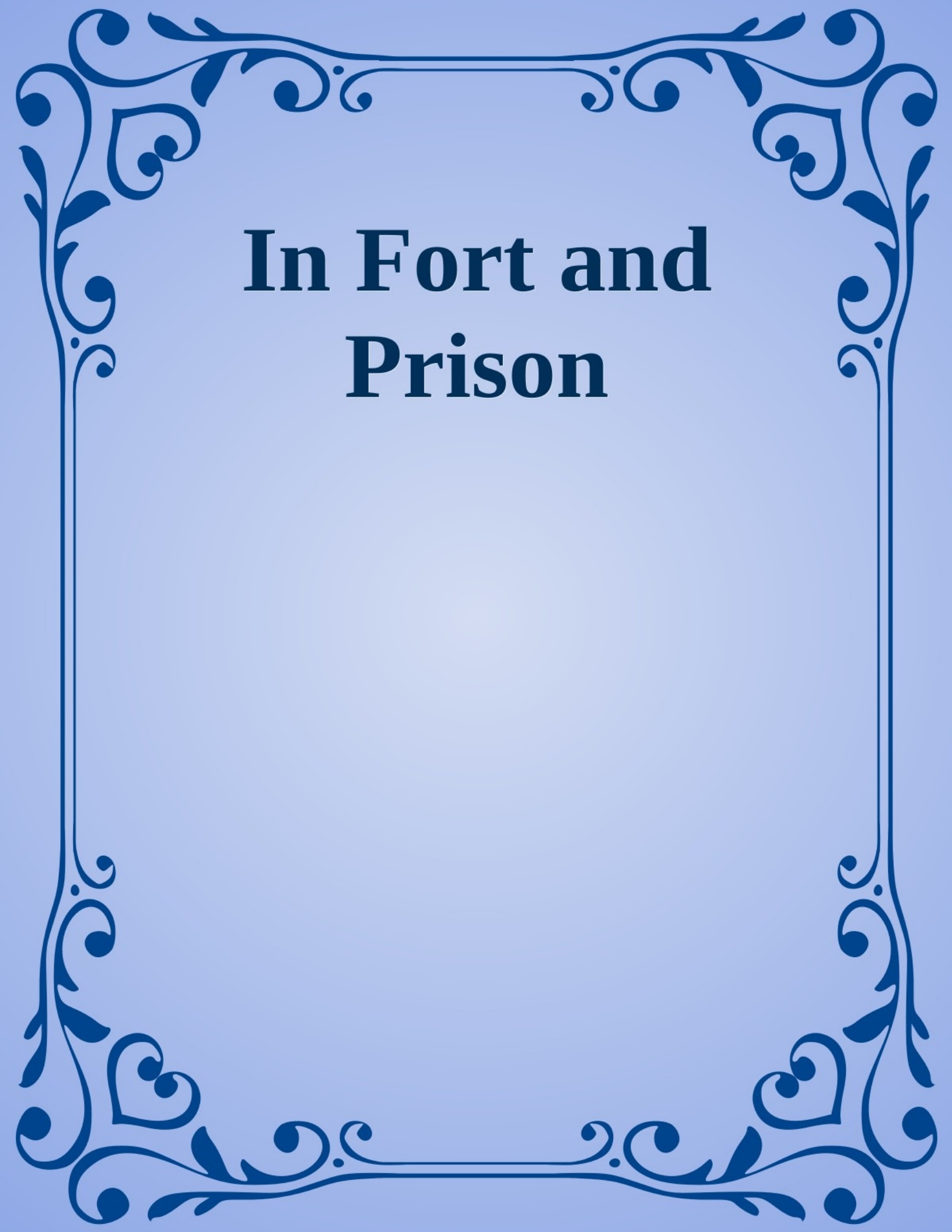


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In Fort and Prison

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Or, The Mystery of Larry Redmayne

by William Murray Graydon

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In Fort and Prison.

CHAPTER I

Eleven o'clock at night in Cincinnati. The April day had been mild and balmy, and the evening was like it. The theatres had just turned out their audiences, and the streets were gay with pleasure-seekers. Saloons, cafes and hotels shed the brilliance of noonday on the pavements from their flaring windows and lamps. Cabs rattled up and down under the electric lights.

A burly policeman, idly swinging his club, was pacing slowly through a dark alley that lay in the rear of one of the main streets. As he reached the entrance to a small, paved court, he was arrested by shrill cries and the tinkle of broken glass. The sounds came from a lighted window that opened on the rear of the court, six feet above the ground. The next instant sash and blind were thrown up, and two lads dropped nimbly into the court. Favored by the darkness, they slipped by the officer, and gaining the alley, shot off at full speed.

The indignant guardian of the law shouted lustily and gave chase, but a protruding cobblestone brought him full length to the pavement. By the time he had gathered himself up, his club, his helmet and a leather-cased pocket flask, pursuit was out of the question.

The fugitives, meanwhile, had separated involuntarily at the first corner, one dashing to the right, the other to the left. The latter did not stop running until he was on the main street. Here he felt reasonably secure, and after strolling for a block or two through the crowd he hailed a passing horse car, and got aboard.

And while he is rolling toward his destination, a brief pen picture of him will not come amiss. Larry Redmayne was a little more than seventeen years old, though his tall, well-knit figure belied his age. His features were handsome and clear-cut. He had ruddy cheeks, light blue eyes, and yellowish-brown hair. His clothes were of fashionable cut, and fitted him perfectly.

Larry was sufficiently master of himself to hide the anxiety that he felt, and during the ride he looked calmly out of the window. He left the car at the beautiful and aristocratic suburb of Walnut Hills, and a short walk brought him to a handsome stone house, inclosed by terraced grounds. He opened the front door with a key, and closed it softly after him; a dim light was burning in the hall.

“I wonder whether Dan is home yet,” he muttered. “If he is, I’ll bet anything he has doctored up some lie for uncle. As usual, I’ll be the one to catch it.”

After a brief delay, Larry started up the stairs with great caution. Nevertheless, his approach was heard, for when he reached the second floor a voice called loudly from an apartment on the right:

“Lawrence, is that you?”

Larry paused, but did not answer. The next instant the door was flung open, flooding the hall with light, and a tall, clean-shaven gentleman, with sparse black hair, appeared on the threshold. He quickly discovered Larry, and, seizing him by the collar, he dragged him roughly into the room. He shook him several times, and then dropped him into a chair.

“Give an account of yourself, you rascal,” he cried.

Having thus vented his wrath, it seemed to occur to Mr. Matthew Redmayne that such conduct ill became one of the most wealthy and influential brokers of Cincinnati. He stiffened up, and glared vindictively at his nephew.

Larry struggled to his feet, flushed with a passion that he could scarce control. He boldly met his uncle’s gaze, and then looked meaningly at his Cousin Dan, a handsome lad of his own age, who was standing at the opposite side of the luxurious, lamp-lit library. Dan did not return the glance, but looked uneasily at the floor.

“Well, you dissipated young scapegrace,” thundered Mr. Redmayne, taking a step toward Larry. “Have you no sense of shame or remorse? Is this the way you repay my kindness in giving you a home and an education—by leading my son into evil courses, and bringing disgrace upon both of us? Do you know that the police are upon your track? This is the last straw. To think that you should be mixed up in a low tavern brawl! I won’t screen you, sir. You shall pay the penalty of your folly, whatever it may be, and then you shall make your own living by hard work. In justice to myself, I cannot permit you to have any further intercourse with my son. You have done your best to ruin him, and the seeds you have sown will not be easy to eradicate.”

Larry’s face hardened as he listened to this scathing tirade, and his bearing became even more defiant.

“You are accusing me unjustly, Uncle Matthew,” he said. “Heretofore I have borne all the blame, but I will do so no longer. I have never used any influence to lead Dan into trouble. The mistake I made was in yielding to everything that Dan proposed. I see it now, when it is too late. I am not guiltless, but I won’t be treated as though I was the chief and only culprit. Nor am I to blame for what happened tonight.

“Come, Dan,” he said, appealingly, to his cousin. “Be a man, and tell the truth. Is it fair that I should shield you always?”

Dan nervously thrust his hands into his pockets, and stared straight at the opposite wall. His manner betrayed his cowardly and sneaking disposition.

“I expected nothing else,” angrily cried Mr. Redmayne. “You have resorted to falsehood to clear yourself, Lawrence, but it won’t avail you. My son is too manly to accuse you from his own lips.

“Don’t be afraid to speak, Daniel,” he added. “Let us hear you relate what occurred tonight.”

“I don’t see the use of going over it again,” muttered Dan, petulantly. “I told it once, but if you insist—”

“I do insist,” interrupted the father.

“Well, all there is of it is this: Larry and I went down to Parker’s saloon this evening with Jim Hallis and Arthur Mattram. We have been in the habit of going there for a good while. We were playing cards in the back room, and—and drinking. Larry and I caught Jim Hallis cheating, and accused him of it. He denied it, and Mattram sided with him. A fight began, and Mattram jumped up, and put out the gas. A glass was thrown from our side of the table, and it cut Hallis badly on the face. Parker ran in with a light, and said the police were coming. Larry and I jumped out of the back window, and cut in different directions. That’s all I know.”

Mr. Redmayne groaned aloud, and paced the room several times.

“What have you to say for yourself, Lawrence?” he demanded. “Nothing, of course. My son has only repeated a part of what he told me before. Through a mistaken sense of chivalry he tries to screen you. It was you who first persuaded

him to go to Parker's, and taught him to drink and gamble. You murderously threw the glass that struck down young Hallis. Ungrateful reprobate! Little did I think, when I took pity on your tender years and friendless condition, that I was nursing a viper in the bosom of my family—a viper that would one day turn and sting his benefactor.”

Mr. Redmayne paused, unconsciously—or purposely—striking a highly tragic attitude.

“Stop, Uncle Matthew,” cried Larry, with flashing eyes. “This is false—every word of it. If Dan told you that, he lies.”

Mr. Redmayne glared at the indignant lad, and then turned to his son.

“I believe I understood you rightly, Daniel. I have repeated correctly what you told me, have I not?”

Dan looked furtively from Larry to his father.

“Yes, sir,” he replied, in a low tone.

“Did you throw that glass?”

“No, sir; I did not.”

“Could young Mattram have thrown it?”

“No, sir. He was beside Hallis.”

“Who did throw it, then?”

“I would rather not tell, sir.”

Mr. Redmayne turned triumphantly to his nephew.

“This interview has gone far enough,” he said, sternly. “You have added willful lying to your other sins. I will not lift a finger to save you from arrest and punishment, since, in that event, no influence of mine could avert a public exposure. If, by any chance, the affair goes no further, I shall turn you out of doors, and apprentice you to some trade suited to your low tastes. That is the

most you can expect from me. You shall never cross this threshold again, nor hold any communication with Daniel or myself. You have blindly thrown away an honorable and prosperous future.”

Mr. Redmayne paused for want of breath, and pointed to the door.

Larry disregarded the hint. Maddened beyond endurance by the ignominy and injustice of his position, he clinched his fists and rushed at Dan.

“You cringing sneak and liar,” he cried. “I’ll teach you a lesson.”

Dan discreetly took refuge behind a chair, and thence dodged to the desk.

“What! Do you dare assault my son, you young desperado?” thundered Mr. Redmayne. He seized a cane, and struck Larry on the arm.

The blow was a severe one, but the lad never winced. He stopped short, and the color forsook his cheeks, leaving them of an ashen pallor. In his eyes was a look before which even the angry broker quailed.

For a moment there was utter and ominous silence.

“Dan, I give you one last chance to speak the truth. You can clear me, if you will. Have I ever persuaded you to go wrong? Did you throw the glass tonight, or did I?”

Larry’s voice was hoarse and unnatural.

Dan looked frightened, and had he been left to himself he might have retracted.

But his father’s eyes were fixed sternly upon him, and he replied, almost inaudibly:

“You have led me to do a good many things, Larry. As for the glass, I have said before that I did not throw it.”

“Liar!” muttered Larry, in a tone of the utmost scorn.

He strode to the door, but paused on the threshold and turned around.

“Uncle Matthew,” he said, “the day will come when you will be sorry for this

unjust treatment. You have always been generous—I admit that—but I never knew the love of a father or mother, and if I have gone astray that has had much to do with it. You cared for your own son, which was quite natural; but you always hated me, and that I don't understand. Dan and I were left pretty much to our own devices, and it is little wonder that we got into bad habits. I think I always had a pretty clear sense of right and wrong, and I did my best to keep Dan straight. I felt that it was my duty to you. All that I received for my pains was ridicule and contempt, and whenever we got into a scrape the entire blame was heaped on me. Of late I have foolishly allowed myself to be drawn into everything that he proposed, though I have never stopped urging him to give up his loose habits and dangerous companions. If Dan was manly enough to speak, he could clear me in your eyes. Not that it could make any difference now; for I will never forgive the blow you struck me. I should like to know why you have always hated me so bitterly, but I don't suppose there is any use in asking. You have persistently refused to speak of my early life, and I know no more about my father or mother than if I never had any. But I revere their memory—dim as it is—and I know what a misfortune it was to lose them in infancy. Did my father ever do you a wrong, that you should show so plainly your hatred and aversion for me? Did he make no provision for me? Have I been dependent upon your charity all my life?"

A sudden look of dread appeared on Matthew Redmayne's face, but it quickly gave way to an expression of rage and hatred.

"You impudent scoundrel," he cried. "How dare you catechise me? Your parents left you nothing—nothing, If I chose to tell you what I know of them you might blush for shame at the tale. Begone! Out of my sight!"

Three steps brought Larry face to face with his uncle.

"For shame!" he cried, passionately. "Would you slander the dead? Of one thing I feel sure—not the slightest taint of dishonor rests on my parents. Some day I will penetrate the mystery of my life. Some day I will know all—all."

Matthew Redmayne staggered back, white and gasping; but Larry had already turned, and did not notice his uncle's agitation. He marched defiantly from the room, closing the door behind him.

CHAPTER II

When Larry reached his own room his fortitude gave way, and the tears came with a rush. He bit his lip fiercely, and was presently successful in checking them. He had passed through a severe ordeal, and yet not an unexpected, one. For months past he had foreseen what would happen, but now that the blow had actually fallen he was a little stunned by the force of it. He paced the floor for a time, chafing under the sense of his wrongs and unjust treatment.

By and by he grew calmer, and, dropping into a chair by the window, he buried his face in his hands. In a dreamy way he reviewed his past life, recalling link after link of the brief and uneventful chain. Of his infancy there existed only a few dim shadows that he could never grasp tangibly—a tall bronzed man; a sweet-voiced woman; a glimpse of salty waves and of a great vessel. That was all. Then came a period almost equally as vague, connected with impressions of his Cousin Dan and of a motherly old woman who was constantly with them both. The next links were clear enough. The place resolved itself to his uncle's roomy house in the suburbs of Cincinnati, and the old woman was superseded by a housekeeper, two or three servants and a governess who wore glasses. This was his Uncle Matthew's first appearance, and Larry remembered the strained relations that had existed between them, even so far back as that.

Various other things crowded rapidly into his mind—first school days; the temptations of city life when he and Dan were free to follow their bent; the ill-concealed aversion of his uncle, which made him often long for the love and care that other boys enjoyed; the later period of reckless scrapes at home and at boarding school; and finally the gradual downward path leading to drink, cards and evil associates that he had followed laggingly under the influence of Dan's headstrong nature, and yet with the sincere but vain hope of reclaiming his cousin. He now realized and repented of his weakness. The memory of the many occasions when he had borne the brunt of misdeeds that were not his own was especially bitter; since the fruits of his self-sacrifice had culminated in Dan's last crowning act of ingratitude and falsehood.

This recalled Larry to the present, and broke his reveries. He was fully resolved to run away, and put into execution a plan that he had often considered.

He was too sensible a lad to be blind to the advantages of such a home as he

possessed, and he was far from elated with the future that stared him in the face. But no other course was possible. He could not forgive the cruel blow—which still tingled on his arm—and the idea of being apprenticed to some trade was intensely abhorrent to him. There was a great deal of natural pride in his composition, and in spite of his wayward life, he had been an apt scholar. But these were minor things when compared with the danger of arrest that confronted him. Nor was the danger an imaginary one; for he knew that the police had doubtless arrested Hallis and Mattram, and that the cowardly fellows would not hesitate to make a clean breast of the affair. Moreover, he realized his utter inability to acquit himself of the charge of throwing the glass. Dan had shifted the act upon his cousin, and no evidence to the contrary could be hoped for.

When the clock struck two, Larry's resolve was fixed. He arose to his feet, and began to overhaul the clothes in the bureau drawers.

“Good-by to the old life,” he said to himself. “I hope I'll make a better success of the new one. Some day I'll come back with an honorable record and a commission, and if Uncle Matthew still refuses to tell me about my parents I will devote the rest of my life to finding out. I believe there is some mystery or secret at the bottom of it all, and it shall be my duty to clear it up. Look out for yourself, Uncle Matthew, if you have done me or them any wrong. I shan't forget how you slurred the memory of the dead.”

Larry put on his oldest suit of clothes—one that he was accustomed to wear on fishing excursions—and pocketed his watch, a few little trinkets and what money he possessed, amounting to a little over five dollars. Donning a slouch hat and a light gray overcoat, he turned out the gas, and left the room. All was dark and silent, as he cautiously descended to the second floor.

He moved on to the front staircase, and had barely reached it when the door bell pealed loudly through the house. Larry was sick with dread for an instant. He firmly believed that the police had come to arrest him. There was no time to lose if he would escape, and a plan quickly formed in his mind. He crept to an unoccupied room in the rear of the house, and lifting a window, stepped out on the roof of the back porch. The bell rang a second time, and he heard doors opening and voices calling. He hastily slid down one of the pillars to the yard, and thence ran to the stable. The coachman slept overhead, but he was not likely to waken.

Larry passed safely through the building, and gained the narrow alley at the rear. He felt considerably relieved now, and at a slower pace he made his way by various turns to a street some distance from his uncle's house. It was too late to catch a car; so he trudged along on foot. An hour later he reached a remote and somewhat squalid part of the city. He paid for a lodging at a second-class hotel, and was soon sleeping off the fatigue caused by the exciting incidents of the night.

He was out of bed at six o'clock, and daylight rather strengthened than diminished his resolve. He felt a curious sense of freedom and elation as he ate, with keen appetite, a breakfast that he would have scorned on other occasions.

As the reader has probably guessed, it was Larry's purpose to become a soldier.

Moreover, it was the only course that now offered him a safe way out of his troubles.

True, he had hoped vaguely to enter the army some day as an officer through the medium of West Point; but he consoled himself with the reflection that by earnest attention to duties, and through his education, he would be promoted in the natural course of events. What mattered a year or two more or less? He had little or no idea of the hardships and humiliations to be faced by enlisting as a private.

With steadfast purpose, Larry pulled his slouch hat over his forehead, and made his way to the recruiting office. The sergeant on duty outside speedily conducted him upstairs to the recruiting officer. He briefly stated his wish, and gave his age as eighteen—not, however, without a twinge of conscience, though he regarded the falsehood as necessary and pardonable under the circumstances.

Perhaps business had been slack of late, or, what was more likely, the officer was impressed with Larry's frank and handsome face. At all events, he demanded no certificate of moral character, nor did he ask any unpleasant questions. He jestingly hinted that a disappointment in love might have had something to do with the young applicant's desire to enlist, and to this Larry replied by forcing an expression of deep melancholy.

A physical examination followed, and Larry proved to be above the required average of height and weight. He easily satisfied the officer that his education was all that could be desired, and surprised him by his intelligent answers.

The necessary formalities were now over, and the oath of service was given and taken. Larry was duly enlisted in the United States Infantry for a term of five years. His pay was thirteen dollars per month, and he had the privilege of buying his discharge at the end of one year's service, or having it presented to him by the government at the end of three; provided he served honestly and faithfully.

Well, the step was taken beyond recall, and Larry tried to view his new future hopefully. In company with several other recruits he spent the three days at the enlistment office, voluntarily instructing himself in military tactics. During this time he did not stir out of doors, nor did he venture to read any of the city's newspapers. Already his old life seemed a thing of the dim past.

Then he and his companions were taken to Columbus Barracks by a non-commissioned officer, and here he found out what enlistment really meant. At times he bitterly deplored his rashness, and longed to be back at his uncle's house. His companions were uncongenial and distasteful to him, and in his heart he felt himself far above them.

However, he persevered in spite of many a snub and insult, and made rapid progress in his duties. He learned all the first principles of a soldier—how to march, drill and to handle a gun.

After eight weary weeks at the Columbus Barracks, Larry was transferred, with a batch of thirty fellow soldiers, to Fort Snelling, Minnesota, one of the oldest military posts in the country. The men were assigned to different companies of the regiment that was stationed there and Larry found himself in Company B, commanded by Captain Kenrick. Though he had hoped for a less civilized post, he was not ill pleased with his new location. The fort was picturesquely built on a high, triangular bluff formed by the junction of the Mississippi and Minnesota Rivers, and commanded a grand view of the surrounding country. With good rations, sociable comrades and comfortable quarters, Larry found life far easier than at Columbus Barracks, in spite of the steady routine of drilling and guard duty.

CHAPTER III

It was the middle of June when Larry arrived at Fort Snelling, and he quickly made himself popular. He accomplished this mainly by his cheerful and obliging nature, and by resolutely facing the fact that he stood on precisely the same level with his fellow soldiers. Nevertheless, a certain touch of hauteur cropped out here and there, while his superior education was quickly recognized.

The men liked him all the better for this, since they perceived that he had the good sense to adapt himself to present circumstances.

With one exception, the officers of Company B were well disposed toward the young recruit. This exception was Captain Kenrick, who had enlisted at an early age, an uncouth and ignorant private, and worked himself up step by step through unflagging attention to his duties, and a dogged perseverance in the face of difficulties. He was a self-made officer, and cherished a secret contempt for the men who had won their shoulder-straps at West Point. He hated Larry from the first, partly because of the lad's popularity among the men—a thing he had never enjoyed—and his polished bearing and manners; but mainly because he saw in the new recruit the promise of rapid promotion without the laborious stages which he himself had been compelled to go through.

Larry soon discovered that he had an enemy in Captain Kenrick, and though the knowledge put him on the alert, he was frequently reprimanded in coarse language garnished with oaths, and was compelled to endure all sorts of insults that were terribly trying to his proud nature. He bore all this as patiently as possible; for he saw that Captain Kenrick wished to force him to an outbreak that would render him liable to severe punishment.

Another member of Company B shared Larry's discomforts to a certain extent. Miles Lascelles was a tall, handsome fellow of about thirty, with a drooping blonde mustache that was the envy of his comrades. Like Larry, he was educated and polished, and he had evidently seen better days. Captain Kenrick hated both privates on the same grounds, but he was more guarded in his treatment of the elder man.

Larry and Miles Lascelles were in the same mess, and notwithstanding the difference in their ages they became fast friends. With the frankness of youth

Larry made a complete confidant of his companion, but Lascelles did not return it in like measure. He was evidently unwilling to speak of the minute details of his past life, though he confided to Larry, from time to time, that he was English by birth, a younger son of an old family, and a graduate of Oxford University.

“I inherited a pot of money when I came of age,” he remarked once, “and, like a fool, I played ducks and drakes with it. Well, I had my fling, and a sad mess I made of it. For the last seven years I have knocked about in every corner of the world; and now I’m trying to make a man of myself. Poverty forced me to enlist. It was either that or dishonor, and I couldn’t be a rascal. So I took Uncle Sam’s shilling a year ago, and here I am. Cheer up, my boy, we’ll carry swords some day in spite of that brute Kenrick.”

Larry was at first a little doubtful as to the advisability of becoming intimate with such an apparent ne’er-do-well, but he could not resist the other’s genial nature.

One afternoon, toward the close of July, Larry and Miles Lascelles procured leave of absence until tattoo—which was at nine-thirty—and went down to St. Paul.

They returned on an electric car, but got off opposite the fort in order to cross the bridge on foot.

When they were nearly over, Lascelles pulled out his watch.

“Just nine o’clock,” he remarked. “We have half an hour yet. What do you say to a swim, Redmayne? The water will be deliriously cool tonight.”

“I feel just in the humor,” replied Larry; “but are you sure we have time enough? You know what is liable to happen if we get in after tattoo.”

“Trust me for that,” said Lascelles, confidently. “I’m not fool enough to give Kenrick such a chance to jump on us.”

“Come on, then!” assented Larry. “Walk faster.” They gained the end of the bridge, and having descended the bluff in the darkness, they came to an ideal bathing place—a pebbly beach screened by dense bushes and timber. Hastily stripping off their clothes they plunged into the water. Both were excellent and fearless swimmers, and they enjoyed the sport keenly. Lascelles swam out

toward mid-channel, splashing and diving like a porpoise. Larry stuck closer to the shore. The water was more chilly than he had expected, and moreover he was not familiar with the currents or the bottom.

“Say, Miles, don’t you think it is time to go in?” he called.

“In a moment,” floated his companion’s voice from the distance. “Come out here, Redmayne, and I’ll race you to shore.”

Larry hesitated an instant, and then succumbed to the temptation.

“All right.” he shouted, as with leisurely strokes he headed for mid-channel.

He had gone but a few yards when a sharp cry rang in his ears. He knew instantly what it meant. His companion was drowning.

“Help! Help!” came Lascelles’ voice from the gloom ahead.

Then came a gurgling sound that chilled Larry with horror.

For one brief instant there was a terrific struggle in the lad’s mind. Should he imperil his own life by trying to save his companion—a man much stronger and heavier than himself? It was ten to one they would both be drowned.

But only for an instant did he waver between cowardice and heroism.

“Keep up, Miles,” he cried. “I’m coming.”

He shouted cheerily as he swam with quick overhand strokes toward the dark object dimly visible on the water; and a faint voice answered, bidding him make speed.

None too soon he reached the struggling man, and with one hand grasped him by the hair.

“No—not that,” gasped Lascelles. “Swim on, lad, and let me take hold of your shoulder. I can keep myself up. I had a bad cramp, but it—it’s going away now.”

His voice was weak and broken, and he shivered with cold.

Larry shifted his position, and tried to swim for shore with Lascelles clinging to

his shoulder. But the attempt was vain, and the swift current carried them both down stream. The bridge and the fort faded in the distance, and soon they were below the point of the bluff. Both shouted for help, but their hoarse cries brought no response.

A musical sound floated over the water, and died away in echoes. It was the bugler blowing the tattoo.

“I’m giving out,” panted Larry. “There’s no hope, Miles. It’s all up with us.”

“Just a minute yet,” whispered Lascelles, feebly. “The cramp is gone, and my strength is coming back, I’ll save us both. Ah! Look there!” he added, in a shriller voice. “It’s a boat, Larry. We are saved.”

A dark object had suddenly loomed into view twenty yards ahead, and as they shouted together they heard the splash of oars, and an answering cry.

The boat reached the spot in the very nick of time, for Larry’s head had already gone under twice when strong arms pulled him over the gunwale, and landed Lascelles beside him.

The rescuers were two fishermen returning to St. Paul after a day’s outing.

By the time Lascelles was able to explain matters the boat had drifted a good half-mile with the current. The men quickly headed it around, however, and pulled with all speed for the bluff, landing, finally, within a few yards of the pebbly beach. The worthy fellows refused to entertain the promise of a reward, and pulled off without waiting for the thanks they had earned so well.

Larry and his companion felt no ill effects from their terrible experience other than cold and weakness. They rubbed warmth into their limbs, and then dressed in haste.

“I’m not much of a hand at putting my feelings into words, Redmayne,” said Lascelles, in a husky voice; “but I shan’t ever forget what you did tonight. You saved my life—and saved it at the double risk of your own. It was a brave deed.”

“You would have done as much for me,” answered Larry, modestly. “Suppose we let the matter drop.”

“Well, but I shan’t forget, you know,” replied Lascelles.

Silently and slowly they toiled up the bluff, and walked briskly toward the bastions of the fort. Lascelles struck a match, and glanced at his watch.

“An hour after time,” he said; “but it can’t be helped.”

“We are likely to spend the night in the guardhouse,” remarked Larry, in a rueful tone.

Lascelles laughed grimly.

“It will be a sad disappointment to our worthy captain when he finds what a good excuse we have. I rather enjoy the prospect.”

Larry was cheered by this view of the matter, and pressed on with lighter steps. They passed the first sentries, and as they neared the blockhouse an officer advanced from its shadow. It was Captain Kenrick. He had evidently been on the watch for the delinquents.

“What does this mean?” he demanded, passionately, and with a choice string of oaths. “How do you account for your tardiness, Privates Redmayne and Lascelles? Tattoo was sounded an hour ago.”

Lascelles briefly and concisely explained.

