow," said Peterkin. "What's to be done?"

"Push on," advised Jake. "The Redskins won't find it in the dark, and when we've

had a couple of hours' sleep we can be way back on the plains long before the skunks break camp."

They rode on for a couple of miles or so until they came into a gloomy defile, which they knew by the name of Mosquito Gulch. By this time it was quite dark; but the moon was rising in a clear sky.

"Guess we might as well squat here," proposed Jake, when they came beside a clump of willows. He dismounted, and Peterkin followed his example. Each unfolded his blanket and hitched his pony to a tree, and they were preparing to lie down when Peterkin seized his companion's arm.

"There's horses about," he announced. "I heard one whinnying."

"So did I," nodded Jake. "It came from along the gulch."

Glancing in the direction whence the sound came, Peterkin caught the flicker of a light half-way up the steep hillside.

"You wait here, Jake," he said, propping his gun against a tree, "wait here while I go along and see who's there."

Leaving Jake, he went away as cautiously

as if he had been an Indian scout. The click of a horse's shoe against a loose stone assured him that the unknown neighbour was not an Indian. Still cautiously he went nearer, and presently he discovered that the light came from a log hut half hidden by a snowdrift. He heard voices, and soon he was able to distinguish words which told him that the occupants of the hut were white men.

Believing them to be a party of trappers, and hoping now to have a comfortable shelter for himself and Jake instead of a night of shivering and hunger in the open, he went boldly up to the door and knocked for admission. But at the moment the men's voices were raised, and it seemed that the knock was not heard.

"No, Will Marlow ain't the one to hang around for nothin'," one was saying, "Will's there every time—the most punctual stage-driver along the trail, bar none."

"Yes, an' I calculate he'll be alongside Lone Pine Gulch three o'clock to-morrow, sure's a gun, with the boodle aboard," drawled another significantly.

“That’s sure reckonin’, I allow,” said a third. “But we ain’t gotten that there boodle yit, an’ don’t none of you fergit that Will Marlow is jus’ as slick with his six-shooter as with his six mules. We’ve got ter face that risk.”

Realising that these men were road-agents—highwaymen—plotting to rob the eastward bound coach, Peterkin drew back. In the darkness, he unfortunately struck his foot against a gun which one of the outlaws had left propped beside the door. The weapon fell noisily. The men dropped their voices to a whisper, and then one called aloud—

“Who’s there?”

“A friend,” Peterkin answered, not knowing what else to say.

The door flew open, and a burly, ugly-looking desperado stepped forth. Seeing Peterkin, the man clapped his hand to his revolver.

“Come in,” he growled.

Peterkin accepted the invitation, concealing his fear, knowing that he could not very well refuse.

The door was closed behind him, and his

eyes fell upon eight as desperate and villainous-looking men as the one who now stood between him and the possibility of retreat. Two of them he at once recognised as teamsters, who had been driving in Will Marlow's outfit a few months before, and who had been discharged for pilfering from the mails. Peterkin himself gave no sign of recognition.

"Who's with you, an' what're you foolin' around here for?" asked one, who appeared to be in authority. There was something peculiarly familiar in the expression of his grim, villainous face, with its bushy, black beard; but Peterkin did not ask himself where he had seen him before. He ventured to approach the fire of logs that burned in the middle of the floor, filling the place with smoke. He spread his cold hands out in front of it. He thought it wise to put on a bold front.

"No one's here with me," he answered calmly. "I've got a pardner waitin' for me with our two ponies way along the gulch. We came out from Eben Coulter's ranch at Willow Bend this mornin' for a bear hunt. Got on the trail of one, but missed him. We

were just goin' into camp down there when I located this dug-out by the light of your fire, and I left my pardner and came along."

"Um!" muttered the spokesman, watching the steam beginning to rise from the boy's wet clothes. "Guess you've been havin' a swim across one of the creeks by the look of you. Reckon you're some hungry, too. Here!"

For a moment the man's face was made clear in the flickering of the fire, and Peterkin shrank back, recognising it as the face of Nick Gurney.

He offered Peterkin a piece of burnt dough-cake and the leg of a roasted prairie chicken.

Peterkin declined the hospitality. He was hungry, but he did not wish to share the food of outlaws.

"How long was you a hangin' around listenin' outside this door 'fore it was opened?" he was asked.

Peterkin looked towards the door, and regretted that it was not still open.

"'Bout as long as it would take you to count thirty," he answered, not very explicitly. "I knocked."

Gurney lighted his pipe with a burning twig from the fire, and, as he did so, he looked significantly from one to another of his companions. Then he fixed his evil eyes upon Peterkin.

"Guess you heard a thing or two?" he inquired pointedly.

"Well, I ain't just deaf," returned Peterkin, "and you weren't speakin' in whispers. You named Will Marlow, driver of the mail coach. Friend of yours, I suppose? He gave me a lift once, when I was caught in a storm 'long the trail."

He said this with such boyish innocence that the thieves ceased to suspect that he might have overheard something of their plot. And, to add to his seeming ignorance of their character, he went on—

"Reckon I'm in luck, strikin' a comfortable shanty like this. Soon as I've warmed myself a bit, I'll slip down and unhitch the ponies and fetch my pardner and blanket and gun, and come back an' stay all night."

Nick was silent for some moments. At length he said—

"Your pony's all safe, so's your pardner, an' you ain't needin' no blanket or gun here."

Peterkin did not betray his feverish desire to escape.

"I was thinkin' of the Injuns," he resumed. "Guess they'll follow on my trail in the snow; and if they track me to your dug-out, that gun might come in some useful."

"Injuns?"

"Yes. There's a village of 'em camped alongside of Butterfly Creek. Crouching Panther's lot, they are. It was them that corralled the bear I was after. And they'd have corralled me, too, if I hadn't hidden myself in the creek. That's how my clothes are wet."

The outlaws were too well accustomed to the truthfulness of the men of the plains to doubt Peterkin's information. Two or three of them reached for their guns.

"Boys," cried Nick Gurney, "d'ye hear that? There's Redskins prowlin' around. Guess you'd do well to round-up our ponies." And he named two of them, who went out, shutting the door behind them, depriving Peterkin of his wished-for chance of escape.

They had been gone hardly a quarter of an hour when the men around the fire were startled by the sound of a shot, and there

was a hurried stampede for the door. As it was flung open, there was another shot, followed by an Indian yell.

Peterkin slipped out at the heels of the alarmed outlaws, to see a band of mounted Redskins riding across a patch of moonlit snow. He crept round to the rear of the hut, and watched the flashing of rifles and pistols. He saw an Indian fall from his horse. He heard a cry of "This way, boys!" But he did not wait to see or hear any more. Escaping unobserved into a belt of trees, he ran as quickly as his feet could carry him down the hillside, straight for the place where he had left Jake and the ponies.

Jake was already astride of his pony, and Peterkin had barely time to snatch up his gun and vault into his saddle when there was a clatter of hoofs, a defiant whoop, and about a dozen Redskins galloped by, lying along the sides of their steeds and firing backward at their pursuers.

Close behind them rode the outlaws, yelling as wildly as the Indians. Peterkin did not count them, but he retained the impression that there were nine of them. Digging his spurs into his pony's flanks, he followed

Jake, galloping off in an opposite direction, never pausing to look round. Nor did they once draw rein until they had left Mosquito Gulch far in their rear.

By that time Peterkin's pony was running lame from a bad strain in one of her hind legs. The lameness was increasing.

"Guess you'd better ride along home without me, Jake," proposed Peterkin. "I'll go aside and turn in at Joe Dutcher's ranch. Sorry we missed that bear. I'd made up my mind to have its skin for Aunt Liza. But you c'n tell Eben and the boys 'bout that gold, if you think it's worth while. I shall be home by breakfast-time, I reckon. Yes, you'd best push on without me."

At eleven o'clock that night he was leading his limping pony along the dark lonesome trail in the direction of a group of low-lying buildings which could hardly have been distinguished by eyes unfamiliar with their position against the black background of a steep hillside. But when he had passed beyond the high stockades of the horse corrals he discerned the shape of the homestead with a light gleaming dimly in one of the lower windows.

"Joe's sittin' up readin', I guess," he decided. "I'm in luck."

He approached up an avenue of pine-trees, and as he was hitching his pony to the tie-post in front of the verandah, the door was opened and Joe Dutcher's tall figure appeared.

"Who's there?" the man called aloud.

"Only Coulter's Peterkin," came the boyish response.

"What, at this time o' night?" cried Joe. "Say, what's wrong?"

Peterkin strode up to him.

"Nothin'," he answered quietly. "I figured you'd give me a shakedown. Eben don't expect me home. I've been out since mornin' on the trail of a grizzly, way back of the Porcupines, an' my pony's some lame."

"An' where've you left the bear?" inquired Joe, leading the way into the cosy living-room. He pushed a pot of coffee into the crackling embers of the stove. "You don't tell me you——"

"Lost him," Peterkin answered. "Just my luck. But it was a grizzly, sure 'nough. Say, I'm main hungry, Joe."

"Lost him? My! 'Tain't like you to fail."

"Jake was with me," Peterkin added.

"Ah, guess that's why the bear escaped," laughed Joe, going to the cupboard and producing a loaf of bread and a plate of cold ham.

It was characteristic of Peterkin that he said nothing of his adventure with Crouching Panther or his discovery of the gold, and that he reserved his knowledge of the outlaws as a matter of no importance; but after he had corralled his pony and eaten a good supper and watched Joe Dutcher filling his last pipe, he said, very casually—

"What're you shapin' to do to-morrow afternoon, sheriff?"

"Guess I'm likely t' boss around 'mong th' boys stackin' the timber we carted in to-day," Joe replied. "Why? Did you notion I might go along an' help you t' locate that bear?"

"No," said Peterkin, "I was just thinkin'."

"Fav'rite occupation of yours, that," smiled the sheriff. "What was you thinkin'?"

Peterkin was standing with his two hands on the ledge of the stove and staring down between them into the dying embers of the fire.

"I'd a notion you might bring along a posse of your boys way back of Lone Pine Gulch," he said. "Barney Maguire an' Jules Cartier'll come too, and Jake, and maybe some of the Ash Hollow lot."

"H'm," murmured the sheriff, who well understood Peterkin's quiet ways. "Say, what's goin' ter happen along at Lone Pine Gulch? Kind of winter picnic you're plannin'?"

"Yes," Peterkin nodded. "Will Marlow 'll be passin' 'long there 'bout three o'clock with a heap of boodle in the coach, an' passengers. Guess he'll not be a whole lot sorry to see us there. Nick Gurney an' his gang'll be there, too. Nick's plannin' t' attack that coach, see?"

"Eh?" exclaimed the sheriff, with sudden excitement. "Nick Gurney an' his gang that Sergeant Walsh has been trackin' for months back? Why in thunder didn't you tell me this before?"

"Guess there's no need to hustle any," smiled Peterkin. "We've a good dozen hours in front of us. Where's Sergeant Walsh, d' you know?"

Very deliberately, very concisely, then, he

told the sheriff what he had discovered of the plans of the outlaws, and together they discussed a scheme by which the attack upon the coach might be frustrated.

On the following afternoon the mail coach, with its precious freight of gold and not less precious passengers, duly entered Lone Pine Gulch. Among the passengers inside was Sergeant Walsh of the North-West Mounted Police, and a party of frontiersmen, led by Joe Dutcher and accompanied by Peterkin, rode so far in the rear that to the nine desperadoes who waited in ambush in the middle of the ravine, the lumbering vehicle seemed to be helpless and unprotected.

Will Marlow slowed down his team to an easy stride and appeared to be wholly unconcerned with thoughts of danger, but he knew, nevertheless, that the outlaws were lying in wait where the trail dipped beyond the pine-tree which had given the ravine its name. His two leaders swerved as they came abreast of the tree, but he held them in and the coach rattled on towards the rocks where the nine road-agents were hidden. Then the desperadoes made their sally from out their shelter. But they had hardly come

level with the foremost of the team and accosted the driver with a threat when Sergeant Walsh revealed himself in his red-coat at the open window of the coach with his carbine levelled at the head of the nearest of the gang. At the same moment the horse-men from the rear had dashed up and there was a general fight. Shots were fired on both sides; two of the desperadoes were severely wounded. One—the leader of the band—escaped. His eight companions were captured and taken prisoners to Fort McLeod, while Will Marlow and his outfit sped on unharmed on his journey to Regina.

“It was all young Peterkin’s doin’,” Joe Dutcher declared afterwards, and Sergeant Walsh was warm in his praise of Peterkin’s promptitude in giving the alarm of the intentions of the outlaws. But whenever credit was accorded to him for the exploit, Peterkin was wont to say—

“I done nothin’ to speak of. It was just Sergeant Walsh and the sheriff that ran that little show. Sergeant Walsh is just great.”

CHAPTER VI

COLONEL PRESCOTT'S OUTFIT

"YOU'VE come home all safe, then, I see." Aunt Liza paused in her ironing and glanced round as the door opened and Peterkin entered. "Guess you're some hungry an' cold, eh?"

Peterkin threw off his beaver cap and buckskin gauntlets.

"Yes, you may gamble I'm hungry, Auntie," he answered, struggling to drag something from the haversack that he wore over his heavy winter coat. "But I c'n wait, sure, till supper-time. Don't you worrit 'bout me."

Ebenezer Coulter glanced up at him from over the top of the three-weeks-old newspaper which he had been industriously reading.

"Brought any grizzly bears home wi' you, Peterkin?" he questioned casually.

Peterkin shook his head as he at length succeeded in extracting a tin cannister from the depths of his canvas sachel.

"I ain't been on the trail of no grizzly this time, Eb," he answered, thumping the cannister upon a corner of the table. "I've been along at Old Man's Creek. You may guess what for."

"So?" Ebenezer folded and laid aside his newspaper and rose to his feet. "Had any sort of luck?"

"Don't just know yet," returned Peterkin, divesting himself of his coat. "That's for you to figure out. I did the same as you told me to—got a heap of that dirt in the prospectin' pan and washed it out. You'll find the result in this can. 'Tain't much. Took me just inside of two mortal hours to gather that tiny pinch."

Ebenezer removed the lid of the cannister under the light of the oil lamp that swung from a beam over the table. He shook out some of the moist, sandy contents into the palm of his hand, spreading it in a thin layer with the point of a gnarled forefinger.

"Um!" he nodded with satisfaction. "Two hours, y' say? Gee! if you'd said two days—yes, or even two weeks—you've got good cause to shake hands wi' yourself. Guess you've struck on a fortune, Peterkin. You'd best hustle along right now and stake out your claim, 'fore anybody else gets wind of this find."

Peterkin went up to the stove to warm himself.

"D'you reckon that's real gold, then?" he inquired incredulously.

Ebenezer turned to Aunt Liza with his hand spread out in front of her.

"D'you reckon that's gold, Ma?" he asked.

She bent over his hand, examining the glittering particles.

"Gold for sure," she decided. "Anybody'd tell you that."

"It feels kind of heavy, too," continued Eben, transferring the dust to Aunt Liza's hand and adding more from the cannister.

She held it closer to the light, estimating its weight the while.

"Say, Peterkin, your fortune's made, I

reckon," said she. "You're rich, if you only work the business right."

"You certain sure nobody's been there in front of you, Peterkin?" Eben desired to know.

"That's what's troublin' me," Peterkin hesitated. "That there skunk Nick Gurney has been cavortin' around some, you see, and I've a notion that he and his pals have been prospectin' along Old Man's Creek for months past. They'd a whole heap of prospector's tools and things in that lonesome dug-out of theirs way back of Mosquito Gulch."

"Looks some suspicious, I allow," commented Ebenezer, "an' he's a 'cute cuss, that Gurney. Pity he wasn't captured along with his mates an' put well out of the track. Howsome, Sergeant Walsh is after him, and you'd best trot along with Barney and me to-morrow, and we'll stake out your claim an' do the thing legal like, against the spring when we c'n start diggin'."

Peterkin shook his head.

"I shan't have time to-morrow," he announced. "You forget that I've got to ride along to Calgary and give evidence at

the trial of Gurney's lot. But Jake can show you the place. He knows most as much as I do where to locate the gold reef. I'm not needed. We're all equal pardners, you see."

"Pardners?—yes, if you like," demurred Eben. "We'll all stand in for a share; but not equal. It's your find, Peterkin, an' you're top boss of the whole show, I figure, an' all the concessions and claims and legal documents 'll have to be taken out in your name. For whatever happens along, and however the thing pans out in the workin', that gold reef is your discov'ry, an' you've got ter keep a tight grip on as big a chunk of it as you c'n claim."

Peterkin signified his intention of taking Ebenezer's advice in all things connected with the diggings; but as a matter of fact he was at present far less interested in thoughts of his discovery of gold than in his journey to Calgary.

He set out in the early morning before sunrise without any expectation of meeting with adventure. There had been a sharp frost in the night, and the patches of snow in the hollows of land were crusted as with

ice, the trees were white with hoar frost and loomed like ghosts through the low-lying mists.

He was riding on his own Prudence, one of the wisest, fleetest ponies on the Saskatchewan trail, as she was certainly the most ungainly and unbeautiful. Critics of horse-flesh declared that her head was disproportionately large, her ears ill-carried, her neck too straight and long, that her shoulders were too sloping, and that she was cow-hocked. To these alleged blemishes was added the obvious fact that she was grotesquely piebald. Nature seemed to have been undecided whether to make her white, or brown, or black, and had hurriedly ended in turning her out patched and spotted with all three colours. When Peterkin had annexed her as his share of the spoil after a successful raid on a Cree village, he had been assured that his claim to her would never for an instant be disputed, for it was clear that not even the most inveterate horse thief on the plains would ever dream of coveting a steed so conspicuously ugly.

But Peterkin had not been long in discovering that all her faults were those of

outward appearance. Indeed, he had only possessed her a week before he was ready to match her against any pony between Regina and Calgary. When he had owned her a twelvemonth she was acknowledged by every one to be superlative. For speed, endurance and intelligence there was nothing in the shape of horseflesh that could approach her.

Her senses were even more alert than his own to discover danger or the presence of a stranger. He could always tell by her behaviour when anything suspicious was in the wind, and on this same morning as she carried him eastward it was Prudence who first told him that something unusual was happening on the plains far in advance of him as he urged her onward into Lost Man's Cañon. While she galloped, he noticed the pony's sensitive ears twitching nervously. She lifted her trembling nostrils to the cold air, and her long measured stride faltered now and again. Once or twice there came to Peterkin's own ears a prolonged murmur as of distant thunder. Yet he knew that it could not be thunder, for the sky was clear all around excepting in the north, where a

bank of woolly snow-clouds rested on the peaks of the Porcupine Mountains.