“You lying dogs!” thundered the captain. “Don’t try to impose such a tale upon me. You have been loafing in some low drinking shop. Don’t deny it. You shall have a taste of the guardhouse for this.”

“My companion has told the truth, sir,” said Larry, striving hard to choke down his indignation. “I can bear witness to that.”

The lad’s forced calmness only enraged the captain the more.

“You mutinous dog, do you dare answer me back?” he roared, striking Larry a severe blow with the flat of his sword.

This was the last straw.

Maddened beyond control, Larry sprang forward, and before Lascelles could check him, he had planted his fist in Captain Kenrick's face, and wrested the sword from his hand.

"Take that!" he cried.

CHAPTER IV

The blow was delivered with such muscular force that Captain Kenrick staggered backward several paces; he quickly recovered himself, and stood erect.

Lascelles sprang between the two, and his face was white and startled as he turned to Larry.

“What have you done, youngster?” he whispered, hoarsely. “It’s all up with you now, I fear. You played right into his hands.”

But words were not needed to waken Larry into a sense of what he had done. Repentance had been almost simultaneous with action, and a look of unutterable horror was in his eyes as he glanced from Lascelles to Captain Kenrick, and then at the latter’s sword, which he had wrested from him by violence. He realized the enormity of his offense, and the dread consequences that it would entail—disgrace, punishment and summary end to the military advancement he had hoped for. He bitterly deplored that brief moment of passion; for he knew that the provocation would count for little before the rigid inquiry of a court-martial.

With lightning-like rapidity these stinging reflections passed through Larry’s mind, and now he shivered with dread when Captain Kenrick’s voice rang loudly and imperiously through the night:

“Corporal of the guard!”

The captain stood just where his staggering steps had landed him. His arms were folded across his breast, and a ruddy mark on his cheek showed the imprint of Larry’s fist. Blended with the glance of hatred and anger that he turned upon the culprit was a touch of exultant triumph. It had doubtless been his express design that this thing should happen; at last he was in a position to grind under foot this aristocratic young private who had incurred his bitter enmity.

The sentry, stationed close by, had silently witnessed the affair without moving from his post. Now, as in duty bound, he seconded his superior officer’s summons, and again the harsh cry echoed over the bluff:

“Corporal of the guard!”

A response was not long delayed. Lights flashed in the direction of the guardhouse, and hurrying footsteps rang on the hard-trodden ground.

For an instant Larry meditated escape, and glanced around to see what chances were in his favor. The sentry read the lad's thoughts, and drew back the hammer of his rifle with a sharp click. Lascelles read them, too, and made a quick gesture of dissent.

"No use," he whispered, almost inaudibly, "you would be shot down right away. The sentry is one of those fellows who are always trying to curry favor with the captain. I know him for a cringing sneak."

"Drop the sword, Redmayne," he added, anxiously. "Drop it at once."

But Larry was too confused to heed or understand the warning, and so it happened that he still held the weapon in his hand when the corporal of the guard arrived breathlessly on the scene.

Captain Kenrick vouchsafed a few curt words of explanation, and then added:

"Take both men to the guardhouse. I will prefer charges in the morning."

The corporal took the sword from Larry and restored it to its owner. The relief arrived at this moment, and the prisoners were quickly marched off, followed by a sneering smile from Captain Kenrick. They had no opportunity to exchange words on the way, and in a brief time they found themselves in separate cells of the guardhouse. Such was the unexpected termination of their pleasure trip to St. Paul.

Larry's brain was in a whirl of conflicting emotions when the door clanged dismally behind him. At one moment he exulted in his muscular vindication of the insults that had been heaped upon him; at another he felt that he would give anything could he only have the affair to go through over again.

"I might have known that Captain Kenrick was purposely trying to provoke me," he muttered. "By keeping my temper and submitting to the blow I could have baffled his designs. Well, it is too late to think of that now."

He paced the floor until he was exhausted, and then dropped down on the hard bed to meditate in quiet.

Through the grated window of his cell came the monotonous tread of the sentry, and scraps of conversation were wafted from the adjoining room where the members of the guard were chatting away their hours of duty.

When Larry's excitement had cooled down a little he began to take a more rosy view of the situation. With the sanguine spirit of youth he discerned rays of hope in the future that had been quite invisible before. He knew that the crime of assaulting an officer—while punishable by death during war—was regarded with far less severity in times of peace. In passing sentence upon such cases the members of the court-martial were permitted to use their discretion. In this particular case their decree would surely be lenient. How could it be otherwise? It would be shown that the prisoner's excuse for tardiness was a good and true one—that he had been grossly provoked to anger—that the officer himself had been guilty of profanity and brutality.

"This may be the best thing for me that could have happened, after all," remarked Larry to himself, as he wound up his soliloquies. "I may escape with a reprimand, or a few days in the guardhouse; and if the trial shows up the petty insults that I have been compelled to endure, I stand a good chance of being transferred to another company, where I shall have a chance to rise above the ranks."

The outcome of the scrape having been thus pleasantly diagnosed, Larry felt his mind at ease; for he knew that Lascelles could be held for nothing more serious than absence after tattoo, and would probably be discharged in the morning. So he fell asleep, and knew no more until he was called for breakfast.

But with daylight Larry's roseate dream had faded. He remembered that courts-martial were rarely convened until the expiration of a month after the offense had been committed. It was a dismal outlook, indeed—four weeks of solitary confinement in the guardhouse.

Such, however, proved to be Larry's fate, and we will touch briefly on the trying period that followed his arrest. Day succeeded day with painful monotony. He listened morning and evening to the strains of the regimental band, and longed to be free. He tried to get interested in the books and papers that were furnished him, but with little avail. He longed for a glimpse of Lascelles' kindly face or the sound of his frank, jovial voice that he missed so greatly. It was impossible to procure any news of his friend, or to learn what was transpiring in the outer

world. The guards would answer no questions. Frequently members of Larry's own company were among them, but the constant presence of others in the guardroom effectually prevented them from manifesting any sympathy for the prisoner which they might have felt. He was kept in total ignorance of everything.

July merged into August, and the hot midsummer month drifted by. Toward the close of the second week, and when Larry's confinement had lasted more than twenty-one days, a peculiar incident occurred. When the guard opened the cell door one evening to hand in his supper, Larry recognized the man as Bart Rakestraw, a private of Company D. Rakestraw accompanied the platter with his head and shoulders.

"Keep a stiff upper lip, my boy," he whispered, in a low voice. "Friends are working for you, don't forget that."

Putting his finger to his lips, he retreated and closed the door.

Larry sat down to his supper in a state of confused amazement, and pondered the incident well. He was less surprised by the news than by the source from which it came. He had never spoken a word to the man, nor was he aware that Lascelles was acquainted with him. In a general way, he knew all about Rakestraw, and that knowledge was anything but favorable. He was a dark-complexioned, brutal-looking fellow, about twenty-five years old. He had been in the service for two years, and it was generally believed that he had enlisted to escape punishment for various civil crimes, the nature of which was darkly hinted at. He was coarse in manner and speech, had a quarrelsome and resentful disposition, and never missed an opportunity of getting drunk. In short, he was regarded as the worst man in the regiment, and he kept up his reputation by being constantly punished, mostly in the way of extra guard duty. It was a matter of surprise to officers and men alike that he had not attempted to desert long ago.

In view of all these things, Larry came to the conclusion that the fellow had either spoken in a rough and impulsive spirit of sympathy, or had received the message from Lascelles. If the latter theory was correct, it simply meant that Larry's chances before the court-martial were favorable, and that Lascelles had chosen such means as he deemed most safe to acquaint the lad with the fact, in order to cheer him up.

It had that effect, at all events, and for the next few days Larry was in good spirits. On Monday night he went to bed with the confident conviction that he would be called for trial some time during the ensuing week. He woke several hours later, and was about dozing off to sleep again, when he heard—or imagined he heard—the sentry outside pause before his window. The next instant doubt fled. One of the iron bars rattled, and a voice whispered, distinctly:

“Redmayne! Redmayne!”

Larry sprang out of bed, and crept to the window. The night was very dark, but he could see a face staring into his own.

“Are you there, Redmayne?”

The voice was that of Bart Rakestraw, unmistakably.

“Yes,” whispered Larry. “What is it?”

“Not so loud,” was the reply. “Here is something for you. Take it.”

He thrust a small, hard package between the bars, and Harry seized it eagerly.

“Tools,” added Rakestraw, “and a note from Lascelles. You’re to read the note by daylight, and then chew it up and swallow it.”

“But the tools?” queried Larry, in amazement.

“Why, they’re to dig out the window bars with. Keep them well hid when you ain’t using them. Work a little every chance you get, and fix things so it don’t show. Don’t take the bars out; just pry ‘em loose.”

“But I—I don’t understand,” whispered Larry. “Why am I to do this?”

“So you can escape, of course,” muttered Rakestraw, impatiently. “What else?”

Larry grew more and more confused.

“Why should I escape?” he asked.

“Because if you don’t you’re booked for Fort Leavenworth military prison, that’s why. The note will explain things, but the long and the short of it is that

Lascelles and me are going to desert. I'm tired of this dog's life, and so is Lascelles. Kenrick is down on him with both feet, an' he was locked up for six days after that night you an' him was arrested. He wants you to go along with us, an' seem' as you're a plucky chap, I don't mind. We intend to strike for Montana or Dakota, and make a pile in the mines. I'm on sentry duty here tonight, and just as soon as I get the same post again—an' it'll likely be in a day or two—we'll get you out of quod, and make a run for it. We're fixin' everything beforehand, so you must be ready when the time comes. Don't fool over them bars."

"One minute," whispered Larry, who had been vainly trying to speak. "Do you mean to say that my case is sure to go bad with the court-martial?"

"Dead sure," replied Rakestraw. "But the note will tell you why. Kenrick has fixed things to suit himself. Look sharp now till I come back."

He turned away, and paced his beat again with slow steps, presumably to make sure that the coast was clear.

CHAPTER V

Larry employed the next two or three minutes to good advantage by concealing the packet of tools about his bed. He was very wary in his actions, for the guards were wide awake in the adjoining room. A tap on the grating announced the return of the sentry, and drew him to the window.

“All serene?” asked Rakestraw.

“Yes, as far as I know,” replied Larry.

“Well, I won’t keep you here long. There ain’t much more to tell, in fact; and what there is Lascelles can spin you.”

“But about the court-martial?” queried Larry. “When will it be?”

“Oh, I can post you on that! It’s garrison talk and everybody knows it. You’re to be hauled up for violating Article 21. The papers were sent to the department commander at Omaha, and came back approved. The major and all the captains but Kenrick are on the court-martial, and they will meet next Monday—a week from to-day. But don’t let that worry you. I’m dead sure to be on sentry duty here between this and then. I know how to manage it. All you need do is to have them bars loose; we’ll do the rest. Look out for us almost any night except to-morrow.”

“I’ll be ready,” assented Larry, rather feebly.

“See that you are. I’m off now, for it’s soon time for relief. Good-night!”

Rakestraw disappeared in the gloom, and was presently heard pacing up and down.

Larry went back to bed in a rather unsettled state of mind. He was at a loss to know how to regard this sudden upheaval of his plans. He felt satisfied of one thing—namely, that Lascelles had good and strong motives for devising the escape, and even for taking such a dissolute fellow as Rakestraw into his confidence.

“The letter will clear the mystery up,” he reflected. “I wish I could read it now.” But this was manifestly out of the question; there was no alternative but to wait until morning.

He presently fell asleep, and did not wake until the sun was shining into his cell. The events of the previous night seemed at first like a dream, but he assured himself of their reality by feeling the hard packet that was under the bed. He opened it after breakfast, when there was little likelihood of his being disturbed. The contents comprised two fine-edged chisels, and a crumpled wad of paper. He hid the chisels about his clothes, and pressed the paper out on his knee. It was covered with minute writing, and bore neither address nor signature. There was sufficient light for Larry to read distinctly. The contents ran as follows:

“I have not forgotten what I owe to you, and am trying now to pay the debt in part. You will be surprised when you receive this, and learn the message that I send by a trustworthy comrade. Don’t hesitate to join us—rash as the project may seem. It is either that or a long sentence in a military prison. I have vainly tried every means to find the two men who hauled us into their boat. They must have been on the water that night with some evil designs, and are consequently afraid to answer my advertisements. The absence of these witnesses leaves you without any defense; for your story won’t be believed, nor will my testimony avail you. The worst of it is that Kenrick intends to deny striking you or using profanity, and the sentry who witnessed the affair will surely commit perjury and back up the captain. I have all this on the best of authority, and there is no doubt that the court-martial will find you guilty of unprovoked assault if you are on hand for trial. I cannot enter into fuller explanations now, but I believe that I am acting for the best. I intend to strike for the Northwest, and I want you with me. Heed all instructions, and wait patiently for the summons.”

Larry’s face was a study when he finished Lascelles’ message. He chewed the paper to a pasty mass, and stuffed it into a crevice of the wall. Then he sat down to meditate. In the first place he hated the very idea of deserting, and that, too, in company with a man of Bart Rakestraw’s stamp; he felt that it would be a lasting disgrace to his manhood, and to the uniform that he wore; he realized that by such a rash act he would cut himself off forever from the military advancement that he had so fondly cherished. Moreover, he had a dim suspicion that Miles Lascelles, though well-meaning and honest, was a dangerous companion for him. He was a reckless enthusiast—a man who allowed himself to be carried away by every enterprise that suggested itself to him, and rarely probed beneath

the surface, or looked far into the future.

But, on the other hand, Larry reasoned, would not his military career be just as utterly blasted if he refused to desert, and stood his trial? The chances were that he would spend a term of years in prison, and then, in addition, be discharged from the service in disgrace. Why should he hesitate for an instant? Freedom, at any cost, would be better than the decree of the court-martial.

Well, Larry's mind was speedily made up, nor could any one blame him for his decision. Though deploring the moment of passion that had brought about his misfortunes, he resolved to desert with Lascelles and Bart Rakestraw. His eagerness to be free increased with every additional hour of confinement. An intense dread of the court-martial loomed over him night and day; for he imagined that extra precautions would be taken to insure his safety should his friends fail to rescue him before the trial.

On Tuesday night he worked by short intervals at the bars, ceasing operations every time the tread of the sentry drew near. The guardhouse was a very old building, and the mortar in which the grating was incased yielded readily, and with comparative noiselessness, to the keen edge of the chisel. Larry was careful to let none of the debris fall outside; he concealed it cleverly in the chinks of the wall behind his bed. By Wednesday night he had loosened four bars in their sockets, and he was satisfied that a slight push would be sufficient to dislodge them.

Thursday was a day of torturing suspense to Larry. Every time footsteps passed the cell, or his meals were handed in, he imagined that detection was about to end his hopes. Friday was even worse; for now the dreaded court-martial was only two days off.

Friday night found him restless and excited. He went to bed at tattoo, but could not sleep. For several hours he tossed and turned, and when, finally, he dozed off from very weariness, he was harassed by troubled dreams. It was Monday, and he was before the court-martial. He heard the stern judges pronouncing sentence of death upon him. Then the scene shifted, and he stood in the gray dawn of day on the open space before the barracks. The regiment was drawn up on the left, and the band played a funeral dirge. Before him was an open grave and a coffin, and beyond them a file of soldiers. Their rifles were pointed at his breast, and he saw Captain Kenrick, with a smile of hatred on his face, waiting to give the

signal. Ah! there it was. "Fire!"

Larry woke with a start, bathed in perspiration, and it was a happy moment when he realized that his terrible experience had been only a dream. He felt almost reconciled to a term of years in Fort Leavenworth prison.

Hark! What was that? Tap, tap, tap! Now the grating rattled.

Larry was out of bed in a second, and pressing his face against the cold iron bars.

"Be careful, Redmayne. It is I. Do you know me?"

"Yes. How glad I am to see you, Miles."

"And so am I glad to see you, my dear fellow. Is everything ready? Is there no danger to be apprehended from the guardroom?"

"The bars are loose," replied Larry. He listened for a moment, and then added: "The relief guard don't suspect anything. I can hear them laughing and talking."

"So much the better," whispered Lascelles. "I hope they will keep it up. Rakestraw went on duty ten minutes ago. He was insubordinate at drill this morning on purpose. I joined him just now. and a nice time I had of it dodging sentries in barracks. The worst is yet to come, but keep a stiff upper lip, my boy, and we'll pull through. Here goes, now. Watch sharp while I press on the bars."

"Wait a moment," whispered Larry. "I'll spread my bedclothes under the window so that the loose pieces of mortar won't rattle if they fall on the floor."

"Good!" assented Lascelles. "Hurry up!"

"Ready!" murmured Larry an instant later, and then followed a creaking noise. One bar was out, and Larry placed it carefully on the floor.

The others were more firmly imbedded, and Lascelles worked with slow caution. At intervals the dim figure of Rakestraw was seen to pace slowly by.

"It's a pity we couldn't have managed this thing between ourselves," muttered Lascelles, as he dislodged the second bar, and began on the third. "That fellow's too desperate a chap for me," he added, glancing toward the now distant sentry.

“I don’t believe he’d stop at murder if he was in a tight place, and wanted to get out.”

“I was a little surprised myself,” ventured Larry; “but I concluded that you had some reasons for it.”

“And so I had,” whispered Lascelles, “and the best of reasons. In the first place, I knew that I would have to take some one into the plot, for I was the last man that would ever have been assigned to sentry duty outside the guardhouse. I remembered that Rakestraw was frequently put on this post as a punishment, so I ventured to sound him one day—of course, this was after I knew that things were sure to go hard with you. Well, to my surprise, he caught up the plan eagerly. He was not only willing to help me, but he wanted to go along. He said he had only been waiting for a good chance to desert, and suggested that we strike for the mining regions of the Northwest, where he was perfectly at home. There was no way to get out of it gracefully, so I consented to his proposal, and between us we fixed the plan up. As long as he behaves himself we’ll stick with him, Larry. It won’t be hard to give him the slip, you know, if his wickedness crops out. Ah! There goes the third bar.”

“Yes,” muttered Larry, absently. He was silent for a moment, as Lascelles began to strain the last bar in its socket. Then he said, huskily: “Look here, Miles. Do you mean to say that you are giving up all your chances of promotion and of making a man of yourself on my account? I don’t believe you had a thought of deserting until I got in this scrape. I won’t accept such a sacrifice.”

“Nonsense? Don’t you suppose I’m tired of this petty tyranny?” whispered Lascelles, evasively. “I’ve tried the army long enough, and it don’t go. But leaving that out of the question, Larry, I’d be a regular sneak if I didn’t do all in my power to pay back the debt I owe you. No, no, my boy, you shan’t go to Fort Leavenworth if I can help it. There’s a snug little boat packed with provisions and clothes waiting on us at the foot of the bluff on the Minnesota side, and if all goes well daylight will find us far away from taps, and tattoo, and reveille, and mess-call, and all the rest of the confounded nonsense. Look sharp now, Larry. There goes the last bar. Up with you, quick! The coast is clear.”

CHAPTER VI

The low-whispered but peremptory command admitted of no delay. Larry's heroic resolve to stay and brave his fate vanished immediately. He drew himself up on the window sill, and was noiselessly hauled through the aperture by Lascelles' strong arms. It was a delicious moment when he found himself on the spongy ground, and felt the cool summer air fanning his cheeks. He was impatient to run and jump—to stretch his limbs after their long and irksome confinement in such narrow quarters.

Lascelles thrust his head through the window, and, cocking it to one side, remained in a listening attitude for a few seconds.

"All serene in the guardroom," he whispered. "They are still laughing and chatting in blissful ignorance. It will be a good two hours before the relief comes on, but we hardly dare count on such a tether. The officer of the day may drop along at any time."

At this juncture Rakestraw advanced to the spot.

"Well done, youngster," he remarked, extending one arm. "It was a neat job, an' you deserve lots of credit. And now, comrades, let's be off."

Larry accepted the proffered hand, and then all three crept to the corner of the guardhouse. Although the elder men had planned every detail of the escape they paused here a moment to reconnoiter anew. Fifty yards to their right, at the north entrance of the fort, stood the office buildings of the colonel and the quarter-masters; opposite these lay the sutler's store, and through the interlying space the deserters had intended to pass. But, unfortunately, a little-dreamed-of obstacle now barred the way. A lamp was burning in the store, and the yellow light, shining through the window, showed in bold relief the sentry pacing to and fro at the fort gate. The sutler was probably footing up his accounts, and it was extremely uncertain when he would quit work and go to bed.

"It's not a bit of use to try that route," whispered Lascelles, "and it would be folly to wait. Our best chance now lies at the main gate."

"Yes, it's fairly dark in that direction," assented Rakestraw, "and it may be an

easy matter to slip through. The only thing is that it takes us farther away from the boat.”

“It can’t be helped,” replied Lascelles, “come on.”

He led his companions out from the shadow of the guardhouse, and they crept silently and in single file across the parade. They headed straight for the colonel’s house, which stood by the lower bastion of the fort, and overlooked, from its rear, the junction of the two rivers. On their right were the officers’ quarters, and on their left the low, gray line of barracks. Happily it was a dark night, and they felt comparatively safe from observation.

When two-thirds of the parade ground had been traversed Lascelles made a detour, and presently halted his companions near the angle of the colonel’s house. They waited an instant, and then crept along the face of the dwelling to the next angle, from which point the main gate was only twenty feet distant. The dark form of the sentry could now be seen, and his tread rang monotonously on the hard ground. His beat was a fairly extensive one—about thirty feet in all. One moment he was close to the concealed fugitives; the next he was a dozen feet on the farther side of the gate.

“There! He’s going to turn now,” whispered Lascelles, at one of the latter intervals. “He comes this way next, and the moment he wheels around we must sneak noiselessly behind him, and slip through the gate. Remember, one break may ruin all.”

“It won’t come from me,” muttered Rakestraw.

“Nor from me, if I can help it,” added Larry. “I feel as cool as a cucumber.”

“Silence, now,” commanded Lascelles.

They crouched deeper in the shadow of the wall as the sentry paced slowly in their direction. But this time he came only as far as the gate, and halted directly in front of it, dropping the stock of his rifle to the ground with a dull thud.

A minute went by—a fateful minute of dread and suspense for the hidden men. The sentry stuck immovably [_sic_] to his post. It was out of the question to slip unperceived through the gate.

“This won’t do,” muttered Rakestraw. “Look sharp, comrades, while I clear a way. You must be ready to bear a hand, if it’s needed.”

“What do you mean?” whispered Lascelles, sternly.

“Why, I mean that I’ll sneak up behind that chap, an’ bring him down so quickly with a rap on the head that he won’t have time to open his mouth.”

As he spoke, Rakestraw significantly tapped his rifle, which he had retained possession of.

“No, you shan’t do that,” answered Lascelles. “You might kill the fellow. If he don’t move in a moment or two we’ll have to overpower him by hand. But no injury must be inflicted; understand that.”

Rakestraw muttered something under his breath, and Larry caught the words: “Soft-hearted fool.” Lascelles probably overheard the remark, but paid no attention to it.

Nothing was said for a little while, and just when the profound silence had grown to be unbearable it was broken in a most startling way. A distant cry was heard, followed immediately by a voice, calling in eager accents:

“Corporal of the guard! Corporal of the guard! Turn out!”

Instantly the whole fort seemed in a babel of noise and confusion. Lights flashed, hurrying footsteps echoed, arms and equipments rattled, and man called to man.

“What beastly luck!” exclaimed Lascelles, in a hoarse whisper. “The officer of the day has discovered Rakestraw’s absence from his post, and your escape, Larry. We’re in a tight place, but we won’t give up yet. A bold dash will do it. Stick by me.”

He sprang toward the gate, followed by his companions.

But the sentry, put on the alert by the commotion, instantly caught sight of the dusky figures, and as quickly comprehended the situation. Leveling his rifle at Lascelles and Rakestraw, who were abreast, he cried, sharply:

“Halt! or I’ll fire!”

Lascelles, dismayed by the click of the hammer and the glistening barrel, pulled up short.

Rakestraw, however, lifted his rifle, and made a reckless dash at the sentry. He struck up the latter’s weapon, causing it to explode harmlessly in the air. Then he reversed his own rifle, and breaking through the sentry’s guard struck him a stunning blow on the head. The stricken man staggered, and toppled over like a log.

There was no time to deplore Rakestraw’s foolhardy act. The report of the gun had drawn general attention that way, and the parade echoed with scurrying feet. Lights gleamed in the colonel’s house, and windows were thrown up.

As the fugitives dashed for the gate an officer approached on a run from the opposite direction. His sword flashed as he made a futile cut at Rakestraw, who slipped by him. Lascelles dodged a similar thrust, but was compelled to grapple with the officer in self-defense. They fell heavily, and struggled over the ground, now one uppermost, now the other. Lascelles fought to break loose, but his antagonist only held the tighter, and shouted lustily.

At this trying moment Larry had his wits about him.

He ran to his companion’s assistance, and tried to disengage the officer’s hold. He was reinforced by Rakestraw, who had nobly turned back as soon as he discovered what had happened.

Against such odds the officer was at a disadvantage. The struggle, though brief, lasted long enough to make the situation of the fugitives seem absolutely hopeless. The tumult now pervaded all quarters of the fort, but the lesser noises were drowned in the loud, steady roll of a drum. This was the general alarm—the ominous sounding of the “long roll”—and it meant that the entire regiment and every inmate of the garrison would speedily be out of doors and under arms.

By a shower of fist-blows Rakestraw partially diverted the officer’s attention, and then tore him bodily from his hold on Lascelles. Larry helped his friend to rise, and away dashed all three just as half a dozen soldiers came within twenty feet of the spot.

Vain commands to halt rang clear on the night air; then rifles cracked, and ruddy flashes blazed athwart the darkness, and bullets went “plunk, plunk!” as they buried themselves harmlessly in the gate posts.

As the fugitives sped through the gate, they found themselves at the head of a long, steep flight of steps. These descended to the triangular strip of low land which jutted out at the intersection of the two rivers. A railroad ran along the left-hand side of it, and then crossed the Minnesota by a bridge that connected the point with the main shore. Lascelles and Rakestraw had intended to descend the bluff here, and creep up the Minnesota shore to the hidden boat. But a single glance satisfied Lascelles that this plan was now impracticable. Voices floated upward through the darkness, and lanterns were moving on the railway platform, and at the foot of the steps.

“We must push along the top of the bluff,” he exclaimed.

“No, we must risk it here,” replied Rakestraw. “There is no other place where we can get down the bluff safely. Come on!”

In one hand he still held his rifle, but with the other he seized the side rail, and went swiftly down the steps, clearing five and six at a leap.

Several precious seconds had already been wasted, and Lascelles lost several more in hesitation. He believed that Rakestraw’s capture was a sure thing, and though loath to desert his companion at such a time he decided to pursue the safer course. Turning sharply, he dashed off on the narrow strip of land that lay between the outer work of the fort and the verge of the precipitous bluff. Larry followed at his heels, and they had gone barely twenty feet when the soldiers came swarming out of the main gate. They did not immediately turn the angle; for their attention was drawn to the noise that Rakestraw made in going down the steps. They quickly discovered, however, that but one of the deserters had taken this direction; and as fresh arrivals now joined them they broke into three squads, the first going down the steps, while the other two pushed in opposite directions from the main gate, along the outer sides of the fort.

Such, at least, Lascelles and Larry judged to be the case from what they could hear. They were mainly concerned with the pursuing squad who trotted along behind them. The officer in command carried a lantern, and it put the fugitives on their mettle to keep ahead of the radius of light.

Fortunately Lascelles had an intimate knowledge of the paths, and he kept Larry out of danger by holding his hand. The racket in the fort was on the increase, and the steady booming of the alarm drum still echoed far and wide.

When half the distance to the upper end of the fort had been traversed Larry slipped on a stone, and fell. Lascelles helped him up quickly, and they ran on. But the brief delay had brought them within the lantern's glow, and a chorus of shouts, followed by the crack of a rifle, announced the dread fact of their discovery.

Still hopeful, they dashed on through the darkness, only to be confronted by a graver peril. Lights arose suddenly in the path ahead of them, and they caught the glimmer of brass buttons and steel. This was to be accounted for in two ways. Either a fresh squad of soldiers had issued from the upper gate of the fort, or one of the other parties had already completed half the circuit.

But it mattered little which fact was correct. The deserters were caught between two fires. Soldiers ahead of them, soldiers behind them, and a dizzy precipice at their side—what hope was left?

CHAPTER VII

In abject misery Miles Lascelles and Larry crouched under a copse of young timber that grew alongside the path. The terrible consequences of what they had done that night stared them in the face. It was maddening to feel that they could do nothing but wait impassively to be captured.

“Is there really no hope?” whispered Larry.

“None,” answered Lascelles, moodily. “By daylight one might find a way down the bluff, but in the darkness we would surely break our necks. I regret now that we did not follow Rakestraw.”

“He may possibly have escaped,” suggested Larry, “though I don’t see how he well could. But here they come, Miles. It’s all up with us.”

The advance was a brief one, however, and the fugitives were unexpectedly given another interval of grace. For as soon as they saw each other’s lights both squads of soldiers stopped short.

“Who comes there?” lustily shouted the officer in charge of the rear party.

“Captain Kenrick, with ten men,” was the immediate response. “Who are you?”

“I’m Lieutenant Maddox. I have eight men here. Go easy, captain, and don’t on any pretext permit your men to fire. The rascals are cornered midway between us, and we can close in on them. Poke through the brush and timber as you advance.”

“Are all three there?” demanded Captain Kenrick, eagerly.

“No, only two,” replied the lieutenant. “The third—I think it was Private Rakestraw—plunged down the steps. He is probably in custody by this time.”

Here the conversation ended, and the two squads picked their way leisurely forward, turning the lanterns on every inch of ground. The advance had hardly begun when Lascelles gripped his companion’s arm convulsively.

“I have a scheme,” he whispered, eagerly. “It’s worth trying, and if it fails we

can't be any the worse off. Follow me quick, Larry, and stoop low."

They crossed the path, and stopped under the rear wall of the long line of buildings that constituted the officers' quarters. They faced the parade, of course, but from the back a row of windows, six or seven feet above the ground, overlooked the bluff. The night was warm, and the window directly above the fugitives was open. A dim light was burning inside, and this indicated that the occupant had probably dressed, and hurried off to obey the command of the alarm drum.

"Face the wall, and brace yourself, Larry," directed Lascelles. "Be quick."

Larry now realized his companion's daring and desperate scheme, and he was dismayed by the apparent hopelessness of it. But, like a good soldier, he obeyed orders unhesitatingly.

Lascelles mounted his shoulders, peered into the room, and then clambered hastily over the sill.

"It's all right," he said. "Come on."

Leaning down he caught Larry's arms, and hoisted him into the room.

At that instant a hoarse outcry broke from the pursuers, and loud above the others rang Captain Kenrick's voice:

"There go the scoundrels. Don't let them escape!"

The fugitives had been seen during the brief moment that they appeared in relief against the lighted window.

"Don't despair," exclaimed Lascelles. "They haven't got us yet."

Larry noted at a swift glance that the occupant of the room had but recently left it. Then Lascelles blew out the lamp, and they groped their way to the door, guided by a dim light that shone through the transom. They encountered no one in the corridor, and plunging down a short flight of steps they emerged on the parade. It was with strange sensations that they found themselves again within the fort. And yet it was really the safest place for them at that moment. Men and officers were still swarming out of the buildings—some rushing for the gates,

others tumbling into line at the tap of the drum. From the stables came the fretful neighing of steeds, and the stamping of hoofs.

Screened by the semi-darkness the fugitives pushed briskly across the parade. Though both were unarmed, and Larry's head was bare, they attracted little or no attention during the excitement of the moment.

"Keep a cool head, and we'll pull through all right," whispered Lascelles. "It will take some time for those two squads to pick their way back to the gates. I don't think it likely that any of the men followed us through the window."

"My nerves are in good trim," replied Larry. "By Jove! that was a daring scheme of yours, Miles."

"It proved worth the trying, anyhow," answered his companion. "Ah, here we are, and a clear coast ahead of us. I fancy the next step won't be a very difficult one."

They circled around the end of the barracks, and a second later bumped into the picket fence that spanned the north side of the fort. On the other side of the fence the bluff fell, perfectly sheer, several hundred feet to the shore of the Mississippi. It was a far worse precipice than that on the south side of the fort.

No sentries were in the vicinity, and with little difficulty the fugitives scaled the fence. On the other side was a narrow ledge, and along this they picked their way with great caution, A misstep would have resulted in a fatal plunge over the precipice.

As they neared the upper end of the fort they saw through the palings the squad of men commanded by Captain Kenrick rush in past the sutler's store. The other squad had no doubt arrived first, for already the tumult was on the increase in the direction of the parade.

"I would like to be there to see the fun," whispered Lascelles. "They will search every nook and corner of the garrison for us."

"I would rather be a thousand miles away from here at the present time," answered Larry. "After all the rumpus that has been kicked up it will be a serious business if we are caught."

Lascelles nodded assent to this, and then they hurried on until they reached the verge of the road that connected the upper entrance of the fort with the bridge across the Mississippi. This was a perilous spot, but they dared not waste time by stopping to reconnoiter the vicinity. They made a bold dash, exposing themselves momentarily to the glare of a lamp-post, gained the friendly darkness beyond without attracting observation, as far as they could tell, and then ran steadily on side by side.

Had they been satisfied beyond a doubt of Rakestraw's capture they would have taken a straight course for freedom, and abandoned the plan of escape by water, since it entailed a return to the dangerous vicinity of the fort. But there was room for doubt, and Lascelles in particular was inclined to lend credence to the supposition that Rakestraw might have succeeded in eluding his pursuers.

"It won't do to go back on a comrade, you know, Larry," he said. "As likely as not Rakestraw got clean away, and is waiting on us somewhere about the boat.

He's a pretty hard character, but I don't believe he would make off by himself as long as there was a chance of our turning up."

"And he can easily tell, by the racket, that we have not been caught yet," answered Larry. "You're right about it, Miles. We must get to that boat somehow or other. Is it well hidden?"

"The soldiers could never find it, I'll wager that," declared Lascelles. "It lies in a little cove, covered with thick bushes. To tell the truth, Larry, the boat offers the best chance of escape, provided we can get possession of it, and pull away from shore without being seen. Leaving Rakestraw out of the question, I think I should rather go back, anyhow. Of course we must make a considerable detour."

Larry was of the same mind, and this important question being settled, the fugitives ran on with increased speed. They stuck close to the wooded bluff of the Mississippi until the fort was half a mile behind them. Then they cut straight across the intervening track of land to the bluff that overlooked the Minnesota River. They reached the bottom after a laborious and dangerous descent, and picked their way for a quarter of a mile over stones and through bushes to the water's edge. They rested a moment or two on a flat stone, watching a big steamer that was plowing its way up stream with much puffing and blowing. Fort Snelling was half a mile below them, and the still night air wafted to their

ears more than one echo of the excitement that their escape had caused—the tap of the drum, the clear note of a bugle, the muffled pounding of horses’ hoofs, or the commanding voice of some officer. Lights glittered on the distant bluff, showing that the search for the deserters was being rigorously conducted.

“If you have your breath we’ll push on,” said Lascelles, finally. “I’m anxious to know the feel of citizens’ clothes again. What fools we were to think of striking back into the country on foot, and arrayed in these togs, when the boat held everything that we needed.”

“That’s true,” assented Larry. “Your plans were laid shipshape. How did you manage?”

“Easily enough,” replied Lascelles. “Every time Rakestraw or I got leave of absence we picked up something in the way of provisions or clothes, and hid the stuff in the boat, which has been lying under a culvert up above here for three days. We bought it in the first place from an old river man and on Wednesday night, before tattoo, we brought it down to its present hiding place.”

“It must have cost some money to do all this,” remarked Larry.

“Oh, I had a little nest-egg laid away,” answered Lascelles. “But come, my boy, we must be moving. I think we will find the bottom land clear of soldiers, since it is very unlikely that our intention to escape by water will be suspected.”

They rose from the stone, and moved briskly down the shore.

CHAPTER VIII

This bottom land, as Lascelles called it, was an expanse of almost level soil connecting the precipitous base of the bluff with the shore of the Minnesota River. It was a quarter of a mile in width, and extended some miles up stream from the point of the bluff. It was stony and sandy, and densely overgrown with bushes and young timber.

But it soon proved to be far from the safe shelter that Lascelles had predicted for it. When the deserters had covered half the distance to the upper end of the fort, and were still about a quarter of a mile from the concealed boat, they became aware that the bottom land around them was literally alive with soldiers. A slight noise first put them on the alert, and when they crouched down and listened for a moment they heard, from all directions, alarming little sounds—low-whispered voices, the click of steel on steel, or the crunch of booted feet on the gravel. These symptoms of danger rose and ebbed as the searchers passed to and fro, evidently exercising as much caution as though they themselves were the hunted ones.

The fugitives were quick to understand what all this meant, and their hopes well-nigh turned to despair. For a moment they sorely repented the rash impulse that led them to turn back from comparative safety to the dangerous vicinity of the fort.

“Rakestraw gave the soldiers the slip, and got safely into the bottom land,” whispered Lascelles. “That’s a sure thing. Now half the garrison are scattered about here hunting for him, and sentries are probably posted at every rod or two. They can’t have found him yet. The chances are ten to one that he has slipped away in the boat without being seen; but it is just possible, on the other hand, that he can’t get to it on account of soldiers being in the vicinity. He may be lying hid somewhere, watching his chance.”

“What shall we do?” asked Larry.

“Push on, of course,” was the reply. “It’s equally as dangerous to go back, and then, you see I want to satisfy myself about the boat. I don’t believe the soldiers can possibly have found it, or that they even suspect its existence. They think they have Rakestraw cornered in the brush, and they are conducting operations

quietly and without lights in hopes that he will stumble on one of their pickets, or betray himself by dodging from cover to cover.”

The idea of advancing through such a hotbed of danger was not to Larry’s liking, but he did not put his objections into words lest his companion would think he was showing the white feather.

Lascelles seemed to expect no answer to the above summing-up of the situation. After listening a minute longer he added:

“Now is as good a chance as we are likely to get, Larry. Creep behind me on your hands and knees, and don’t make a bit of noise if you can help it. Stop when I stop.”

“I understand,” whispered Larry. “Go ahead.”

They crawled off like two great cats, keeping as nearly as possible about thirty feet back from the shore of the river. The bushes were not so dense here, and for this very reason there was less likelihood of encountering the soldiers. Rakestraw would be most urgently sought for where the shelter was thickest.

Lascelles was too sharp-witted to omit any precautions. At frequent intervals he called a halt to listen, and on each of these occasions significant sounds were heard from different quarters—now from the left hand, and now from the rear. Sometimes the noise seemed to be ahead, and then the fugitives would lie low for several minutes before venturing to push on.

Their advance was necessarily by slow and laborious stages. They crawled through dense gloom under overhanging bushes, and circled around masses of rock with the dreaded prospect of coming face to face with an armed sentry. They scurried across open spaces where their trail left a distinct mark upon the sand and pebbles. They paid scant attention to the sharp flints and thorny plants that painfully lacerated their hands and knees.

Once they had a narrow escape that brought their hearts to their mouths. As they were creeping through an unusually heavy thicket the utter silence was broken by a rasping noise just ahead, and a yellow glimmer of light instantly succeeded it. In a little clearing, barely ten feet beyond Lascelles, stood a burly soldier. In one hand was his rifle, and in the other he held a lighted match with which he was igniting a short pipe. With breathless caution the fugitives turned, and

crawled away. They made a detour clear to the water's edge, and did not venture back to their original track until they had gained a hundred feet or more.

The longer the silence remained unbroken by anything like a general alarm the more certain it seemed that Rakestraw had actually made off with the boat. Larry, at least, felt that he was on a wild-goose chase, but he nevertheless resolved to face the issue, whatever it might be.

An hour of this serpent-fashion journeying brought the two weary deserters nearly opposite the upper end of the fort, and Lascelles now announced that the boat was close by—or, at all events, the spot where it had been concealed. He led Larry on with redoubled caution, heading in a slightly diagonal course toward the water. Presently a narrow open space was reached, and crossing this, with a quick glance in each direction, they slipped into a dense tangle of stones and bushes. They crouched here for a full minute, scarcely daring to breathe.

"I don't hear a sound," whispered Lascelles. "Come on, Larry, but be more careful than ever. The cove is only six feet in front of us."

He crawled slowly ahead, and a few seconds later a sharp exclamation escaped his lips.

"What is it?" asked Larry, pushing hastily to his side.

"The boat is gone," was the chagrined reply. "It was hidden right here under the bushes. I can't feel it anywhere."

He thrust his arms out in the darkness, and Larry did the same. They encountered only empty space; the boat was missing, beyond a doubt. Neither spoke. Each was trying to realize what this not unexpected catastrophe meant.

All at once a faint sound came floating into the cove from the nearby river—click! click! gurgle! gurgle!

Lascelles trembled with excitement.

"It's the boat," he whispered, hoarsely. "What beastly luck! Rakestraw has just started, and we are too late!"

"Can't we get him back?" exclaimed Larry.

“Doubtful,” muttered Lascelles, “but we’ll make a bold bluff for it. Give me your hand, quick. I know every inch hereabouts with my eyes shut.”

He took hold of Larry, and fairly dragged him into the shallow water of the cove. They splashed on through the gloom, bending low, and forcing aside the obstructing bushes. Suddenly they emerged in a dusky light that was rendered all the clearer by the blackness they had just left behind. As they stood knee-deep in the rippling mouth of the cove, the broad Minnesota was before them, and on either side, between the river’s edge and the bushes, was a sloping strand of pebbles half a dozen feet wide. But the fugitives paid brief note to these insignificant details. Before their eyes was the pale figure of the boat, now thirty feet from shore, and receding slowly. In a few seconds it would be invisible.

Lascelles hastily scanned the shores, and seeing no trace of an enemy he made a trumpet of his two hands, and called through it, in a loud whisper:

“Rakestraw! Rakestraw! Come back for us.”

There was an agonizing interval of silence, during which the boat receded a little farther. Again Lascelles called—this time in imprudently loud tones, and now the craft was seen to head around, and creep shoreward. The oars dipped and fell noiselessly. An instant later all doubt was removed, for Rakestraw’s familiar voice hailed the fugitives in a whisper:

“Where did you chaps spring from? I give you up long ago. A minute later and you’d have found me out of call.”

“It was a close shave,” answered Lascelles. “Hurry up, old fellow. Standing here seems unpleasantly like waiting to be shot. The coast seems clear now, but—”

For obvious reasons Lascelles never finished that sentence. It was interrupted by the advent upon the scene of a tall soldier, who stepped from the bushes a dozen feet above the mouth of the cove.

“You are my prisoners,” he cried, bringing his rifle to bear upon the fugitives. “If you offer resistance I will fire.” Then he uttered a shout that instantly brought half a dozen responses from a distance.

With sickening dread Larry and his comrade faced their captor. Liberty had never seemed sweeter than at that moment, and yet it was hopelessly beyond

reach. A dash for freedom would surely result in the death of one or the other.

A few seconds went by, and the scurrying tread of the approaching soldiers could be plainly heard. In that brief interval Rakestraw was not idle. The boat was now ten feet off the shore, and with one hand he swung the bow outward again.

“None of that,” growled the sentry, who had been keeping one eye upon the craft, and the other upon Lascelles and Larry. “Pull in here, and be quick.”

Rakestraw’s answer was to drop the oar and snatch his rifle from the bottom of the boat. He took hasty aim at the sentry, and the hammer fell with a sharp report.

It was all done with incredible swiftness. Before Larry or Lascelles could realize their companion’s murderous intent they saw the sentry stagger, and then topple over on the beach with a shrill cry of pain. The horror of the deed blunted them to their peril, and they started involuntarily toward the wounded man, who was vainly struggling to rise.

“You fool!” yelled Rakestraw, who had immediately snatched both oars. “Swim out to the boat, quick! I won’t wait a second. Leave that fellow to his friends. They will be here soon enough, from the racket they are making.”

Lascelles pulled up short.

“The thing can’t be undone, Larry,” he exclaimed, hoarsely. “We would be fools to stay here and suffer for Rakestraw’s crime. Come on.”

He plunged into the river with Larry at his heels. Six feet off shore the water came to their necks, and they began to swim. The boat had drifted down a little, but their vigorous strokes brought them rapidly near. Hoarse yells, and the crashing of heavy bodies through the brush rang in their ears as they caught the stern of the boat. Lascelles pulled himself over the gunwale, and dragged Larry after him. Rakestraw tugged desperately at the oars, and drove the craft swiftly away from the shore.

CHAPTER IX

The boat was provided with two pairs of oars, and as soon as Lascelles could shake the water from his clothes he sprang to the seat behind Rakestraw, and unshipping the oars began to pull vigorously. With increased momentum the boat shot into the gloom, heading diagonally down and across the river. It was barely thirty feet from shore when the soldiers began to issue from the bushes in twos and threes. For an instant they gathered about their wounded comrade; then the click of the oars called their attention to the boat, which was yet dimly visible. Immediately a shout arose, and the command to fire echoed shrill on the night air.

But the deserters were on the alert for danger. The moment the soldiers broke from cover Lascelles and Rakestraw gave the oars a final jerk that sent the boat well on its way, and then dropped flat in the bottom, pulling Larry down with them. There they lay for several minutes while the rifles kept up a merry fusillade, and occasionally bullets came “plunk! plunk!” against the stout timbers of the boat. Presently the firing died away, and the fugitives ventured to sit up. The first glance was reassuring. The impetus of the boat, combined with the strong current, had taken it well out toward mid-channel. The cessation of firing indicated that the craft was invisible from the shore; nor, indeed, could the deserters distinguish the meeting line of beach and water from the deep gloom.

Rakestraw and Lascelles resumed the oars, and pulled with noiseless strokes toward the opposite shore. Not a word was spoken for five or ten minutes. Larry scanned the half-dozen packages, done up in coarse wrapping paper, that lay at his feet. Then he turned toward Fort Snelling, which rose in bold outline against the starry-sky. It was very quiet over there now, but moving lights indicated that the garrison was astir. Strenuous measures to intercept the deserters were undoubtedly being set on foot.

When two-thirds of the distance to the other shore had been covered. Rakestraw and Lascelles turned the boat directly up the stream, and pulled with bolder strokes. The craft was an easy runner, and great waves arose to right and left of the bow as it sped along.

“I thought we were going down the river?” asked Larry, in a wondering tone.

“That was our intention had we been able to embark before our escape was discovered,” replied Lascelles. “If we attempted to reach St. Paul now we would surely be caught, for they will first search for us in that direction. By pulling up stream, we may throw the enemy off the track.”

“And how long will we stay on the water?” asked Larry, whose wet clothes were now making him shiver with cold.

“Until near daylight,” answered Rakestraw, “and then we will hunt a snug hiding place. But your teeth are chattering, lad—and little wonder. Here, take the oars a bit till you warm up.”

Larry gladly exchanged seats with Rakestraw, and soon the warm blood was flushing his chilled limbs as he pulled an even stroke with Lascelles. The boat sped on between the dark shores, and presently the fort-crowned bluff was hidden by a slight curve of the channel. The silence was profound, and the deserters began to realize, for the first time, that they were really secure from pursuit.

Rakestraw untied a packet of provisions, and served out biscuit and tinned salmon to his companions, who rested by turns on their oars while they ate. Then Lascelles suggested that it would be a wise plan to change their clothes before the time came to land. This was agreed to, and more bundles were promptly overhauled. A complete outfit had been provided for each one— jacket, trousers, shoes, a slouch hat, and a soft flannel shirt. The clothes were cheap and ready-made, but they were well suited for the purpose. The operation of changing attires proved somewhat precarious, but by dint of care and patience each one, in turn, safely accomplished it. A brief halt was made at a small island, where half a dozen good-sized stones were taken aboard. Then, while Larry and Lascelles bent to the oars, Rakestraw wrapped up the discarded uniforms, weighted the package with stones, and dropped it overboard.

“Those togs will tell no tales,” he muttered, complacently. “Uncle Sam is minus three uniforms.”

He changed places with Larry again, and for an hour the boat steadily pursued its course through the dark and silent night. Some conversation was carried on, but it was of a constrained nature, Larry and Lascelles studiously tried to conceal the aversion which their companion’s bloodthirsty deed had aroused in them, and

Rakestraw, on his part, seemed to be aware that this feeling existed. Mention of the affair, however, was tacitly avoided by all. Rakestraw told the story of his escape to the bottom land, and the many dangers that he eluded before he succeeded in gaining the boat. His companions, in turn, related their adventures, and then Lascelles explained to Larry—more minutely than Rakestraw had previously done—how Captain Kenrick had planned to have the court-martial convict the prisoner without mitigating circumstances.

“There wasn’t the ghost of a show for you, my boy,” he concluded. “So we determined to save you from Fort Leavenworth. It proved to be a pretty tough contract, but we are better off, at all events, than if we were back in the fort.”

“Right you are,” assented Rakestraw. “I defy those blackguards to stick their dirty uniforms on me again. I’ll die first. There ain’t much danger, though. If we keep our eyes peeled it won’t be hard to get safely to the Northwest. And then for the yellow gold!”

His companions made no reply, and Rakestraw lapsed into sullen silence, jerking vindictively at the oars. For some time longer the boat cut its way through the swirling current. It was now that darkest hour of the night which immediately precedes the dawn, and the fugitives realized the necessity of seeking cover. As nearly as they could judge Fort Snelling was five or six miles distant.

“Let’s pull for the right bank,” suggested Rakestraw. “It’s a good thing we’re armed, in case we stumble on any troublesome people. I have seven cartridges left, and every one will count.”

There was a brief silence.

Larry shifted uneasily on his seat, and Lascelles’ lips tightened ominously.

“Look here, Rakestraw,” said the latter. “Don’t you think that rifle has done mischief enough?”

Rakestraw turned partly around.

“I like that,” he replied, sulkily. “It’s a purty way to talk. Where would you chaps be now if I hadn’t made use of that gun?”

“Oh! I don’t deny that you pulled us through a tight place—a couple of them, in

fact,” said Lascelles; “but I think it was a dearly bought escape. To speak plainly, Rakestraw, if I could undo all that you have done tonight by going back to Fort Snelling, I would gladly go.”

“And so would I,” interrupted Larry. “I would willingly face the court-martial.”

Rakestraw gave a harsh laugh.

“I was a fool to pull back for you two idiots,” he muttered. “That’s gratitude for you!”

“I don’t question your motive,” pursued Lascelles, calmly. “In fact, I appreciate it, because your actions, rash and cruel as they were, showed a spirit of true comradeship. One sentry stunned with clubbed rifle; and another shot, and probably fatally. Why, there will be such a hue and cry after us as no army post ever knew before. Descriptions and reward notices will be posted up everywhere, and every Tom, Dick and Harry will be on the watch for us. If we are caught it means years of imprisonment—or something worse; for of course a court-martial would hold us all equally guilty—”

“See here! stop your gab,” interrupted Rakestraw, savagely. “I won’t have it. Mark that!”

“Hold on now,” exclaimed Lascelles. “I haven’t come to the point yet. I’m not trying to shirk the responsibility for tonight’s work, and I don’t intend to. It’s too late to mend matters, and we must make the best of our chance. Larry and I will stick by you, and we expect you to do the same by us. But there must be no more violence or shooting affrays if we hope to reach Montana in safety.

“To be brief, old fellow,” he concluded, in a pleasant tone. “I want you to throw that rifle overboard. It affords as sure a proof of our identity as the uniforms could have shown.”

Rakestraw dropped the oars, and wheeled squarely around.

“That rifle won’t go overboard,” he snarled. “I don’t intend to part company with it, and if ever it stands between me and freedom I’ll make better use of it than I did tonight. That’s my ultimatum, Miles Lascelles, and I warn you not to meddle with me. I’m a bad man when I’m started, an’ it wouldn’t be the first time—”

He stopped abruptly, and resumed rowing.

“Very well,” answered Lascelles. “If you are determined to hang on to that rifle we’ll have to part company, that’s all.”

Rakestraw did not reply, and for fifteen minutes the silence was unpleasantly indicative of a storm. The boat moved on under the steady strokes of the oars.

During the past hour Rakestraw had been slyly applying a black bottle to his lips at infrequent intervals—a fact which was suspected by Larry, but unknown to Lascelles. Now the sulky fellow produced it again, and boldly drained half the contents. The effect was soon noticeable. He muttered audibly to himself and constantly lost stroke with Lascelles.

The latter lost patience after a while.

“Drop the oars,” he exclaimed. “I’ll land the boat myself.”

“Drop your own, if you want to,” snarled Rakestraw. “I’m master of this craft.”

With one hand he clumsily tried to row, and with the other he produced the black bottle again.

Lascelles leaned forward, and caught his arm.

“Don’t drink any more,” he said, earnestly. “You don’t know now what you are doing.”

Rakestraw swore violently, and dropped the bottle. He stooped, presumably to recover it; but when he staggered unsteadily to his feet an instant later it was the rifle that he held.

“Now get out of this,” he cried, savagely. “Jump for your lives, you white-livered cowards. I want to see you swim.”

He poised [_sic_] the muzzle into Lascelles’ face, but, quick as a flash, the latter wrested the weapon from the drunken brute, and tossed it into the river. He sprang to his feet just in time, for Rakestraw was at him like a tiger, and down they crashed between the seats.

The boat rocked and tossed as the combatants struggled fiercely. Lascelles, who was undermost, wasted no breath; but Rakestraw shouted and swore as he pummeled his victim.

Larry was badly scared, for an upset seemed imminent. He was more alarmed, however, for his friend's safety. He crept to the seat ahead of him, and tried vainly to loosen Rakestraw's hold, then he began to pound him lustily on the head and shoulders. But the desperate fellow only clung the tighter, and Lascelles uttered a hoarse appeal for help.

Larry was in despair, and as he anxiously debated with himself what to do next a puffing noise fell on his ear. Glancing up stream he was horr[i]fied to see the lights of a big, swift-moving steamer come gleaming around a nearby bend. The boat was directly in its track.

CHAPTER X

The recognition of this new peril only incited Larry to greater efforts. There was twofold danger, in fact, for in addition to the risk of being capsized the deserters stood a chance of being picked up and taken aboard the steamer.

Larry seized Rakestraw's shoulder with both hands, and tugged frantically.

"Let go!" he cried. "Are you mad? There is a steamer coming, and we are right in its track."

But Rakestraw neither heard nor heeded, though just then a hoarse, bellowing whistle echoed over the water. He clung to his victim with the tenacity of a bulldog.

Not so with Lascelles. He realized the danger, and made a desperate but futile attempt to overturn his antagonist.

"Take him by the collar and choke him, Larry," he cried, hoarsely. "Quick! quick, lad!"

Larry clinched his teeth, and shot a brief glance at the steamer, which was now within one hundred and fifty yards of the drifting boat, and forging ahead rapidly. Then he fastened both hands on the back of Rakestraw's collar, and pulled with all his strength. This mode of assault speedily proved effective. The intoxicated man choked and gurgled as the pressure shut off his windpipe, and finally he released his hold on Lascelles to strike at his younger enemy. Larry instantly jerked him over the seat, and Lascelles was equally quick in rising. Between them they thrust Rakestraw into the stern corner, and struck him a couple of heavy blows by way of intimation that they now had the upper hand.

"Watch him, Larry," cried Lascelles. "Throw yourself on him if necessary."

He sprang to the seat, and grasped the oars.

But there was no need of further violence. Rakestraw understood the situation, and glared in stupid terror at the approaching steamer, which now seemed to loom directly above the boat. It was a large and clumsy double decker, and the

whirr and splash of its side paddles was deafening.

Lascelles headed the boat around, and pulled desperately at the oars. Seeing that no attack need be apprehended from Rakestraw, Larry sprang to the other seat, and pulled in time with his companion. Neither dared look at the rapidly approaching monster which was bearing down upon them. The boat hovered for an instant in the track of the light thrown out by the steamer's lanterns, and then swung toward the rim of darkness just in time to escape the massive prow.

As it arose on the crest of the swell a shout was heard, and glancing up the deserters saw two men staring at them over the rail of the foredeck.

"Harder!" cried Lascelles, "Pull harder, lad."

Confused by the heaving motion Larry missed a stroke, and the next instant a gigantic wave thrown out by the revolving paddle flung the boat high in air and turned it bottom up. Everything grew black to Larry, and he knew that he was far under water. He held his breath, and soon arose to the surface, gasping and spitting. The first thing he saw was the steamer speeding swiftly on its course, as though nothing had happened. Then the trail of light reflected from its stern showed him the upturned boat twenty feet away. He fancied he saw some one clinging to it, but before he could make sure he was sucked down into a trough between the waves. He calmly kept himself afloat until the swell of the passing steamer had subsided somewhat. A dark object was now visible, and when his resolute strokes brought him near he discovered that it was indeed the boat. Lascelles was clinging to it, and when he spied Larry he uttered a shout of joy and swam forward to meet him. They returned to the boat side by side, and with some difficulty clambered out on the flat bottom.

"Safe for the present," murmured Lascelles. "It was an awfully close call, Larry, and we ought to be mighty thankful. But where is Rakestraw? I hope the poor fellow is not drowned."

"It looks that way, though," answered Larry, sadly. "He was too drunk to swim, even if he knew how."