As he entered the deep gloom of the cañon, between the towering walls of cliff that hemmed him in and shut off the light of the sun, the sound ceased, and the weird, oppressive silence was broken only by the hollow pounding of the pony's hoofs on the frozen ground.

Mile after mile he galloped through the dismal gorge; but as the cañon widened into an open valley and he followed on the beaten trail to the higher land of the foothills, the moaning came again, louder, more distinct than before; and this time he knew it to be the confused bellowing of a herd of buffaloes racing across the plain in wild stampede.

After a while, when he drew nearer and mounted to the level ridge of the Washakee divide, the bellowing was mingled with shrill human cries and the sharp cracking of whips; and suddenly, as he tore at top speed over the shoulder of Washakee Peak, he looked down into the valley and saw a vast black herd of the hairy monsters, close packed in a moving mob, surrounded by yelling Red-

skins, who were galloping round and round, shooting their arrows and shot-guns into the outer ring of the compact crowd, each mounted warrior and brave picking out his chosen victim and leaving it roaring and bleeding on the grassy prairie.

So intent were the braves on the work of providing themselves with robes and food for the winter, they paid little heed to so small a thing as a solitary rider, and Peterkin's pony and his scalp were both safe. As for himself, though he took a boy's interest in all that he saw, the one thing that disturbed him was the discovery that a band of the Black-foot Indians had dared to come out from their reservation, and had invaded these hunting-grounds to the danger of any unwary emigrants who might happen to be journeying along the Saskatchewan Trail.

It was of this possible danger that he was thinking as he crossed the flooded ford of Spider Creek and made for the forest land beyond. As she clambered up the rough slope of the river's bank, Prudence stumbled and then ran lame on the near forefoot, as if she had sprained a tendon. At the edge of

the timber Peterkin dismounted to see what was wrong, and found a fragment of rotten buffalo rib wedged across the shoe, pressing upon the frog. He had wrenched the thing out, and was ready to leap back to the saddle, when there came to him like a cry of pain from out the pine-trees, desolate and melancholy, the trembling strains of a fiddle playing the saddest, most weird melody that he had ever heard.

It was strange and unnatural to hear music like that in a place so remote from civilisation, and Peterkin wondered and wondered who it could be that had taken the singular fancy to charm the wild creatures of the forest in so outlandish a way.

It was not long before he found out.

Riding quietly in among the giant trees where the ground was carpeted soft with pine needles, he came abruptly into an open glade and saw a young girl sitting all alone on the top of a smooth, mossy boulder, so lost in the music of the violin that she was playing, that, even when he halted beside her with his face on a level with her own, she was not aware of his presence.

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She was hardly more than a child, and he might have thought that she was just some woodland fairy but for the fiddle and bow that she managed so dexterously. She wore a white serge frock and a faded crimson sun-bonnet which did not quite cover the curls of yellow hair that fell like a golden shower down her back. What he noticed most was the delicate whiteness of her hands and the clean shapeliness of her fingers as they rippled up and down the strings.

“Real pretty, an’ no mistake,” he said, as she paused on a note that faded slowly into silence.

She turned her startled face, and her blue eyes were opened wide in childish fear as she stared at him and gripped the shaft of the violin as if to use the frail thing as a weapon of defence. A beam of sunlight rested upon her, and shone on a curious ornament of twisted gold that she wore suspended by a thin chain from her neck.

“Say, you’ve no occasion to be scared, missie,” he tried to assure her, covering his pistols with a fold of his saddle blanket. “I shall not hurt you any. What’re you doin’

here, all lonesome and unprotected? Campin' out, are you? Guess you'd best get back to your outfit, wherever it is. 'Tisn't just safe for a little one like you to be wanderin' alone, when there's Injuns knocking around, see?"

"Indians?" she repeated wonderingly. "Indians, with feathered head-dresses, and all that? Oh, that's interesting! I hope they will let us have a good look at them! I've read about Indians, and always wanted to see a real live one. Up to now I've only seen frontiersmen and—and desperadoes, like yourself."

Just at that moment Peterkin heard movements among the pine-trees. A man coughed; a horse's hoof kicked against a stone, and he was conscious that there was a flavour of tobacco smoke in the air.

"What's your name?" he questioned, not heeding the girl's mischievous remark about his looking like a desperado, though in truth he looked more like one than he supposed. "What's your name, and where are you bound for?"

She slid down from the boulder and went

to the pony's side, and drew back the corner of the blanket that covered Peterkin's revolver.

"Well, we're on our way to a place called Vancouver," she answered. "We're English, you know. I dare say you guessed I was a Canadian. Every one does. My name is Elsie Prescott. What's yours? Moccasin Bob, or something like that, I expect. You're a backwoodsman, or a trapper, or a prospector, aren't you?"

"I'm English, like yourself," Peterkin answered. "I was born in Islington—in London. But I've been out here since I was a nipper. What's my name? Peter Beamish. They call me Peterkin. I live on a ranch called Willow Bend, away back of the Porcupine Mountains. You'll pass alongside of our ranch. Maybe I shall find you there when I come back home from Calgary, where I'm gon'. I hope so, anyway. 'Tisn't often that we see any one English there, and Ebenezer Coulter and Aunt Liza, they won't let any one pass without givin' them a call."

She walked along by his stirrup, carrying her fiddle and bow tucked under her arm.

He looked down at the tendrils of her fair hair that escaped from under her sun-bonnet.

“Say, that’s a dinky kind of necklet you’re wearin’, missie,” he said. “Sort of thing a Injun ’d covet a whole lot if he caught sight of it.”

“No Indian is going to catch sight of it, though,” she smiled, hiding the thing beneath her white lace collar. “It’s Egyptian filigree work. My father brought it home from Cairo.”

Beyond the glade they came upon her father’s outfit of two prairie waggons and several mules and about a dozen men. The men were lounging or lying near a smouldering camp fire. They had just had their breakfast, and were resting before continuing their journey westward. Peterkin rode up amongst them and drew rein.

“Say, boys,” he warned them, “there’s a band of Blackfoot Indians knockin’ around on a stretch of prairie you’ll be crossin’. They’ve been havin’ a buffalo surround. Guess you’d best be prepared against them, case they notion to attack your outfit.”

The waggon master was a burly, red-bearded Scotsman, known by sight to Peter-

kin, who had seen him more than once before along the trail conducting emigrant parties across the plains. Dave Sinclair was his name. He was a giant in stature.

"Oh, we're all right, stranger," Sinclair responded, pocketing his pipe. "We're ready to meet any of your Indians. We're well armed, ye see. It's not the first trip I've made along here, by a long way. And I'm no' just a tenderfoot. Besides," he added, jerking his thumb over his shoulder towards the foremost waggon, "we've gotten a fire-eatin' English colonel along wi' us."

"Maybe the Redskins 'll have vamoosed 'fore you get as far as where I located them," Peterkin remarked, taking a drink of warm tea from the pannikin which one of the teamsters had handed to him. "But I shouldn't hustle any, Dave. Give 'em time to quit, see?"

A voice hailed him from the waggon—a clear, aristocratic English voice it was—

"I say, boy, are you riding eastward? You're just the chap I want. Perhaps you could post a letter for me, could you? What's the postage from here to London?"

He was leaning over the tail-board, a very tall thin man of distinctly soldierly appearance. Peterkin guessed him to be the colonel, and by his blue eyes and the fairness of his military moustache he further surmised that he was the father of Elsie Prescott.

"Yes, sir, I'm going east as far as Calgary," Peterkin answered, striding towards him. "I'll post your letter in time to catch to-day's mail."

"Thank you," nodded the colonel, and he handed Peterkin the letter, which was addressed to a General Somebody at Woolwich. "Here's a shilling," he added. "It will cover the postage."

Peterkin saluted him as well as he knew how to, seeing that he was a field officer, and giving a side glance of "Good-bye" to Elsie, and a "So long!" to the men, he remounted Prudence and rode away by the darksome forest path.

At Hamilton's coulée he rested, and just as he was starting anew Joe Dutcher came out of the saloon.

He, too, was going east to Calgary to give

evidence, and they rode on to the fort together.

The trial of the outlaws for their attack upon the coach lasted a very little time, and the men were committed to prison. Joe Dutcher intended to remain in Calgary for the night, but for the sake of having Peterkin's company, he resolved to start as soon as the business of the court was ended.

"I don't hanker after makin' that long journey alone," he said, "an' if you're bent on goin' back home to-night, well, I'll jest trot along of you, if you'll wait a hour or two."

It was dark night when they got as far as Hamilton's. A bitterly cold wind was blowing from the north, bringing snow with it. When they had taken some food they drew their cloaks about them and started again.

"Guess you'd have been some wiser to push on an' not wait for me," Joe said as they left the coulée behind. "I reckon there's somethin' of a blizzard comin' along."

"Yes," Peterkin agreed. "We shall catch it crossin' Washakee Peak."

"You'll face it the better havin' a companion, though," said the sheriff. "And as

for me, I'm in luck havin' you along o' me, for I don't know that I could find my way without you on a night like this, with never a star blinkin' or a landmark to steer by. What about that outfit that went west this mornin'? 'Taint just a picnic for that English colonel and his little gel, crossin' the plains in a snowstorm, eh?"

"No," Peterkin acknowledged ruefully. "But it's likely Dave Sinclair 'll cry halt soon as they reach the shelter of the foothills. They should be pretty well there by now."

They talked as they rode side by side; but when they had gone three or four miles Peterkin quickened his pace and Joe dropped to the rear, following closely.

The piercing wind was in their faces now, and their cloaks were getting whitened with the snow that swirled against them from all sides at once, in stinging, blinding gusts, now coming in a fine, penetrating powder, now in big feathery flakes, and again in sharp, gritty hail that cut like glass. The wind shrieked dismally through the ravines and swept with hurricane fury across the plains, driving the snow before it into curling

wreaths. The farther the two riders advanced the worse it became, until when they entered Stone Pine Gulch they were in the midst of a real blizzard.

In the forest they got shelter from the icy blast and the driving snow, but not from danger; for the swaying pines flung broken branches across their path, and the ceaseless moaning of the wind in the trees was mingled with the shrill wailing of wolves.

In the open glade where the waggons had halted in the forenoon a circle of glistening eyes stared out at the two riders through the inky darkness, and as Peterkin led the way, dashing along the woodland trail, the eyes moved in unison, and the yelps of the hungry brutes followed close at the horses' heels.

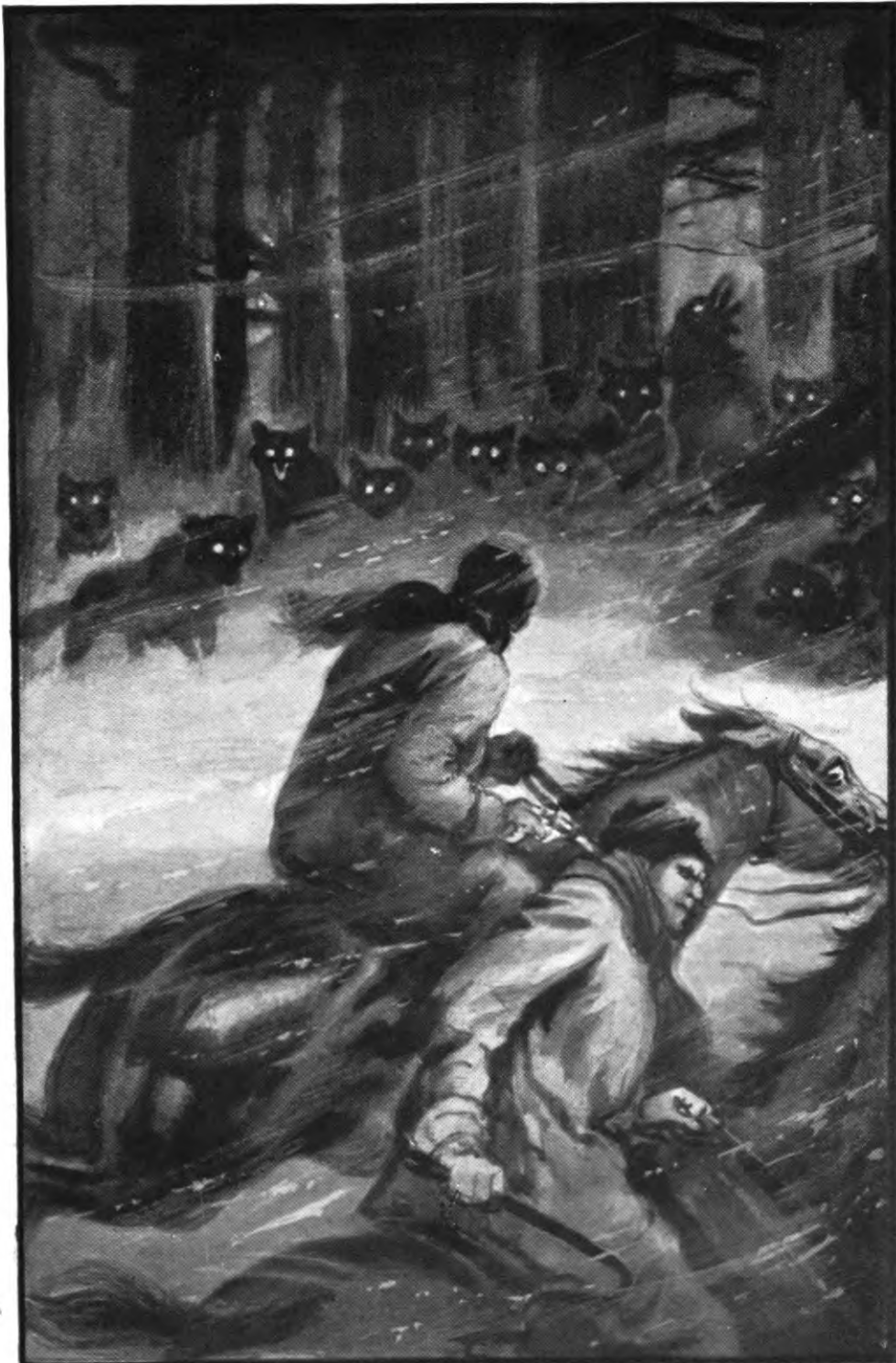
When they had plunged through the swollen ford of Spider Creek, Joe looked back over his shoulder, and Peterkin heard a shot from his pistol fired into the midst of the pack that had dared to cross the boisterous torrent. The wolves dropped behind, and the two riders galloped on and on, bending over their ponies' necks to shield their eyes and faces from the cutting wind

and its cruel arrows of frozen snow. But again as they got to the level land in the lee of Washakee Peak, dark shapes loomed out of the mist, and Peterkin saw scores of scavenger wolves tearing at the buffalo carcasses which the Indians had left upon the plain.

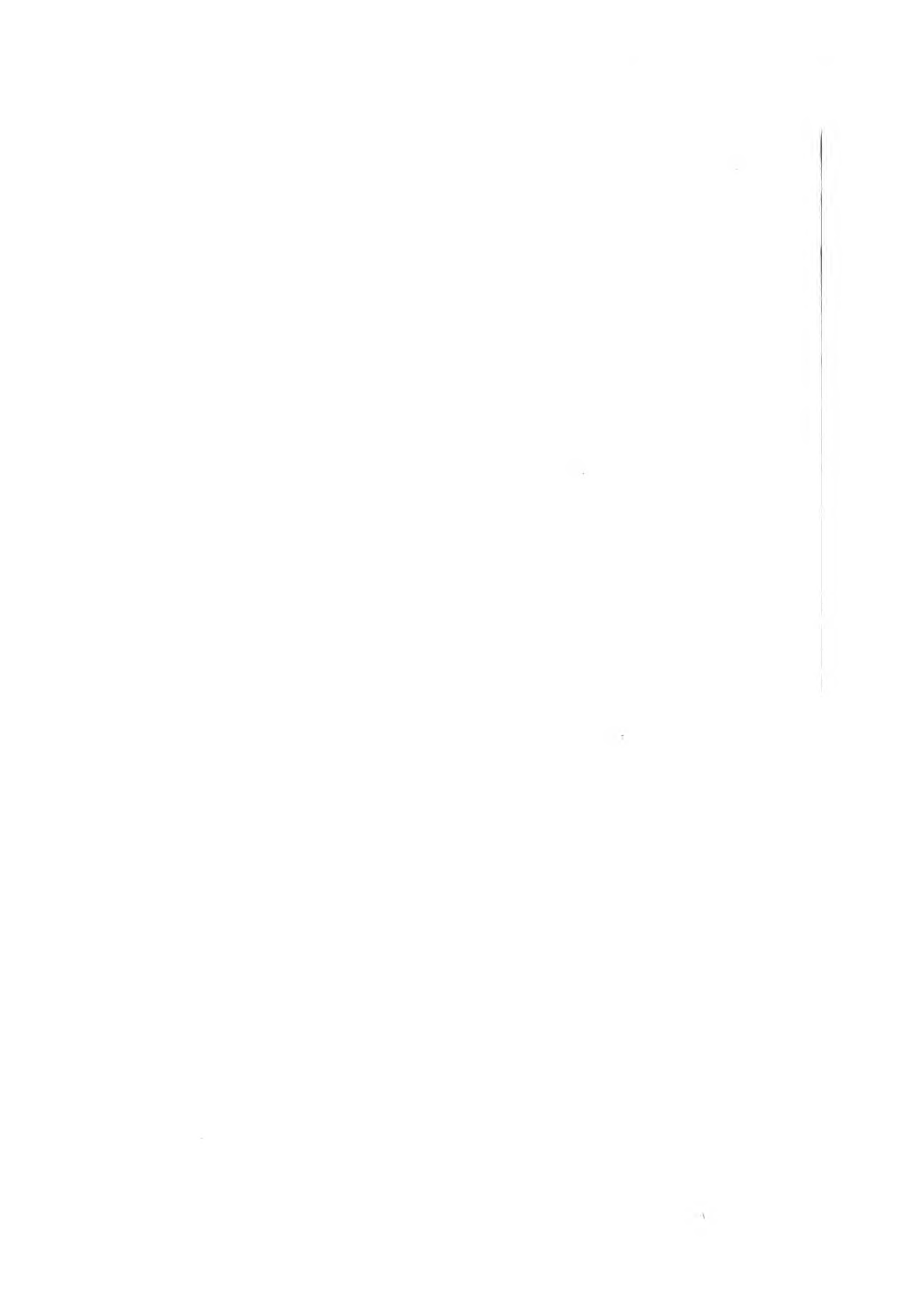
The blizzard was at its worst as the dauntless travellers fought their difficult way up the slopes of the Washakees, but they managed to keep to the trail, helped by the instinct of their ponies; and on the farther side they slowed down to take breath in the shelter of Lost Man's Cañon. Here Peterkin dismounted to pick out the clods of frozen snow that had gathered in his pony's hoofs. Joe Dutcher rode in advance, and Peterkin was drawing on his gloves again when he heard the sheriff shrouting in a voice of consternation—

“Peterkin, Peterkin! Quick, your lantern!”