"But the shock might have sobered him," rejoined Lascelles, "and he was always expert in the water. I won't give up hope yet."

As they stared in all directions through the gloom a faint shout was heard. They

answered lustily, and the cry was repeated.

“There he is,” exclaimed Lascelles. “Do you see?” He pointed to a dim object thirty feet below the boat.”

“I’ll go after him,” said Larry, preparing to plunge into the water.

“No, you won’t,” declared Lascelles. “I’m the stronger.”

Without more words he slipped off the boat and swam rapidly away.

Larry waited with keen anxiety. Meanwhile the boat drifted down stream, and bumped gently into Lascelles, who was swimming toward it with Rakestraw in tow. Larry lent a helping hand to pull them out on the bottom. It was evident that Rakestraw’s strength had been nearly spent. He lay in a heap, gasping painfully for breath.

Now that all were safe, the deserters began to think of relief from their precarious situation. Not only by water did perils beset them, for already the sky was pale with dawn. Unless they were in hiding by daylight discovery and capture were certain.

“It was lucky that the steamer did not lay by to pick us up,” said Lascelles, pointing to a yellow glimmer far in the distance. “Either the captain was too hard-hearted to stop or else he did not know that we upset.”

“But won’t he report seeing us when he reaches St. Paul?” asked Larry, uneasily.

“Of course,” answered Lascelles, “and there lies our chief danger. We must find a way to reach the north bank in the least possible time.”

A hasty consultation revealed the only feasible method of doing this. It was impossible to right the clumsy boat, so Larry and Lascelles lowered themselves into the water, and swam shoreward, pushing the craft ahead of them. Rakestraw was unable to bear a hand. It was all he could do, in fact, to balance himself on top. His silence and abject attitude seemed to indicate penitence for his mad conduct.

Navigation under these conditions was necessarily slow and laborious, but happily the water was not cold enough to seriously interfere with the operation.

When the boat had drifted down about half a mile it drew near a small, wooded island that lay about seven hundred feet from the north bank of the river. The swimmers aimed to cut across the upper point of this, and would probably have succeeded but for an unforeseen circumstance that altered their plans.

When the island was diagonally distant twenty feet or more Lascelles touched bottom. He secured a foothold, standing breast high in water, and held the boat stationary for an instant.

“We can wade around the point now,” he said, cheerily, “and by the way, Larry, don’t you think it would be a clever idea to stop at the island and right the boat? We may find some bits of wood that will do for paddles.”

“Just the thing,” assented Larry. “I’m tired of swim— Hello! look there, Miles!” He pointed in alarm to a glimmering light that had suddenly become visible on the main shore.

Lascelles and Rakestraw scanned it for a few seconds.

“That means danger,” said the latter. “We can’t land there now.”

“True enough,” murmured Lascelles, uneasily. “They are watching for us.”

“Had we better push for the opposite shore?” suggested Larry.

“No; I have a better plan,” answered Lascelles. “It may seem a little hazardous, but I am convinced that it offers the greater safety. We must cast the boat adrift and take refuge on that island.”

“And when the boat is picked up down the river every one will believe that we are drowned?” exclaimed Larry, catching on to the idea.

“Exactly,” replied Lascelles, “and the search for us will probably come to an end. We can hide on the island all day, and after dark it will be an easy matter to cross to shore by a log raft, or something of that sort.”

Rakestraw huskily gave his assent to the plan, and it was hastily put into execution. Lascelles drew the boat farther in, and waited until his companions had waded to the shore of the island. Then he stemmed the current neck deep, pushing the boat before him, and finally gave it a shove that sent it whirling out

into the gloom. It was visible for an instant or two before it vanished on the tide.

Lascelles joined his companions on the beach, and they regarded one another in silence for a moment. Their condition was indeed forlorn. They had lost all their provisions, and had no clothes but the dripping-wet garments that now covered them. Rakestraw sat moodily down upon a stone, and rested his forehead on his hands, while Larry began to squeeze the water from his trousers. Lascelles walked to the head of the island, and returned an instant later.

“The light has disappeared again,” he announced, “but I have no doubt that searching parties are in the vicinity. Come, we must find a hiding place. Don’t you see the daybreak stealing over the water?”

CHAPTER XI

The island on which the deserters had voluntarily cast themselves away was about a thousand feet long, and several hundred feet wide. The beach terminated at a six-foot bluff of clay and gravel, and on top of this was a tangle of undergrowth and timber. By the time a suitable hiding place had been found in the center of the thicket it was broad daylight, and when the sun came up the shivering men began to have hopes of warmth and comfort.

By this time Rakestraw had evidently recovered from the effects of his struggle in the water, and likewise from his intoxication. He was in no talkative humor, however, and probably felt ashamed of his late dastardly actions. Finally he turned sheepishly to Lascelles and said:

“See here, comrade, I made a fool of myself out there a while ago. It was the drink that did it. You were right about the gun, and I’m glad it’s gone. If it hadn’t been for you I might be at the bottom of the river. Will you call it square now, and shake?”

“Certainly I will,” responded Lascelles, taking the proffered hand. “I never bear a grudge for what a man does when he’s not in his senses. I hope there will be no more trouble. If we want to get well out of this scrape we must stick together like brothers.”

“Right you are,” assented Rakestraw. “We’ll do it, too.” Turning to Larry he added: “You’ve got fists like iron, lad. My head aches yet where you hammered it. But I don’t hold malice, oh, no!”

“I hope not,” assented Larry. “For I had to do it, you know. The steamer was coming, and we were right in the track.”

“Yes, I reckon I held on purty tight,” said Rakestraw, “though I don’t recollect of it. There’s a good deal of the bulldog in my nature.”

He might aptly have added that there was a strain of snakish cunning and treachery, for, as he turned aside, his face assumed a brief expression of malevolent hatred that boded no good to Larry. The sullen fellow may have been sincere in what he said to Lascelles—because the latter had saved his life—but

he was actuated by no such feeling toward his younger comrade. The heavy fist blows still rankled and hurt.

However, Rakestraw's protestations were taken at their face value, and the subject was discreetly dropped. The sun crept higher and higher until its rays shone slantingly into a little open glade, strewn with drift sand, close to where the deserters were hidden. They ventured out to it, and sat in the warmth until their clothes were thoroughly dry. They bore their hunger patiently, since they knew that it was out of the question to procure food. The hours wore on, but not exactly in a monotonous way. There was a good deal of stir on the river that day, and the fugitives watched proceedings anxiously from the wooded lower point of the island, whence a good view was to be had of both shores.

From early morning until late afternoon two or three steamers and a dozen small boats, crowded with soldiers and civilians, cruised about the neighborhood. Nor were the shores void of searchers, for frequent shouts were heard, and bayonets gleamed in the sunlight as their owners prodded the undergrowth.

But there was more of good cheer than despair in these demonstrations, for the fugitives well understood that the upturned boat had been found, and that the search now being made was for their bodies. Hope waxed stronger as the day waned. Though some came perilously near, not a boat touched at the island. One by one the different crafts dispersed, and an hour before sunset the last of the invading fleet vanished down the river. The shores, too, were silent and deserted. There was every reason to believe that no spies were near.

"At last I feel as though I can draw a free breath," exclaimed Lascelles. "How cleverly our ruse succeeded! It seems too good to be true. We are undoubtedly believed to be dead—dead to our old life at Fort Snelling; dead to the world. This is the beginning of a new chapter, comrades. Let us make the most of it."

His companions were no less delighted and enthusiastic.

"Hurrah for the great Northwest!" cried Larry. "The past will seem like a bad dream when once we get there."

"Yes, that will be a life worth living," said Rakestraw, but we are not there yet. Think of the miles and miles that lie between."

"Our safety depends on ourselves," replied Lascelles, reassuringly. "By constant

caution we can keep out of danger. A few hours more on the island, and then we will begin our journey. I have a way planned out for reaching the shore.”

Darkness succeeded twilight, and the singing of the birds gave way to the croaking of the frogs and the sportive splashing of fish. About nine o'clock the fugitives dragged to the water's edge some logs that high floods had left upon the point of the island. They bound them together with tough vines, and made a light but substantial raft. This was not intended to transport themselves. They undressed and, putting their clothes upon it, swam with it toward the north bank of the river. They soon covered the short span of water, and landed in safety. As soon as they were dressed they cut the raft apart, and scattered the logs at different points along the shore. It was important that no evidence should be found to show that they were still alive.

They sat for a little while in the dense shelter of the bushes, briefly outlining their plans. These were but immature as yet. They proposed to strike for Moorhead, at which point they would decide whether to push on to Eastern Montana by way of the Northern Pacific Railroad, or to take the Great Northern Railroad to the northwestern part of Montana. Their general aim was to reach some sparsely-settled region where mining camps and gold existed. To Larry the proposed undertaking offered novelty and adventure. Rakestraw and Lascelles anticipated the latter only, for each had seen life in the West before.

The night was silent and solitary as the fugitives toiled up the bluff. No sentry challenged them, nor did they encounter a living creature in their long tramp across the tract of land that lies between the Minnesota and Mississippi Rivers. The distance was more than half a dozen miles, but they covered it in less than two hours, hungry and weary as they were. They felt that their troubles were partly over when they came in sight of the twinkling lights of Minneapolis. Their civilian attire, and the fact that they were supposed to be dead, gave them courage that they could not have felt under other circumstances.

At the southern outskirts of the city Larry and Rakestraw waited while Lascelles made a foraging expedition in quest of a store. It was not yet midnight, and there were hopes of finding one open. He returned in half an hour laden with bread, crackers, cheese and jerked beef. The fugitives ate a hearty meal, and stowed the balance of the supplies in their pockets. Then, with great caution, they picked their way through the darkest streets they could find to the yards of the St. Paul, Minneapolis and Manitoba Railroad. They crept between long lines of standing

freight trains, and finally stopped before a car that was partially loaded with barrels of flour. The marks upon them showed that they were consigned to Fargo, Dakota.

“Here is just the car we want,” said Lascelles. “No doubt it will start before long, for the other cars appear to be filled and locked. We need not fear the long journey. Our supplies will last us for a day or two.”

He climbed in, followed by his companions, and they stowed themselves in a corner, where there was barely room for all three.

It was just as well, perhaps, that immediate advantage was taken of this place of shelter, though Lascelles proved to be considerably off on his reckoning.

It was early on Sunday morning when the stowaways entered the car, and there they remained motionless for twenty-four long hours, fraught with keenest suspense and anxiety. They slept and ate at intervals, hoping always that the train would start. The peril they feared most was spared them, for none of the yard employees came near.

At two o'clock on Monday morning the car was shifted, and presently a number of barrels and boxes were thrown in upon the tier of flour barrels. Then the sliding door was drawn shut and presumably fastened, and after several more hours of monotonous waiting and shifting to and fro the train to which the car was attached got under way in dead earnest, and went creaking and rumbling out of the yards. At last the sorely-tired fugitives were *en route* for the great Northwest.

CHAPTER XII

A fast passenger train on the St. Paul, Minneapolis and Manitoba Railroad, leaving Minneapolis at seven-ten in the evening, arrives at Moorhead at five-five the next morning—a run of less than ten hours. But the freight on which our stowaways had taken surreptitious passage was far from maintaining a similar record. It made long and frequent stops at way stations, no doubt to discharge and take on goods.

It was not a pleasant ride for the deserters. The car was hot and stuffy, and jolted incessantly. More than once danger threatened in the shape of trainmen, who opened the door to take out boxes and barrels. Late on Monday afternoon the train was still rolling along, and none of the three had any idea of the distance yet to be traversed. There were no crevices in the car through which they could see out, and note the names of the stations. They passed the time in eating, sleeping and chatting, and it was during an interesting conversation on gold discoveries that the train came once more to a full stop.

After waiting a moment to make sure that the stoppage had nothing to do with their car, Lascelles crept over the barrels to the door, and discovered a small crack which had escaped his notice before. He summoned the others, and they came cautiously forward. The aperture was long enough for all three, and they glued their eyes to it. What little could be seen was disappointing. Opposite the car was a long warehouse cumbered with miscellaneous freight. Two or three rough-looking men stood on the platform with their hands buried deep in their pockets. There was absolutely nothing that could reveal the name or location of the place.

Voices were audible close by, and presently the speakers shifted their position, and paused directly in front of the car door. One was a tall, slim man, quite respectably dressed, with smooth-shaven face and ferret-like eyes. The other—who wore blue overalls—was evidently the conductor of the freight train.

“No; I ain’t seen them,” said the latter, in response to a question from his companion. “They ain’t on my train, and anyway, it’s common talk down at Minneapolis that they were upset by a steamer, and drowned. The boat was picked up below St. Paul in the morning.”

“Nonsense!” said the ferret-eyed man, very sharply. “Look here, my friend, I’ll put you up to a thing or two. Those deserters are no more drowned than you or me. They were seen in the railroad yards at Minneapolis early on Sunday morning. I saw them myself, and I supposed that they boarded a freight train which pulled out about that time. I took a passenger to Fargo, and got ahead of the freight. I failed to find my men, though, and now I’m retracing my steps. Those deserters are worth sixty dollars a piece to our agency, and if you can put us in the way of capturing them, I’ll see that you get a slice of the reward.”

“That’s a fair offer,” replied the conductor, “and I’ll keep my eyes open. How will I know the chaps if I see them. Are they in uniform?”

“No; they took good care to provide themselves with citizens’ togs before they deserted. I found the party that sold them the clothes. But here is a printed description of the men. If you learn anything telegraph direct to the sub-agency at St. Paul. They always know my whereabouts there.”

“All right,” answered the conductor, taking the circular. He walked off in one direction, and the ferret-faced man vanished in another. The next instant the car started, and the stowaways drew back from the crevice to stare with questioning alarm into one another’s faces. They felt as though the bottom had dropped out of all their hopeful plans.

“What beastly hard luck;” exclaimed Lascelles. “They’ve brought us to life again in some unexplainable way. To think of spies being on our track away up here!”

“But what did it mean?” questioned Larry. “The man spoke about an agency and a sub-agency.”

Lascelles looked puzzled, but Rakestraw quickly spoke up.

“I’ll explain that, comrades. Did you never hear about those blasted mean skunks who make a business of earning the sixty dollars reward that the government offers for every deserter? They have a head agency in Chicago, and sub-agencies all over the country in charge of detectives. As soon as a soldier deserts, a description of him is flashed everywhere. You may know by what we just heard how clever they are in getting on the scent. I wish I had hold of that hound now.”

Rakestraw gritted his teeth, and swore savagely.

Lascelles and Larry were not a little dismayed by this piece of news, for neither had ever heard of such an agency before.

“Things look blue,” muttered the former. “Whoever that man was I’ll give him credit for a lot of cleverness.”

“It was certainly smart detective work,” assented Larry, “but it looks to me as though he was pretty well off the track now. We are safe for the present.”

“Yes; as long as we stick here in the car,” growled Rakestraw. “The minute we poke our heads out we run the risk of being recognized by some one who has been posted by that blasted hound. I wish I had a copy of that printed description.”

“It ought to make interesting reading,” said Lascelles. “The scrape looks serious, I’ll admit. What had we better do?”

“The best thing I can see is to separate,” rejoined Rakestraw, after a moment’s deliberation. “We might meet again at some point agreed on. The fact that we are three in number will tell against us.”

“You mean that Larry and I should stick together, and you strike out by yourself?” asked Lascelles.

“That will do,” answered Rakestraw. “Have you any money left? I don’t suppose you have, though, after buying all that stuff. I can spare you a dollar.”

“How much have you?” asked Lascelles.

“About four dollars,” was the hesitating reply.

“I have seven dollars,” spoke up Larry. “That ought to last a while.”

Lascelles smiled, and slowly put his hand into his waistcoat pocket. He drew out a small canvas bag, and emptied the contents on the head of the flour barrel beside him. The light which filtered through the crevice of the door revealed a fat wad of notes and a number of gold and silver coins. Larry uttered a surprised exclamation, and Rakestraw’s eyes sparkled with greed.

“I don’t think I’ll borrow your dollar,” said Lascelles. “Here are ten for you.

Added to what you have, it ought to see you through until we meet again.”

Rakestraw pocketed the money with alacrity.

“Where did you get all that wealth?” he demanded. “Have you been robbing a bank?”

“There were ninety-three dollars in that bag,” replied Lascelles, laughingly. “Thirty-three dollars came from Uncle Sam, but you can’t guess how I earned the rest. I tried my hand at writing a year ago, and sent a sketch of garrison life to a New York paper. They accepted it, and paid me for it, and since that I’ve sold them a dozen.”

“That was splendid,” exclaimed Larry. “By Jove! what a shame it was for a man like you to enlist!”

Rakestraw shrugged his shoulders. “I call that a mighty easy way of making money,” he remarked.

“Do you?” said Lascelles. “Just try it once, that’s all I have to say.”

He gathered the money into the bag, and put it back into his waistcoat pocket, not observing that Rakestraw was greedily watching his every movement.

The light at the crevice had now faded away, and the interior of the car was shrouded in deep gloom.

“We had better make up our minds quickly what we are going to do,” said Lascelles. “Fargo can’t be a great distance away, for all the freight is out of the car but this flour, which goes clear through.”

“Oh, thee ain’t any great hurry,” replied Rakestraw. “After we leave the car we can decide where to meet, and then separate. That will be safe enough, for we are sure to reach Fargo in the night. I want time to think over the matter, anyhow.”

Larry and Lascelles were quite in accord with this. All stretched themselves out on the barrels in comfortable attitudes. For an hour the train rumbled on through the black night, whistling shrilly at intervals. Rakestraw appeared ill at ease, and finally—as though the idea had just struck him—he drew a big case knife from

his pocket, and opened the blade.

“What fools we are to sit idling here!” he exclaimed. “The car door must be pried open before the train stops at Fargo. We must slip out before the train hands see us.”

The others saw the wisdom of this step, and Lascelles helped Rakestraw with his task.

Working by turns with the sharp, heavy blade, they soon dug a hole through the planking. Rakestraw slipped his hand out, and undid the wire which was twisted in the hasp. Then he pressed hard against the door, and slid it more than halfway back.

“A neat job that,” he muttered.

“A deuced hot one,” replied Lascelles, wiping the perspiration from his face. He stooped to pick up his coat and waistcoat, which he had discarded at the commencement of the task, by Rakestraw’s suggestion, but before he could lay hands upon them he received a violent push that sent him reeling on his knees toward the narrow upper portion of the open doorway. A second shove completed the dastardly deed, and with a shrill cry on his lips Lascelles shot head first out of the car.

CHAPTER XIII

At the time the door was thrown back, Larry was sitting tailor-fashion on the tier of barrels, watching the movements of his companions as closely as the gloom would permit. He saw Rakestraw slip behind the stooping man; he heard Lascelles' awful cry, and saw him vanish swiftly through the open door. He instantly realized the fearful crime that had been committed, and understood the motive. For a brief moment he was simply paralyzed with horror at the fate of the genial young Englishman, whom he had learned to love with almost brotherly affection. Then he trembled with fear to think what his own fate might be, now that he was at the mercy of this bloodthirsty and pitiless assassin.

But his natural courage came to his aid, and he nerved himself to make a desperate battle for life. He rose to his feet, and slipped noiselessly back to the corner of the car. His heart sank again as he realized that he was without a single weapon of defense; he had not even a pocket-knife. Moreover, his strength would be of little avail against Rakestraw's powerful build.

He braced himself against the end of the car, and waited in dreadful suspense for the first move on the part of his enemy.

The assassin, meanwhile, was too preoccupied with other affairs to pay any attention to Larry, whom he evidently regarded as an insignificant factor. His first act after the commission of the foul crime was to possess himself of Lascelles' waistcoat and transfer the bag of money to his own person; then he pitched coat and waistcoat through the open door.

Had it been daylight an unmistakable look of contrition might have been seen upon the ruffian's face. He had evidently not been insensible to Lascelles' noble conduct in saving him from a watery grave; yet he had allowed his greed for money to outweigh his gratitude. The scoundrel now stood out in his true light—a man without a spark of mercy or humanity.

The penitent expression was quickly succeeded by a look of revengeful hatred that boded no good to Larry. The ruffian was resolved to settle old scores with the lad. He quickly drew the sliding door shut, thus plunging the car into total darkness. Then he stealthily crept over the barrels toward the corner where his intended victim was hiding. His purpose was all too plain, for in one hand he

grasped the open knife.

Though wide awake to his peril, Larry did not lose heart at this dreadful moment. He was conscious of a burning desire to revenge poor Lascelles' fate, and had the odds been equal he would gladly have faced the assassin. But he knew it would be simple suicide to court an attack under present circumstances, and so, when he heard Rakestraw's approaching footsteps, he softly slipped along the opposite side of the car, and gained the other end. This afforded him a brief breathing spell, for as yet his ruse was undiscovered. He had little hope of keeping; up these tactics successfully. Capture was inevitable, unless the train should soon stop. In that event he might be able to open the door and spring out. It was out of the question to execute such a plan at the present time, for the train was rumbling along at a high rate of speed.

A minute passed by, and as Larry strained his ears to detect the slightest intimation of his enemy's approach, he heard a disappointed exclamation, mingled with oaths, from the other end of the car. Rakestraw had discovered his victim's flight.

Almost instantly shuffling footsteps came over the tier of barrels, and Larry knew by their sound that his enemy was groping from side to side, in order to shut off every avenue of escape.

A most disheartening ordeal now faced the lad, but his wonderful courage kept him cool and alert, and nerved him for what he had to do. He possessed one advantage over his enemy. He could move from place to place with absolute noiselessness, for the steady rumble of the train drowned his light steps. Rakestraw, on the other hand, was taking no pains to conceal his heavy tread. He was in too great haste to execute his revenge.

As the assassin drew nearer, Larry bent almost double, and crept warily forward. He was terribly afraid that the loud beating of his heart would betray him. He advanced half a dozen feet, and then paused to listen. To his horror not a sound could be heard above the rumble of the train. Rakestraw had also halted for the same reason.

Larry felt a cold shiver run through his veins, and the temptation to cry out was almost irresistible. He mastered his agitation, and took three steps forward, cautiously extending his arms. Still no sound from his enemy. He advanced three

more steps, and the fourth proved fatal. His foot slipped into a crevice between the barrels, and he pitched blindly forward—right into the ruffian’s arms. With a startled cry he fought to break loose from the vengeful grasp. His desperate struggles were vain. Rakestraw handled him with iron force, and quickly landed him on his back. Then the ruffian knelt upon his victim’s chest, and holding him securely down with one hand planted two or three cruel blows in his face.

Dizzy and stunned with pain, Larry ceased to struggle. He could not see even the outlines of his cruel enemy, but he knew instinctively that the knife was poised above him.

“Don’t kill me, Rakestraw,” he pleaded. “I have done you no injury.”

The ruffian laughed hoarsely.

“I never forgive a blow,” he snarled. “I haven’t forgot how many times you struck me on the river. I’d kill you for every blow, if I could, you stuck-up, conceited young whelp. And, besides, dead men tell no tales. Do you think I’m fool enough to let you live after what you’ve seen tonight? Oh, no! lad, I’m not that kind! I think no more of killing a man than of squeezing the life out of a rat. Lascelles wasn’t half a bad fellow, and I might have spared him had there been an easier way of getting the money. Is it likely, then, that I would let your life stand between me and safety? I wouldn’t be Bart Rakestraw if I did.”

At this juncture Larry made a futile attempt to twist out of the assassin’s iron grasp. The certainty of death unnerved him, and he began to beg piteously for mercy. But he might as well have pleaded with a graven image.

“Expect no mercy from me,” snarled Rakestraw. “I don’t know what it means. I have the knife in my hand, lad; and though you can’t see it you will feel it in an instant. I know where to find your heart, and I’ll make the stroke a sure one.”

“Mercy! Mercy!” cried Larry, raising his voice to a shriek.

A harsh laugh mocked his appeals. There was an interval of silence, during which he suffered as acutely as though the knife were already between his ribs. The steady rumble of the train rang in his ears, and he heard vaguely a shrill, alarming blast from the locomotive whistle.

“Die!” cried Rakestraw.

Larry felt the muscular movement as the arm was lifted higher for the fatal stroke. He quivered in anticipation of it.

Crash! Crash! The car seemed to be rent suddenly into fragments, and then the lad lost all sense of life or feeling. The rumbling of the train had ceased now, and the night echoed to a medley of shrill whistles and hoarse shouts.

CHAPTER XIV

When Larry recovered consciousness his first sensation was one of surprise that he was still in the land of the living. He remembered Lascelles' fate, his own terrible struggle with the assassin, and finally the stunning crash that had brought oblivion with it.

"And now for the present," he muttered. "I wonder what has happened, and where I am. I don't feel any too good, at all events."

He staggered to his feet, and was rejoiced to find that no bones were broken, though his limbs were sore and bruised. His head ached painfully and dizzily, and he was strongly inclined to lie down again.

The thought that Rakestraw might be nearby gave him strength, and he crept slowly forward over the now broken and disarranged barrels. The front end of the car seemed to be entirely torn away, and the pallor of the night was relieved by a ruddy glow which shone from some point ahead.

Hoarse cries and the hiss of escaping steam rang in Larry's ears as he advanced over a mass of splintered beams and broken barrels, twisted ironwork, and loose heaps of flour. He understood it all now. A railway accident had mercifully saved him from the assassin's knife.

He saw no signs of Rakestraw as he climbed out of the car, and stood alongside the track. Either the ruffian had been killed, and was lying back amid the debris, or else he had fled immediately after the accident, under the impression that his victim had perished.

Larry did not know how long he had been unconscious, but he judged from what he saw, that it was but a brief space of time. His car was the third one from the engine, and the two ahead of it were in even a worse condition, being literally smashed to pieces. The engine itself was almost buried in wreckage belonging to another freight train, into which it had crashed with telescoping effect. The fragments of the caboose were recognizable only by their color. Here, where the brunt of the collision had been, a group of trainmen were working amid the debris by the light which a heap of cotton waste afforded. From the groans and cries that mingled with the escaping steam it was only too evident that some

poor unfortunates had suffered.

An impulse of pity prompted Larry to go forward and offer assistance, but a prudent afterthought checked him.

The freight conductor who had received the circular from the detective was probably among the crowd, and would likely recognize one of the deserters.

“I must look after poor Lascelles first,” resolved Larry. “He may be lying alongside the track terribly injured, instead of dead. I don’t believe it was twenty minutes from the time he was thrown out until the accident, and in that interval the train could not have traveled more than three or four miles.”

Before starting off on this project, Larry crept back into the wrecked car on a double quest—to find Rakestraw, and to procure the stolen money. But a close search revealed no trace of the ruffian. He had escaped injury, and made off with his ill-gotten booty.

Larry left the car, and glanced forward at the little knot of workers busy amid the wreckage. He shuddered to see them carry a limp form to the light of the fire.

“I ought to be thankful that they don’t have to handle me that way,” he muttered, as he faced around and walked briskly past the cars, some of which were partly derailed. The train was a pretty long one, but at length the caboose hove in sight, with its red and green lights.

As Larry drew near he saw a shadow darken the side windows, and a prudent instinct led him to take to the thick bushes which bordered the track. These screened him from observation, and he advanced cautiously until he was directly opposite the caboose. He started with surprise and dread to recognize the man inside as Bart Rakestraw. His purpose here was only too plain. The scoundrel was taking advantage of the trainmen being absent at the scene of the wreck to rifle their quarters in search of money or valuables. His head and shoulders were visible at intervals as he moved about.

Larry fairly boiled over with indignant passion.

“The cold-blooded fiend!” he muttered. “Don’t I wish they would catch him at his dirty work! If I only had some sort of a weapon I would face him myself, and demand Lascelles’ money. What shall I do, anyhow? If I go back and report him

to the trainmen it's ten to one I will find myself in limbo."

As the lad thus debated with himself the question was settled in an unexpected manner. Two men came hurrying along the opposite side of the train, and as they mounted the caboose Larry recognized one as the freight conductor.

"I'm sure I have some whiskey here," he said to his companion. "You can run back with it while I hunt the bandages."

Both disappeared inside, and the next instant a commotion arose that made Larry's heart throb with delight. He was satisfied that the ruffian was caught in a trap.

But Rakestraw was not the man to submit to force of numbers. Presently the three came struggling through the narrow door in a tangle of squirming arms and legs, and rolled down on the track, where they fell apart. Rakestraw was first on his feet, and off he sped through the gloom, steering a straight course between the rails. The others were quickly in pursuit, but after running twenty yards they pulled up short. Larry could dimly see their outlines.

"Stop, man!" yelled the conductor. "You're running straight to death."

"There's a trestle ahead," added the other.

The warning came too late. A shrill scream arose on the night air, and died away in shuddering echoes. A dull sound followed. Then silence.