When Peterkin got up to him, he discovered the sheriff hitching his pony to the wheel of a prairie waggon. There was a second waggon beyond, but no sign of the mules. There was no sound but the souging



"A CIRCLE OF GLISTENING EYES STARED OUT AT THE TWO RIDERS THROUGH THE INKY DARKNESS."



of the wind and the heavy breathing of the two ponies. Neither Joe nor Peterkin spoke. Both knew what had happened.

All around in the darkness the sinister shapes that lay in the snow told their own terrible tale. Peterkin opened his lantern and flashed the beam of its bull's-eye upon the form of a dead horse with an Indian crushed beneath it. Beside the nearer wagon he counted the bodies of seven white men. Their scalps had been taken. Farther away there was a ring of dead Indian ponies and ugly dark-red patches in the snow where their fallen riders had lain. Every rope and weapon, every movable thing of value, had been removed.

"That's Dave Sinclair," murmured Joe as the lantern beam fell upon a white upturned face. "They fought at close quarters, you can see," he added.

As they searched, Peterkin was looking for signs that might show in which direction the Indians had gone with their loot; but the frozen ground was too hard to have taken the marks of hoofs, and the dry, drifting snow held no impressions.

Peterkin climbed into the rear waggon, but found only some broken packing-cases and travelling trunks that had been wrenched open and despoiled of their contents. On the top of one of the trunks was the name "Elsie Prescott," and inside of it was nothing but a black lead pencil and a crooked hair-pin. On the floor there were two or three empty cartridges. A dead Indian lay across the driver's seat, with a bullet wound in his spine.

He went next to the foremost waggon. It was here that the fight had been hottest. It was the larger of the two vehicles, and had been used by the travellers as a dwelling, partitioned off, like a caravan, into living-room and caboose.

"Any one left alive, Peterkin?" inquired Joe, climbing up beside him. "I figger it was in here that the colonel made his defence. The cover's all riddled with shot holes."

"Yes, here's where they held on to the end," agreed Peterkin. "He gathered his men all in here. They all knelt at the sides firin' out over the rail. Look!"

He swept the lantern light along the floor

of the waggon, and counted ten scattered piles of spent rifle cartridges, sprinkled on top with the smaller husks of revolver bullets. All about, the boards of the cart bore ominous dark stains. These signs of the gallant defence he had seen and understood, even before Joe had swung himself into the devastated waggon. But it was something else that held his eyes fixed.

Lying along the floor was the body of Colonel Prescott. Dressed in the same grey tweed suit that he had worn when he had handed Peterkin the letter, he lay at full length with his arms flung forward. He had been shot in the back of the head, and had fallen on his face. The Indians had left him as he fell. He was the only one whose body they had respected. In his rigid right hand he still gripped his service revolver, with a finger on the trigger, arrested in firing the last shot.

In his left hand he held a torn fragment of a girl's white lace collar, and between the tight clenched fingers a tiny lock of golden hair.

Peterkin drew back, uncovering.

“Do you see, sheriff?” he asked. “Do you understand?”

“Sure,” Dutcher nodded solemnly. “It’s plain. He’d kept his last shot for the end, but didn’t live to use it—as he intended.”

He looked at Peterkin with a scared face.

“Say, Peterkin,” he murmured, “where is she—the gel? Where is she? She ain’t anywheres here! I’ve been a-lookin’ for her all the time.”

“So have I, Joe,” Peterkin responded, feeling a choking in his throat. “They’re all accounted for but her—twelve of them. The colonel held out to the last, hopin’ to save her, keepin’ her safe and unhurt till that rifle shot took him back of the head. And then——”

He met Joe Dutcher’s eyes with his own.

“They dragged her away from the very grip of his fingers,” said Joe, “and carried her off, I reckon.”

“Joe, old man,” said Peterkin, “guess we’ve got to try to rescue that poor little English girl, eh?”

“Why, yes, Peterkin,” decided Joe.

CHAPTER VII

PRUDENCE

NOTHING could be done without help; yet where was help to be found? There was not a human dwelling within many miles, and before a company of men sufficiently formidable to undertake the pursuit could be mustered, the Indians would be far away within the refuge of the mountains.

“Elias Lowell’s camp, back of Kicking Horse Ridge, is the nearest, I calculate,” said Joe Dutcher. “Say, if you was to ride along that far, Peterkin—leavin’ me here on guard—you might chance to find a constable there. D’ye think you might try?”

“I’d made up my mind to do it ’fore you spoke,” returned Peterkin. “I’ve a notion that Sergeant Walsh is likely to be somewhere thereabouts. If I c’n locate him, I’ll send him here to you, sheriff. And then I’ll go farther along the trail and rouse all the boys at the ranches.”

“Good,” nodded Joe. “They c’d be told to muster here at sunrise. What about that carbine of yours? You ain’t fergot to clean and load it, have you? And your six-shooter?”

Peterkin confidently tapped the good weapon at his belt.

“Trust me for that,” he responded. “Why d’you ask? D’you notion I shall be liable to need them?”

“There’s no knowin’,” said Joe.

“I’ll leave the lantern with you,” Peterkin suggested. “And if I was you, I’d light a fire. There’s plenty of fuel if you break up two or three of the empty packin’-cases. And now I’ll quit.”

He turned to his waiting pony. Prudence shoved her warm velvety muzzle under his chin as he untethered her from the wheel of the waggon. He leapt into the saddle, and as soon as his hard knees gripped her sides, she broke off at an easy gallop through the haunting gloom of Lost Man’s Cañon.

Over the wintry land Peterkin sped, flashing through narrow passes and along deep defiles, plunging across flooded fords and

high-flung bridges; now rattling in mad haste by the level trail, now mounting to rocky heights where the crusted snow lay deep in the hollows and the wild wind shrieked.

All the time as he rode he was thinking of the tragedy of Colonel Prescott's last brave stand in defence of himself and his daughter and of the grim horror of those dead bodies lying so still in the snow. It was clear to him now as it had been when he had gazed upon the lifeless form of the gallant soldier, that Elsie had been torn away from him by the Indians. That tiny lock of gold hair and the fragment of lace collar had told their own tale.

Peterkin felt very sure that she had been carried away alive, as a captive, and he shuddered at the thought of the refined English girl being compelled to endure even one night's captivity in the hands of the savages who had murdered her father and the men who had fought in that hopelessly unequal fight. Every minute was of importance, if she was to be saved from the terrible fate. Well did he know that there was no white man from end to end of the Rocky Moun-

tains who would hesitate for a moment to ride forth to the girl's rescue. The news of the awful outrage would soon spread from ranch to ranch when once it was told, and Peterkin was never more thankful than now that he was mounted upon so fleet and sure-footed a horse.

Prudence had already done a hard day's work, and it grieved her rider to have to urge her to her fullest speed. But he promised himself that when he should arrive at Lowell's ranch he would leave her to a well-earned rest and borrow another pony from Elias with which to continue on his journey to spread the alarm.

Long before it was possible that he should see it, he began to look forward eagerly for the first faint gleam of the light in the ranch window. Elias would surely be awake, and the sound of the galloping pony's hoofs on the hard frosted road would bring him to the door with his wife and their big sons, eager to know what should bring a horseman to their homestead at this late hour of night. Peterkin, knowing these simple-hearted settlers, could well imagine what their con-

sternation would be when he should tell them his tragic message!

He urged Prudence to a final spurt, and she made a noble effort in obedience to the loving caress of his hand on her shaggy neck. As he topped the heights of Kicking Horse Ridge, Peterkin realised that the wind was less strong and that the snow had ceased falling. The moon had risen behind the clouds and the darkness was less intense than it had been. He looked down into the further valley in the direction of the ranch. Surely it was later than he had supposed, for there was no light in the window. A watch-dog's deep insistent bark conveyed a sense of unwonted desolation, and still no light appeared. As he drew swiftly nearer, Peterkin's heart beat faster; a grim foreboding of evil seized him. What had happened?

He dug his spurs into his pony's flanks. Prudence jibbed and flung up her head, with ears lying back and nostrils snorting. Peterkin gave her a reproachful slap with his gloved hand, and she started forward unwillingly, lowering her head. Then, as he

coaxed her, she resumed her steady, even stride, nor slackened pace until at the bridge she came to a sudden halt in front of something that lay in an ominous heap on the snowy track.

In an instant Peterkin had slipped to the ground. Still gripping his bridle, he bent over the gruesome thing at his feet. One glance was enough.

It was the dead body of Elias Lowell, with an Indian's broken arrow piercing the heart and a bullet hole in the forehead. His scalp had been taken. The blood was already frozen dry. There was a sprinkling of snow on what remained of the rancher's clothing, and Peterkin calculated by these signs that the Indians must now be miles away—too far away for him to think of following on their trail to discover their whereabouts, even if the trail had not been obliterated by the recently fallen snow. Yet he could not doubt they were the same band who had committed the outrage in Lost Man's Cañon.

He wondered to what tribe they belonged. The Indians of Canada were usually peaceful and had a respect for law and order.

He had never known them to go out upon the war-path, or to molest the peaceful settlers. But these were evidently of the more savage sort. He remembered to have heard very lately that several bands of the Sioux had crossed over into Canada from the United States, and believing now that these were of the Sioux nation he dreaded more than ever to think of the fate of Elsie Prescott.

Leaving the lifeless body of Elias Lowell where it lay, he rode up to the house. In the clearing in front of the dwelling he came upon the bodies of seven Indians who had obviously been shot by the defenders of the homestead. Near the well an Indian horse lay moaning. He ended its death agonies with a bullet as he passed.

The cabin door was in splinters, the windows and their shutters were smashed. The home had been plundered. He glanced hastily within the silent room. The fire was out and the light of the moon was too faint to permit him to see more than the body of Elias Lowell's eldest son lying across the table where he had fallen.

The Redskins had done their gruesome worst.

“The durned skunks!” cried Peterkin, turning away. “Quick, Prudence! To the stables!”

Prudence seemed to understand, and perhaps, believing that her work for the night was over, she had expectation of a feed of corn and a well-earned rest.

Peterkin rode her round to the stables and the corrals, a good distance away, hoping that at least Lowell’s horses would be safe, and that he would find one that would carry him to the next ranch. At his quick approach, the old bloodhound renewed his insistent baying; but all else was silent, and when Peterkin dashed up to the corral it was to see the gates lying in ruin and every horse gone.

“Prudence, old friend,” muttered Peterkin, dismounting, “you’ve got to go at it again. There’s no rest for you yet. But before we start, we may as well see to our weapons; and I guess we’ll let Satan run loose.”

He examined his rifle and revolver, then,

leading the pony round to the rear of the stables he set free the bloodhound. Satan ran to and fro in wild excitement, with muzzle to the ground and tail in air, until he picked up the scent of the Indians, when he ran off in pursuit.

Peterkin's dominant desire was to work speedy vengeance upon the savages who had so cruelly devastated this peaceful home. He had already assured himself that the victims of the outrage were beyond his help, and he resolved that he would not rest until he had mustered a posse of stout men of the plains to deal retaliation upon the Redskins.

He rode back to the bridge at a brisk gallop. Here in the layers of drifted snow he discovered the trail of the Indians—the hoof marks of their own and of the stolen horses and mules. By the impressions he judged that the marauders had gone in the direction of his own destination, but he did not shrink from following them. A thick trail of blood, which he tracked for many yards, ended in a dark pool beside the carcass of an Indian mustang. At this spot the snow had gathered in a deep drift, through which,

as he estimated, some fifty or sixty horses had passed. The band was evidently a large one, and he dreaded the danger that lay in front of him. But he urged Prudence onward.

Prudence at first rebelled against this extension of her journey. She had already done more than a pony's ordinary day's work; but she knew her rider's determination; knew that her easiest course lay in obedience and the highest speed.

Beyond the ford at Devil's Creek the trail forked into two paths, one leading through the deep gorge of Red Pine Notch, which could only be followed in safety by daylight, and the other round the easier shoulder of Red Peak.

Had it not been for his dread of the Indians, he would have taken the nearer and more difficult way through the haunted darkness of the gulch; but now, as he approached, he hesitated, not so much distrusting Prudence as fearing that the Sioux might after all be directly in advance of him in the shelter of the defile. He had ridden with such reckless speed that he had not

paused to search in the darkness for the small signs on the snowy ground which might have warned him, and now it seemed to him that the bitter wind from the north bore with it the faint odour of burning pine-wood, and in spite of his haste he resolved to keep to the certain safety of the open trail.

At the fork of the two ways, Prudence suddenly swerved and threw up her head, and searching for the cause of her alarm, Peterkin caught sight of a dark figure moving stealthily against the lesser darkness of the sky and disappearing behind a boulder. In the next moment there was a flash and the sharp crack of a rifle, and Peterkin knew that a bullet had torn its way through the crown of his beaver cap.

He did not stop to return the shot, but it had warned him that the Indians were indeed close at hand and that the scout who had fired at him had been posted on the trail to give the alarm to the warriors in the event of a pursuit.

The alarm had now been given, for the alert Sioux in their encampment not far distant must surely have heard the shot.

Peterkin slung his bridle over his wrist, gripping his revolver, and flung himself flat on the pony's back. Prudence seemed to apprehend that this method of riding, as well as the startling sound of the gun, meant danger, and she galloped forward as if a thousand fiends were at her clattering heels.

Presently, when Peterkin raised himself a little to look round, he saw the glow of the bivouac fires of the Indian village. Then right in front of him he heard the patter of horses' feet. Some moments afterwards he dimly saw the figures of a full score of Indian horsemen rapidly approaching.

The foremost rider was far in advance of his followers, mounted, bare-backed, on a fleet pony, whose coat of piebald white and black showed dimly in the clouded moonlight. The Indian wore a chief's war-bonnet of white eagle feathers and carried what looked like a repeating rifle. As Peterkin galloped towards him, he drew to a halt and waited, levelling his weapon in steady aim.

Peterkin was lying along the pony's back and neck, with his right arm outstretched, his revolver pointing between the pony's twitch-

ing ears. Simultaneously, two shots rang out. Prudence plunged forward, and as she raced past the spot where the warrior had paused, Peterkin saw that the Redskin had fallen to the ground.

Meanwhile the other Indians were galloping nearer and nearer, yelling their wild war cries. Peterkin left the beaten trail and made a wide detour for the mountain track; but the Redskins, already aware of the death of their leader, gave chase.

“On! on!” cried Peterkin. Even if he escaped both bullet and arrow now, he knew that it was death by fearful torture if he should be captured, and escape seemed to be an impossibility. How could he hope to save himself from this yelling band of relentless savages, excited to madness by the fire-water that they had plundered from Lowell’s ranch? Even in his dire extremity he thought of Elsie Prescott. Was she alive? Might it be that she was even now a captive in one of the wigwams of the encampment whose fires blinked at him through the darkness? Who could spread the news of her capture if he should fail?

He heard the horsemen drawing nearer. They gave him a close call with a volley of bullets. He heard their arrows whistling past him in their random flight. Prudence seemed to know as well as he what depended upon her fleetness, and she was running steadily, swiftly, without needing the spur. He was hanging by leg and arm along her off-side, returning the Indians' fire with his free hand beneath her outstretched neck. Once a bullet struck the heel of his boot; once an arrow's feather grazed his chin. But he was conscious all the while that he was not losing ground. And at last he had left the Redskins far in the rear.

Prudence pounded along, her belly sweeping the tall withered grass. On and on she went, breathing deeply, but never faltering, never slackening her racing, bounding speed. Over Red Peak Trail she carried him, and down into the farther valley. Then across the open plain and again mounting the rocky heights or dashing through narrow ravines to the sound of the dismal howling of the wind. Seven miles she ran without a pause, and at length Peterkin saw the barns and steadings

of Lavender Ranch looming through the darkness in advance of him, with a tiny friendly light in one of the windows of the dwelling, showing that some one had been awakened by the sound of the pony's hoofs and was awaiting Joe Dutcher's expected return to his home.

Peterkin coaxed Prudence to a slower pace. The splendid-hearted mustang by this time was betraying signs of exhaustion. She was breathing huskily and her gait was unsteady. Peterkin felt a tremor under the grip of his knees. But she held on bravely during the last half-mile, and only abated her gallop to an uneasy amble when she had crossed the bridge. Here she came to a halt as two men from the ranch ran up, each with a lighted lantern. One of them was Alf Hawthorne, the overseer. He caught at the pony's bridle as Peterkin dismounted.

"Reckoned it was Joe," he said, turning the light of his lantern upon Peterkin. "Say, you've rid her hard this journey," he added, laying his bare hand on the pony's palpitating side.

“Yes, I’ve rid her hard, you bet,” returned Peterkin. “And good reason. I’ve had a brush with Injuns back of Red Pine.”

He turned to Prudence. She was swaying curiously, with her head lowered and her legs outspread. As he strode up to her she sank down on her haunches and then slowly rolled over.

“Why, she’s clean done up!” declared Alf. “You’ve rid her to rags!” He put his hand along her heaving flanks. “Hello!” he cried excitedly, “what in thunder’s this? A Injun arrow, buried in her side! Snakes! You don’t say she’s run miles with that in her—without sayin’ a word—without a complaint?”

He drew forth the arrow as from a sheaf, and the dark blood streamed freely from the gaping wound.

“The durned skunks!” cried Peterkin. He caught at Alf’s arm eagerly, agitatedly. “Can we save her, Alf?” he questioned in a hollow voice. “You’re a bit of a doctor. For the love of heaven, save her! ’Tis Prudence, my Prudence—the fastest, wisest pony on the trail—the dearest, lovin’gest

horse that ever chewed grass. You can save her—Alf, eh?”

Alf Hawthorne shook his head as he knelt in the blood-stained snow and laid his open palm tenderly upon her side.

“Too late, Peterkin,” he muttered. “Guess she’s run her last stage.”

Peterkin stared blankly into her glassy, expressionless eyes. Then, kneeling, he flung his arms about her neck and sobbed like a child, with his trembling lips upon her smooth cold nose, from which the last fluttering breath of her brave life had ebbed away.

CHAPTER VIII

THE FILIGREE NECKLET

EXHAUSTED though he was by a long, hard day in the saddle, and torn by grief at the loss of his favourite Prudence, Peterkin intended still to ride back on a fresh pony to Lost Man's Cañon to relieve Joe Dutcher of his gruesome task. Alf Hawthorne would pass the word along the trail of what the Indians had done, and would round up a band of ranchers and cowboys for the purpose of tracking the savages and rescuing Elsie Prescott.

As he accompanied Alf into the house, Peterkin told him the whole story of his adventure, and he was continuing his narrative while Alf was warming up some supper for him.

"Guess I'll go along right now and rouse up the boys," declared Alf grimly, signing to Peterkin to help himself to the food.

The food and the warmth and the relief from battling with the wind soon made Peterkin painfully sleepy. His head dropped on his arm and he was dozing when suddenly he heard the click of spurs and a hand was laid on his shoulder.

“Say, boy, what’s this tale I heard you tellin’ Alf Hawthorne ’bout Indians and—and an English colonel?”

Peterkin started at the voice and was instantly wide awake. He sprang to his feet and found himself confronted by a man in the uniform of the North-West Mounted Police.

“How do, Corporal?” he cried. “You’re just the man I wanted to meet. Alf never told me you were here. He’s just gone out to saddle his pony.”

Corporal Smith was buttoning his red tunic. His eyes betrayed that he had just got out of bed.

“Tell me what you know,” he said solemnly, the while he opened a handkerchief and began to fill it with slices of bread and chunks of cheese and meat.

Very quickly, very concisely, Peterkin gave

him his story, and the corporal listened to every word with keen attention, interrupting now and then with a searching question, and showing particular curiosity concerning Colonel Prescott and the fate of his daughter.

"And so you notion to ride back to Joe Dutcher, do you?" he inquired.

"Yes, right now." Peterkin glanced at the contents of the handkerchief which the corporal was now tying into a compact bundle. "That food's for Joe, I guess. He'll need it, hangin' around there in the cold, so lonesome and hungry, and with all those dead bodies lyin' about. I don't just know how he can endure it. I couldn't. I'd be scared."

"Scared?" repeated Smith. "I don't figure you being scared at anything."

"Joe frets himself a heap when he's lonesome," Peterkin observed quietly. "He's a rare one for company. But dead bodies ain't just companionable on a cold night. And there's a pack of wolves prowlin' around Stone Pine Forest. Yes, I'll go right now, soon as I can get a pony saddled."

"What, and run the gauntlet of those

Indians again?" questioned Corporal Smith, wondering at the boy's nerve. "You're not fit, Peterkin. After all you've gone through since early morning you're not fit. You're needing a sound sleep. That's what you need more than anything; and it's what you're going to have. The cot that I've just left is real cosy. Go to it. When you've had a good doss, you can come along, and with as many of the boys as you can muster, see? You'll find me there in Lost Man's Cañon, waiting for you."

He took his fur coat from the peg near the stove, pulled his beaver cap down over his brows, and, taking his Lee-Metford carbine and the bundle, went out into the night.

"So-long, Peterkin," he said over his shoulder as he closed the door behind him. And in a very little while Peterkin heard him riding off in the direction opposite to that which Alf Hawthorne had taken.

How it had all been managed Peterkin did not quite know, but when, on the following morning, he rode into Lost Man's Cañon with his party of cowboys from Coulter's, Turley's and other ranches, he found that Joe Dutcher

had already been joined not only by Corporal Smith, but also by Sergeant Walsh and a score or more of the ranchmen from distant settlements, as well as two Cree scouts.

Sergeant Walsh took command of the whole company and gave his orders. It had already been ascertained that the offending Indians had shifted their quarters during the night. Probably they had considered that they had pitched their village too near to the trail to be safe from the vengeance which was certain to follow upon their evil work. And they had taken the precaution of moving while snow was falling, so that their tracks would be obliterated, as indeed they were.

Taking the two scouts with him, Corporal Smith rode out in advance. His own trail was easy to follow, and the direction of his search was known. It was believed that the Sioux had taken refuge among the mountains of the Livingstone Range.

Each man had brought his own supply of food in his haversack, but, in view of the uncertainty of the pursuit and the signs of a further fall of snow, Sergeant Walsh deemed

it expedient to take fuller supplies, and he sent out a party of his men to Calgary with instructions to meet him with the necessary stores at a point which he indicated on the north bank of Tongue Creek.

His precaution was wise, for on the next night as they encamped the snow came down heavily, blotting out all tracks and delaying the return of the scouts, and thus stopping all movement. It was not until noon on the following day that one of the Crees, sent back by Corporal Smith, came into the camp to report that no trace of the Sioux had yet been discovered. Corporal Smith was still searching, and had sent a message advising the sergeant to advance as far as Beaver Lodge Creek.

The advice was taken and the command made a forced march through the driving snow to the appointed place. But Corporal Smith and the two Cree scouts did not yet appear. After lying in camp for twelve hours, Sergeant Walsh called for volunteers to go out in search of the wanderers, and Peterkin was one of those who were chosen. He was considered a skilful tracker, and he knew

his way about the Livingstone Mountains as well as did any of the ranchmen. He went out alone on Ebenezer Coulter's three-year-old Rollo, determined to find either Corporal Smith or the Redskins.

He was so far fortunate in his difficult quest that on the same day he came upon the trail of a big village, and he followed it up until dark.

At daybreak he built a fire and was warming himself, when suddenly a rifle ball knocked up the fire, and he turned to see half a hundred Indians making in his direction. He ran to his horse, flung himself on the animal's back and dashed off in a moment.

The Redskins followed, whooping and yelling. Peterkin got well ahead of them, and was thanking his good fortune in that his scalp was safe, when Rollo fell headlong into a ravine that was filled with drifted snow, carrying his rider with him. The snow broke his fall, but the more he struggled the deeper he sank. Cutting the girths with his knife to give him freedom, Peterkin took his pistols and burrowed in beside him; but instead of remaining there to be discovered,

he began to dig a way for himself through the deep drift.

He had not tunnelled very far before he heard the Indians riding up, and he dared to cut a small peephole in the crust of the snow by which he could look out. The savages yelled, and Rollo, making a great bound, leapt out upon the solid earth and raced furiously away, carrying Peterkin's stock of food along with him in the saddle-bag, and leaving Peterkin trembling in the awful fear of being almost certainly captured.

He was terrified, but he did not move. While some of the Indians rode after the escaping horse, others prowled around searching for its missing master. One of them came within half-a-dozen yards of him. He was a chief. Peterkin watched him, ready to shoot, and just as the warrior turned to gallop away after his companions, he looked round as for a last search to the place where Rollo had kicked up the snow's smooth surface, and Peterkin caught sight of something which he wore in front of his feathered head-dress.

It was Elsie Prescott's filigree necklace.

Thrilled to something even like warmth by his discovery, Peterkin watched the Indian riding away; but even when he knew that he was safe he did not dare to climb out from his curious place of ambush. The Redskins were still in the neighbourhood, and without a horse to carry him it was useless for him to think of trying to make his way back to the command. For hours he crouched within the protection of the snowdrift. He was not cold, for he was thickly clothed with fur, and the biting wind did not reach him; but he was beginning to feel desperately hungry.

Towards nightfall, when he was thinking of creeping out and even daring to make a dash for liberty at the risk of leaving his footprints behind him, he was startled by hearing the sound of horses' hoofs crunching in the hard snow. He trembled in apprehension, fearing that it was the Indians coming back to find him. But as he peeped out he saw what it was, and he breathed a deep breath of relief.

It was Corporal Smith riding on his own horse and leading Rollo along with him.

Without hesitation now, Peterkin scrambled

out from the snowdrift and ran with faltering, staggering gait down the hillside, and in a few minutes he was astride his horse.

Corporal Smith had been without food for two days until he captured Rollo with Peterkin's saddlebag still safe. But he had tracked the Indians to their encampment, and was now on his way back to the command. As Peterkin rode at his side he told him of the filigree necklace, and the information gave the final proof that these were the same band of savages who had attacked Colonel Prescott's outfit and raided Lowell's ranch.

"We've got them, I reckon," declared the corporal. "They've chosen their pitch beside Short-nose as if they notioned to stay there for the rest of the winter, and if that little English girl hasn't come to any harm so far, I calculate she's as good as saved."

On rejoining the command, he assured Sergeant Walsh that the Sioux were wholly ignorant that there were any white men within fifty miles of their village, and that a cautious approach was certain to find them unprepared for an attack. Accordingly, on the following

day the advance began, and in the evening the carefully-planned attack was made.

So well was the surprise contrived that the ranchmen were in the midst of the village before a shot was fired and before the savages could reach their horses.

While the fighting was going on, Peterkin and Joe Dutcher, led by Corporal Smith, crept among the tepees in search of Elsie Prescott. In the fading evening light Peterkin caught sight of something red suspended from a totem pole in front of one of the larger lodges. At first he was not quite sure, but on approaching nearer he became almost certain that the thing was the red sun-bonnet which he had seen worn by the young gold-haired girl as she stood on the mossy boulder under the pine-trees. And the sight of it made him think of the melody which she had been playing on her violin when he went up to her.

Recalling the notes, he crawled up and in and out among the wigwams, and, lying down within sight of the sun-bonnet, he whistled the melody.

He did not believe that it could be heard

above the racket of the rifle and revolver fire and the wild yells of the fighting braves; but soon, as he lay there, listening, he caught a gentle humming sound that grew and grew until presently it rose into a choking effort at melody, as if some one were trying through tears to echo the plaintive tune that he had just been whistling.

He could not have made a mistake. It was indeed and in very truth the same air, and the voice was as surely the voice of a girl. He crept nearer to the wigwam. His fingers clutched at the lower edge of its covering of buffalo hide. Gently, but firmly, he raised it from the snow and lowered his face to the opening.

“Elsie!” he called aloud. “Elsie!”

She answered with a low, moaning cry.

Peterkin crawled away then and sought Joe Dutcher, who had hesitated to go so far.

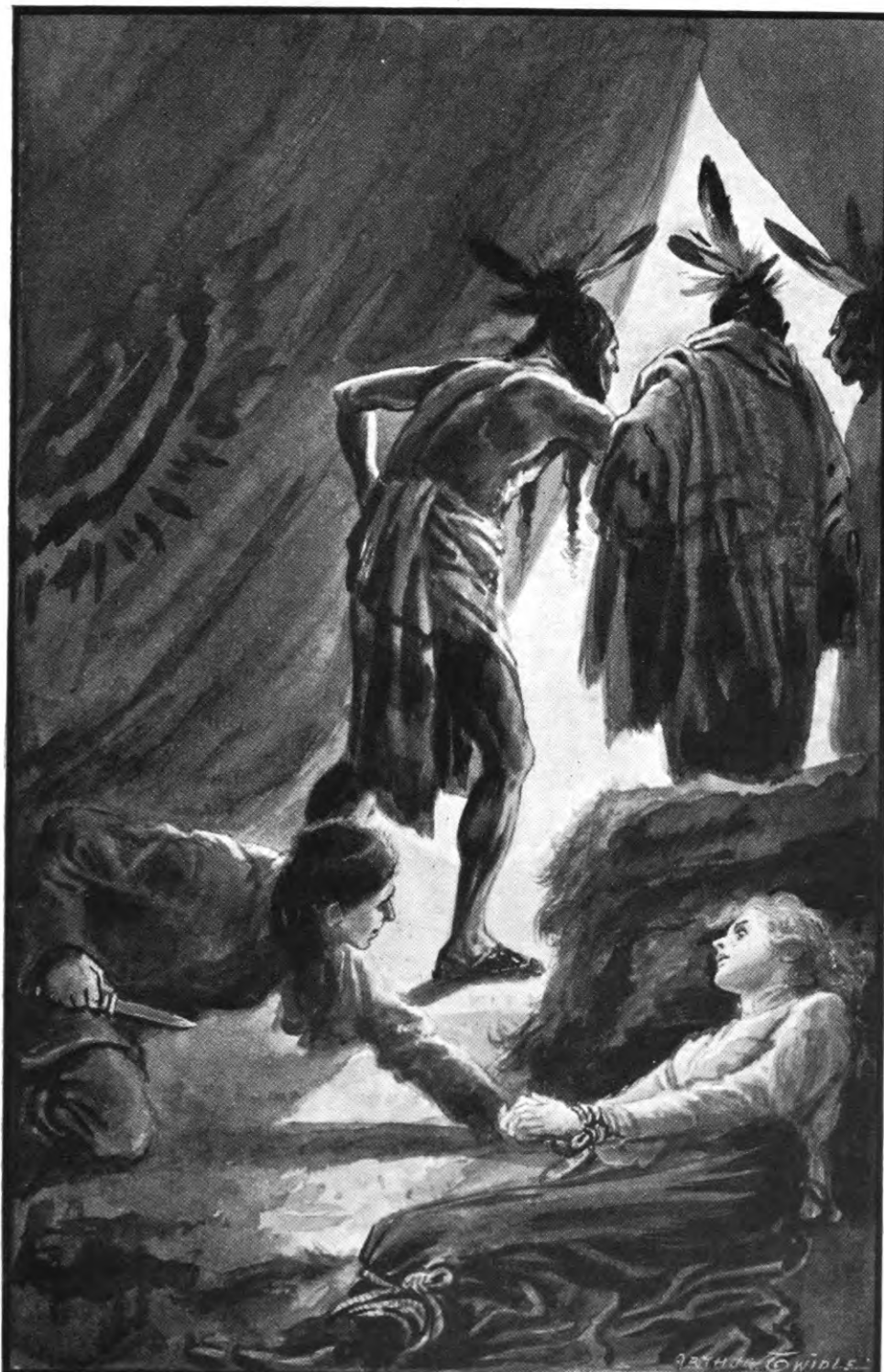
“She’s in that nearest tepee,” he whispered. “Go back and fetch Corporal Smith and the ponies—quick! Bring them right here.”

Without questioning the boy’s motive, Joe returned to where he had left the ponies in

charge of the corporal, while Peterkin went back to the medicine lodge. Again he lifted the edge of the buffalo hide. This time he raised it so high that he could see within, and what he saw was Elsie Prescott lying on her back, with her hands and feet bound with ropes, and three medicine men standing between her and the open door-flap. The Indians were looking outward, seemingly watching the fighting, but it was clear that they were there standing guard over the captive, ready to kill her rather than that she should escape.

Drawing his knife, Peterkin crept within, silently as a snake. Inch by inch he made his way towards her, fearing that at any moment one of the Indians would look round and see him; fearing lest the girl herself might hear him and utter some sound of alarm or consternation.

"Elsie!" he dared to whisper. Then he stretched forth his hand and touched her. She did not move. He caught at one of her feet and quickly severed with his sharp knife the thongs that bound them. His heart was thumping wildly against his ribs as he moved



“PETERKIN CREPT WITHIN SILENTLY AS A SNAKE. INCH BY INCH HE MADE HIS WAY TOWARDS HER.”

yet again to cut the bonds that held the girl's arms to her sides. Just as he was slashing at them, one of the Indians turned, saw him, and leapt forward to seize him.

Peterkin knew that Elsie Prescott's life as well as his own was at stake, and that it was no moment for hesitation. He flung himself back, dropping his knife, and, whipping out his revolver, he fired point blank into the Indian's face. The other two ran out of the lodge in alarm, but returned just as Peterkin had lifted Elsie from the ground and flung her bodily across his left shoulder. His weapon-hand was free, and now he fought his way out, firing to right and left into the midst of the Sioux who crowded round the entrance to bar his passage. They fell back from him, and he carried his burden round to the rear of the wigwam where his two companions met him and defended him from the savages.

Elsie, although too weak as yet to help, was nevertheless able to grip the pony's mane as she was flung into the saddle. Peterkin leapt up behind her and they rode off, still fighting.

“This way!” cried Corporal Smith, and Peterkin followed, while Joe Dutcher brought up the rear, covering their retreat.

They were chased, but they gained the open, between the wigwams and the firing lines, and there, just as Peterkin was gaining breath, his horse dropped, with an arrow in his heart, while Smith and Joe rode on.

Peterkin thrust Elsie behind the barrier of Rollo’s warm body, where she knelt, and taking his spare revolver, joined him in firing at their enemies, even as she had joined her father during the desperate defence of the waggon in Lost Man’s Cañon. She was cool and deliberate, and her aim was true.

The Indians were pressing round them now in a yelling crowd. In their midst Elsie saw the chief with her filigree necklet decorating the front of his head-dress. He rode up with his tomahawk raised to strike. Peterkin saw him, also, and they both fired, and the tomahawk dropped from a lifeless hand. But the end seemed near, for their ammunition was spent, and just as Peterkin flung himself protectingly in front of the girl, pressing her down into greater safety, a troop

of the cowboys, led by Sergeant Walsh, dashed up like a whirlwind, and the savages took to flight.

Elsie Prescott was lifted unharmed across the saddle of Joe Dutcher's pony, and Joe led her away, followed by Peterkin.

"You came along just in the nick of time, sheriff," said Peterkin when they were waiting for their companions in the shelter of the trees. "But your comin' wouldn't have been of much account if Elsie, here, hadn't been a brave soldier's daughter. Guess most girls would have fainted; but she—she was as good as a man."

"And you were as good as two," interposed Elsie. "You saved my life at the risk of your own. You ought to have the Victoria Cross for what you've done."

"Me?" returned Peterkin, with a shrug of his shoulders. "There's no credit due to me. I reckon any other scout would have done the same."

CHAPTER IX

THE BOY MIDAS

THERE was a dispute among the men as to what should be done with Elsie Prescott now that she was rescued out of the hands of the Indians. Joe Dutcher claimed a sort of proprietary right in her, and expressed his desire that she should make her home at Lavender Ranch and add to his already large household of womenfolk. Ebenezer Coulter thought that, as Peterkin had been the means of rescuing her, Peterkin had the prior right to decide that she should take up her residence at Willow Bend, where Aunt Liza would be a mother to her. George Turley considered that Ash Hollow might be the most suitable place, where his two young daughters, Jess and Mary Anne, girls of her own age, would be kind of companions for her. Sergeant Walsh declared that wherever she should go she wouldn't be staying

very long in any case, as she would very soon be sent home to her people in England. It would be his duty to make a full report of all that had happened, and the Commissioner in forwarding the report to Ottawa would naturally suggest that the girl should be restored to her relatives.