Larry shivered. He knew that he had heard Rakestraw's death cry. The trainmen went forward, but soon returned, talking loudly as they drew near Larry.

"It's no use to waste time now," said one. "The poor chap paid dearly for his thieving. There can't be any life in him after falling eighty feet to the bottom of that ravine."

"I recognized the fellow," answered the conductor. "He was a deserter from Fort Snelling—I'm sure of it. There must be two more of them somewhere around. I'll look into the matter when I get a chance."

They vanished in the caboose, and Larry went trembling on his way. He stuck to the bushes until the sloping ground indicated that the ravine was near at hand.

Then he ventured out on the track, and with slow and cautious steps crossed the long trestle. It was not a very perilous operation, for the ties were broad. The space between them was considerable, however, and it was easy to understand Rakestraw's fatal plunge when he dashed blindly and at full speed upon the trestle.

Larry almost pitied his late companion, as he peered into the dizzy chasm, and thought of the mangled body lying far below. But the remembrance of Lascelles' fate, and of the death that he himself had narrowly escaped, soon changed his mood, and he reflected with grim satisfaction on the assassin's well-merited punishment.

The trestle was safely passed over, and just beyond it was a sharp curve which made clear to Larry's mind, the cause of the collision. He pressed on rapidly, for he was extremely anxious to remove the doubt that lingered in his mind concerning Lascelles' fate. That he could have escaped fatal injury, to say the least, he deemed impossible.

Before he had gone far, he saw a flagman with a lantern ahead of him. The man had, no doubt, been sent there immediately after the collision to warn other trains.

This necessitated a detour through the bushes of a quarter of a mile, and after returning to the track again Larry pushed forward on a trot. When he had covered several miles, as nearly as he could judge, he moderated his pace and kept a close watch upon both sides of the ties.

As he trudged slowly along his keen ears caught a footfall, and the next instant a figure stalked out of the gloom.

Larry's heart beat wildly, for there was something familiar in the stranger's outlines.

"Is that you, Miles?" he cried, huskily.

He was answered by a joyous exclamation, and all doubt was removed when Lascelles sprang forward and caught both his hands.

"Larry, my dear fellow," he cried. "This is too good to be true. I never expected to see you alive again, for I thought that Rakestraw would serve you as he did

me. I have been hunting the track for your body.”

“Just what I was doing,” replied Larry. “Providence seems to have interposed to save us both tonight. Rakestraw has met his just deserts. He is dead.”

“Dead? Tell me about it.”

They sat down on a stone alongside the track, and Larry related the whole story at length, taking care to omit no single detail. Lascelles was a deeply interested auditor, and broke in from time to time with forcible exclamations.

“It reads like a romance, Larry,” he said, when the recital was concluded. “My own yarn will sound very prosaic beside it. I have nothing to tell, in fact. Rakestraw gave me such a violent shove that I cleared the ties entirely, and landed headfirst in a soft, newly-graded embankment. I wasn’t hurt a bit, though I got a good deal of dirt in my nose, ears, and mouth. So retribution fell heavily on Rakestraw. Well, if ever a man deserved a violent death he did. But it’s not a pleasant subject, and we won’t talk about it. We must be careful what we do next, though. If that freight conductor recognized Rakestraw he will be on the lookout for you and me.”

“Good gracious. Miles!” suddenly exclaimed Larry. “I forgot that money. It is still in Rakestraw’s pocket.”

“Well, we can’t do without it,” replied Lascelles. “We must push ahead, and search that ravine before the trainmen get through at the wreck. It won’t be hard to find the body, and I don’t think we run any risk in the darkness. Are you able to travel?”

“Yes,” said Larry. “My head aches, and one leg is stiff, but that don’t count.”

“Come on, then,” added Lascelles. “I’ll help you, if you get tired.”

They started rapidly along the track, and it seemed but a short time until the flagman was sighted. They then took to the woods, and wisely remained under cover until they reached the brink of the ravine.

CHAPTER XV

With great caution Larry and Miles Lascelles crept down the steep bank, and after groping for a while through the gloom they found themselves under the railway trestle. A shallow stream trickled along the center of the ravine, and the level ground on each side was comparatively free from bushes or debris. This made the quest an easy one, and five minutes sufficed to satisfy the searchers that Rakestraw's body had been removed by the trainmen. It was certainly not there.

When Lascelles struck a match, to make assurance more certain, the only visible trace of the disaster was a sprinkling of blood on a flat stone by the edge of the stream.

They turned shudderingly away, and trudged down the ravine.

"Good-by to all that money," said Larry, with a sigh. "I suppose it's out of reach now."

"Absolutely," replied Lascelles. "We would be nabbed the moment we put in a claim for it. But the situation might be worse. You have seven dollars yet?"

Larry thrust his hand in his pocket.

"Yes, the money is there," he exclaimed gladly. "I was afraid Rakestraw had stolen it while I was unconscious."

"He was in too great a hurry to escape from the wreck, I imagine," rejoined Lascelles. "By the way, did you notice if he had his coat on when he ran out on the trestle? He took it off at the same time I did mine, when we began to cut that hole through the door."

"No; he was in his shirt sleeves," exclaimed Larry. "That shows what a hurry he was in to get away from the wreck. But your bag of money was not in the coat, Miles. I saw him put it in his trousers pocket."

"I thought it might be," answered Lascelles, in a chagrined tone. "The ten dollars I gave him was in the inside pocket of his coat, though," he added,

triumphantly. "He placed it there right in front of my eyes. And for all we know his own money was in the same pocket."

Larry caught the drift of his companion's inquiries.

"Would it be safe to go back to the car and make a search?" he asked.

"I can tell better after we take a peep over the edge of the ravine," replied Lascelles. "If there are bushes close to the track, as you say, we stand a good chance of getting into the car without observation. I have a double reason for wanting to investigate. My own coat and waistcoat ought to be some place in the wreck, and I don't fancy traveling in my shirt."

"By Jove, what a shame!" exclaimed Larry, "I forgot to tell you that Rakestraw had thrown your things out of the car. We might have gone back and found them."

"Too late now," replied Lascelles. "I suppose I missed them as I came along. Well, that's all the more reason why I should get hold of Rakestraw's coat. Come, let's be off."

As they turned to ascend the bank of the ravine, a rustling was heard in the bushes ahead of them, followed by the sharp snapping of a twig.

Larry trembled, but Lascelles coolly picked up a stone, and hurled it in the direction of the sound. It landed with a crash, and then all was still. The deserters waited a moment, but heard nothing more.

"Some small animal roused from its lair," muttered Lascelles. "Come on, lad. We have nothing to fear."

They changed their direction slightly, and climbed wearily up the steep bush-grown bank of the ravine. Larry was glad to reach the top, for he was not entirely satisfied with Lascelles' explanation of the mysterious noise.

It was comparatively easy to approach the scene of the wreck under cloak of the thicket, and the fugitives presently found themselves opposite the car in which they had journeyed from Minneapolis. Crouching down in the bushes alongside the track they surveyed the situation. Considerable changes had taken place in the past two hours. A wrecking crew had arrived from some nearby point, and

already there was ample proof of their handiwork. The debris of the two smashed cars next to the engine had been dragged partly to one side of the track, thus screening the very car which Larry and his companion wished to enter. The victims of the collision—and no doubt Rakestraw's dead body as well—seemed to have been removed from the scene. The wrecking crew were now busied with the engine—a very fortunate fact for the deserters.

"We could not have a better chance," whispered Lascelles. "Not a soul is in the vicinity, and that mass of timber screens us from the lanterns."

He slipped out from the bushes, followed by Larry, and they were speedily in the dim interior of the sadly-battered car. Luckily, it proved unnecessary to strike a match. The coat was found on a broken flour barrel, close to the open door. Lascelles grabbed it, and hurried back to the thicket, never pausing until he was a dozen yards from the track. Then he sat down on the ground, and examined the prize.

"Here's a match, Larry," he said. "Strike it, and shade it with your hands."

Larry obeyed, and held the tiny blaze where his companion wanted it. Lascelles' face shone with delight as he displayed a handful of money.

"How's this for luck?" he exclaimed. "Here is the ten-dollar bill I gave Rakestraw, and no less than thirty-two dollars additional—forty-two in all. What a contemptible liar that fellow was! He said he had only four dollars."

"Where do you suppose he got it all?" asked Larry.

"Stole it, no doubt. You know there were complaints of that sort in his company. We'll take it as a loan, and when we strike gold we'll send that amount to Fort Snelling."

Larry laughingly assented, and helped his companion on with the coat, which, although a little short, fitted fairly well in other respects.

"Now for a start in earnest," said Lascelles. "We will sheer off from the railroad, and hunt a good place to hide through the day. I'm badly in need of sleep. Fargo can't be many miles away, and we will try to reach it by dark to-morrow evening."

“I’m pretty well fatigued myself,” assented Larry, “and I hope we’ll soon find that hiding place.”

As they arose to go, Larry fancied that he heard footsteps close by. Lascelles had heard nothing, and attributed the alarm to his companion’s imagination. However, to satisfy Larry, he poked about in the bushes for a little while with a lighted match; but found no trace of an intruder.

Then they started off briskly, and after tramping for an hour or more through timber and thickets they came to rolling prairie land. Half an hour’s jaunt over this brought them in sight of a bulky object looming out of the dusky night. Approaching nearer they found it to be a large frame shed nearly half full of hay.

“There must be a cattle ranch close by,” said Lascelles. “This is one of the outlying hay sheds where they store winter supplies for the stock. It’s just the place we want, anyhow.”

He had already climbed by a series of strips to an open door ten feet above the ground. Larry followed him, and they crept over the hay until they found a snug hollow place, where they dropped down side by side.

“I wonder what time it is,” said Larry.

“About two or three o’clock in the morning, I fancy,” replied Lascelles, in a drowsy tone.

A little later both were sound asleep.

Lascelles’ slumber was the profound, dreamless one of thorough exhaustion, but several times Larry awakened in a state of half-consciousness. On the latter occasion he felt a hand steal across his breast, and slip under his jacket. He concluded that his companion had thrown his arm over him, and called, drowsily:

“Is that you, Miles?”

There was no answer, and he drifted off to sleep again. He was aroused from a hideous dream—in which he was fleeing from a devouring prairie fire—by a feeling of suffocation. He sat up to find that the fire, at least, was a veritable fact. A ruddy glare was dancing before the door of the shed, and the interior was fast

filling with volumes of dense yellow smoke.

“Miles! Miles! Wake up,” Larry’s voice rang in shrill echoes of fright above the crackle of the ignited hay, as he tugged frantically at his companion.

Lascelles awoke, stared around him, and then grasped the significance of the terrible danger.

“To the door, Larry,” he cried, hoarsely. “A bold rush will do it. Give me your hand. That’s it; now hold your breath and run.”

Too late! Before they could take a single step forward the smoldering hay burst into crimson tongues of fire that leaped upward, and in all directions. The flames licked the sides of the doorway, and darted roofward up the timbers, hissing and roaring as they went. Sparks flew in myriads, and the yellow billows of smoke curled over and over as they rolled inward.

For one brief instant the glare made the interior of the shed as light as day, and revealed, only too plainly, the absence of any door or window other than the now impassable main entrance. Then the suffocating cloud rolled down on its two terror-stricken victims as they stood clasping each other’s hand.

CHAPTER XVI

Death in its most awful form was now imminent. There was no possibility of escaping the flames. The only egress from the shed was hopelessly cut off.

A choking cry burst from Larry's lips as he staggered backward to avoid the dense smoke billows that curled around him. His eyes tingled, and his cheeks seemed to be shriveling up under the fiery heat. He lost his companion's hand, and groped blindly for it.

"Miles! Miles!" he shrieked. "Where are you? This is horrible. Must we stay here and burn to death?"

Suddenly his arm was clutched in a firm grasp, and Lascelles' voice whispered huskily in his ear:

"Courage, my poor boy! Our fate is inevitable. Let us face it as brave men should. The smoke will mercifully suffocate us long before we can feel the flames."

They stood side by side for a few terrible seconds. Lascelles' lips moved in prayer, and Larry tried to remember the words his old nurse had taught him to repeat at her knee years ago.

The smoke had been momentarily increasing, but now it rolled upward for an instant as a draught of air surged into the building. The flames leaped forward in a solid sheet, driving a parching, spark-laden wave of heat before them.

Lascelles glanced eagerly around, and the pallor of his face was lighted by a gleam of hope.

"We'll make one more attempt, Larry," he cried. "Perhaps we can break through the planking of the rear wall. Quick! before the smoke lowers again."

The cheering words aroused Larry from his stupor, and a fierce resolve to live and defy the flames asserted itself. The smoke had weakened his eyes, and he clung blindly to his companion as he staggered over the yielding hay.

The scorching atmosphere almost forced them to cry out with pain, and ere the brief space was traversed the yellow smoke was once more wreathing thickly around them.

“Just a few more steps,” pleaded Lascelles. “Just a few more, lad. Don’t breathe more than you can help. Ah! Here we are!”

They stumbled against the rear side of the shed, and, as though to encourage them in their last desperate chance, the planking rattled and creaked with the force of the collision. Fortunately the hay was packed tight and solid just here, and afforded a good foothold. Again and again Lascelles threw himself against the board wall, pounding with clinched fists, and kicking lustily.

Larry forgot his smarting eyes, and assisted his companion with might and main.

But there seemed little hope of success. The planks yielded and creaked under the attack, but the nails still held them firmly to the crossbeams. Meanwhile the smoke became denser, the heat grew unbearable, and the sea of flames came leaping and roaring nearer. They shot upward to the roof, and greedily licked both sides of the inflammable old tinder box; sparks whirled and scintillated, and the very smoke billows changed from yellow to a ruddy crimson.

Larry abandoned the struggle, and fell back on the hay, gasping for breath. Lascelles staggered under the terrible heat, and very nearly dropped beside his companion. But desperation lent him a final spurt of strength. He drew back half a dozen feet, gritted his teeth, and rushed at the planking like a stone from a catapult.

Crash! A ripping noise was heard, and a wave of cool air surged into the shed. One of the widest planks had given way at the bottom, and when Lascelles pushed against it he felt the swaying motion. He shouted madly at Larry, but received only a stupid, unintelligible answer in return. Then he groped for him in the smoke, and dragged him upright.

“We are saved, lad,” he shouted, hoarsely, as he held the tottering form. “Saved! Do you understand?”

But Larry was past understanding, and realizing this Lascelles dropped his helpless burden, and commenced to batter the broken plank. Failing to get a good point of vantage, he threw himself flat upon the hay and pounded with both

feet to such good effect that the plank parted at the upper end, and fell clattering to the ground.

With a shout of joy, Lascelles dragged Larry to the orifice, pushed him through, and after holding him at arm's length for an instant dropped him softly. Then he allowed himself to slide over the edge of the hay and by swinging dexterously to one side he landed a little beyond his companion.

The escape had been accomplished none too soon; for Lascelles had barely staggered to his feet when a forked tongue of flame darted through the gap in the shed wall, and an instant later the timbers on both sides were blazing merrily.

Larry stirred, sat up, and gazed stupidly at the conflagration as he rubbed his eyes. Lascelles took him under the arms, and dragged him over the prairie to a safe distance. Then they sat down side by side, and took long, refreshing draughts of the cool night air, while the burning shed blazed higher and higher, making the scene as light as midday for a broad radius round about.

"How do you feel now, my boy?" asked Lascelles.

"Fairly good," replied Larry, "though my face and eyes smart painfully. My throat feels choky."

"Of course it does. That comes from the smoke you swallowed. It will wear off after a while, and you will be as good as new."

"I hope so," answered Larry. "But tell me how we escaped, Miles. I must have fainted; for I don't remember anything after I was kicking at the wall."

Lascelles modestly told the story, and hastily cut short Larry's protestations of gratitude, by saying:

"I would give a good deal to know how the shed caught fire, lad. There is something very mysterious about it. Everything was safe when we went to sleep. The flames started right at the door, too."

"And we slept at least an hour," answered Larry, "for I was awake twice, and there was no sign of a light either time. You were awake yourself on the last occasion. I heard you stir, and then you put your arm across my breast."

“You were dreaming, my boy,” said Lascelles. “I slept like a rock, and what’s more I never move from the position that I take when I lie down.”

“I’m sure your arm was on my breast,” replied Larry, decidedly. “You moved it just like this.”

He went through the motion until his hand slipped under his coat. Then he plunged it suddenly into his inner pocket, and withdrew it—empty.

“My money is gone,” he cried. “Pocketbook and all!”

Lascelles clapped his hand to his trousers, and then eagerly turned both pockets inside out.

“Mine is gone, too,” he groaned. “We have been robbed of everything, Larry. I see through it all now. Some scoundrel followed us to the hay shed, and rifled our pockets while we were asleep. And the same person must have set fire to the hay with the deliberate intention of burning us up.”

“But who knew that we had money?” exclaimed Larry. “Who knew in what pockets we kept it? Who could have been fiendish enough to try to murder us in such a dreadful manner? There is only one man, Miles—”

“And he is dead,” interrupted Lascelles.

“Bart Rakestraw is not dead,” declared Larry, solemnly. “He can’t be. It was he who made that noise in the bushes when we climbed up the ravine. He followed every step we took from that time, and saw you count the money and put it in your pocket. Then he dogged us to the hay shed, and conceived that devilish plan for getting our money and putting an end to us at the same time. I’m as certain of this as I am of sitting here beside you, Miles.”

Lascelles gritted his teeth, and broke into a torrent of violent language.

“Ah! if I only had the fiend by the throat now,” he hissed. “I would wring the life out of his carcass. I believe you are right, Larry, and yet I can’t reconcile the facts. How could he have escaped death—or at least fatal injury—after such a fall as that? You remember the blood on the stone?”

“I think I can see through the mystery,” replied Larry. “When he fell through the

ties he must have caught on some of the girders underneath, and saved himself. The blood could easily have dripped down into the ravine from a cut on his face or hands. After the trainmen went back, he no doubt climbed up on the trestle, and from there made his way into the ravine to hide.”

“That sounds plausible,” answered Lascelles; “but there is another solution, now that I think of it. He may have fallen through the very beginning of the trestle and rolled down the bank, and over to that stone, where he lay in a stunned condition until just before we arrived to search for him.”

“One or the other is certainly the true solution,” rejoined Larry. “But which don’t concern us, since we know that Rakestraw is alive.”

“And it would be a wise plan not to concern ourselves about the rest,” said Lascelles. “The less we have to do with such a cold-blooded fiend the better. He believes us dead; let him continue to believe so. No doubt he is far away by this time. It maddens me to think that he has all our money, though. The fact that we are penniless may handicap us seriously.”

“Well, I’m willing to let him go his way,” replied Larry; “but I shan’t forget this night’s work if ever we meet in the future.”

“Nor I,” assented Lascelles. “And now, if you feel able to walk, suppose we hunt a safer locality. The danger of our position just occurred to me. The shed has been burning for twenty minutes, and it is a wonder that no one has arrived on the scene by this time. Here we have been sitting like a pair of fools.”

“And if we are caught, we will probably be accused of setting the shed on fire,” answered Larry.

As they arose to their feet the burning structure fell inward with a crash, and myriads of sparks floated skyward. The blaze leaped high for an instant, and then subsided.

CHAPTER XVII

Larry's fear was not exaggerated. The deserters had already lingered far too long at the scene of the fire, as they were destined to learn to their cost. They trudged wearily away, hungry, penniless, and not a little down at heart.

They chose a direction parallel with the railroad, as nearly as they could judge; but they had barely passed beyond the radius of light from the flames when the quick trampling of hoofs was heard at no great distance to the left.

"By Jove! here they come!" muttered Lascelles. "Run for it, lad! They may not have seen us."

This was a vain hope. As they changed their pace to a brisk trot two or three shouts rang loudly on the night air, and the pounding of hoofs swelled to a terrific clatter. The ruddy glare had betrayed the dark figures to the approaching horsemen.

There was no cover at hand, so the fugitives tried their best to escape under cloak of the darkness by dodging and twisting in all directions. But the pursuers came on with unerring instinct, and soon they appeared in relief against the starry horizon as they rode over the crest of a slight ridge. Two or three hoarse commands to stop were emphasized by a volley of pistol shots—purposely fired high. This was more than the fugitives had bargained for.

"The game is up," cried Lascelles. "We must surrender and face the music, Larry. Show a bold front, and don't despair.["]

The next instant they were surrounded by half a dozen horsemen, three of whom quickly dismounted and presented revolvers at the prisoners.

"Put up your weapons," said Lascelles, calmly. "We have no intention of resisting, nor have we committed any offense that warrants you in arresting us."

The leader of the party—a burly, bearded man—seemed momentarily taken aback by Lascelles' confident manner and words, and scrutinized his face as closely as the darkness would permit.

“You can’t bluff me by smooth words,” he growled. “You two firebugs shall pay dearly for this night’s work. Tie their arms up, boys, and we’ll be off. We can’t do any good at the shed. It’s a mass of embers by this time.”

The rough cowboys obeyed the command of their leader with alacrity. They cut a lariat into strips, and bound the prisoners’ arms behind their backs. Larry submitted quietly, but Lascelles lost his temper at the indignity.

“I told you that we had no intention of escaping,” he cried. “Can’t you take a man’s word of honor? This is all a mistake, anyhow, though I admit that circumstances are against us. We went into the shed to sleep, and some scoundrel followed us, and after robbing us of our money set the place on fire. We only escaped by breaking one of the planks off the rear end.”

“A likely story,” sneered the bearded man. “Shut up, and don’t waste your breath. It’s useless.”

Larry took a step forward.

“If we had been guilty of setting the shed on fire, do you suppose we would have remained in the vicinity until it was nearly burned down?” he said, respectfully. “If you want proof of our story, look at our singed eyebrows and hair.”

The leader of the party uttered a hasty exclamation, and seemed undecided what to do or say. Finally he turned to his companions, and exclaimed, gruffly:

“Dick, strike a match, and take a look at these fellows. We’ll catch them in their own trap.”

One of the cowboys obeyed the order, and the others crowded closer as the flame blazed up. Larry’s suspense was great for a few seconds; for he had spoken on the spur of the moment, and was by no means sure of what he said. He need not have feared, however. The narrow escape from the flames had left plain traces upon both prisoners. Their hair and eyebrows were scorched; their hands were smoke-grimed, and their eyes were inflamed and watery.

“It looks like a straight story, Mr. Barker,” exclaimed one of the cowboys.

“That’s right,” assented another. “The chaps hev made a close shave from the fire.”

Mr. Barker was the leader of the party, and doubtless the owner of the burned shed. The glow of the match showed him to be a broad six-footer, with a frank, honest face, and a long yellow beard. He nodded assent to the opinions expressed by his companions, but his next words indicated no hope for the prisoners.

“You’re a pair of rascals,” he growled, “and if you’ve told the truth in one way you’ve lied in another. That story of the robbery won’t go down. You’re likely looking chaps to have had money. I reckon you sneaked into the shed—where you had no business whatever—and set it on fire with a pipe or a cigar. I don’t intend to stand the loss, and let you go free. I’m not built that way.”

Lascelles indignantly denied the accusation, and attempted to give further explanations, but a peremptory command to “shut up” checked him. Both prisoners were quickly boosted up behind two of the cowboys, and secured in such a way that they could not fall off. Then the little procession moved off on a brisk trot, Mr. Barker leading the way.

Dawn was now breaking in the east, and presently the pale light came stealing over the prairie. It was not fully day when the horsemen reached a mass of buildings—some of wood and some of stone—with a broad river gleaming duskily in the distance. The prisoners looked curiously about as they were being taken down from the horses. The place seemed to be a combination of ranch and farm. Here and there stood large barns. Off to the left were fields of stacked grain, and to the right vast herds of grazing cattle were visible.

“This way,” commanded the ranchman, and the prisoners followed him into a long, low stone building. They passed through a gloomy hall, and were ushered into a small room scantily furnished with a table and three chairs. The floor was strewn with untanned hides. Mr. Baker left the apartment without a word, and locked the door behind him.

Larry and Lascelles looked blankly at each other.

“He might have untied our hands,” exclaimed the latter, indignantly. “We’re safe enough without that.”

“How do you suppose this scrape will turn out?” asked Larry.

“That’s hard to say,” replied Lascelles. “They can’t well do anything with us for

going into the shed to sleep—even though they believe that our carelessness set the hay on fire. They may take us to the county town, and commit us on a charge of vagrancy. This man Barker seems to be a decent sort of fellow, however, and when his passion cools down he may let us off entirely. All I'm afraid of is that this sneaking scoundrel from the detective agency may get on our track while we are detained here.”

“And in that event it would be all up with us?” queried Larry.

“Exactly. We would go back to Fort Snelling as sure as fate; and it's the last place in this world that I ever want to see again. But we won't worry until the time comes, my boy. We need sleep and rest, and now is our chance to take it.”

Lascelles stretched himself on one of the rugs, and Larry chose another close to his companion. In spite of their troubles both were soon sleeping soundly.

The sun was shining into the room when one of the cowboys entered, and woke the prisoners to give them their breakfast, or—to speak more properly—their dinner; for it was close to noon. He untied their hands, and the coarse but palatable food disappeared rapidly.

Lascelles tried to ask some questions, but the cowboy was provokingly uncommunicative. He rebound the prisoners when they were through eating, and departed with the tray of dishes.

The day wore monotonously on, and Mr. Barker—though constantly expected—did not put in an appearance. The room had evidently been constructed for the purposes of a prison. The walls were thick, and one small, square window, six feet above the floor, furnished the supply of light. The sash had been removed for the sake of light, but the outer side was protected by two flimsy iron bars.

Toward the close of the afternoon, Lascelles shoved the table across the floor until it was directly beneath the window. With some difficulty he and Larry succeeded in climbing upon it, and by resting on their knees they obtained a clear view out. The window faced an open space fifty yards or more wide, on the opposite side of which were the stable—a long flat building with a dozen doors. In the foreground were watering-troughs, and some large wagons. To the left was open ground, and a little to the right stood a large barn. The scene was animated and lively, for the ranch hands were constantly passing in and out of the stable doors, or hastening across the court. A wagon drove up to the barn

doors, and busy hands began to load it with sacks of threshed grain. Presently it drove off, and another quickly took its place. Mr. Barker, however, was nowhere visible on the scene.

CHAPTER XVIII

“I don’t intend to remain a prisoner longer than tonight, unless we know definitely what is to be done with us by that time,” said Lascelles.

“Why, do you think we can escape?” asked Larry.

“I’m pretty sure of it, provided we can find a way to release our arms. Those iron bars are merely clinging to the rotted mortar. Some of the cowboys may be hanging around the stables, but we can easily slip by them in the darkness, if we once get safely out the window.”

“You won’t take any of the horses?” ventured Larry.

“Of course not. I should like to have a couple well enough, but a thousand dollars wouldn’t tempt me to take them. In this part of the country they string men up for horse stealing. However, it’s too soon to lay our plans. Barker may turn us loose before evening. Suppose we get down from the window before any one sees us.”

This suggestion was carried out, and the table was pushed back to its former place.

No one came near the prisoners until just before twilight, when the same cowboy who had been in before arrived with the supper tray.

“What does Mr. Barker intend to do with us?” asked Lascelles, during the progress of the meal.

“I dunno,” was the reply. “He’s been too busy all day ter think about you chaps.”

“He will surely let us go, won’t he?” questioned Larry.

The cowboy laughed.

“Not by a jug full, he won’t. I reckon he’ll turn you over to the sheriff at Fargo.”

“How far is that from here?” asked Lascelles.

“‘Bout nine miles. But I can’t talk any more, it’s agin’ orders. I must be off.”

He rebound the prisoners’ arms, and departed, banging and locking the door. In his haste he did not observe the absence of one of the knives, which Lascelles had managed to slip into his coat pocket.

The brief summer twilight soon faded from the room, leaving utter darkness in its stead. Gradually the noise and turmoil about the ranch subsided until all was quiet, save for a whinny or restless movement from the stables. There was no question or argument as to what should be done. The plan of escape had been tacitly resolved upon since supper.

About ten o’clock the first step was taken. Lascelles bent downward, and shook the knife from his pocket. Then he and Larry stretched themselves on the floor back to back. Larry held the knife in his fingers, with the blade turned outward.

Lascelles pressed his fettered wrists against the keen edge, and rubbed softly until the lariat parted, incurring several cuts during the operation. He quickly unbound Larry’s arms, and a moment later they had the table under the window, and were standing upon it. The bars proved to be even less secure than had been anticipated. Several vigorous wrenches bent them to one side, leaving plenty of space for the prisoners to slip through.

Lascelles poked his head out, but could see or hear nothing alarming. A lantern fixed over one of the stable doors shed a flickering gleam partly across the court, but the foreground was in comparative darkness.

“All serene?” whispered Larry.

“Yes; the coast seems clear,” was the reply. “Come on.”

Lascelles dropped nimbly to the ground, and Larry followed him. They crouched a moment in the shelter of the building, and then moved cautiously toward the open stretch on their left. They were nearly opposite the end of the stables when their attention was arrested by a peculiar sight. A dark figure stalked out of the gloom, glided stealthily by the extreme edge of the lantern’s glare, and then—with a hasty glance around—vanished in the stables through the last door but one.

Lascelles halted, and made a gesture of silence to his companion.

“What do you think of that ?” he whispered. “Did you notice anything familiar about that man’s walk and build?”

“No,” replied Larry, an indefinable feeling of dread taking root in his mind as he spoke. “Why do you ask, Miles?”

“Well, I’ve seen him before, unless I’m greatly mistaken,” returned Lascelles, evasively, “and I want a glimpse of him when he comes out. Wait a moment. Ah! I have it. Do you see that wagon? We will creep over there, and hide under it.”

The wagon stood two-thirds of the way across the court, and close to a watering-trough. The fugitives easily gained it under cover of the gloom, and crawled between the wheels.

They had barely ensconced themselves in this position when the stable door opened softly, and the stranger reappeared, leading a powerful and handsome bay horse. There was sufficient light from the lantern to show that the animal was the one which Mr. Barker had ridden the previous night—no doubt his favorite mount. There was also sufficient light to reveal clearly the man’s features, and Larry and Lascelles were thrilled to recognize the blo[o]dthirsty ruffian and assassin, Bart Rakestraw. He bore more than one mark of the accident from which he had so miraculously escaped with his life. A dirty handkerchief was bound across his forehead, and his left hand was wrapped in another; one eye was purple and swollen, his nose resembled a piece of raw flesh, and there was a visible limp to his walk. Yet the scoundrel had the same jaunty, dare-devil air about him as of old.

A hoarse sound came from Lascelles’ lips, and he trembled with well-nigh uncontrollable passion. Larry gritted his teeth, and longed to have his fingers on the ruffian’s throat.

All unconscious of the propinquity of those whom he had twice tried to murder, Rakestraw led the steed several feet out from the stable door. He had put on a saddle and bridle, and was ready to mount. What his object was could not be easily guessed. Urgent indeed must it have been to drive him to such a risky act as the theft of a horse from the ranchman’s stables. The clatter of the hoofs was likely to bring a storm about his ears at any instant.

In the gloom under the wagon the hidden watchers fumed and quivered, forgetting their own peril in the sight before them.

Rakestraw shot a hasty glance on all sides, and resting one foot in the stirrup swung lightly into the saddle.

“By gracious! This is more than flesh and blood can stand,” hissed Lascelles, in a low, fierce whisper. “I must have it out with the fiend. Don’t try to stop me, lad.”

Throwing off Larry’s detaining hand he slipped from under the wagon, arose upright, and plunged with great strides across the open.

Rakestraw saw him coming, but supposed him to be one of the ranchmen. He uttered a yell, and drove his heels into the horse’s flanks. The startled brute sprang forward.

But it was too late for escape. A tigerish bound planted Lascelles directly across the path. He dodged the plunging hoofs, and snatching the bridle brought the horse to a standstill.

“You black-hearted fiend,” he cried, glaring into Rakestraw’s face, “it is my turn now. Come down here.”

The glow of the lantern playing full upon Lascelles’ face made recognition swift and sure.

A gleam of unearthly terror flitted across Rakestraw’s battered features, and for an instant he swayed in the saddle.

“You—you?” he gasped, with chattering teeth.

“You know me, do you?” snarled Lascelles. “Come down, you craven coward!”

The ruffian’s demeanor instantly changed, now that he knew the apparition to be real flesh and blood, and not a ghost. With a savage oath he slipped sideways in time to avoid Lascelles’ outthrust arm. Quick as a flash he whipped a revolver from his pocket, and cocked it.

“I’ll fix you this time,” he cried, pulling the trigger.

A sudden plunge of the horse was all that saved Lascelles. The ball whizzed by his ear, and the flash actually singed his forehead. The report rang sharply

through the night.

Maddened to desperation, Lascelles dropped the bridle, sprang upward, and fastened both hands about the ruffian's throat. The frightened horse plunged forward for half a dozen yards with his double burden. Then Rakestraw lost his balance, and reeling in the saddle came heavily to the ground with Lascelles on top of him.

Meanwhile the pistol shot had aroused every soul on the ranch, and the night fairly rang with shouts, curses, the banging of doors, and the rush of feet.

Larry still crouched under the wagon, oblivious to everything but the terrible drama that was being enacted before his eyes. His glance momentarily followed the horse as it plunged madly into the darkness with empty saddle and dangling stirrups. Then his attention was riveted on the two desperate men struggling for mastery over the ground. Now Lascelles was uppermost; now Rakestraw. Now they were tangled up in a squirming heap, and now they had fallen violently apart. Rakestraw was instantly on his feet, but Lascelles, to all appearances seriously injured, struggled slowly and painfully to his knees.

The ruffian might even then have made good his escape, for the approaching ranchmen were some yards off. But he was insane with rage, and his safety seemed slight in comparison with the opportunity of revenge. Cursing ferociously he dashed at Lascelles, knocked him flat on his back, beat him in the face, and then deliberately jumped upon him with both feet.

CHAPTER XIX

With rage and horror Larry witnessed this brutal attack. He realized that he must act at once if he would save his friend's life. It might be too late ere help from other quarters could arrive.

"Oh, if only I had some weapon!" he muttered.

As if in answer to his wish, he espied just then a heavy cart whip lying by his side, where it had probably fallen from the wagon. He grasped it two feet from the butt, made a dive between the wagon wheels, and bore straight down on Rakestraw.

Thud, thud! Two forcible blows on the head arrested the fiend in his murderous work. With a growl of rage he turned on his brave assailant, and struck at him. Larry dodged the blow, and, swinging to one side, he delivered another stinger that made Rakestraw bellow with pain and fury.

Half a dozen men, headed by the ranchman himself, were now within twenty feet of the scene. The ruffian saw them coming, and wavered briefly between passion and prudence.

"We shall meet again, curse ye," he snarled at Larry. Then he turned, and started to run.

But Larry had a last card to play, and he played it well. A short rush brought him directly into the ruffian's path, where he dropped quickly on his hands and knees—a trick that he had learned in his school days. Rakestraw had no time to avoid the obstacle. He tripped over Larry, and came with a heavy crash to the ground. Before he could rise, the mob of shouting cowboys were on the spot. With many exclamations of surprise they pulled Larry to his feet, and quickly overpowered Rakestraw in spite of his desperate struggles. Some consideration was extended to the former—for his fight with the ruffian had been witnessed—and for the same reason Lascelles was handled tenderly by the cowboys who had picked him up. More excited spectators appeared on the scene, and every one seemed to be trying to ask questions at once. Two or three lanterns were lighted, and shed a brilliant glare on the assemblage of eager faces.

Mr. Barker pressed through the crowd, and, after glancing briefly at Rakestraw, he turned with undisguised astonishment to the other prisoners.

“What does this mean?” he demanded, sternly. “How did you break out?”

Though suffering great pain, Lascelles was able to speak. He frankly explained how he and Larry had escaped, and then added:

“We would have been far away from here by now, but for that scoundrel there. He is the man who robbed us, and set fire to the hay shed. We caught him in the act of stealing your horse, and tried to capture him. You and your men arrived just in time, for the rascal was getting the best of us.”

“That’s a lie,” snarled Rakestraw. He attempted to get at Lascelles, but the cowboys dragged him back, and choked him into submission.

The ranchman hardly heard the conclusion of Lascelles’ story. He rushed to the stable, glanced through the open door, and turned back in a state of great excitement.

“This fellow tells the truth,” he cried. “My best horse is gone. I would not lose that animal for a thousand dollars.”

“I don’t think there is much danger of losing him,” said Larry. “He ran off only a moment ago, and can’t be far away.”

He indicated the direction, and two of the cowboys quickly mounted, and rode off to search for the animal.

Mr. Barker looked puzzled and undecided for a moment.

“I believe your story is straight,” he said, addressing Larry and Lascelles.

“Everything points that way. You saved a horse that I value more than anything in the world, and by doing so you lost your chance of freedom. It was just as well, perhaps, for I shan’t forget this service. I won’t hold a grudge against you for breaking out of my prison. But I want to make a closer investigation into this matter before I decide what to do.

“I see you are hurt, my man,” he added to Lascelles, who was standing upright, supported by two men.

“Not much,” replied Lascelles, with a smile. His looks belied his words, however. He was deathly pale, and his face and hands were streaked with blood in several places.

“You need attention,” said Mr. Barker, kindly, “and you shall have it at once. Bind that fellow hand and foot, boys, and throw him into the stable,” he added, designating Rakestraw. “And put a strong guard over him.”

Leaving three men to execute this order, the ranchman led the rest of the party across the court, and thence around the end of the stone building to a door on the other side. They entered what was evidently the living-room of the ranch—a large apartment strewn with rugs and decorated with arms and game trophies. Lascelles was placed on a rude couch, and Larry sat down beside him. Both were in a hopeful and contented mood, for their troubles had been unexpectedly cleared away.

An examination disclosed the fact that Lascelles was suffering from nothing more serious than a number of painful bruises on different parts of his body. Mr. Barker gave him a small glass of brandy, and after drinking it the color came back to his cheeks, and he sat up.

“Don’t worry about me,” he said to Larry. “I’ll be all right inside of an hour.”

“I hope you will,” replied the ranchman, who was standing near. “What both of you want now is a good sleep. If you give me your word of honor not to escape, I’ll let you spend the night right here. I want to have a friendly talk with you in the morning.”

Before either could reply the door opened, and one of the cowboys burst impetuously into the room.

“We’ve got the horse,” he exclaimed. “He’s safe in his stall again. I say, Barker, there are visitors outside. Bill Jeffries is in the party, and a queer-looking chap what looks like a minister. We ran across them back here on the prairie. They were striking for the ranch on foot.”

“Visitors!” muttered the ranchman. “It’s a queer time for that.”

Larry and Lascelles turned pale, and exchanged glances of fear and consternation.

Just then a loud knocking was heard on the door, and Mr. Barker hastily opened it. The first to enter was a grim-featured, clean-shaven man with ferret-like eyes, and at sight of him Larry and Lascelles abandoned hope. He was followed by three roughly-attired men, all heavily armed. The party had a weary, jaded look, as though they had traveled far.

“Sorry to intrude,” began the clean-shaven man; “but we’ve been on the hunt for a fellow since afternoon, and seeing the lights of your ranch we thought we might get some information here. I’m Detective Steelyard, of the agency for capturing United States Army deserters. This is Sheriff Jeffries from Fargo, and the other two are his assistants—”

He stopped abruptly, and his little eyes twinkled. He had just caught sight of Larry and Lascelles. He whipped a revolver from his pocket, and strode forward.

“This is better luck than I expected,” he exclaimed.

“Two birds at one stroke! I arrest you fellows for desertion.”

The next instant he recoiled as a heavy hand descended on his shoulder.

“Put up that shooting-iron, old shaven face,” cried the ranchman. “You’re on my premises now, don’t forget it.”

“I forbid you to meddle with me in the discharge of my duty,” exclaimed the detective. “Sheriff, I demand your help in taking these deserters.”

“How is this, Jeffries?” questioned the ranchman.

“I reckon it’s straight enough, Barker,” replied the sheriff. “These two chaps answer to the printed description. If you can prove ‘em otherwise, I’ll take my men away from here instanter.”

The ranchman turned to Detective Steelyard.

“Cool down, my man,” he said. “Take a seat, and spin me your yarn. I have no intention of interfering with the law.”

The detective dropped into a chair, and mopped the perspiration from his brow, keeping his eyes closely on Larry and Lascelles.

“I’m glad you’ve decided to take a reasonable view of the matter,” he began.

“These two men and another party named Rakestraw deserted from Fort Snelling last Friday night, and pretty nearly murdered a couple of soldiers before they got away. I was on the track for a while, but lost it. Early this morning, while I was down at Wahpeton, I got a telegram that had been sent from Fargo to the head office at Chicago. It informed me that the deserters had been on the northbound freight that was wrecked back here last night. I wired to the sheriff at Fargo to bring two assistants and meet me at the scene of the wreck. I joined him there, and before long we got on the trail of one of the deserters. The fellow was lame from falling off the trestle, but for all that he was spry enough to give us the slip in the woods. I suspected that he would strike for the nearest ranch, and try to steal a horse. I didn’t expect to find the other two deserters here, though. That younger chap there is more desperate than he looks to be. He was in the guardhouse at Fort Snelling on a charge of assaulting an officer. His trial was to come off this week. I hope I can lay hands on the third man. He’s the worst of the lot, and is the one that did the shooting.”

CHAPTER XX

The detective closed his narrative, and produced two pairs of handcuffs from his pocket.

“Now that I’ve made out a clear case,” he said, “I hope you will give me peaceable possession of the prisoners. I want to deliver them at Fort Snelling as soon as possible.”

Mr. Barker glanced at Larry and Lascelles, and the hopeless expression of their faces left him no room for doubt as to their identity.

“I reckon your yarn is true,” he said, turning to the detective. “I don’t care about getting into a muss with Uncle Sam; so you may have the men. But, of course, you and your party will remain here overnight. I judge from your looks that you need rest and food pretty badly.”

Detective Steelyard hesitated.

“Yes; we will accept your hospitality with gratitude,” he assented, finally.

“That’s right,” replied the ranchman. “Just make yourselves at home. By the way, I have a little surprise for you.”

He made a gesture to a couple of the cowboys, who immediately left the room. They returned shortly with Rakestraw. The ruffian’s legs had been unbound so that he could walk.

The detective jumped for joy.

“That’s my man,” he cried. “That’s Bart Rakestraw. Where did you get him?”

“These two fellows here are responsible for his capture,” said Mr. Barker. “They prevented him from riding off with my best horse.”

“Ah! is that so? Well, it’s one thing to their credit. I suppose they had some grudge against him.”

“Doubtless,” replied the ranchman, dryly. “You can take that fellow back now,”

he added to the cowboys.

“Hold on,” cried the detective. “Why don’t you keep him here? He may escape.”

“No danger of that,” said Mr. Barker. “He will be bound hand and foot, and locked up in the stable under strong guard. You may substitute handcuffs for that rawhide, if you wish.”

Rakestraw had been standing quietly all the while, his scarred face drawn with lines of bitter hatred, and his eyes roving alternately from his former companions to Detective Steelyard. He knew what it all meant, but his demeanor showed no trace of fear or confusion. He drew himself up stiffly as the rawhide was removed from his wrists, and the steel manacles clapped on instead. Then he limped off between his guards, casting a backward glance at Larry and Lascelles, which they were destined to remember long afterward. The door closed behind him, and every one looked relieved.

“Now,” said Mr. Barker, “I want these other chaps to tell their story before I lock them up for the night. I imagine it will prove interesting.”

“Yes, no doubt,” exclaimed the detective, eagerly. “I shall be glad to hear it.”

He hitched his chair closer, and assumed an expectant attitude; but his face fell when Mr. Barker added to the prisoners:

“I would advise you to tell nothing that will criminate yourselves. We are mainly interested in the history of your relations with this man Rakestraw, who seems to hate you bitterly.”

The ranchman’s face was inscrutable, and his harsh, stern accents seemed to indicate that his heart was void of any sympathy for the prisoners. Nor did they expect either kindly feeling or assistance from him. The return to Fort Snelling was inevitable, and they knew it.

However, the relation of their adventures was quite another matter; they were quite willing to reveal Rakestraw in his true colors. When all had gathered about the couch—the ranchman, the detective and his party, and the rough cowboys—Lascelles began the story, prudently omitting all reference to the desertion, and starting with the commencement of the railway journey from Minneapolis. He told all that he knew, and Larry supplied the rest. When the dual recital was

finished the audience expressed the unanimous opinion that burning at the stake would be a far from adequate punishment to fit Bart Rakestraw's crime. A wave of sympathy might possibly have rippled into existence in favor of the prisoners, but its seeds were promptly stifled by Mr. Barker.

"You've had hard luck, my men," he said, sternly; "but it serves you right for deserting in such bad company—for deserting at all, I mean," he added, hastily. "You will have plenty of time for repentance when you reach Fort Snelling, and I hope you will be led to see the error of your ways. I will take good care that you don't slip out of the ranch again."

"You surely don't intend to put them in the same place from which they escaped before?" expostulated Detective Steelyard.

"Oh, they can't work that game again!" replied Mr. Barker. "It's the safest place to keep them, for the walls are thick, and the door has iron bolts on the outer side."

"But—but you say they escaped by the window before."

"Exactly; and that is just the point I intend to make the strongest now.

"Dick," added the ranchman to one of his men, "take a loaded gun, and pace in front of that window until I relieve you at daybreak. If either of the prisoners pokes his nose out, fire at him."

This stern order pacified the detective.

"Of course you know best," he said. "You have no objection to putting these bracelets on them, I suppose? The men are worth sixty dollars a piece, and it is my duty to take every precaution."

"I don't blame you for wanting to pocket your little commission," replied the ranchman, in a dry tone. "But it is hardly necessary to cumber them with steel. Let them enjoy a good night's rest. I will have their arms bound securely and comfortably."

Detective Steelyard assented rather ungracefully. He was reluctant to press the point.

At a sign from Mr. Barker the cowboys produced rope, and tied the prisoners' arms close to their sides. They submitted without a word.

"No shamming now," growled the ranchman, addressing Lascelles. "You can't play sick with me. I dare say your injuries were all assumed."

Lascelles reddened with anger.

"I am not complaining," he said, quietly. "You forget in whose cause I was hurt, sir."

Mr. Barker turned hastily away, and gave some orders to his men.

"Food and drink will be served to your party," he said, addressing the detective. "It will be ready in a few moments." Then he approached Larry and Lascelles, and briefly bade them follow him.

"I would like to see that prison of yours, if I am not asking too much," said Detective Steelyard. He evidently wanted to make assurance doubly sure by a personal inspection.

"Glad to satisfy you," replied the ranchman. "Just come along."

He took the lead, lantern in hand. Larry and Lascelles followed, the latter leaning heavily on his companion. The detective brought up the rear, watching the prisoners as though he feared they would vanish through the floor.

The way was short, and in brief time Larry and Lascelles were thrust into the room from which they had escaped barely an hour before. Detective Steelyard took the lantern, and closely examined the walls, the windows, and the fastenings of the door.

"Satisfied?" queried the ranchman.

"Yes, it's safe enough," was the reply.

They went out together. The door clanged behind them, and the bolts shot creakingly into place. The prisoners were left to darkness and solitude.

"This ends it all," moaned Larry. "I wish I was dead, Miles."

“Don’t talk to me,” replied Lascelles. “I’m in a desperate humor, Larry.”

He began to grope restlessly about the room.

For five minutes there was utter silence. Then footsteps echoed in the corridors, the bolts flew back, and the door creaked open. Some one scraped a match, and the some one proved to be Mr. Barker.

“Hush! No noise!” he whispered, holding up a warning finger. “Old shaven face and his posse are stuffing themselves with bread and meat in the kitchen. I gave them an excuse, and slipped away. Turn your backs to me. There, that’s it.”

A ripping noise was heard, and Larry and Lascelles felt their arms to be free. The sudden transition from blackest despair to brightest hope almost took away their powers of speech. They were dazed and stupefied by their good fortune.

The match went out, but the ranchman did not light another.

“Don’t miss a word, I say,” he whispered, rapidly. “I can’t stay long. You fellows did me a service tonight, and I intend to pay the debt. Uncle Sam can snap his fingers after you. I have no love for the United States Army, anyhow. The part I played a while ago was only a bluff, intended to deceive old shaven face. Now, these are your instructions. Wait here quietly for half an hour. Then crawl through the window, enter the stable by the third door from the lower end, and take your pick of the horses. The sentry under the window and any more of my men who may be outside will be posted, and won’t molest you. When you leave the court turn sharp to the left, and you will strike the road to Fargo. It runs most of the way along the Red River. Walk your horses until you are well beyond the ranch, and then ride your best. Tie the animals to a fence or a tree before you enter town. I am not afraid that you will steal them. I am a good enough judge of character to read honesty in your faces. I don’t want to know anything about your plans, but I will tell you, by way of advice, that you had better catch the first westbound freight. Don’t let any one see you, if you can help it. Don’t worry about Rakestraw any more. He is booked for Fort Snelling, dead sure. Here is a small bottle of brandy, which may be needed, and this pocketbook contains fifty dollars—all the money I have on the ranch. Don’t scruple to take it. It is only an advance, for I will lessen Rakestraw’s plunder by that amount before old shaven face takes him away in the morning. You needn’t worry about me. It won’t be hard to account for your escape—a knife left in the room—a

sleeping sentry outside the window. See?”

He paused a moment to listen.

“Now, I must be off,” he added. “Good-by, and good speed to you.”

His companions tried to thank him, but the words seemed to stick in their throats. They heard the door close, and the bolts slide into the sockets. Then all was still.

CHAPTER XXI

The minutes dragged slowly by. That brief half-hour, during which the prisoners had been instructed to remain quiet and inactive, was a severe test of their patience. In fact, it was a period of acute suspense; for they were still a little fearful that some hitch in the programme might occur. Not until they were riding on fleet horses through the night would they believe in the reality of their good fortune.

“Barker is one man in a thousand,” said Lascelles, “and I hope I will see the day when I can repay him for his kindness.”

“So do I,” replied Larry. “Just think of him giving us money, and trusting us with horses. He may get into an ugly fuss with the government, if that detective finds out what he did.”

“Don’t worry,” answered Lascelles. “He is too sharp for that. He will find a way to account for every link of our escape. That knife we had a while ago is still lying on the floor.”

“So it is,” exclaimed Larry, “and that will explain how we got our arms loose, to begin with.”

“Exactly,” assented Lascelles.

They kept on talking in low tones, until they were satisfied that the half-hour limit had expired.

“It won’t be long now until we know the worst or the best,” said Larry. “I feel as cool as a cucumber. How are you, Miles?”

“A little staggy,” replied Lascelles. “I am not surprised, though, when I think how that brute trampled and kicked me. But it is an easy matter to brace up, thanks to Mr. Barker’s forethought.”

He swallowed a few drops of brandy, and immediately announced that he felt better.

“Bear a hand here with the table,” he added.

They carried it quietly to the window. Larry poked his head out, and joyfully announced that the sentry was stretched on the ground—apparently sound asleep. At all events, the fellow proved himself as good as a sleeping man, for he did not stir or make a sound as the prisoners dropped beside him, and scurried off into the gloom.

They were confident of success now, and did not hesitate to enter the third stable door. They chose two powerful-looking horses, and quickly saddled and bridled them. Not a man was in sight as they led the animals into the court, and thence around the corner of the ranch, which was now in utter darkness. The outlines of the road were now dimly visible through the gloom, and after pushing on for a hundred yards or more they swung themselves into the saddle, and went cantering swiftly toward Fargo. Faster and faster they rode through the night, with the broad bosom of the Red River of the North on one side, and on the other the ghostly outlines of grazing cattle, stacks of hay, and scattered ranch buildings. The breeze put new life into their veins, and every moment the ugly nightmare of the past seemed more and more an intangible dream. They were free—free as the current of the river, and the fishes that swam in its murky depths.

Lascelles was a skilled rider, and Larry, though he had been on horseback less than a dozen times in his life, stuck well to the saddle.

At last the pale, white electric lights of the metropolis of North Dakota gleamed in the distance, and when the town was close at hand the fugitives dismounted. They fastened the horses to a roadside fence, and pushed ahead on foot. Reaching the suburbs they sat down on a lumber pile for a brief rest and consultation. As yet no discussion of their future plans had taken place between them.

“Whatever we decide to do must be done quickly,” began Lascelles. “Two big railroads go toward the Pacific from Fargo. The Northern Pacific runs due westward through Dakota and Montana. The Great Northern, which is a continuation of the St. Paul, Minneapolis and Manitoba, goes far north toward British Columbia, and then strikes westward. I think that line offers us the best chance. It runs through Northern Montana, and if we can reach Fort Assinaboine or Milk River it will be an easy matter to strike the Missouri River, and go down

by boat to the mining region that lies south of Fort Benton.”

“You seem to know all about that part of the country,” said Larry.

“I ought to know it,” replied Lascelles. “I was through there once. “Well, what do you say?” he added, hastily.

“I don’t say anything. I leave our plans entirely to you. By all means let us take the Great Northern. Do you intend to travel in a passenger car?”

Lascelles laughed grimly.

“I wish we could, but it is out of the question. We must hoard our fifty dollars like regular misers, for we will need outfits and supplies when we reach our stopping-off place. A freight car is the best accommodation that we can hope for, and we will be lucky to get that. I know where the Great Northern yards are, and now that our plans are settled we had better strike in that direction at once.”

Larry assented with alacrity, and they trudged on through the suburbs of the town, choosing, as far as possible, the outlying streets.

It was between two and three o’clock in the morning, and this fact proved to be both an advantage and a disadvantage.

On the one hand but few pedestrians were about; on the other hand there were no places open where provisions could be purchased—unless it was in the center of the town, where the fugitives feared to venture.

“We may have to go hungry for a few hours,” said Lascelles. “It won’t be safe to loaf around till daylight. If we can find quarters on a northbound freight that is ready to start no doubt we will have a chance to stop off at a way station and buy some provisions.”

“I can stand it if you can,” replied Larry. “It don’t seem long since supper, and I ate heartily.”

They were now close to the bustling railway yards, and presently they slipped in among long lines of freight cars, some empty and some loaded. They advanced warily, ready to dodge out of sight at the first sign of an approaching employee. The narrow avenues between the cars were in deep gloom, and this greatly

lessened the danger of discovery.

Fortune seemed to favor the fugitives, as it had done on a previous occasion in the Minneapolis yards. They stopped before three detached cars, on either side of which were long trains stretching into the distance. Two of these cars were box cars, and the doors were locked; but the one sandwiched between was an open truck loaded with queer-looking objects muffled in canvas sacking.

Lascelles climbed up, and lifted the cover of the largest object, which stood six or eight feet high.

“Here’s luck,” he whispered, “a big stationary engine! The furnace door is large enough to crawl through, and the inside will hold us comfortably. There is no danger of our being discovered, either.”

“Where is it consigned ?” asked Larry.

“By Jove! I forgot,” exclaimed Larry, in a crestfallen tone.

He jumped to the ground, and searched the side of the car until he found a tag nailed to the woodwork. He scraped a match and instantly blew it out, but the brief glare had revealed all that was wanted.

“Pacific Junction, Montana,” exclaimed Larry.

“Yes; that’s it. No doubt the entire load goes there. Nothing could be better. Up with you, my boy, before the guard comes around for tickets.”

“The guard?” queried Larry.

“Oh, that’s English for conductor,” laughed Lascelles. “You see I’m not quite Americanized yet.”

They scrambled hastily aboard the truck, and Lascelles delayed an instant to gather an armful of the straw that was wrapped around some of the other machinery. Then they crawled under the canvas and into the roomy furnace, closing the door partly. They felt perfectly secure here, and the straw made such a tempting bed that they stretched themselves out on it, side by side. They did not intend to go to sleep; but drowsiness crept over them, and before long everything had faded from their minds. Weariness made their rest profound, and

they slept on and on. Rattling and rumbling, and puffing and whistling echoed around them. They heard nothing—not even the shifter that swooped down on the three cars, and bore them to their place in a train that was being made up.

When the first flush of dawn streaked the eastern sky the still slumbering fugitives were speeding northward, little dreaming of the terrible and mysterious events in which they were destined to shortly play a part.

CHAPTER XXII

The curtain rises again after an interval of several weeks, and this time the scene is laid in Northern Montana—far from grim old Fort Snelling; far from Mr. Barker's Dakota ranch.

Let the reader picture, if he can, a granite butte towering high toward the starry, midnight sky; at its base a triangular spit of land, timbered and rock-strewn, bounded on one side by Dry Fork River, on the other by the mighty Missouri. A camp-fire throws its ruddy gleam on a dugout moored at the water's edge, and on two figures that sit side by side on a log. They lean toward the flames with evident enjoyment, for the September air is chill and piercing. Both are picturesquely attired in high boots, flannel shirts and soft felt hats. The one is young, with a frank, handsome face. His companion is older and taller. A drooping, golden mustache shades his mouth, and his chin is covered with a silken beard of three weeks' growth.

But the reader has by this time rightly guessed the identity of the pair, and it only remains to tell briefly what befell Larry Redmayne and Miles Lascelles since we saw them last in the railroad yards at Fargo. The stationary engine made an admirable hiding place for the fugitives, and they suffered no inconvenience during the long ride.