The difficulty was temporarily decided by the fact that Ash Hollow was the first ranch arrived at on the return journey from the scene of the raid, and as Elsie had suffered considerably in health from her privations and rough usage at the hands of her captors and needed immediate care and attention, she was left for the time being in the charge of Mrs. Turley.

During the few days that followed, Sergeant Walsh and Corporal Smith were able to reclaim some of the property stolen by the Sioux, and among other things Elsie's violin was returned to her, found by Peterkin among the trophies which the Sioux had respected as "medicine." It was many a week before Elsie could be induced to play upon the instrument again, and then only at Peterkin's especial request, on the rare

occasions when the weather permitted him to journey as far as Ash Hollow to see her.

“Elsie thinks heaps of Peterkin,” remarked Jess Turley. “She’d do just anythin’ to please him.”

“She don’t think more of him than he does of her,” responded Mary Anne. “But then, they’re both English, you see. Guess that’s why.”

Often during the long Canadian winter he would make the journey to and fro, wearing his snow-shoes, bringing her some little present as an excuse for his visit; and when the snows had melted and the land took on the laughter of spring, he sought for the earliest flowers and carried them to her to remind her of far-away England.

But with the passing of winter and the breaking up of the ice came the possibility of working the gold which he had discovered in Mosquito Creek. Peterkin had established his claim to the section which he had pegged out, and with the help of Ebenezer Coulter and Barney Maguire, who had both had experience of placer mining in Cali-

fornia, he had got all the necessary appliances for carrying on the work.

At first the results were disappointing, but soon the mine began to yield a rich harvest, and Peterkin found himself growing wealthy and more wealthy with every week that passed. The news that gold had been discovered among the Porcupine Hills was quickly spread abroad, and there was a rush of prospectors and miners to the neighbourhood.

Peterkin was not greatly elated by this promise of riches. He was not ambitious, and would have been content to spend the rest of his days on Coulter's ranch, among the horses and cattle. The life of a rancher suited him, and he saw no need for the making of a fortune if only he could remain happy.

The change from contentment to ambition came over him very suddenly.

Returning to Willow Bend after a month's hard work at the mining camp, he rode one morning as far as Ash Hollow. Jess Turley met him in the clearing in front of the ranch house.

"Hello, Peterkin!" she cried in greeting. "Takin' a holiday, eh? Well, I suppose you c'n afford it. Makin' your pile at the diggin's, I hear. Say, you're real lucky."

Peterkin slowly took off his gloves and thrust them under the front buckle of his belt. He glanced inquiringly towards the windows and beyond the corner of the house to the patch of garden. Then he turned to Jess.

"Elsie anywhere about?" he asked.

Jess looked up at him curiously.

"Elsie?" she repeated. "Say, didn't you know?"

"Know what? She ain't ill?" he questioned in consternation.

"She's gone away home to England," Jess informed him.

His hands crisped sharply on the bridle, his face went a deeper red under its sunburn, his lips trembled.

"Gone home to England?" he echoed in a hollow voice, "and without sayin' good-bye—without so much as lettin' me know she was goin'?"

Jess was surprised at the way he was taking the information. All the alertness seemed suddenly to have gone out of him. He sat in his saddle like one who had received a physical blow.

"Guess she notioned you didn't care a whole lot whether she went or not," she responded, with a forced smile. "Soon as she got the letter from London, she told Sam to tell you 'bout it and that she was goin' to quit. Left it to you to come and bid her good-bye. But you never came. She waited a week for you beyond the time she'd fixed on for goin'. Guess she was some sorry you neglected her that way. It didn't seem kind."

Peterkin's lips took on a hard, grim expression.

"Sam never told me," he muttered angrily. "I'll pay Sam out for that! He might have known. And she's gone, eh? Gone right away out of my life, and I shall never see her again!"

"Well, she ain't anyways likely to come back to Canada," reflected Jess. "Shouldn't wonder any if she forgot all about you, livin'

with all her grand relatives in London. People with high-soundin' titles, ownin' great estates and mansions and all that. She'll be a grand lady herself when she gets there. No, Peterkin, she's not anyways likely to come back to Canada, and I don't notion how you'll ever see her again—unless you take it into your head to follow her to England."

Peterkin drew a heavy breath.

"Wish' I'd only known!" he meditated. "I'd have been here like a shot. Nothin' would have kept me back from sayin' good-bye to her. Notioned I didn't care, did she? Guessed I thought more of that dirty gold than of her—her that's worth all the gold in the world: her that I'd have given my life for!—gee!"

Jess Turley had plucked a maple leaf from the tree beside which she stood, and now she was nervously tearing it to pieces in her fingers.

"Say, Peterkin," she resumed, "Elsie left somethin' for you, a kind of keepsake, I reckon. I'd better give it to you."

He looked at her sharply.

"Where is it?" he demanded. "Fetch it, right now."

While Jess went into the house he dismounted, tethered his pony and strolled to and fro on the gravelled path in front of the house. He paused before the verandah, where a luxurious rose climbed the trellis. He had himself given this rose to Elsie, and she had planted it here and tended it with loving care, and now it was crowded thick with blossoms that sent their delicious perfume into the air. He plucked one of the opening buds and fixed it in the buttonhole of his blue shirt.

"Didn't know you were anyways sentimental, Peterkin," said Jess, coming behind him along the border of short-cut turf and thinking that he had not heard her. "You don't forget that that's Elsie's rose bush."

He turned to her.

"Say, I'm hoping you won't allow it to get damaged any," he smiled. "You'll water it regular, eh? and prune it and keep the insect's off it, eh?—specially those green ones?"

"Sure," nodded Jess. "Elsie gave it into

my charge 'fore she went away. She took one of the roses along with her—only one—a bud same as the one you've just fixed in your buttonhole. Said she'd never part with it. Said it would always mind her of Ash Hollow, and—and of Peterkin."

"Sure? She said that?"

Jess had been holding something concealed behind her back. Now she produced it—an ordinary white envelope bulging with something that was inside of it.

"This is what she left for you," she said.

Peterkin took it slowly, as if he were not in the least interested concerning it, and dropped it into his breast-pocket.

"Ain't you goin' to open it?" Jess inquired.

He shook his head.

"Not now," he answered, glancing aside at his waiting pony. "I must quit. I'm goin' way back to the camp to-night. Maybe I'll open it then."

He mounted to the saddle and rode off, whistling softly—whistling the same melody that Elsie Prescott had played on her violin in Red Pine Forest, and that he had whistled

outside the wigwam in which she had been held captive. He urged his steed to a gallop, but he had not gone very far when he drew rein at the far end of the corn-field where the maple-trees hid him from the ranch windows.

There he dismounted and eagerly drew Elsie's envelope from his pocket and opened it very tenderly.

It contained a letter, and within the letter was the filigree necklet which she had worn when he first saw her and which he himself had recovered from the head-dress of the dead Sioux chief. The letter, written in Elsie's bold school-girl hand, told him to keep the trinket for her sake. She wished him good-bye, but not, she hoped, for always. Some day, she felt sure, they would meet again, and she would never, never forget him and all that he had done for her. Perhaps, she added, when he had become rich from the gold of Mosquito Creek, he would come home to England.

"That's just what I will do," he resolved, as he put away the letter, and from that day onward his ambition was fixed. From that

day onward his life was filled with the purpose which he set before himself. No man on the diggings worked harder or more steadily than he, and while he worked, his luck, as men called it, followed him. His claim yielded more gold than any other, and the new claims which he took up all seemed to prosper. Sergeant Walsh playfully called him the Boy Midas, because everything he touched turned to gold.

There was one thing which greatly troubled Peterkin at this time, and that was the thought of his father. All through his young boyhood he had vaguely believed that by some chance his father would hear that he was still alive and would come and claim him; but there had been no sign. Then Peterkin had come to the conclusion that his father was no longer living; that probably he had not even survived that journey in the snow long ago when his child had strayed and been lost. But as he grew in years and intelligence, Peterkin realised the vastness of those territories of the North-West and understood how easy it was for a father and son to dwell even in the same Canadian province

and yet be as little aware of each other's existence as if the whole continent of America separated them.

The doubt as to his father's fate oppressed him more and more as the seasons went by. He wanted to know with certainty what had become of him. Might he not be living in dire poverty, working perhaps as a labourer on some ranch, or hanging on as a loiterer about some unprosperous mining camp? This was the fear that Peterkin felt most acutely. And now when he himself was becoming wealthy, the desire to help his father, if help were needed, was so real that he resolved to institute inquiries through the medium of the North-West Mounted Police, and he was only waiting until chance should bring him into the company of one of the officers of that all-powerful force.

Often had Peterkin wondered (supposing that his father might still be alive) what kind of a man he would be. Would he be a parent to be ashamed of? Once when Peterkin had consulted Joe Dutcher, the sheriff had wisely shaken his head and said—

“Take my tip, boy, an' let well alone.

Dare say he's dead. If he ain't dead, but livin', it's ten to one he'd be no great credit to you. Y'see, Peterkin, he'd been in prison, a convict, 'fore he came out to Canada; and a man like that's liable to go wrong wherever he is. You wouldn't hanker to make his acquaintance supposin' he'd become one of those low-down skunks that hang around in gamblin' saloons, drinkin' an' playin' poker and maybe cheatin', and all that. And it's a heap easier for a man to go to the bad than to live hon'orable an' straight in a minin' camp, as you very well know. Guess I'd let sleepin' dogs lie, if I was you."

"Still," demurred Peterkin, "he's my father, and if he's in want, if he isn't anyways flush of money, ain't it my place, my duty, to give him a helpin' hand?"

Joe Dutcher shrugged his broad shoulders.

"Guess he wasn't over anxious to search for his kid when that kid was lost on the prairie," he pursued.

"That don't seem to signify a heap," returned Peterkin. "Reckon I'll make inquiries, anyway. Dare say Sergeant Walsh can do somethin'."

“Yes,” agreed Joe. “Dare say he can. He c’n pass the word on by his chums in the Force. And seein’ that the Mounted Police are distributed all over the North-West Territories, I notion that’s as good a way as any.”

Peterkin himself made casual inquiries among the miners who came from all parts of Canada to the ‘diggings round about Mosquito Creek. But none of them knew the name of George Beamish, and after all the years that had passed, Peterkin was unable to give a personal description of his father. He was no more successful at Calgary, where he went periodically to deposit gold in the bank. It was, however, at Calgary that he got the first gleam of light.

“Hullo, Peterkin. Wet day, eh? Waitin’ for the mail to come in?”

Peterkin had stood under the wide verandah of Brierley’s saloon, sheltering from the heavy rain and watching it racing and bubbling past in the deep gulley that it had scored in the middle of the sandy roadway. He looked up with a nod of recognition at the tall uniformed figure of Sergeant

Walsh, who had just dismounted from his steaming charger.

"Yes. 'Tain't due inside another hour yet," he answered. "Say, sergeant,"—he glanced back into the saloon and sniffed—"you comin' in along o' me to have a drink of that coffee that Dan's brewin'?" he invited. "I want a yarn with you."

Sergeant Walsh held the loose bridle of his horse in his gloved left hand.

"Coffee?" he smiled. "Well, that's wholesomer than anything stronger. I don't mind if I have a cup and a pipe."

He hitched the bridle over a hook of the tie-post, covered the saddle and carbine, and bent his head to allow the rain to stream off from the upturned rim of his wide felt hat. Then he strode to the door of the saloon, and looked within through the mist of tobacco smoke. On the threshold he hesitated and turned abruptly.

"No, boy," he said lightly to Peterkin. "After all, if you'll excuse me, I'll not go in there. My appearance would only make those fellows feel uneasy. No use disturbing them; and there's one chap at least who'd

sink into his boots at sight of my uniform. I'll hang around for a bit and see you again before you leave."

A trifle disappointed, Peterkin strolled into the saloon alone. His dripping cloak left a track of wet on the sawdust of the floor. Dan Brierley nodded as the boy went up to the bar and pushed a dollar bill across the counter. Peterkin watched the saloon-keeper filling a pint cup with fragrant coffee. He helped himself to a cracker and a corner of cheese. Pocketing his change, he seated himself on a high stool with his back to the bar, munching the crisp biscuit in his strong teeth.

"Wonder what made Sergeant Walsh turn away?" he ruminated. "Wonder which is the chap that's liable to sink into his shoes at sight of him?"

Without seeming to be observing his surroundings, he took stock of the occupants of the saloon, trying to pick out the person to whom the sergeant had referred.

Near him there stood an aged, wizen-faced Indian in a faded red blanket and a be-draggled feather head-dress, smoking a clay

pipe and nursing a glass of firewater, while he watched a couple of half-breeds struggling through a slow game of draughts on the end of a packing-case. In a far corner a party of bull-whackers talked noisily of a rattlesnake that had been found in one of their waggons. A group of cowboys sat on tilted chairs, with their steaming wet boots propped on the top of the stove on a level with their heads. Nearer to him there was a company of ranchers and gold-miners seated at a table playing poker, watched by a bare-armed blacksmith from the smithy and a pale-faced clerk from the bank.

Peterkin failed to discover in the miscellaneous company anything which explained Sergeant Walsh's abrupt turning away. Dismissing the matter for the moment, he turned his attention to the players. He knew some of them by sight and name. They were the aristocrats of the Calgary district, the men of position and substance, yet a rough, reckless-looking lot; the sort of men who would think as little of riding to certain death through a crowd of savages as they thought of risking their

dollars on the turn-up of a greasy, dog-eared card.

Peterkin saw that they were playing for high stakes. There was a pile of bills and gold and silver pieces in the pool, and one of the players, for lack of ready coin, had raised his stake by putting in a diamond ring. He won the ring back, and much more, on showing a flush of five cards, all of the same suit. With hardly a smile on his sun-tanned face, the rancher quietly swept his winnings to his side of the table, while a companion gathered and shuffled the disreputable pack, and another rose to his feet, declaring that he had nothing else left to stake but his six-shooter.

The game proceeded more desperately than before. One by one the cowboys and miners left the warm comfort of the stove and strode to the table. The Indian emptied his glass of firewater and glided silently into the circle.

Peterkin himself never played cards; gambling was abhorrent to him: but he knew the rules of the game and the meaning of all the declarations and gamblers' phrases, and

he always found interest in observing the emotions of the players as they lost or won. He was observing them now. One in particular interested him—a big, broad-shouldered miner, who was known as Curly Hayes, on account of his long, curly red hair. Curly owned a small ranch near Middle Crossing, but he had neglected his farming to join in the rush for gold at the diggings. He was playing recklessly against men who could better afford to squander their money on a game of chance. He had already taken his last bank-bill from the lining of his buckskin jacket, and had staked it on a brace of queens, and lost. He seemed to be peculiarly confident of his luck on queens.

“Have a care, Curly,” one of the on-lookers cautioned him. “You’re not a millionaire yet.”

But Curly was a confirmed gambler, and, although he had lost his ready cash, he yet had something of value to stake in the live stock at his little ranch.

His feet played a nervous tattoo on the floor as he stared over the top of his cards at the bundle of bank-bills and the gold

pieces that represented the biggest stake he had ever played for—the biggest, with one exception. Once he had staked his life on the turn-up of a card; his life against the life of a far braver man. And he had won then on the queens. There were queens in his hand now—three queens.

“Wake up, Curly!” some one urged. “Four hundred’s up against you.”

Curly glanced furtively across the table from under the rim of his hat that hid his avaricious eyes from the man who had dared him to go one better.

“I play!” he gasped out. “Guess my three mustangs an’ the old cow will cover it, if I lose.”

The crowd of onlookers pressed nearer. There was a dead silence. The men puffed hard at their pipes. Peterkin looked across at Curly, almost hoping that he would lose—certain, indeed, that he could not win. For his sharp eyes had caught sight of the cards held by the player who sat nearest to him, and he could not imagine how Curly could hold a higher hand.

Then a call was declared, and the man

near him spread out a sequence of hearts, headed by the king.

"Straight flush!" he announced in a level voice, and he reached forth his hand to rake in his winnings, adding, in the same deliberate tone, "Say, Curly, you can send that old cow and the three mustangs around to my shanty to-morrow morning."

Curly had flung his cards on the table and fallen back limp as a blade of faded grass. The men crowded round him, and even Peterkin slipped from his perch to look at the hand on which the reckless gambler had staked and lost all the movable property that he possessed.

"It's a punishment," moaned Curly, breathing wheezily. He staggered to his feet and strode unsteadily to the bar, muttering to himself as he went.

Peterkin glanced at the cheap little clock that ticked out the moments among the bottles and glasses on the back shelf. There were still three quarters of an hour to spare before the mail could be due. He filled up his cup with coffee and seated himself anew on the high stool. Curly stood near him,

reaching for a bottle. All around the men were talking loudly.

“Somehow, Curly ain’t the same man that he was,” one of them was saying. “He’s sorter different from what he was last time I met him, only a month back. Bold as a lion he was then. Nothin’ could make him flinch. But now, what’s come over him? He’s all of a tremble! Watch how that bottle’s shakin’ in his hand! You’d think he’d just come off a bed of fever. What’s come over him?”

“Wough!” grunted Wa-sha-pa, the Indian, flinging the loose corner of his red blanket over his shoulder. He shot a glance of proud contempt at Curly. “Once he was a man. He was brave. He kept his scalp. He rode like the wind before the steeds of the Redman. None could catch him. The warriors feared him. Now there is no fight left in him. He is weak. He is as a woman. The braves of my tribe would say that he is a coward!”

Curly heard these words, spoken by a despised Indian. He turned round, but without resentment.

"An' the braves of your tribe wouldn't be a whole lot wrong," he retorted huskily. "Coward?" he repeated. "Yes. Guess there ain't a bigger one, white or red, this side the Rockies."

"Come, Curly, come!" interposed one of the ranchers. "Takin' on like this 'cause you've dropped a chip or two over a quiet hand of poker!"

Curly shook his head slowly from side to side.

"'Tain't that, Dick," he said, "'tain't that." He stood with his back to the bar counter, folding his arms across his chest. "Look here, boys," he resumed, "I've got somethin' to say. It's bound to come out. I c'n hide it no longer. Listen!"

"Say, Curly, if you're intendin' to hold forth on the iniquities of gamblin'," interrupted Peterkin, dismounting and passing his stool to the man, "take this here stool of repentance and do it proper. We're all ready to listen. Heave it out."

Curly seated himself and began.