The train stopped frequently, allowing them to procure what provisions they needed. At Pacific Junction, where the truck containing the machinery was switched off, they transferred themselves in safety to another car, and rode some miles beyond Fort Assinaboine. They took advantage of a stop at a watering station to leave the train by night, and after trudging for several hours along the track they reached a small settlement in the early morning. Here forty-five dollars out of the fifty was expended in the purchase of two second-hand rifles, ammunition, hats, boots, shirts and a small store of provisions. Thus equipped the fugitives started southward on foot with light hearts. They encountered no adventure worth speaking of during their tramp through this desolate and mountainous region. On reaching the Dry Fork River they purchased a well-worn dugout from a half-breed hunter, gave it the needed repairs and paddled down the swift current, en route for the Missouri.

Now, for the first time, they tasted the delights of absolute freedom. Not the

faintest shadow of recapture and punishment troubled their minds. Lascelles was somewhat accustomed to the grand and rugged scenery of Montana, and to the exhilaration of outdoor life; but it was all new to Larry, and he enjoyed the experience with the keen zest and ardor of youth.

The ninety-mile stretch down the Dry Fork River was quickly covered, and at the close of the second day's paddle the voyagers reached the spot where we find them at the opening of this chapter. They had been sitting for hours by the blazing camp-fire, talking over their past adventures, and though it was close to midnight, they felt no desire for sleep.

"It seems odd to be in sight of the Missouri once more," remarked Lascelles, half sadly, as he stirred the embers of the fire. "I feel an older man than when I saw it last, and yet it was less than three years ago."

Larry did not reply. He hoped that his companion would drift into a reminiscent mood, and reveal some of the secrets of his past life.

But Lascelles had no such intention. Presently he resumed, in an altered voice:

"This winds up one stage of our journey, my boy. I fear the next one will not be so easy."

"Naturally," assented Larry, "since we must paddle up stream. It's funny how the Missouri flows—first northward, and then due east. From this point we go up the river in a southwesterly direction, don't we?"

"Yes," replied Lascelles, "we must paddle fifty miles against the current. Fort Benton is twenty miles away, and our stopping-off place is thirty miles beyond that. Then, in order to reach our proper destination, we must tramp ten or twenty miles into the mining region that lies east of the Missouri."

"Are you going to some place where you have been before?" asked Larry.

"Not exactly. Of course, the neighborhood will be familiar to me. We will do a little prospecting on our own account, and perhaps hunt some of the mountain streams for gold-bearing gravel."

"I can hardly wait till we get there," exclaimed Larry. "What a pity there are no steamers on which we could take passage up the river."

Lascelles laughed.

“There are steamers in plenty,” he said. “Some owned by the government, and others by private parties. Formerly they only came up the river as far as Fort Benton, but I believe the channel has since been improved for a farther distance of forty miles. It is a little late in the season for navigation, but as the river looks unusually high I don’t suppose the steamers have stopped running yet. That fact don’t concern us, anyhow, for we have no money to pay our passage.”

“And if we had money would it be safe?” questioned Larry.

“Well, in that case I wouldn’t hesitate to stop the first boat that came along,” replied Lascelles. “I don’t think we need have the slightest fear of recognition. Neither Detective Steelyard nor the Fort Snelling authorities will think of looking for us in Northern Montana.”

“Unless Rakestraw puts them on the track,” suggested Larry.

“No danger,” said Lascelles. “The rascal no doubt believed that we would abandon our plan through fear of that identical thing. So you see we adopted the very safest course.”

The conversation continued a little longer. Then Lascelles arose, and went down to the dugout. He returned with a pair of blankets, and was about to unroll them when a sharp, crackling noise was heard close by. The sound came from the Missouri side of the butte, and was evidently caused by some person, or some animal stepping upon a dry twig.

“Did you hear that?” whispered Larry.

Lascelles nodded, and, snatching his rifle, he pushed Larry into the shadow of a big rock. Then he crouched down beside him. A moment or two passed in utter silence, and just when the suspense had grown unbearable, a hoarse voice rang out from the darkness:

“Hello, there! Don’t be afraid.”

“Step forward, and throw up your arms, whoever you are,” sang out Lascelles.

The bushes rustled, and the next instant a tall figure advanced into the light of

the camp-fire.

The two hidden watchers behind the boulder were profoundly amazed, and well they might be. The stranger was a man of about forty, with sandy hair, blue eyes, reddish mustache and mutton-chop whiskers of the same color. These distinctively British traits were further emphasized by his sporting attire of gray tweed—steamer cap, Norfolk blouse, baggy trousers and leggings. He carried a gun on his shoulder, and his appearance indicated that he had traveled a long and rugged distance.

With a gasp of surprise, Lascelles arose, and stepped forward, followed by Larry.

“I’m deuced glad to meet you chaps,” began the stranger, abruptly. “I approached your camp with great caution, not knowing whether I would find friends or foes. My name is Corwallis, and I’ve had a pretty tough experience to-day. I was bound for Fort Benton on a government steamer, and early this morning some of the machinery broke. The boat went ashore for repairs, and I took the opportunity to go off on a little hunting trip. I carelessly failed to mention the fact to the captain, and when I returned to the shore the boat had gone. It is my beastly luck to be always tumbling into scrapes, but this was about the most awkward one I’ve been in yet. There was no other course that I could see, but to strike for Fort Benton on foot. A pretty tramp I’ve had of it, too. I didn’t fancy the idea of spending the night out of doors, so I pushed on as well as I could after dark, hoping to strike a habitation. Jove! but I was glad to see the twinkle of your camp-fire.”

CHAPTER XXIII

Having accounted for his intrusion in the above manner, Mr. Corwallis coolly sat down upon a log, and requested something to eat. Larry brought him some biscuit and jerked beef, and he speedily put them out of sight.

Lascelles' face wore a rather inscrutable expression, and he was evidently ill at ease. He flushed when the visitor questioned, abruptly:

"You look like an Englishman, my friend, and you talk like one, too. Am I correct?"

Lascelles shook his head.

"I have been in the colonies," he replied, evasively, "and I suppose I have picked up a good many Britishisms. There is no mistaking your nationality."

"So I have been told a hundred times since I landed in this country," answered the other. "I'm just over here on a short run, and I expect to meet a friend beyond Fort Benton. I live in London, and am a barrister by profession. Here is my card—Hugh Mortmain Corwallis, Gray's Inn. But where are you chaps bound, if I may take the liberty of asking?"

Lascelles briefly related the plans which he and Larry had in view.

"You are welcome to accompany us to Fort Benton," he concluded. "Our dugout will easily carry three."

"Thanks, awfully," replied Corwallis. "But look here, I want to ask you something. Is this place you are striking for anywhere near the mining town of Silver Ledge?"

Lascelles gave an involuntary start, but quickly recovered his composure.

"Yes," he answered, "our general destination is in that neighborhood."

"Just the thing," exclaimed Corwallis. "Suppose we join company? I would rather do that than hire a guide at Fort Benton, as I had intended to do. I like your faces, and will make it worth your while to accept my proposition. All my

luggage is on board that steamer, but no doubt I will get it back again. What do you say?"

He anxiously scanned the faces of his companions, neither of whom seemed ready with a reply.

Larry hated the idea of taking a stranger into the party, because of the caution which it would necessarily impose upon their speech.

Lascelles' hesitation was probably from different motives, known only to himself.

But before the Englishman could take offense the embarrassing situation was unexpectedly relieved. A shrill quavering sound rose on the night air, and died away in echoes.

"What was that?" exclaimed Larry.

"The whistle of a steamboat down the river," replied Lascelles.

"A steamboat!" cried Corwallis. "How far away is it?"

"About two or three miles, I should judge," said Lascelles.

Corwallis clapped his hand under his jacket, and produced a fat, morocco-leather pocketbook. He inspected the contents, and turned eagerly to his companions.

"Look here!" he exclaimed. "I want an answer right away. If you chaps consent to my proposition, I will pay your passage to Fort Benton on that steamer, provided we can paddle off to it in your dugout, and get on board. I have money enough with me for that purpose. Moreover, if the big boats are not running above Fort Benton I will charter or purchase a small steamer in which we can journey up the Missouri to our destination. That is a fair offer, surely."

Larry and Lascelles exchanged meaning glances. Such a chance was not to be despised, and they knew it.

"We accept your kind offer," exclaimed Lascelles, "but on one condition. You must allow us at some future time to refund our share of the expenses. I regret to say that our resources are limited at present."

Corwallis was not disposed to haggle over such a trifling point, in which he probably put but little faith, anyhow.

“As you please,” he replied, “though the outlay of money will hardly repay the debt I owe you. Do you think the plan can be carried out?”

“Easily,” rejoined Lascelles; “but we had better not lose any time.”

He hastily gathered a great armful of dry grass and wood, which he deposited in the dugout. Larry followed his example with the blankets and such other traps as lay about the camp-fire. A pan of water was thrown upon the burning embers, and a moment or two later the little party were paddling out on the broad current of the Missouri. Their start was well timed, for already the steady puffing of the approaching steamer came to their ears on the night air, and soon the flashing lights hove in sight around a bend.

Lascelles now kindled a fire in a tin pan, and placed it on the bow of the dugout, where the blaze could be readily seen. When the steamer was within a quarter of a mile, he fashioned a torch out of a thick clump of dry grass, ignited it, and waved it to and fro over his head. This flaming signal had the desired effect. A shrill whistle echoed over the water, and a bell rang twice. Then the steamer gradually slowed up, and allowed the dugout to run alongside. Few persons were awake at this time of night. Three or four men peered over the rail, and presently the captain joined them. After a brief conversation, Lascelles and his companions were assisted on board with their luggage, and the dugout, being of little value, was cast adrift.

The *Missouri Queen*—for so the steamer was named—was a long, bargelike affair, with double decks and side paddles. It was not a government vessel, but belonged to private parties.

The captain’s wrath at being roused from his sleep was speedily appeased by the bank notes which Corwallis put into his hand. Satisfactory explanations were made, and by the time the steamer was forging ahead once more the three weary passengers were sleeping soundly in comfortable berths; nor were their fellow travelers aware of what had occurred.

At daylight the *Missouri Queen* lay moored under the frowning parapets of Fort Benton, and after breakfast the passengers went ashore. For the most part, they were miners, stockmen and adventurers bound for points in the neighborhood.

Among them were a few tourists, who intended to go down the river on the next boat.

Larry and Lascelles were not a little alarmed to find themselves subjected to the scrutiny of United States soldiers, but they wisely put on a bold front, hoping to pull through the ordeal in safety.

“We are right in the lion’s mouth,” said Lascelles; “but nevertheless this is the last place any one would think of looking for two deserters.”

Corwallis recovered his luggage, and inexpressibly relieved the officers of the government steamer which had deserted him. He was supposed to have fallen overboard, and been drowned.

The greater part of the morning was taken up in hunting a small steamer, for it was ascertained that the large boats had ceased to run above Fort Benton, owing to the uncertain depth of water at this advanced season of the year. A little stern-wheeler, fifteen feet long, was finally found and chartered. The owner of it—a man named Sanders—was engaged to make the trip.

Corwallis evidently had plenty of money, and he insisted on purchasing new and expensive outfits for his companions, which, to tell the truth, they sadly needed. Their second-hand rifles were accepted as part payment by the trader. The Englishman had taken a fancy to his new friends, and they disliked to offend him by refusing his gifts.

Fortunately, Corwallis was in haste to reach his destination, and Larry and Lascelles were spared the risk of staying overnight at Fort Benton. By four o’clock in the afternoon the preparations were completed, and the little party boarded the steamer, which was fired up ready for departure, and lay a little above the regular landing. It was named the *Helena*, after its owner’s native place. A canvas awning roofed it completely, and as the boiler occupied the center, there was plenty of room fore and aft.

“I suppose you fellows don’t want to lie here till to-morrow morning?” asked Sanders, when all were snugly fixed on board. “You see, it won’t be safe to run through the night on account of rocks and the floating driftwood. There ain’t no channel in the upper part of the river that a man can depend on.”

Lascelles glanced uneasily at Corwallis, and the latter answered, quickly:

“No, we don’t care to spend the night here. Run as long as you can, and then put inshore.”

“All right,” assented Sanders. “Orders is orders, and I always sticks to them. I reckon I can cover ten or fifteen miles afore dark.”

He instantly put on steam, and the boat moved slowly toward mid-channel, it and its occupants an object of some curiosity to a dozen or more loungers who had gathered on the shore.

Just at this moment the group was joined by two new arrivals, who had strolled down to see what the crowd meant—a tall man in a gray traveling suit, and a lad of seventeen or eighteen, similarly attired.

Larry saw them, and his face turned pale as he recognized Matthew Redmayne and his son Dan. Lascelles noticed the lad’s agitation, and inquired the cause of it.

“There are my uncle and cousin,” whispered Larry. “What shall I do?”

“Get behind me, quick,” replied Lascelles.

The warning came too late.

Matthew Redmayne’s sharp eyes had been scanning the steamer, and now, with an excited gesture, he strode to the water’s edge.

“Lawrence! Lawrence!” he shouted, loudly. “Come back here!”

CHAPTER XXIV

Larry was about to dodge behind Lascelles, when the latter checked him by a quick movement.

“Pretend you don’t know him,” he whispered, sharply. “It’s your only chance.”

Larry took the cue, and stared his uncle in the face with a well-assumed expression of amazement. Sanders and Corwallis observed what was going on, and the crowd on shore seemed equally interested. An officer and two privates were now among them.

But Matthew Redmayne was not a man to be easily deceived. He pointed Larry out to Dan, and the latter confirmed the recognition.

“Hello, Larry,” he exclaimed, in great surprise. “How did you get here?”

“You young reprobate,” shouted Mr. Redmayne. “Don’t try to fool me. Somebody bring that steamer back.”

“You are mistaken, my friend,” cried Lascelles. “This lad don’t know you.”

Larry played his part in silence, though he was trembling inwardly.

Meanwhile, at a signal from Corwallis, Sanders sent the steamer ahead under full pressure. The Englishman probably had an inkling of the situation, and was disposed to help his friends.

Mr. Redmayne continued to shout and prance excitedly up and down the shore, greatly to the amusement of the spectators. Presently a bend in the channel hid him from the view of those on the steamer. Sanders was too wise to make any comments on what had just occurred. He attended silently to his duties, and sent the *Helena* forging ahead at a rapid speed. Corwallis walked to the stern of the boat, and busied himself with his luggage, leaving Larry and Lascelles alone in the bow.

“That was an unfortunate recognition,” said the latter. “Your uncle was too smart to be fooled. Do you suppose he wanted you for any special reason?”

“No, I think not,” replied Larry. “The meeting was entirely accidental. I remember now that my uncle intended to make a long trip somewhere this summer, and I suppose he decided on this part of the country. Don’t you think that his recognition of me puts us in great danger?”

“To speak plainly, I do,” answered Lascelles. “Since you enlisted under your real name, he has probably learned by this time, through the newspapers, all that occurred at Fort Snelling. In his anger he may expose you to the authorities at Fort Benton, and in that event half the garrison will soon be steaming up the river after us.”

Larry turned pale.

“What can we do?” he asked. “It means sure capture, if we stay on this steamboat.”

“I’ll think over a plan,” replied Lascelles. “Something is sure to turn up. The safest course would be to leave the boat as soon as it stops for the night; but Corwallis would regard such an act as a contemptible desertion, and I don’t see my way clear to give him a satisfactory explanation.”

“That’s true,” assented Larry. “Hush! Here he comes now!”

Corwallis made his way leisurely forward, and glanced at the disturbed faces of his companions. With the astuteness common to his profession, he had fathomed the situation pretty accurately.

“That gentleman back at the landing seemed anxious to interview you,” he said, in an easy tone, glancing at Larry.

“He was my uncle,” replied Larry. “He treated me badly, and I ran away from him last April.”

“Yes, that’s the whole story in a nutshell,” added Lascelles.

“The whole of it?” queried Corwallis, staring fixedly at his companions, and lowering his voice so that Sanders could not hear. “Do you know, you chaps remind me of a pair of deserters who escaped from Fort Snelling a few weeks ago. I saw several printed descriptions of them at St. Paul—”

The sentence was interrupted by Lascelles, who uttered a sharp exclamation, and quickly snatched his rifle. His expression was fierce and determined as he faced the Englishman.

“Sit down,” remonstrated Corwallis, quietly. “You have nothing to fear from me. I don’t want to hear any explanations. I only want to say this to you: Soldiers are plenty at Fort Benton, and more steamers can be had. When our boat stops for the night, as it must do presently, you are at perfect liberty to part company with me, should you deem it best. I shall always remember you gratefully, and shall hope to meet you at some future time. You may be sure that no one will extort any information from me. There, that settles it now. We will drop the question.”

“Bless you, sir!” exclaimed Lascelles. “I shall never forget your kindness.”

“Nor I,” added Larry, in a husky voice.

“Hush! Not so loud!” cautioned Corwallis. “Sanders must know nothing of this. By the way, I presume he will be able to guide me to my destination all right?”

“No doubt,” answered Lascelles. “You can’t well miss the place. The mouth of the valley is close to a tall, steeple-shaped rock, and a rough road leads to Silver Ledge, ten miles back from the river.”

The conversation now turned on other topics, while the steamer plowed swiftly up the river, amid scenery of the grandest nature. Not until twilight had faded away did Sanders slacken speed, and when he finally ran the boat under a wooded bluff on the left-hand shore of the Missouri, Fort Benton was fifteen miles in the rear. Had the navigation been less dangerous, Corwallis would have avoided the necessity of parting with his companions by insisting that the voyage be continued through the night.

The boat was moored within easy access of the shore, and after a hearty supper had been eaten, Larry and Lascelles prepared to start, stating, as a pretext for Sanders’ ears, that they were in haste to reach their destination, and would cut across country. Corwallis fairly insisted on loaning them a sum of money, but they refused to take it. They parted from the kind-hearted Englishman with many regrets, and pushed briskly up the strip of land that lay between the river and the base of the bluff.

It was a weird and lonely tramp, and but for his companion’s encouraging words

Larry's spirits would have sunk to their lowest ebb.

"No use in mincing matters, my boy," said Lascelles. "We have sixteen or seventeen miles ahead of us, and we must cover the distance before daylight. Then we will hide securely from the soldiers—should any be sent after us—and sleep until evening."

"Do we go beyond the ravine that leads to Silver Ledge?" asked Larry.

"Yes; a mile or two. Walk a little faster, if you can. I will lead the way. All you need do is to keep close behind."

For several hours they pushed ahead, making fairly good progress in spite of the many obstructions and difficulties. The shore of the Missouri was extremely hard to follow. Thick timber and rocks abounded, and in many places it was necessary to wade through shallow water that rippled against the precipitous buttes. On two occasions the travelers waded shoulder-deep across broad creeks, holding their clothes and rifles overhead.

But they went steadily onward through the darkness, nothing daunted by the hardships of the journey. About midnight they stopped for a brief rest at the mouth of a gloomy and somber ravine, through which trickled a brawling mountain torrent. They quenched their thirst, and then sat down to eat some of the biscuits and tinned meat that Corwallis had insisted upon loading them with.

"I never knew anything to taste so good," said Lascelles. "It takes a tramp like this to give a fellow an appetite. Eat hearty; you will feel all the stronger for it. If we continue to make as good progress as we have been doing we will finish our tramp before daylight."

"You needn't urge me to eat," replied Larry, laughingly, as he opened a second can of beef. "I feel better already. Just give the word when you are ready to start."

"All right," assented Lascelles. "We can afford to rest a little longer, though."

It was past one o'clock when they resumed the journey, and for half a mile or more the river was full of turbulent rapids. Conversation was almost impossible, owing to the deafening roar and thunder of the current as it swirled over sunken rocks. Finally the tumult faded away in the distance, and as the travelers were

advancing in single file through the stones and bushes that encumbered the shore of the river the silence of the night was broken by an ominous sound. The sharp report of a rifle woke the echoes, and scarcely ten seconds later came a second report, blended with a shrill cry of agony.

Larry convulsively caught hold of his companion's shoulder.

"What does that mean?" he exclaimed, hoarsely.

"There's only one thing it can mean," muttered Lascelles, "and that's murder."

As he spoke three or four more shots were fired in quick succession, and the direction from which they came was easily located. The scene of the invisible struggle was not more than forty or fifty yards up the river.

"We must creep forward, and see what is going on," said Lascelles. "Is your rifle loaded?"

"Yes," whispered Larry.

"Well, come on, then. We may be needed. Stick close to me, and make no more noise than you can help."

CHAPTER XXV

The conflict seemed to end as abruptly as it began, for not a sound was heard, as Larry and Lascelles pushed cautiously forward over the stones and bushes. It was a tremendous strain on their nerves, and before they had gone twenty yards they began to wish that they had not meddled with the affair.

All at once a bend of the shore brought a smoldering camp-fire into view. Lascelles turned, and gave Larry a warning tap on the breast. Then, without a whisper, they crept on, bending close to the ground.

Crash! Down went Lascelles on top of some soft bulky object that lay across the path, and, with a thrill of horror, he realized that he had stumbled over a man. Nor was the man dead—far from it, indeed. A sharp cry rang out, followed by savage curses, and Lascelles found himself in the grasp of no mean antagonist.

It was too dark for Larry to see the struggle; he could only judge from the sound what was taking place. He slipped to one side, and fumbled in his pockets for a match. But before he could find one, a startling diversion occurred in another quarter. From the thick bushes beyond the fire burst two men. They dashed forward, shouting savagely and brandishing their rifles. They had barely crossed half of the open space in which the fire was burning when a flash and a sharp report came from the rocks on their right. The foremost of the two spun around with a cry of agony, and lurched against his companion.

The latter grabbed the wounded man, and pulled him hastily out of sight into the bushes.

Scarcely a minute had elapsed since their first appearance, and now all was still again, except for the hoarse breathing and scuffling struggles of Lascelles and his unseen enemy.

Larry was sufficiently quick-witted to see through the situation. The man who had fired the fatal shot from behind the rocks was the party attacked. One of his enemies had made a detour to take him from the other side, and when the rascal fell into Lascelles' clutches his cry for help led his companions to believe that he had been caught in his own trap.

Consequently they had dashed forward, only to be ambushed by the watcher among the rocks. These reflections passed through Larry's mind in the twinkling of an eye. He was about to strike a match when a crashing noise was heard, followed by hastily retreating footsteps.

"Confound the scoundrel!" cried Lascelles' voice. "He broke loose, and got away. I think he will remember me for some time to come, though."

"Are you hurt?" exclaimed Larry.

"Not a bit; but I have lost my rifle—no; here it is. What does this mean, anyhow? Who fired that shot?"

Larry prudently restored the match to his pocket, and then explained, in a whisper, what had taken place.

"Well, it's dangerous to stay here," rejoined Lascelles. "That scamp may creep back and make a target of us at any moment. We must join that chap among the rocks, if he has sense enough to understand that we are friends.

"Hello, there!" he added, loudly. "Do not shoot; we want to come to you."

The stranger seemed to be quite aware of what had occurred, and was disposed to accept the new arrivals as friends.

"Come on!" he replied, in a clear, boyish voice. "You must make a run for it, though. The light of the fire exposes you to danger."

Larry and Lascelles were well aware of this fact. With quick strides they crossed the intervening stretch of rocks and undergrowth, and dodged into a triangular cleft between three massive granite boulders. The gleam of the nearby fire faintly illumined this retreat, and revealed the presence of a tall, well-built lad of about Larry's own age. Indeed he bore quite a strong resemblance to Larry—a fact which Lascelles noted with surprise.

For an instant the stranger scrutinized his visitors closely, and was apparently well satisfied with their looks.

"Keep low," he whispered. "The danger is not over yet, though I hardly think they will dare to attack three of us. They are only three in number, for that fellow

I shot in the breast won't do any more fighting, I'm sure."

They waited for nearly ten minutes, all three keeping their guns trained on the crevices between the rocks. But not a sound broke the stillness, until, finally, a splashing noise was heard some distance up the river.

"There they go with their boat," exclaimed the young stranger. "They have abandoned their designs, thanks to your timely arrival. I owe both of you a debt of gratitude, which I shall not soon forget. I judge from your appearance that you are on a hunting trip. May I inquire your destination?"

"We are prospectors, and are bound for the region beyond Silver Ledge," replied Lascelles. "I am very glad that we happened to be in the neighborhood when you were attacked. Things would have gone badly with you. What was the motive of the scoundrels? Robbery and murder?"

"I suppose so," replied the lad. "They were desperate villains. You see it happened in this way: I started for Fort Benton at noon yesterday, and hoped to get below those dangerous rapids yonder before dark. But I made less speed than I expected, and had to camp here for the night. I pulled my boat up in the bushes, and, after making a fire. I went to sleep. I was awakened by a splashing noise, and knew that a boat had landed nearby. I had just time to dive among the rocks when the first of the rascals appeared at the edge of the bushes, and fired at me. I blazed away in return, and shot him through the head. His three companions dragged him away, and then opened a fusillade on me. They were trying to surround the rocks when you appeared, and turned the tables on them."

The lad related the above story in a hesitating manner, and then intimated, by leading the conversation adroitly into other channels, that he wished the subject to be dropped. He did not even state his name, nor did he inquire the names of his companions.

Larry and Lascelles were satisfied that some mystery was connected with the lad's journey to Fort Benton, but his face was so frank and honest that they could not find it in their hearts to credit him with any wrong or evil motive for his secrecy. They stifled their curiosity to know more, and refrained from any questions that had bearing on the subject. Nevertheless they were puzzled and mystified more than they chose to let appear. The lad's bearing and speech indicated refinement and intelligence. His words were well chosen, and his voice

was so much like Larry's that Lascelles mistook the one for the other several times. Moreover, his dress and equipments were of the most expensive kind—from his broad-brimmed sombrero to the boots of soft leather. His rifle was a Winchester repeater, and his belt contained a pair of handsome revolvers.

Perhaps the young stranger was equally surprised at the similar characteristics of his companions, but if such was the case, he did not express it by word or sign.

Under the circumstances, Larry and Lascelles felt that it was incumbent upon them to stay where they were for the balance of the night, lest the desperadoes should return, and their proposal to do so was eagerly accepted. The fire was allowed to burn out, and each took a turn at guard duty by the mouth of the cleft, while the others snatched brief intervals of sleep. Larry and Lascelles had a double object in keeping their eyes open, but when daylight streaked the east neither soldiers nor desperadoes had made their appearance. Traces of the latter were not wanting, for a trail of blood led to the spot where the boat had been moored on the previous night. Both the wounded men had evidently been taken away by their companions.

Long before the sun was fairly up breakfast had been eaten, and the young stranger was ready to resume his voyage down the Missouri. In the light of day his resemblance to Larry was more than striking. It was, indeed, remarkable. In eyes, hair, and features the two lads were as like as two peas. The stranger was possibly the elder by a year or two.

Lascelles looked and marveled, but said nothing. It was not the first time he had seen accidental resemblances. As was quite natural, neither Larry nor the stranger noted the circumstance. The latter was in haste to be off, and seemed to have no dread of being intercepted by the desperadoes farther down the river—a contingency that was far from remote. He bade his chance friends good-by, assuring them of his gratitude, and expressing a hope that they would all meet again. Then he paddled his craft into the current, and was soon speeding swiftly toward the distant rapids.

Larry and Lascelles watched him until he was out of sight, little dreaming under what circumstances they were next destined to meet.

"I would give something to know who that fellow is, and why he is going to Fort Benton," said Larry. "There is a deep mystery about this whole affair."

“Yes, there is,” assented Lascelles; “but as we can’t hope to solve it, suppose we banish it from our minds. We have more important matters to think of—matters that directly concern ourselves. Instead of following the river any longer, I intend to cut across the mountains from here. The route presents a good many difficulties, but there are two good reasons for taking it. In the first place, we have lost considerable time, and if troops from Fort Benton are on our track they stand a good chance of overtaking us should we stick to the shore of the Missouri. On the other hand, these outlaws may be somewhere in the vicinity watching a chance to ambush us, and take their revenge for our interference last night. Do you see the point?”

“Well, I should say I do,” replied Larry, glancing uneasily around him. “By all means let us strike over the mountains.”

“But I warn you in time that it will be a severe and rugged journey.”

“All right. I feel equal to it. Remember I have had two hours’ sleep and a good breakfast.”

“That’s true,” assented Lascelles. “Pardon me for underestimating your powers of endurance. Ready, are you? Shoulder arms! Forward! March!”

CHAPTER XXVI

Larry's boasted powers of endurance were well-nigh exhausted before that day's march was ended, and even Lascelles was more fatigued than on any occasion which he could remember. Hour after hour they toiled across ravines, through deep and rapid torrents, up rugged mountain sides, and down dizzy precipices where a single misstep meant certain death. Only once they stopped, and after eating a few crackers, and taking a draught of cooling water, they pressed on again with renewed energy.