At the first Peterkin paid little attention to the man's narrative, but kept his eye on

the clock, holding himself in readiness to quit the saloon as soon as he should hear the sound of hoofs telling him that the mail had arrived. But as he listened and grew interested, he began fervently to hope that something would happen to delay the carrier of letters; for he wanted to hear the story to its end.

CHAPTER X

THE COWARDICE OF CURLY

“YES,” began Curly, in a slow, drawling, but not uneducated voice, “you heard what that low-down Injun called me a bit ago—a coward. That’s what I am. It wasn’t in me to deny it. And when I’ve said what I’ve got to say, I reckon there isn’t a one of you who’ll call me anythin’ else. A mean, despicable, selfish coward, that’s me, down to the dust.”

He paused to allow his hearers to settle themselves in a group about him.

“Guess it’s as sure as night and day that when two men are thrown together, one of ’em’s bound to come out on top,” he went on. “It was that way with me and The Gent, as we called him at Athabasca Landing. He was always the better man; better in every way. We’d known one another for a long while, off and on. Best friend I ever had in my life was The Gent. He never went back

on me: always split fair. It was share and share alike, so long as there was a bite of grub to split. And if there wasn't enough left for both, why, he'd just force me to eat the last crumb, and make out that he wasn't anyways hungry. He'd strip the coat off his back to give it to a friend, would The Gent.

"We'd wrestled against the howling blizzard together; we'd slept under the same blanket. We'd camped together on the lonesome prairie, watched by the stars; wandered side by side through the forest, over desolate mountains; worked on the same claim at the diggings. Brave? Well, I lay he was brave. Didn't reckon the meaning of fear. He was a marvel. For knowin' the secrets of the plains, for scoutin' a difficult trail, for seein' an' hearin' an' knowin', he hadn't an equal. The cleverest, pluckiest man I ever clapped eyes on, he was; with the great heart of him always in the right place, ready to do a good turn, ready to do anythin' on earth so long as it was honest and noble and good. A real, true man of grit, down to the soles of his boots. That was The Gent."

Curly turned to take up his glass, but laid

it down again without raising it to his dry lips. When he spoke again there was a shamed look in his pale grey eyes. Peterkin tried to meet them with his own, but they avoided him shiftily.

“And we were friends—friends,” the gambler went on slowly, dreamily. “Leastways he was a friend to me. Don’t know that I ever was much a friend to him. ’Twas always him that was the good Samaritan, as they say. I was the one that he helped. That was his way. With him it was give—give what you can. With me it was take—take what you can git. Somehow it never occurred that The Gent needed help: not till the end. Not till the last, when there wasn’t a chance but for one of us. And then——”

He broke off and looked round at his glass. This time his trembling fingers clutched it greedily, and he drank; drank to the last drop. Peterkin began to wonder what was coming. Had there been a quarrel between these two friends—a desperate fight? What had Curly done that had been so cowardly?

Curly continued—

“For two blazin’ hot days we’d been crossin’ the parched prairie land. A hundred miles in front of us were the jagged peaks of the Big Horn Divide lyin’ like clouds against the blue. Far away we could just make out the dark line of the foothills, with a glint now and then of Crazy Woman’s Creek. The sun was blisterin’ hot, the air stiflin’ as an oven. There was barely a gallop left in our sweatin’, worn-out nags. They dragged their hoofs heavy as lead through the tall dry grass that was brown and sapless. Mine was the worse of the two, with her swollen tongue lolling out from the side of her jaw, her ears lyin’ back, her head droopin’ between her knees. But The Gent’s was still some fresh, the same as himself. Seemed like as if neither of ’em knew the meanin’ of thirst—such all-fired, perishin’ thirst as me and my mare were endurin’.

“‘Haven’t you got any water left, Curly?’ he asks, as if he didn’t remember I’d emptied my bottle an hour before. An’ he drew rein an’ dismounted. ‘Best give her a rest,’ he says. An’ when she’d cooled down, he went to the mare’s head and talked

to her croonin' like, same as he'd croon to a babe in its cot. Then he nipped hold of her muzzle and heaved up her head. 'Most before I knew what he was doin', he'd got his bottle between her teeth, and was pourin' the precious water into her gullet. It was 'most all gone 'fore I could stop him.

“‘Here, humans before beasts!’ I panted, hardly able to drag a word 'cross my leathery tongue. And it wasn't till I'd drained the last drop that I guessed he might like some himself. When I said I was sorry, he laughed.

“‘I wasn't needin' it so much as the mare—an' you, Curly,’ he says, swingin' his leg over the saddle.

“After that we pushed on a bit better; an' toward sundown we struck on a water-hole hardly the size of your hat. When I drew back from it, and The Gent shoved his face in the pool, he drank, drank, drank. Never saw such a thirst as was on him. And there was his horse at his side, both were drinkin' together.

“We sat on the rim of a buffalo wallow for a feed and a pipe.

“‘Guess we'll camp under the willows

alongside the creek,' he proposed. 'Tisn't more than a two hours' ride in the cool of the evenin'.'

"'Reckon here's good enough,' I objected. 'No need to hustle any. An' I'm dog tired.'

"'Nags needs a rest, too,' he agreed, yieldin' as always. 'As for me, I could sleep on the edge of a knife, I'm that weary.'

"So we took off the saddles for pillows and spread out our blankets and tethered the two horses each by its lariat to a stake driven into the dry ground. And when I was just on closin' my eyes The Gent come up to me and 'Curly,' he says, 'I notion we'd best quit, after all, and push on to Crazy Woman's Creek.'

"'Git!' I say, 'we're fixed for the night.' And I saw him lick his finger and hold up his hand to discover which way the air was driftin'. You couldn't call it a breeze—just a breath from the west, warm and nutty. But in the twilight I saw his eyes turned to the eastward, the way we had come.

"I looked that way, too, and made out a heavy dark cloud lyin' low on the waves of the prairie.

“ ‘Rain comin’ on,’ I says.

“ ‘No, ’tain’t rain,’ said he, with a shake of the head. ‘Guess it’s smoke—smoke risin’ from burnin’ grass.’ He watched it for a spell. ‘ ’Tain’t comin’ this way,’ he decided. ‘Wind’s against it. Wind might change in the night, though.’ He looked kind of uneasy.

“ ‘ ’Tain’t likely to change,’ I said, turnin’ an’ shuttin’ my eyes.

“ ‘No, ’tain’t just probable,’ he allowed, standin’ over me windin’ his watch.

“ Well, I soon fell asleep: slept only as a man can sleep that’s been in the saddle for twelve mortal hours at a stretch.

“ Time of sunrise I awoke with a start—with the grip of a hand on my shoulder. My tongue was as dry as a bone; I’d the tickle of smoke in my nostrils. From behind came the snort of a horse that was pulling like mad at his halter. And The Gent was there on his knees, starin’, starin’ into the east.

“ The wind had changed. It had shifted right round to the eastward, and was blowin’ hard, swayin’ the dry prairie grass like a field

of maize, and bringin' along a mist of nippin', chokin' smoke. Flocks of prairie birds were in flight—sage hens and sand owls and linnets—all wingin' their way to the westward. Far back, the whole prairie was wrapped and shadowed in a vast rolling cloud of grey smoke. The risin' sun shone dimly through it, red as the flames beneath, that leapt and curled and twisted like a long ocean wave breakin' on the beach, sendin' up a spray of sparks into the overhangin' gloom. We could hear the weird moan of the fiery tide as it swept towards us, devourin' all in its way.

“For a minute or more I stood dumbly wonderin’.

“‘Guess we’d best quit,’ I said hoarsely. My throat was as if it were coated with dust.

“‘Say, your pony’s gone off,’ said The Gent. ‘Reckon I heard her gallopin’ away just as I woke. She’d pulled out the peg, Curly. Guess you didn’t just drive it in deep enough, eh?’

“I looked at him blankly. Sure as sure, my pony had gone. And his own would have followed, only he’d been better secured.

“‘Gimme a match,’ I says. ‘Quick! We can start a back fire. Quick! a match!’

“‘Haven’t got one,’ says he. ‘I gave you the last when you lighted your pipe in the evenin’.’

“He was cool, as he always was in the face of danger. He never turned a hair; only looked around to calculate our chances. Yet both of us knew how little the chances were. And the crackle of the flames grew louder. Great gusts of smoke were rollin’ towards us, and the hot breath of the burnin’ prairie grew hotter and hotter.

“A ghost of a smile played on the face of The Gent as he saddled his horse.

“‘Reckon one of us can do a bolt for it, Curly,’ says he. ‘Only one. We’re neither of us a featherweight, eh?’

“‘No,’ I says, wonderin’ what was workin’ in his mind. Did he notion to leave me behind? ‘No, guess the nag couldn’t carry us both. One’s got to stay. One’s got to hand in his checks. We can’t both escape.’”

Already the fingers of the clock were creeping to the time when the mail would be due. Peterkin pressed forward.

“Go on,” he urged impatiently, as Curly paused. “Go on. What did you do? Why didn’t you both leap on the one horse and cut off? He’d have carried you both. There was time. What did you do?”

Curly looked at the boy for a fleeting instant, but quickly withdrew his eyes and continued his narrative.

“‘Quick!’ cried The Gent. ‘Take your chance! There’s the horse. Take your chance!’

“‘No, old pardner,’ I says. ‘It’s your nag, not mine; and we’ve always split fair, you and me. We’ll split fair again, for the last,’ I says, and I drew out my cards. ‘It’s your deal. Deal slick. Highest hand takes the pony. Lowest hand——’ And I signed with my thumb over my shoulder to the thing that was comin’ along for the one that would be left behind.

“Above the roar and crackle of the flames we could hear the poundin’ of many feet, as if all the livin’ things of the prairie had bunched together in a wild stampede, makin’ the earth tremble.

“We went down on our haunches, face to

face. The Gent gripped the cards. He never waited to shuffle them: didn't even cut. Trusted me, he did, as I'd have trusted him. And he dealt the two hands calm and deliberate, as if we'd been playin' for small points in this here saloon. I drew three queens—just as I'd expected—*queens!* just as I'd planned.

“‘How many?’ he asked. ‘Two?’”

“‘Listen!’ I cried huskily, lookin' round as he thrust two more cards in my hand. ‘Listen!’”

“‘Yes,’ he nodded. ‘Guess it's just the wild things comin’,’ and he looked in the same direction.

“Against the glare of the fire, under the brown blanket of rolling smoke, we could make out a movin' mass of the prairie critters—elks and antelopes first, then a black crowd of buffaloes, and a host of the smaller fry, with maybe a wolf or two here and there—all boundin' along together, friend and foe alike, in advance of the blazin' grass, all runnin' for life.

“I dropped the cards in front of me face upwards, as if I didn't see them, or know

what they were. But The Gent saw them plainly.

“‘Four queens and a five,’ he muttered between his set teeth, knowin’ that he’d lost, for his own were a poor lot. Then he rose to his feet.

“‘The chance is yours, Curly,’ he cried. ‘Quick! Into the saddle with you! Fly! Fly for your life—for your life!’”

Curly eyed his empty glass as if expecting that one of his listeners would fill it, but no one offered to pay for another drink. The men around him exchanged meaning glances.

“Well?” urged Peterkin, “well?” He was trying to hide his contempt for this cowardly craven who could think for an instant of deserting his friend to such a terrible, unspeakable fate.

“It was my life against his,” resumed Curly. “We’d played for the chance. It was mine. If he’d won, ’stead of me, he’d have took it, I guess.”

“Snake!” hissed Peterkin, standing up to the man menacingly. “He wouldn’t have left you behind. And you cheated him!”

“Stand back, Peterkin!” Some one

tugged at the boy's sleeve. "Let the cur finish."

"If he'd won he'd have took it, I guess," Curly repeated. "And there was no time to delay. The chance was mine, and—I didn't refuse it. In an instant I'd leapt to the saddle. The Gent bent his head to plant a kiss on his horse's muzzle.

"'Good-bye,' he says softly. But it wasn't to me that he spoke. He didn't seem to notice the hand I held out to him, but stood aside and stared back at the flames and the mad stampede of the wild critters comin' along.

"The horse wasn't needin' the goad of the spurs; but I dug the spikes into his flanks, and he plunged off with a long, racin' stride for the river twelve miles to the west. I never looked back. Just thought for a bit of The Gent, standin' there like a rock in the roar of the ravenous flames. Mile after mile we galloped, with never a pause or a break, yet nearer an' nearer came the poundin' hoofs of the buffaloes and the lighter tread of the racing antelopes. The air was filled with their terrified cries, they bellowed and snorted

in their panic. All around and in front the ground was astir. The prairie dogs and jack-rabbits shot out from their burrows, and even the rattlesnakes crawled from their lairs in the rocks, while the coyotes and wolves loped out from their hidin' places and joined in the general race.

"It was life—precious life—we were seekin', and death that we sought to escape. And all the time the furnace roar of the fire pursued us, and the blindin' smoke rolled round, swept in advance by the wind. A herd of antelopes forged on ahead, with a pack of grey wolves in their midst never thinkin' to touch them, and the buffaloes came on behind with a thunder of hoofs.

"For a time I got mixed in the crowd, and the horse lost the swing of his regular stride as he tried to find room. But at last we got clear from the throng and went on at a desperate pace. I flung off my jacket and shaps to lighten his burden, I coaxed and I scolded by turns, and patted his sweatin' neck as I slashed at his heaving sides with the spurs. Still the fire, with its terrible crackle and moanin', came closer and closer. The smoke

hemmed us in, blindin' and chokin'. Thin tongues of fire started up from the prairie where sparks had alighted. I felt the bite of a spark on my cheek, on my neck, and my breath came in gasps, short and painful. But in a lift in the reek right in front, the tops of the willows stood forward like shadows to show that the river was near, and I goaded my nag to his utmost.

"He took to it bravely, though there came a quick wheeze in his chest and an ominous heave in his flanks. We raced neck and neck with a buffalo bull that had nostrils like pits full of blood. But that spurt was the last. At the brink of the creek, where the press of the clamourin' critters was thickest, I felt the horse stagger. He stumbled, exhausted, and dropped like a stone."

"Ah!" cried Peterkin, "pity that horse hadn't been saved, 'stead of a cowardly skunk like you! Guess you've no occasion to tell any more. We know you escaped, or you wouldn't be here. And you ain't just the hero of this story: not by a long way. Say, have you got any objection to tellin' us the name of the man you cheated so cruelly and

left there to die when you might have saved him? Guess I ain't the only one here that's hankerin' to know. That was a man, that was: a real white man. But you—well, there isn't a word to describe you."

There was a movement in the crowd. Some one touched the boy's arm.

"There's the mail just come in, Peterkin. You'd best quit, if you're expectin' any letters."

A few minutes afterward Peterkin was in the shed loosening his pony, when, raising his eyes, he observed Sergeant Walsh standing watching him.

"Say, sergeant d'you happen to have known a man that went by the name of The Gent, along at Athabasca Landing?" Peterkin inquired. "Rather a nice sort of chap, I'd say. Friend of Curly Hayes, it seems."

"Oh," returned the sergeant, "friend of Curly's, eh? Didn't know that Curly had such a thing as a friend left."

"Guess he don't just deserve to have any," observed Peterkin; "not after what he's been tellin' us 'bout himself in the saloon there."

Sergeant Walsh was holding the bridle while the boy prepared to mount.

"What's he been saying?" he inquired.

"Been makin' a confession of his cowardice," explained Peterkin. "He and a chap he called The Gent got corralled by a prairie fire last week, back of Crazy Woman's Creek. They'd only one nag between them. Seems they couldn't both quit. Don't know why. So they played a hand of poker for who should have the mount. Curly won; left his chum behind to be wiped out by the flames. But the deal wasn't straight. Curly cheated; planted four queens top of the pack so as they'd fall to his own hand and his friend would lose."

Sergeant Walsh gasped in amazement.

"Cheated?" he echoed, "cheated? And let the other fellow get burnt to death!"

Peterkin nodded as he took the bridle in his left hand and lifted his toe to the stirrup.

"I was wonderin' who the other fellow might be," he mused as he hesitated to mount.

Sergeant Walsh repeated the man's nickname.

"The Gent? Yes, I knew him. Curly

and he were partners on a claim near Fort Steele. They never made it pay, though; and the last I heard of them was that they'd given it up and intended to try their luck on Mosquito Creek. I suppose they were on their way there when they were corralled by that fire. It was a bad fire. We went over the ground last week, searching for the remains of a man that I had heard had been caught. We didn't find much—only his revolver and his watch; a English-made watch, it was, with his name scratched on the inner case. I've always known he was an Englishman, but never got at his true name before."

"What was it?" questioned Peterkin.

The answer came to him with the force of a physical blow: "George Beamish."

Peterkin withdrew his foot from the stirrup and turned round, staring at Sergeant Walsh in bewilderment.

"George Beamish?" he cried aghast. "Then he was my father! The Gent was my father!"

"Your father!" exclaimed Walsh. "You don't say! Well, that's queer, mortal queer, your being the son of the George Beamish

that we've been looking for these months past. Come along to the fort, Peterkin. The Assistant-Commissioner is there, and he'll be glad to have a yarn with you."

Peterkin accompanied the sergeant to the quarters of the North-West Mounted Police, and there he discovered many facts that were of personal interest to him.

It appeared that a certain firm of lawyers in London had been making inquiries in Canada concerning George Beamish, who was believed to have gone out to the Calgary district with his little boy some ten or twelve years before. The reason for their inquiries was that Mr. William Beamish, the brother of the missing man, had died, leaving a considerable amount of money to which George Beamish was the heir, and they desired to find him so that the property might be transferred to him. They referred to the circumstance that George Beamish had suffered a term of imprisonment in an English convict prison, but they intimated that it had since been proved by the confession of the real criminal that George Beamish had been absolutely innocent of the crime charged against

him, and that if he wished to return to England he might be assured that his name was cleared.

Such were the strange means by which Peterkin discovered his long-missing father. Sergeant Walsh congratulated him on becoming the heir to his late uncle's wealth; but Peterkin was not greatly elated over the prospect.

"I'm not hankerin' after comin' in for any wealth that I haven't earned for myself," he declared. "It isn't the thought of my Uncle William's money that makes me glad. Better than all the money in the world is the discovery that my father was an honest man, that he was brave and good and unselfish, and that he deserved and never disgraced his nickname of The Gent."

CHAPTER XI

THE BEADED MOCCASINS

MORE than ever now, Peterkin's desire to return to England was strong within him, and in order to accumulate enough money, he worked as hard as any man, and his luck at the diggings did not forsake him. Once every week he rode to Calgary to deposit a goodly bag of gold dust in the bank, and the account to his credit was growing steadily larger.

On more than one occasion he ran the risk of being robbed of the treasure that he was carrying. Somehow it got to be known beforehand when he was to ride along the trail, and road-agents would lie in wait for his coming; but he usually evaded them by taking a different way, sometimes going many miles out of the customary course. Of adventures he had many, but his chief adventure at this time had no direct connection with the

carrying of gold, but with Indian horse-thieves and a raid upon the corrals of Joe Dutcher at Lavender Ranch.

It requires some preface.

Peterkin had been at home at Willow Bend over Sunday, and on the Tuesday forenoon, as he was setting forth for Mosquito with his week's store of supplies, he came unexpectedly upon the sheriff leading a chain of riderless ponies by their halters.

"Hullo, Peterkin!" the sheriff began in greeting as he drew to a halt on the near side of the wooden bridge.

Peterkin looked at the animals critically. He was regarded as a good judge of horses.

"I see you've been south to Middle Crossing, doin' a deal in ponies," he said. "What's your game? Haven't you got enough horses in your corrals already?"

"Wal," drawled Joe, "you see it's this aways, I've gotten a commission from the North-West Mounted Police to supply them with remounts, and I'm buyin' in the best I c'n find. What d'you think of this bunch here?"

Peterkin shrugged his shoulders.

“They ain’t a bad bunch,” he judged. “’Bout a half of ’em might be good enough for the Redcoats.”

“Glad you think so well of ’em,” said Joe. “I allow the lot I got at Lal Putnam’s last week are a heap better’n these, taken all round. Wish you’d come along and have a look at ’em, Peterkin, an’ help me to sort ’em out. Say, it’s a long while since you favoured us with a call at Lavender. ’Tain’t just neighbourly, you’re neglectin’ us. Dinah was askin’ after you only yesterday—wondered what had gotten over you. As for Stella, I guess she’s ’bout given you up as a deserter. ’Tain’t enough for Stella that you should give her no more’n a wave of the hand as you’re ridin’ along the trail. Poor gel, she’s kind of lonesome.”

“Lonesome, is she?” smiled Peterkin. “Well, I’ll take pity on her. Next time I’m along to Calgary, I’ll drop in and say a word to her.”

Stella was an Indian girl who, since her earliest childhood, had lived as a member of the Dutcher family at Lavender Ranch. She had a strange, dog-like affection for Peterkin.

She and he were of an age. They had been school-fellows and playmates. He had taught her to ride in the Indian fashion; he had taught her to throw the lariat, to trap beaver, to know the notes of the birds, the names of the flowers, to find her way by the stars, and to fire a pistol. He had no need to teach her to be brave. She was that by nature from the beginning.

Nobody ever knew where she had come from. All that Joe Dutcher himself knew was that one winter's night he found her Pawnee mother lying dead in the snow, with the child beside her. He had carried the little waif home to his ranch and brought her up and loved her as if she had been his own flesh and blood. Yet she was Indian, and always was known by the fancy Indian name that Joe had given her—Star of the Morning; for the morning star was shining over Arrow Wood Ridge when he carried her into his home. But her pet name was Stella.

Star of the Morning had inherited the Indian's love of bright colours, and she was exceedingly clever with her needle. Peterkin supplied her with pieces of bright cloth,

with furs and skins and glass beads, and she always took girlish pride in showing him her dainty handiwork.

One spring afternoon which he always remembered, she had shown him a pair of moccasins which she had just finished making.

"See, Peterkin," she said, bringing them out from her basket where she kept all her needlework. "See what Star of the Morning has fashioned out of the skin of the mountain goat that you gave to her when the ground was white with the early snow!" And she timidly laid the moccasins on his knee for him to look at and to admire.

"Dinky little moccasins," he said.

He looked at them all round, inside and out, from toe to heel, and said that the work was good. He was satisfied; he allowed that Star of the Morning had marvellous skill with her needle. The pattern she had wrought with the coloured beads and silken threads was more wonderful than any he had seen in the wigwams of the Redskins. No squaw could have done better. But, fearing to swell the girl's pride with so much praise, he added—

“Yet they’re not just perfect, for all that. There’s one thing wrong with them that takes the shine out of their beauty.”

A flush mounted over her dark cheeks and forehead as she heard these words. She was vexed, he could see.

“What is the fault you find with them?” she demanded to know.

Peterkin held one of the pretty things out on the palm of his hand, where it looked like a tiny toy made for an infant’s doll, or a jewel to be kept in a glass case.

“Guess they’re heaps too small for anything,” he answered her. “Say, d’you notion that any girl in the whole length and breadth of the North-West Territories could manage to squeeze her hoof comfortably into a dandy shoe like this?”

At that, Star of the Morning opened her red lips in a mischievous smile. Her large eyes twinkled merrily, and, taking the moccasins from him, she quickly slipped them over her toes and stood back, drawing up her skirt to let him see how well they fitted the dainty feet for which they had been made.

“There, Master Peterkin!” she laughed.
“Are you satisfied now?”

And he could say no more.

Often and often after that time, whenever he went aside to Lavender Ranch, she wore those moccasins, and seemed glad that he noticed them. And later, when he was riding along the trail, unless it was a dark night or the weather was more than ordinarily peevish, Star of the Morning, seeing him from afar, would trip down to the trail to meet him. And sometimes, after a long and lonely ride, not always free from peril, it was to him like sunshine breaking through clouds to see her waiting there on the gate, swinging her moccasined feet in front of her, and alighting like a rose-leaf on the grass to come to his side as he drew rein and dismounted.

In hot weather, when his throat was parched with the alkali dust of the prairie, she would have a dipper of cold water ready; in winter, when his limbs were stiff with frost, a drink of warm soup or milk, or a roasted potato. And never did she fail to take a peep at his revolver to make sure that it was properly loaded in case he should be waylaid by lurk-

ing outlaws or hostile Indians in the gloomy gulches and lonesome ravines through which he had yet to pass.

One summer day when she came down to the trail to meet him, he noticed that she wasn't wearing the moccasins as usual, and that she had a crimson poppy in her black hair. When he let her see that he missed the moccasins, she said, with a shrug of her shoulders—

“No, Peterkin, I am not wearing them, because, when I do so, you no longer look into my eyes. You think more of the beaded moccasins than of their wearer.”

Perhaps this was true. But for all that, Peterkin never forgot that her eyes were beautiful, and that her face put the fairest prairie flower to shame. Somehow, she was different from most Indian girls—different in every way. She was refined, gentle, sweet. She only betrayed that she was Indian by the blackness of her hair, her adventurous spirit, and her reckless courage.

She proved her courage in a hundred ways, but never so splendidly as upon the last night of her simple young life—the night following

the occasion when Peterkin met Joe Dutcher near Willow Bend bridge and promised that he would call at Lavender and say a word to her.

Long afterwards when a stranger from England visiting the ranch was strolling about the parlour, curiously examining the prints on the walls, the guns and bowie-knives in the racks, and the various treasured trophies in the form of Indian war-bonnets, bows and arrows, spears and tomahawks, and in his wanderings about the room came upon a pair of beaded moccasins lying on the top of the family Bible, he made the remark—

“Dainty little Indian slippers! That bead-work is simply lovely! I wonder——”

He was about to examine them more closely when Martha Dutcher laid a restraining hand upon his arm.

“Quit touchin’ them, please,” she said gently. “Joe don’t like them to be touched.”

The stranger stood back obediently.

“What was you wonderin’?” questioned Martha.

“I was wondering if I might buy them and take them home to England,” returned the

visitor. "Do you suppose your husband would sell them?"

Martha shook her head.

"No," she answered decisively, "I'm certain sure he wouldn't. Nothin' would make him part with them—nothin'! They're—well, they're what you might call sacred," she added significantly; "sacred."

Nor was it any wonder that Joe Dutcher should cherish that pair of moccasins so tenderly, though he could not have needed such tokens to remind him of Star of the Morning and of what she did on that awful night. To him and to his, as the Redskins would say, they told many things. They were great medicine. They were sacred.

Somewhat late in the afternoon Peterkin had been riding homeward from Calgary, where he had been to see a lawyer concerning some concessions. On leaving the fort he had been warned that there were road-agents—highwaymen—lurking along the beaten trail, and, as he was in no great haste and did not wish to encounter such rough characters, he went aside from the track, riding round by the east of Cottonwood Ridge. Some-

thing, he could hardly have told what—maybe it was the flavour of burning pine-wood in the air, or the flight of a covey of sage-hens—drew him yet further from his straight course into the valley of the Elk Horn range, and it was here that he struck the trail of a big village of Indians.

He was greatly surprised. There had been no sign of Indians for months back. The police of Calgary and Fort McLeod had no knowledge that any had come out from their reservations among the Porcupine Mountains, but there, before Peterkin's eyes, was the trail of a travelling village, and he could not mistake it. He calculated that it was about two days old. A sandstorm of the day before had blown over it, but the downtrodden grass had not had time to rise or the broken cactus to lose its sap.

He followed the trail as far as the second fork of Little Bow River, and it was there in a secluded cañon hemmed in by mountains that he located a village of many tepees. They were the wigwams of a tribe of Black-foot and half-breeds. He could hear the beating of drums, the monotonous chanting

of many voices, with other sounds which told him that the warriors were engaged in a sundance. By that he knew that they meant business, and that it would not be long before they were out on the war-path.

So he tethered his pony and crawled nearer. Lying hidden in the long grass, he counted their ponies, and calculated that there were not so many but that the Indians would want to add to their number.

The Blackfeet were preparing to go out on a horse-raiding expedition. Peterkin thought of Joe Dutcher's crowded corrals at Lavender Ranch. Joe had been making a roundup. He had been buying ponies all along the trail. He had a herd of three hundred well-chosen mustangs, bronchos and Americans. Peterkin believed that the Blackfeet, scouting around, had got wind of these, and that they had planned to stampede them into their own camp.

Even as he watched, a crowd of armed warriors and braves in full war-paint came out, as if ready to start on a raid. Already Peterkin had waited too long. He was inside the ring of their pickets, and it was not

an easy matter to win back to his pony unseen. He had trouble with one of their scouts who had got on his track, but managed to slip by him, and in another hour he was riding at break-neck pace along the main trail.

In One Pine Hollow he espied a patrol of Blackfeet in ambush, and ran the gauntlet of their arrows. A squad of them headed him off and he galloped through a rain of arrows and rifle bullets. But they did no harm that he knew of; and, towards sundown, he was within sight of Lavender Ranch, racing up the cart track on a pony clammy with sweat and panting like a furnace.

It had been a ride to remember.

Star of the Morning met him at the porch as he slipped, exhausted, from the saddle.

"Say, Peterkin," she exclaimed, staring at him with great, tender eyes, and looking just the least bit frightened, "'t isn't often that you ride a pony to rags like this! What's wrong?"

She looked almost majestic as she stood there in the rosy glow of the setting sun, with the evening breeze sending her loose

black hair into ripples. Her beautiful face was a little paler than usual, and her eyes seemed to question him as if he had been guilty of cruelty to the horse, for to be cruel to any animal was in her eyes an unpardonable crime.

“What’s wrong?” he answered her lightly, holding in his breath to make her think that he wasn’t just winded. “Oh, nothing to speak of, Stella. Where’s Joe?”

She stepped to his pony’s haunch and drew an Indian arrow from the wounded flesh. A drop of blood fell from its point and splashed upon the toe of one of her moccasins.

“Of course, this isn’t anythin’ to speak of?” she said calmly. “Or this?” She plucked a second arrow from the folds of his cape. “’Tisn’t anythin’ at all to speak of—hardly worth mentionin’—that you’ve just escaped with your life from a band of Redskins!” She touched his cheek with the tip of her finger and showed him the colour of what he had thought was a trickle of perspiration. “Were they Blackfeet, Peterkin?” she inquired.

"Yes, if you're hankerin' to know," he responded; "they were Blackfeet."

"Where? And how many?" she then asked.

"Way back of One Pine Hollow," he told her. "'Bout a dozen, I'd say, more or less. Where's Joe?"

She signed to him to go into the house.

"I'll look after your pony," she said. "Slip indoors. Wash the blood off your face. Get somethin' to eat from the mother, and take the good rest that you need. Joe and the boys are at work in the corrals. Star of the Morning will give them the alarm. She understands. She is not blind."

"Alarm? About what?" he asked her. "There's no danger to speak of," he said, though he knew there was much, but he did not want to scare her.

Mrs. Dutcher gave him food when he had washed, and he could not hide from her or her daughter Dinah the fact that he had had a brush with the Indians, though he tried to make light of all possible danger. But for all that, they saw that he was anxious.

There were five women in the household :

Mrs. Dutcher, her invalid sister, her daughter Dinah, Star of the Morning, and the woman Jane, who did the rough chores, and it was on their account mostly that Peterkin was anxious.

He looked to the windows to see if they had strong shutters. From where he sat he could see out to the horse corrals, faced by a strong, high stockade that formed a half-circle against a wall of the cliff, the gate fronting the kitchen window. In the gun-rack near the kitchen fire-place he counted twelve Lee-Metford and Winchester rifles, and as many Enfield revolvers, and he knew that the sheriff was in the habit of keeping a good store of ammunition. He was comforted by the knowledge of these resources. Mrs. Dutcher must have seen him taking stock of the defences.

“You shapin’ ter ride home to Willow Bend t’night, Peterkin?” she inquired, cutting the top off his third fresh egg. He noticed that her hand was firm as a rock. She was a true woman of the Dominion, was Martha Dutcher, and could handle a gun as well as a man.

“Well, I dunno,” he said, with affected carelessness; “I reckon Ebenezer and Aunt Liza won’t fret theirselves any if I don’t turn up.”

“Ah,” she nodded, looking him steadily in the eyes. “Then you calculate there’s some danger here?”

“Guess there’s always a spice of danger when there’s Redskins prowlin’ around, Mrs. Dutcher,” he admitted, trying to force a smile.

It was then that the sheriff came in, followed by Star of the Morning, the four ranchmen, and Dinah’s sweetheart, Alf Hawthorne. And by the look on Joe Dutcher’s face it was easy to see that Peterkin’s warning had not been idle.

CHAPTER XII

STAR OF THE MORNING

“DROPPED on a trail of Injuns, I hear, Peterkin?” Joe began, wringing the boy’s hand with secret understanding. “Blackfeet, eh? Big village?”

“Yep,” Peterkin answered. “I notion there’d be no sort of harm in gettin’ ready, just in case, you know. Your ponies all right, Joe? Stockade all serene?”

“You bet,” returned Joe, slowly loading his pipe. “Gate’s double-barred on the inside. Ponies and cattle all corralled. Nothin’ short of a batterin’-ram could make a breach in the stockade.”

He drew Peterkin aside. They went out together into the open air. Peterkin told all that he knew, hiding none of his worst fears. They reviewed the situation as quietly and calmly as if they had been discussing the condition of the crops or the

market price of buffalo robes. The sheriff was always cool in an emergency.

"What's your plan?" he inquired. "Do you figure we ought to send for help to Calgary, Middle Crossing or Devil's Gate?"

"No," Peterkin advised. "Calgary is cut off from us by the Indians. They're lying about all around, and we're not blessed with telegraph wires yet. The ranches are too far, and whom could you send? You can't spare a man, or woman either. We've got to barricade the doors, the windows, leavin' loopholes to fire through. See that there's plenty of water in the house. Trot out all your ammunition. Get bandages and splints ready. At the first sign of the enemy, we can set a light to the timber-stack. It's ready to hand, and well away from the house. The fire will be seen from Richardson's camp, and Tony and his boys will come along—if they can."

"Good," agreed Joe. "I'll shove some light tinder in the wood-stack right now, and lay a train of dry hay. You see to the guns, Peterkin; set the boys and the women to their posts, and all that. Mother'll see to

the bandages and things. She knows what to do. She's been through it before. The Redskins'll be here before moonrise, if they're comin' at all. Guess they won't find us asleep."

For the next hour they were busy as beavers. Nothing was forgotten. And when all was ready, Joe read an appropriate Psalm and said a prayer suitable to the occasion.

Then it was that Peterkin made a proposal which had been simmering at the back of his head from the beginning.

"Joe," he said, "they'll be here inside an hour. Their scouts found me spyin' on their village, others gave me a chase through One Pine Hollow. They're bound to guess that I notioned to give the alarm. They won't waste a whole lot of time makin' the attack. They'll make for the corrals. The ponies are their object, not the homestead. They're not lookin' for scalps. But you're all fixed up now. Guess you can easily hold out for a couple of hours."

As he spoke he was tightening his belt. He turned to Star of the Morning. She

stood at his side and had listened to what he had said.

"Have you gotten that pony ready, Stella?" he asked her.

She smiled sadly.

"You'll find him in the small compound, back of the barn," she answered. "It's Black Peter, the best pony we've got on the ranch."

"Say, what's your notion, you two?" cried the sheriff, scenting a conspiracy. "Where are you thinkin' of goin', Peterkin? You ain't goin' to leave us in the lurch, eh? You ain't goin' home?"

Peterkin shook his head.

"Home?" he smiled grimly. "No. I'm going along to Calgary to fetch a handful of the Redcoats and as many boys as I can find. That's where I'm goin'—Calgary."

"You ain't," Joe protested warmly. "You'll do nothin' of the kind. You're the best shot we've got. We can't spare you. And, remember—there's five women to defend, one of 'em a bed-ridden invalid, another a helpless girl." He glanced aside at Stella. "You can't desert 'em, Peterkin. You can't abandon 'em—*women!*"

Peterkin breathed impatiently.

“But there’s a whole army of savages, Joe,” he objected obstinately. “Blackfeet and half-breeds. They’ll be on you like a pack of ravenous wolves. You can’t resist them for more than a couple of hours at the outside.”

“All the more reason why you should stay by like a man and fight,” the sheriff declared sternly. “You can’t be spared, Peterkin. That’s straight. You’ve got to stand in with us now.”

Peterkin saw the wisdom of the argument. Joe wanted him to stand by him and help protect the women and defend the homestead.

“Don’t suppose that I’m blind to the risks of the perilous journey you’d planned to take,” the sheriff pursued. “There’s less peril here than in taking that desperate ride of fifteen miles through wild mountainous country and open prairie, menaced in every mile by lurkin’ savages. I’m aware of the risk. But if you should be killed on the way, if you should fail to bring help, where’d be the good of your going?”

Joe was right. Peterkin could not be spared. Yet he fretted to go.

Then from beside him there came the whispered words as a little hand caught his in a firm clasp.

“You won’t desert us, Peterkin, will you?” And he turned to see the glistening eyes of Star of the Morning bent upon him in soft entreaty.

“No, Stella,” he resolved. “I ain’t goin’ t’ leave you. Never fear.”

He went to the door and slipped out to make certain, for the last time, that the barricades were secure, that no precaution had been neglected. He crept round and about the ranch buildings and steadings, listening to every little sound, searching through the darkness for signs of the enemy. Then he stood still, listening, listening.

Suddenly, in the silence, he caught a weird, far-off cry, as of a curlew, twice repeated from different quarters. He knew it. No bird had made that cry. It was the signal call of the Blackfeet. They were closing in upon the ranch. The moment had come. He returned indoors.

“They’re comin’, boss,” he said. “They’ve dismounted. They’re crawlin’ up through the long grass.”

As he spoke he strode up to the fire to light the torch which he had kept handy.

He turned to go out again, carrying the flaming brand, and, glancing aside, he saw Star of the Morning watching him—watching him intently, the while she was taking off her moccasins. She caught his eyes upon her. Holding his glance, she raised the points of the pretty little shoes to her lips. Then, crossing the room, she laid the moccasins reverently upon the open Bible.

Peterkin went out to do his work. Even while he was kindling the stubborn tinder in the wood-stack, he was wondering and wondering what the girl meant by leaving the moccasins in so strange a place. He was still wondering, when he was startled by something touching him. His free wrist was seized in trembling fingers, and he felt the pressure of warm lips upon the back of his hand.

“Stella! Stella! Go back! Back into the house!” he cried.

"I am going, Peterkin," he heard her murmur. She looked at him strangely by the dim light of his torch. "I am going," she repeated. And these were the last words that he ever heard her speak. Blind that he was, he did not guess her intention, did not dream of the heroic sacrifice that she was making for the sake of those whom she loved.

"I am going," she said. But she did not tell him where.

Before he got back into the homestead the dry hay and twigs were crackling noisily in the huge stack of timber. Amid this sound he heard the muffled beating of a horse's hoofs. From the upper windows in front of the house there came a sharp volley of rifle shots, followed by a wild Indian war-whoop of defiance. He rushed in, locking and barring the door behind him. The lights were all out; even the fire had been extinguished. In the darkness some one passed by him and went up the stairs. He believed it was Star of the Morning, going up to her appointed post at the east window with the rifle that had been served to her. When Peterkin looked forth through the loophole which com-

manded the verandah and the more distant gates of the horse corral, there was a flickering glow of light from the rising flames of the burning timber-stack.

Through the reflections he could distinguish several dark figures crawling nearer and nearer up the slope from the west side. Alf Hawthorne was at the pantry window. He was the first to open fire from the lower rooms. Mrs. Dutcher and two of the ranchmen were in the room above, and all five of them kept up a steady fire. Every shot told.

The Indians were making for the corral. It was the horses they wanted; but they soon discovered that it was useless for them to approach the high, spiked stockade under the constant rain of the bullets from the five Lee-Metford rifles so unerringly aimed. Not one of them got near; and, after a while, they turned to make a combined attack upon the homestead, as it had been expected that they would.

A few arrow shafts found their way through the loopholes. The Indians' bullets pattered against the walls. But the flames from the burning stack leapt higher and higher, casting

a bright glare all round, and the defenders could pick off the savages one by one as easily as if it had been day.

Some dared to crawl up to the door and to attack it with club and tomahawk. But Hawthorne's loophole commanded the porch and his revolvers kept the way clear. Once there was a lull in the firing up-stairs. A rifle clattered to the floor; there was a moan; something dripped through the ceiling. Peterkin guessed what it was; but the savages were massing in the open and he had no time to do more than keep on firing with gun after gun. Dinah had stiff work of it, emptying and refilling the magazines, shoving a fresh rifle in readiness in exchange for the one that was spent.

The fight was now all at the back of the house. With every moment it grew more fierce and deadly. Joe Dutcher came down-stairs to help at the lower loopholes, upon which the enemy were concentrating their fire.

"Isa Cook's done for," he reported grimly, as he took a position beside Peterkin. "And Will Gammage has lost the use of

his right arm. Martha's took his place. She's great!" He was firing steadily as he spoke. "D'you reckon the boys'll soon be coming from Richardson's?" he asked anxiously.

"There's only a poor handful of 'em at the best, even if they do come," murmured Peterkin. "Guess you ought to have let me ride along to the fort. We shall never get out of this, unless help comes soon. They're too many for us. Look at the gang of them over there against the trees! Say, we shall need some one to load up for us, now you're here. Where's Stella? Tell her to come."

"Stella?" Joe repeated blankly, looking round into the dark room through the mist of pungent powder smoke. "Ain't she here?"

"Here? No. She's up-stairs," Peterkin shouted, as a deafening storm of bullets and arrows rattled against the walls and a succession of heavy blows fell upon the door. "She's up at the east window."

"She ain't. No, she ain't," cried Joe in alarm. "Where is she? I've not seen her since the fight began."

Peterkin's brain whirled. The gun slipped from his arm. He clutched at the casement for support. Then he gasped for air and closed his eyes.

"You hit, Peterkin?" he heard some one say, as a mug of water was held to his lips. The cold drink revived him, yet his brain was still in a maze. One thought filled it—the thought of Star of the Morning and her dreadful peril. Where was she? Where could she be? In his perplexity he seized upon the awful possibility that in coming back into the house he had locked the door upon her and that she was even now outside, hiding perhaps in some corner of the steadings. He remembered the pony, Black Peter, which he had bidden her saddle for him. Had she delayed in order to put the horse into the temporary safety of the stable? Where was she?

Little need was there for him to ask himself the question. He knew, and had known instantly, the only possible answer.

"I am going, Peterkin," she had murmured, not daring to betray her secret purpose by a more pointed farewell; and he

knew now that, instead of coming back into the house, as he had bidden her do, she had stolen round to the small compound at the back of the barn, where Black Peter was waiting, that she had leapt astride of the pony and dashed off on her self-appointed mission to Calgary.

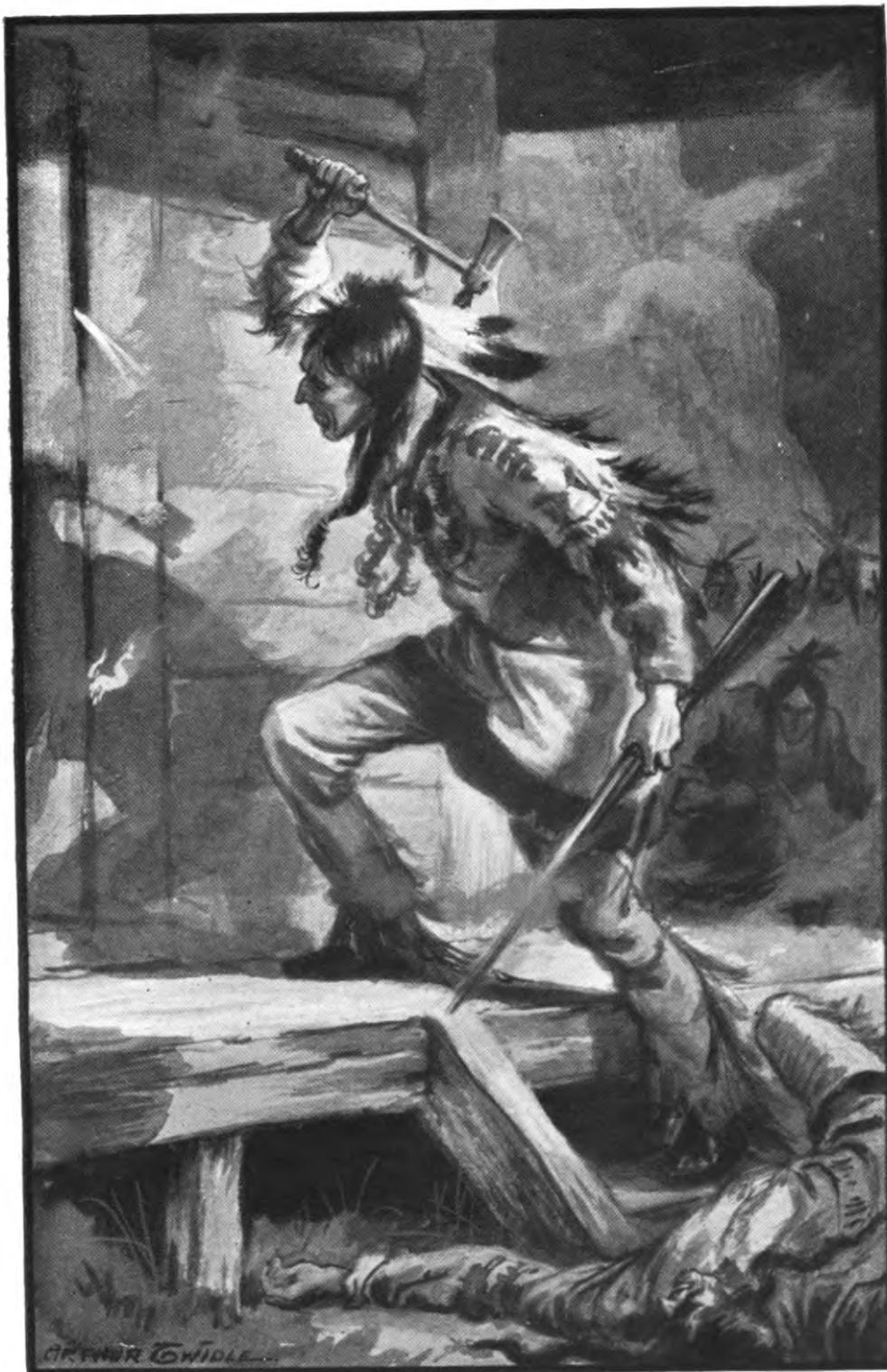
She had gone for help. She, an Indian, was risking her life among Indians, to bring succour to the whites!

Peterkin fancied that he could see the brave girl lying along the side of her galloping pony, boldly breaking through the ring of menacing savages, forcing her perilous way to escape them—perhaps falling a victim to their arrows. It was too late to save her now. She had taken her fate into her hands, to bring help, or to die in the attempt. Would she succeed? He dared hardly hope for so happy a result of her valour, but could only pray that God would guide the devoted girl into safety.

As he thought of her splendid courage, a frenzy overwhelmed him. He seized his gun and leapt to the loophole which he had deserted. Rifle after rifle he emptied and

emptied again, until at last there was but a poor handful of cartridges left. The savages pressed nearer, yelling, shrieking. The air was filled with their wild shouts and the ceaseless crack! crack! crack! of rifle and revolver: for it was fighting at short range now, and the defenders could do little but guard the loopholes, the doors, the windows, and keep the ferocious brutes from making an entry.

At the end of the second hour of the desperate conflict the defenders were failing. The Indians had divided their forces; some were attacking the house by door and window, others were crowding about the corral, battering the gates. Soon they would force a breach and stampede the horses. The ranchers could no longer prevent them. Their ammunition was dwindling, their strength was yielding. Three of the stockmen were dead, the fourth was wounded. Jane was blinded by a splinter, Mrs. Dutcher's nerve had given way, Dinah was exhausted. Even the sheriff himself was giving up hope and had put aside a reserve revolver for the awful, unspeakable end.



“THE INDIANS WERE ATTACKING THE HOUSE BY THE DOOR
AND WINDOW.

“Stick into it, sheriff,” cried Peterkin. “We’ve still got our knives, and the boys may come yet! If I’d gone along to the fort, they’d be here by now; and I reckon she’d do the journey as quick. Think of her, Joe. She’ll not fail.”

“Ah, God bless her, anyhow,” said the sheriff, plucking up new courage, and he blazed away with his six-shooter, resolute, merciless.

The fire of the wood-stack had burnt itself out by now, but the moon was shining.

“Stand by the door and be ready with your axes, boys!” commanded Joe. And Alf and Peterkin took up their stations, gripping their hatchets.

For a long time they waited and nothing happened. But suddenly they heard a great crash from the corral. There was a panic among the ponies, then at the same moment there came a yell from throats not Indian, and, running to the window loophole, Peterkin saw half-a-dozen of Richardson’s cowboys dashing across the open, firing right and left and driving the Redskins from the fallen gates. They were lost in the swaying

crowd; but soon three riderless ponies came out of the charge and the three that were left, with the brave boys in their saddles, came galloping down to the ranch house with a pack of yelling warriors riding at their heels.

Peterkin heard them fighting at the back of the barn. But soon a new sound broke upon his ears—the blast of a bugle, the galloping of heavy horses and the rattle of carbines.

“She’s done it, Joe!” cried Peterkin, flinging his axe aside. “She’s got through!” and he tore the casement open to look out into the moonlight as four of the red-coated Mounted Police from Calgary, leading a troop of volunteers, made a gallant, sweeping charge that was like a fierce prairie fire, devouring all that it met.

Lavendar Ranch was saved. Star of the Morning had done her splendid best!

But she never came back: though she tried. Yes, she tried. They had told her to stay at the fort; but she could not wait. She wanted to know if her friends at the

ranch were safe, to be sure that she had not risked her life in vain, and to busy herself with any wounded. She rode homeward on the trail of the men she had sent to the rescue.

Next morning, as she had not returned, Peterkin and Alf Hawthorne went out to search for her. Away back on the silent prairie they found her. There were five dead Indians lying about her. One of them still held the haft of his tomahawk in his fist; its other end was buried in the forehead of Black Peter. The girl's two revolvers were empty. She lay with arms outstretched. Her eyes, still open, looked up into the sky, where a lark was singing. An arrow stood upright from the whiteness of her neck. "I am going," she had said. She had gone.

And that was why Star of the Morning never returned to Lavender Ranch. All that remained of her there was a glorious memory—just a glorious, undying memory—and the beaded moccasins, whose sacred place was, where she had left them, on the top of the family Bible.

The defence of Lavender Ranch was the last of Peterkin's adventures in the far west of Canada. Shortly afterwards the suppression of the Riel Rebellion and the completion of the great railway across the Dominion put an end to all disturbances among the Indians, and the work of the North-West Mounted Police established a reign of peace throughout the land. Peterkin therefore laid aside his firearms, having no further use for them, and applied himself to the fulfilling of his ambition to become rich. It seemed to him that his best course was to continue at the diggings, but after a year or so of good fortune the claims ceased to be highly profitable, and in the meantime he had invested a large part of his wealth in the purchase of a ranch, which became far more productive than the gold mine, for it was one of the largest and most fertile in Southern Alberta.

So deeply engaged was he in agriculture that he delayed and still delayed his anticipated trip to England, always hoping to receive some word from Elsie Prescott, telling him that she had not forgotten him.

But at last, as no letter came, he decided to undertake the journey, leaving Jake Cheverill in charge of the ranch. He was so far determined that one day in the spring he took train to Regina in order to make full inquiries in preparation for his departure.

Always afterwards he regarded it as one of the most amazing incidents of his life that he should be in Regina railway station on that particular day. Surely some beneficent providence had been working in his favour or the thing could not have happened!

He was consulting with the station-master about the booking of his fare when the westward bound emigrant train from Montreal rolled in to the platform. Here many of the passengers for the smaller stations along the line between Regina and Fort McLeod had to change, and Peterkin studied them with interest, knowing that some of them were from England. There were men with their wives and children, come out to seek a living in the far west; young fellows who looked like farm hands or artisans, who had evidently emigrated in the hope of finding more profitable work in Canada than at

home; and girls, mostly of the domestic servant and dairymaid class. Among them were a few of the better sort, and Peterkin was puzzled to know why they had left their homes.

Standing apart beside her personal luggage and with her back towards him was a tall girl, whom he supposed might be a governess on her way to one of the growing towns where teachers were so much wanted. She held a violin case in her hand, and he conjectured that she was a music teacher. She seemed very lonely and friendless, and was apparently anxious concerning the train into which she was to change, for as a porter passed near her, she stepped forward to question him; but he went on hurriedly without attending to her. Then she turned round slowly and glanced at Peterkin, standing there dressed as a rancher in his wide felt hat, blue shirt and buckskin breeches, and spurred boots. He saw that she was very fair and beautiful, but he was too bashful to ask her if he might be of any help to her. He was about to move away when she appealed to him with the question—

“Can you tell me if I am on the right platform for the train going to Ash Hollow, please?”

He saluted her.

“Yes, miss; she’ll be along inside of quarter of an hour,” he answered, wondering why she was looking at him so curiously.

She withdrew her eyes from his face, and he saw her start as they rested for a moment on his watch-guard, from which was suspended the gold filigree ornament which Elsie Prescott had given to him as a keepsake.

“Ash Hollow’s one of the smallest stations along the line,” he told her. “There’s only half-a-dozen log huts in the whole place, besides the two ranches—Turley’s and—and mine. Guess it’s to Turley’s you’re goin’. Didn’t know they were expectin’ a visitor from England; ’specially while the two girls are away at Ottawa.”

“Away? Jess and Mary Anne away in Ottawa?” The girl’s look of disappointment was pathetic. “I ought to have written to tell them I was coming,” she said. “But

I intended to take them by surprise. If they are away from home, I had better get back into the train and go on to Savona."

As she spoke her eyes rested upon the filigree ornament hanging from his watch-chain. Then she raised her eyes to his face in curious perplexity, and he knew her, as she knew him.

"Peterkin!" she exclaimed. "It is you! I know it is you!"

"Elsie! Elsie Prescott!" he cried in confusion. "Say, what's brought you away from England? I was on the point of going there on purpose to find you. Guess I won't go now; not now that you're here in Canada. But I'm curious to know why you've left home, and why you're goin' to such an outlandish place as Savona."

"Home?" she repeated sadly. "I have no real home. I am poor—very poor. The money—all the money that was to have been mine—was lost in an unfortunate investment; and I have had to earn my own living. I am on my way now to British Columbia to take a situation as a music teacher."

"That's real brave of you, to come all this

way," said Peterkin. "I'm sorry for the people who engaged you, though; because they'll have to find another teacher instead of you. For you're not going to them, see? You're coming with me right now, to my new ranch house, where Aunt Liza'll look after you. That'll be your home now, and for as long as ever you like. And you won't need to do any work or think of earning your living. That's fixed."

Elsie demurred, but in the end Peterkin prevailed, and she went with him to his home on the sunny side of the mountain, and there she has remained to this day.

THE END

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