In the early part of the afternoon they crossed a valley through which zigzagged a narrow and badly-rutted stage road. Lascelles declared that this led to Silver Ledge, whither Corwallis was bound. He took good care to reconnoiter the vicinity before leading Larry across, and until the top of the next ridge was gained he pushed ahead at more than his usual rate of speed.

It was nearly four o'clock in the afternoon when they descended into the deepest and gloomiest gorge that they had yet seen. A stream brawled through the center, and on one side, following the curve of a precipitous butte, was a well-graded railway track.

Larry was astonished to see this.

"It looks as though we were approaching civilization," he remarked.

"So we are," replied Lascelles, "only we won't go close enough to become a part of it. Half a mile above here is the populous settlement of Red Rock, where a number of large silver mines are located. The ore is shipped to the Missouri on this railroad, and thence floated down the river. The railroad belongs to the mine owners."

"But we are going toward the settlement now," said Larry, for Lascelles had turned up the track.

"Only for a short distance," replied the latter. "Presently we will come to a path that leads up the mountain side. Brace up, my boy! We won't have much more climbing to do."

They trudged wearily on for fifty yards, with the granite butte towering above them on one side, and on the other a thickly-timbered slope dropping to the edge of the stream. Suddenly, from behind a monstrous boulder, a tall, burly fellow appeared—a miner, evidently, for he wore a red flannel shirt, and his beard and face were grimy. Placing two fingers to his mouth, he gave a shrill whistle, and instantly a dozen more men, as coarse and brutal as himself, popped out of the timber, and surrounded Larry and Lascelles. Resistance was useless, and they passively submitted to the eager hands that robbed them of their arms and equipments. The red-shirted miner, who was evidently in command of the party, finally succeeded in quieting the clamor, and gruffly demanded of the prisoners:

“What business have you here, and where did you come from?”

Lascelles made a brief explanation, and he had barely finished when three or four voices cried at once:

“Did you see any soldiers down the river?”

“No; all was quiet when we left Fort Benton,” replied Lascelles. “What is the meaning of this outrage?” he added, indignantly. “It’s a strange thing that two harmless prospectors can’t wander about the country without being set upon in this way. You will get into serious trouble if you don’t release us and let us go our way.”

The men laughed boisterously at this.

“How’s that fur cheek, Rogan?” cried one.

“Jest hear the tenderfoot,” yelled another. “You’ll get inter trouble, Rogan.”

The red-shirted miner—whom the others addressed as Rogan—frowned angrily at this coarse badinage.

“We ain’t lettin’ any one wander about the country just now,” he said, addressing the prisoners. “You fellars must be took into custody, an’ I advise you, fur your own good, to keep your mouths shut.”

Turning to the crowd, he picked out four men, and briefly instructed them to take the prisoners up to Red Rock.

“Let Murdock see ‘em,” he said. “Fur all we know they may be spies sent here a purpus. And the rest of you git back under cover. There may be more strangers down the gorge.”

The orders were instantly obeyed, and, a moment later, Larry and Lascelles were marching despondently up the railway track, guarded by four burly miners. They had gone less than a quarter of a mile when a lively rifle fire started up ahead of them, and the shrill echoes reverberated down the pent-in gorge. The fusillade was accompanied with hoarse and incessant yelling.

The miners quickened their pace, and forced the prisoners roughly along. They were evidently anxious to take a hand in the shooting.

An inkling of the truth began to dawn on Lascelles’ mind.

“Is there a strike going on up here?” he asked.

“You bet there is,” replied one of the miners, “and a big one, too.”

“What is the cause of it?” persisted Lascelles, seeing that the fellow was disposed to talk.

“Well, it’s this way,” was the reply. “Yer see, all these silver mines belonged ter two pardners, Blair & Dimsdale, who were the first to discover them. Blair run them, while Dimsdale lived in Bismarck, an’ ‘tended to the ore. ‘Bout a year ago Blair died, an’, bein’ unmarried, he left everything to his pard. So Dimsdale come here ter run things, an’ the first thing he did was to run ‘em in the ground. He put a lot of non-union men on, an’ kept addin’ more an’ more. We stood it as long as we could till three days ago our hed boss, Murdock, was discharged an’ a non-union man put in his place. Then we pitched in an’ took possession of everything, an’ drove the scabs out. This mornin’ the scabs was reported as armin’ themselves among the hills, an’ gettin’ ready fur a fight. So we sent a force round to cut ‘em off, an’ drive ‘em back toward Red Rock. I reckon that’s what the shootin’ means.”

“And what about Dimsdale?” asked Lascelles.

“Oh, he an’ half a dozen sneakin’ fellows like him are locked up in his house! He won’t agree to run the mines without the scabs. He’s an obstinate, high-spirited sort of chap, but we’ll force him to terms purty soon. We ain’t molested him yet,

but if it turns out that he has sent a spy down to Fort Benton fur troops we'll settle his hash mighty quick, an' he'll never see daylight ag'in. Yer see there's a rumor out ter that effect, and that's why we was on guard duty down the gorge. We don't want no soldiers meddlin' with our affairs, curse 'em!"

Here the fellow's comrades put a stop to his loquacity, but not before Lascelles had obtained all the information that he desired.

"Don't be frightened, Larry," he whispered. "We will soon be out of this scrape."

But nevertheless Larry was considerably alarmed. How could he be otherwise with the rifles cracking briskly just a little ways up the gorge, and the hoarse bawlings of an angry mob ringing in his ears.

He felt like a soldier going into his first battle, as he was hurried on a quickstep up the railway track.

Lascelles was more cool-headed, and showed no trace of fear or excitement.

Now a sharp curve brought the whole scene into view—a scene that caused Larry to lose half his timidity in amazement. Years afterward his mind's eye was able to recall it with perfect and startling vividness. Just ahead, where the valley widened a little, lay Red Rock. There was not much of it—a long straggling street bordered by cabins and shanties, saloons and gambling houses, great somber mills and towers, heaps of ore and stacks of machinery. Above them, on each side, towered the grim and rugged mountains, pierced by many a gloomy shaft. To the right, apparently from under the very houses, leaped the sparkling torrent.

But toward the upper end of the settlement the vista was limited by a surging mass of dusky forms, over whom hung a curling cloud of powder smoke. Other puffs of smoke were constantly leaping from the hills on each side, and the gathering twilight was beginning to show the bright, red flashes.

And the tumult was deafening. Yell after yell went up from the angry mob, until the very heavens seemed to ring. The miners caught the excitement, and hurried their prisoners along at furious speed—past long lines of trucks brimming with silver ore, through the foaming bed of the torrent, and thence into the deserted lower end of the street, where broken panes and smashed shutters told of the destruction that had raged there at the commencement of the strike.

CHAPTER XXVII

The little party were less than halfway up the street, when the firing suddenly ended, and the tumult subsided to a low murmur. The ringing cheers were heard, and as the bank of powder smoke began to lift it was seen that the mob were returning to the settlement.

The guards halted with their prisoners near the upper end of the street, and angrily vented their disappointment at not being permitted to take part in the fight. Presently a ragged, powder-begrimed fellow came limping by. One arm hung loosely at his side, wrapped in bloody bandages. The miners hailed him eagerly, and demanded to know how things were going.

“Everything goin’ our way,” replied the fellow, as he scrutinized the prisoners curiously. “When the scabs seen they was between two fires they begged fur mercy, an’ Murdock brought ‘em to terms purty quick. They’re bein’ disarmed now, an’ they’ve agreed ter leave the neighborhood an’ never come back.”

The fellow limped on, and a little later his story was seen to be true. Miners came straggling down the street in groups, and then followed the main body, three or four hundred strong, cheering hoarsely over their victory. All were heavily armed, and some bore three and four guns apiece—the spoil of the captured scabs. Here and there limped wounded men, while the rear was brought up by a solemn procession—half a dozen dead borne on rude litters. The scabs had already been released, and, now that the smoke had lifted, they could be seen plodding up the hillside, in haste to leave the scene of their utter defeat.

General attention was drawn to the two prisoners, and they were quickly surrounded by an excited mob who accused them of being spies, and clamored for their lives. For a moment the situation was critical. Then the leader appeared, and, by his commanding presence, quelled the tumult. Murdock was a brawny six-footer, with a stern and rugged face. His speech and bearing showed that he was a man of some intelligence, and well fitted to control the turbulent body of men who looked to him for guidance.

He questioned the prisoners pretty keenly, and put them through a sort of cross-examination. He was evidently satisfied with the account that they gave of themselves.

“I believe your story,” he whispered in an undertone; “but it won’t be an easy matter to convince the rest. You see they’ve got it into their heads that you fellows are spies. There is only one thing you can do to secure your safety. You must join us, and give us all the help you can. Everything is working our way now, and, when the strike is over, I can promise you good positions here, if you feel inclined to accept them. Be quick with your decision. I can’t answer for some of these turbulent fellows.”

The prisoners were quick to see that the situation was exactly as described, and they made the best of a very ugly scrape by accepting Murdock’s proposition. The mob were easily satisfied with their leader’s explanation, and in brief time Larry and Lascelles were provided with arms, and found themselves actually a part of the riotous miners of Red Rock. Nevertheless, they were subjected to a close scrutiny that precluded the possibility of escape, while Murdoch privately warned them that unless they entered with enthusiasm and spirit into whatever was going on they would likely be suspected of treachery, and fare badly.

By this time twilight had settled down on the valley, and almost blotted from view the little house, part way up the hillside, where Mr. Dimsdale and a few staunch friends had taken refuge from the mob. So far no violence had been offered them, but for the past two days the place had been closely watched from all sides, in order that no messenger might be dispatched to Fort Benton. As has been already shown, some uneasiness was felt lest the surveillance had not been entirely successful.

As the night deepened, the rioters bivouacked in the open street, and ate supper by the light of blazing fires. Up on the hillside the pickets kindled other fires, and here and there a ruddy gleam was visible down the gorge.

Early in the evening a message was sent to Mr. Dimsdale to the effect that the miners were ready to lay down their arms and resume work, if he agreed to pay the union scale of wages, reinstate the old hands, and employ no more scabs. But the deputation soon returned with adverse tidings. The mine owner refused to submit to dictation. He sent word back that whenever the men resumed work he was ready to have a fair talk with them— not before.

This news caused a furore of excitement, and an indignation meeting was at once held. All sorts of threats were freely made. The more turbulent of the mob insisted that the mine owner’s house should be taken and the inmates shot.

Others wanted to rush off and set fire to the mills. But Murdock asserted his authority, and made a pacifying speech.

“It is too soon for violent measures,” he said, “and, what’s more, we will be only spiting ourselves if we destroy the mills and machinery. Give Dimsdale a little more time for reflection. He is sure to come around in the end. How can he help himself? We have driven the scabs away for good, and are strong enough to hold what we have gained. If we continue patient and firm we are sure to conquer.”

“But suppose Dimsdale has sent fur troops?” came a voice from the crowd, and a dozen others took up the cry.

With difficulty Murdock restored comparative quiet.

“I don’t have any faith in that rumor,” he declared. “How could any one slip past our sentries, the way that house has been guarded? And even if Dimsdale did get a messenger off we’re sure to have early notice—as early as we need. Four men are watching the Missouri at the mouth of the valley, and Rogan and his party are down here in the gorge where the trail comes over the mountains. If troops are sent here from Fort Benton we’ll give them a stubborn fight, I promise you that. When I took charge of this strike, I made up my mind to see it through, come what would. But just so sure as my authority is disobeyed I’ll drop the whole thing.”

Murdock’s speech had the desired effect. With the exception of a few unruly spirits all saw the force of his advice.

As the night wore on the settlement assumed a more peaceful aspect. Many of the miners turned into their cabins, and went to sleep. Others slumbered beside the fires. A score of men, carefully picked out by Murdock, constantly patrolled the street, guarding the closed liquor saloons and stores, and keeping a keen watch on the mining property. A bright light streamed from a little shanty, where a surgeon was ministering to those who had been wounded in the fight. Off on the mountain side shallow graves were being dug for the dead, and the sound of pick and spade echoed dully on the night air.

Murdock was indefatigable and sleepless. His headquarters were in the little frame building which had been Mr. Dimsdale’s office, and here he received tidings from the various outposts, or sent men off with whispered instructions.

Larry and Lascelles were assigned to sleeping quarters in an inner room—evidently Mr. Dimsdale’s private sanctum. They had for bedfellows half a dozen rough miners, whose presence rendered any private conversation impossible. In spite of their burning desire to discuss the situation, they assumed an air of utter indifference, and stretched themselves side by side on the neat matting that covered the floor. The light streamed in from the partially open door of the front room, and shone on a framed portrait of the mine owner that hung over the desk—a handsome bearded face, not unkind in its expression, yet denoting a proud and inflexible will. On the mantel opposite stood a small clock, ticking monotonously.

“We may get a chance to talk this over in the morning,” whispered Lascelles. “Have patience until then.”

“All right,” responded Larry, in a sleepy tone. And then he knew no more.

An hour after midnight a dead calm reigned over the little settlement, but it was such a calm as presages the gathering storm, and its ominous disturbing influence was felt everywhere—by the sentries on bivouac down the gorge, by the pickets on the lonely hillside, by the miners patrolling the street, and even by Murdock himself as he threw his wearied frame on a bench, hoping to snatch an hour or two of sleep.

The clock in the back room ticked away the morning hours. Its hands moved from one to two, from two to three.

At twenty minutes to four—that black period which precedes the dawn—the storm burst.

A locomotive came whistling and shrieking up the gorge, waking the echoes to thunderous reverberations. It halted alongside the little platform at the lower end of the street, and while two men jumped hurriedly off a third pulled the bellcord incessantly, and the jingling peal rang shrilly on the night air. Two or three guns roared above the din, and sentries shouted to sentries. Like bees the alarmed miners swarmed out from their cabins, and from every quarter arose hoarse cries :

“The troops are coming! The troops are coming!”

CHAPTER XXVIII

Larry and Lascelles were among the first to seize their guns and rush into the street, whence Murdock had already preceded them. The fires threw a red glare on the scene of confusion as the miners ran to and fro, not yet comprehending what the alarm meant. The jangle of the locomotive bell had now ceased, and there was a general tendency to rush in that direction. Some of the mob still clamored loudly that the troops were coming.

Larry and Lascelles were swept down the street in the thick of the crush, and presently they found themselves close to the railway platform. Some one held a torch over the heads of the crowd, and by its light three men—one of them Rogan—were seen to climb upon an empty truck. Murdock followed them, and by a single gesture restored the mob to comparative silence.

“Stop your clamor, an’ give these men a chance to be heard,” he commanded. “There’s no cause for panic. Go ahead, Rogan.”

“I ain’t got nothin’ ter say,” replied Rogan. “Here air Boswick an’ Marden ter speak fer themselves. I jumped on their engine down here in the gorge an’ rode along up.”

There was a moment of breathless silence. Then Boswick—an evil-looking ruffian—took a pull at a black bottle, and addressed the crowd:

“You’re a purty set of fellars ter keep a watch on Dimsdale,” he began, waving his arms excitedly. “In spite of all your caution he’s sent a spy down to Fort Benton—”

Here the speaker was interrupted by a hoarse and angry murmur.

“Yes, I mean it,” he resumed, when he was able to make himself heard. “There ain’t much time ter spare, so I’ll cut the story short. You know that me an’ Harden here, an’ Biggs, an’ Andrews, was sent down to the mouth of the valley day afore yesterday ter keep a lookout. Well, that same arternoon this cussed young Rodney Dimsdale slipped by us and started down the Missouri in a boat. By the time we could find another boat he was a mile or two ahead of us. We put in our best licks ter overtake him, an’, as luck would have it, he camped fur the

night this side o' the falls. I reckon he was afraid ter run 'em in the dark. We seen the light of his fire, an' tried ter capture him. But the derved young imp o' Satan opened on us with his rifle, an' killed poor Biggs. Then two strangers come along an' joined him, an' in the next scrimmage Andrews was shot in the breast. He died in a few minutes. Well, Harden an' me concluded it wer'n't no use ter fight agin' three, so we hid the dead bodies in the bushes, an' took to the boat ag'in. We run the falls all right, an' pulled inter shore a couple of miles below, intendin' ter watch fur young Dimsdale in the mornin'. He come along soon after daylight, an' just when we was startin' ter cut him off what should come up the river but a steamer full of soldiers. Dimsdale joined 'em, an' had a talk. Then the steamer went up stream an' young Dimsdale paddled down the river, takin' two of the soldiers with him. I wanted to cut straight acrost the hills fur Red Rock, but Harden ses: 'No, that won't do. Them soldiers will only go as fur as the mouth of the valley, an' then they'll wait on the reinforcements what young Dimsdale has gone ter fetch. We'd better sneak up thar, an' get all the news we kin afore we go back ter Red Rock.' This sounded fair, so me an' Harden tramped up the shore, an' reached the mouth of the valley toward sunset. Here we found the soldiers camped. They hed possession of the wharves an' everything. When dark come we sneaked up close, an' heard them talkin'. It seems they was comin' up the river on some other business when Dimsdale met them, an' told them they was needed at Red Rock. So they sent him on ter bring up more troops as quick as he could. While me an' Harden was hid in the bushes some of the soldiers fired up an engine, so's it would be ready ter hitch onto a train as soon as the reinforcements arrived. We waited till arter midnight fur a chance ter steal that engine. It come at last, an' here we are, safe an' sound. But there ain't no time ter lose, fur three companies of infantry air expected by daylight. The river hes raised a little, an' the big boats what they have at the fort can easy come up."

The conclusion of Boswick's narrative was greeted by such a howl of fury that the very ground seemed to tremble. From hundreds of throats burst savage imprecations, and curses, and threats. The mob were insane with rage.

"Revenge poor Biggs and Andrews," they cried. "Fire the mills! Smash the machinery! Down with Dimsdale! Cut his throat! Burn his house over his head!"

These and kindred cries made the night hideous, and sent a moaning echo through the gorge. Even Murdock was powerless to still the tumult, though his tall form swayed with excitement as he tried to make himself heard. Taking

advantage of the pandemonium around them, Larry and Lascelles edged as far away from the track as possible. Well they knew what would be their fate should Boswick or Marden spy them, and learn how they chanced to be among the miners.

Their share in the death of Biggs and Andrews would be instantly discovered, and their lives would pay the forfeit on the spot. The mystery of the lad whom they had saved from the midnight assassins was a mystery no longer. Boswick's narrative had made it all plain.

To tell the truth, the outlook for our heroes was blacker and more hopeless at the present time than it had ever been before. Even should they ultimately come safely out of the scrape with the riotous miners, they would be confronted with a peril almost equally as great, and one which they had fondly hoped was banished forever. Boswick's story left no doubt in their minds that Matthew Redmayne had supplied the object which sent that steamer full of troops up the Missouri. Their mission was to seek and capture the two deserters from Fort Snelling.

"Put a bold face on the matter," Lascelles whispered in Larry's ear. "If we show any fear we are lost. The chances are in our favor, anyhow. Boswick and Harden did not see us plainly that night, and would not know us again. As long as this excitement about the troops lasts no one will think of connecting us with the men who helped Rodney Dimsdale. We must wait events as patiently as possible. If we find a chance to escape we will take it—but I don't think one is likely to come our way."

Lascelles did not dare to say more, for several of the miners were watching him suspiciously. The uproar still continued, but it was suddenly stilled by the report of a rifle on the outskirts of the crowd. The shot was probably fired for a diversion, and it had the desired effect. Murdock took advantage of the brief hush to claim the attention of the mob, and he held it from the very first words.

"You insane fools," he cried, angrily. "Have you lost your senses? Do you want to undo all that has been accomplished? This is just the time when we must show our firmness and our power. Order and obedience are now needed more than ever. I will shoot the first man who attempts to start a riot. I command you all to fall back into the village. Let each man fill his pockets with as much ammunition as he can carry, and a day's rations. Rogan will serve the supplies from headquarters. Then wait under arms for further orders. The troops cannot

possibly arrive here before noon. So you see there is no need of panic. Dimsdale has made a grave mistake in sending for troops, but this is not the time to punish him. Wait and see what happens before night.”

This brief harangue had an electrical effect upon the mob. With loud cheers for Murdock they dispersed up the street, Larry and Lascelles being entangled in the thick of them. The vicinity of the railway platform was soon deserted.

CHAPTER XXIX

Half an hour later, when the cold, gray dawn came stealing into the valley, the strikers were in as thorough a state of subjection as though they had been so many companies of United States Infantry. All along the street were glistening stacks of arms. From a building adjoining headquarters Rogan and a corps of assistants were kept busy handing out ammunition and supplies to the orderly crowd. Farther down the street a small cabin served as a temporary guardhouse, where three or four unruly characters were confined.

Inside headquarters the scene was terribly grim and in earnest. Murdoch had taken possession of the rear apartment, and was here laying his plans for the threatened attack with a skill that would have done credit to a military tactician. He had pounced upon Larry and Lascelles, and impressed them into his service as clerks. They sat at the open desk, writing down as fast as their hands could travel over the paper the orders which Murdoch dictated to them with feverish haste. A number of miners—specially selected for their ability to read—stood in the outer room waiting to carry the written dispatches to their destinations as fast as they came from the hands of the clerks. Men were coming and going constantly. No sooner was one order finished than Murdoch's busy brain planned and dictated another. They were of various import. Some were conveyed to the pickets, who were stationed on the hillsides far beyond the settlement, instructing them to redouble their vigilance, and guard all the mountain passes and trails. One order went to the cordon of sentries, who were drawn up around the Dimsdale cottage, commanding them to protect the house and its inmates, and to let no one pass in or out. Another was sent down the gorge to Rogan's little detachment, bidding them advance two miles nearer the Missouri, and hasten back as soon as they caught sight of any advancing troops.

The last order caused Lascelles to open his eyes in amazement and breathe more quickly. He wrote it out, word by word, and blotted the paper with a shaky hand. Murdoch quickly passed it to the next room.

"Give that to Boswick and Marden," he directed. "Tell them to act at once."

Turning to his clerks, he added :

"That is all for the present. Stick close by me, though. You must show your zeal

by taking a leading part in whatever may happen to-day.”

Lascelles glanced at Larry, and made a wry face. They said nothing, but followed Murdock into the street. General attention was centered at that moment upon Boswick and Marden, who were marching gingerly down the street, bearing between them a small wooden box that appeared to be enormously heavy. They disappeared in the direction of the railway platform, and five minutes later they were seen leaning out of the cab, as the locomotive went backward down the track, puffing out dense volumes of smoke and whistling shrilly.

This caused some excitement, which increased when the rumor was whispered about that Murdock intended to blow the troops up with dynamite. However, the true meaning of the affair was given out a little later while the men were eating a hasty breakfast in the open air. The box which Boswick and Marden had taken down the track did indeed contain dynamite, but it was intended to be used in blowing up a railroad bridge, which spanned a cross-ravine a mile and a half below Red Rock. Here Murdock proposed to offer a stubborn resistance to the advance of the soldiers, and that the struggle was likely to prove a desperate one was shown by the grim and determined expressions of the men when they heard the order. There was no cheering or riotous bawling. All seemed to realize that success or utter failure was the stake to be fought for that day. If they succeeded in repelling the troops, the mine owner would have to submit to dictation.

By eight o'clock the settlement was deserted, with the exception of the sentries, who were stationed here and there to keep up a line of communication with the outposts on the hills. Down the railway track, in a long serpentine column, wound the grim and determined band of rioters, their rifles flashing in the rays of the September sun. Murdock was at the head with his right-hand man, Larry and Lascelles among the number.

A halt was made this side of the bridge, among the lower timbers of which the dynamite had already been placed. The cross-ravine which necessitated the bridge was hardly worthy the name. It was merely a gully, extending cleftwise into the mountains for a short distance on each side. The railway embankment was close to the base of a rugged hill, and from its level a timbered slope led to the stream, which was shallow and brawling at this point. Then came another timbered incline terminating at the foot of a steep mountain.

As the timber naturally afforded a protection of itself, the only weak point was the bed of the stream. This was soon strengthened, however, by a low parapet of stones and logs. From behind this and from the shelter of the two wooded slopes a raking fire could be poured into the troops, if they should attempt to force their way up the bed of the stream.

By ten o'clock all the preparations were completed to Murdock's satisfaction, and the next thing in order was a period of monotonous waiting. Nearly a quarter of a mile of the track was visible beyond the bridge, and this vista was eagerly scanned for the appearance of the sentries who had been posted a mile or two nearer the river. But hour after hour dragged by without a sign of them. It was quite likely that the troops would not come before late afternoon, and they might possibly defer their advance until morning. Even admitting that Rodney Dimsdale had reached Fort Benton by noon of the previous day, the reinforcements could hardly arrive at the mouth of the valley inside of twenty-four hours—and that period had hardly expired yet. Moreover, Red Rock was a good nine miles back from the Missouri. Still there was room for doubt, and Murdock exercised constant vigilance in seeing that all was in readiness for the attack.

Larry and Lascelles were posted on the slope nearest the railroad, and about three o'clock they found themselves sufficiently distant from the others to carry on a conversation in low tones. It was the first time such a chance had offered since their capture, and they made the most of it. They discussed the situation from all sides, but did not derive much comfort by comparing views."

"We have just one chance," said Lascelles. "If the troops don't come to-day we must try our best to escape during the night. If we succeed, we will get out of this neighborhood as fast as possible."

"And if we don't succeed?" queried Larry.

"Then we must face the music and take whatever comes. In case of an attack, we will probably be put in front, and if we don't use our rifles to good advantage against the soldiers the miners will shoot us from behind."

"That's a pleasant prospect," muttered Larry. "I don't like the idea of killing United States troops—not to speak of the possibility of being killed by them."

"Neither do I," replied Lascelles; "but that's just what we've got to face, if the

troops come up this valley before sunset. To a certain extent I pity these misguided fellows. Dimsdale has right and law on his side, but he might have prevented the trouble by displaying a little common sense. He made a mistake in employing non-union men.”

“He may be sorry for it yet,” suggested Larry.

Lascelles laughed, grimly.

“I have no doubt he will, and, on the other hand, these miners will regret their mistake as well. They may drive the soldiers back at first, but in the end they will pay a terrible price for their outlawry. It’s an ugly affair to be mixed up in, and I would give a good deal to be a thousand miles away from here.”

“Well, there’s no use in wishing,” replied Larry. “I’m counting mostly on the soldiers failing to turn up to-day. If that chance of escape comes tonight which way will we strike—down the valley or back toward Red Rock?”

“Neither,” answered Lascelles.

Before he could say more, a shout was heard close by, and then another, and another. All else was instantly forgotten. Larry dashed up the slope with Lascelles at his heels. Reaching the track, which already swarmed with miners, they glanced across the bridge, and saw a little group of men advancing on a brisk trot.

CHAPTER XXX

The men drew rapidly near, and now they were seen to be the sentries who had been posted down the valley. They dashed across the bridge, panting and breathless. The leader staggered up to Murdoch.

“The soldiers!” he gasped. “They are coming—on cars—they are close behind—get ready.”

The fellow was too badly winded to give particulars, and the fact was accepted without questioning. Already a dull rumbling noise was echoing up the valley.

Murdock’s coolness prevented anything like a panic. He quickly issued one order after another. The main body of the miners fall back for several hundred yards. Murdock himself crawled under the bridge to light the fuse. He reappeared in a moment, and hurriedly joined his men.

By this time the rumbling noise seemed close at hand, and suddenly a locomotive dashed around the curve, drawing a long column of trucks, which fairly bristled with troops wedged tightly together. The sinking sun gleamed on brass buttons and polished rifle barrels.

There was a moment of keen suspense as the armed convoy rumbled nearer. Would the fuse reach the dynamite in time? Suppose it should go out, or burn too slowly!

As the train arrived within two hundred yards of the bridge, Larry closed his eyes. He was fairly sick with horror. Lascelles’ hand was resting upon his shoulder, and he could feel it tremble.

Nearer and nearer crept the train, those on board all unconscious of the awful deathtrap that lurked ahead.

But the fuse did its work just in time. With startling abruptness there came a tremendous explosion that shook the ground like an earthquake. The mountains seemed to tremble and rock. Stones, timbers, and twisted rails spurted high in air, and vanished in a great dusky cloud. Then the shower of debris thundered to earth again and the smaller fragments clattered about the miners, and fell thickly

among the panic-stricken soldiers. As the smoke drifted slowly away, the train halted within fifty yards of where the bridge had been but a moment before. The smokestack and headlight of the engine were missing, but the trucks seemed to have escaped injury.

Murdock's voice now rang shrill and clear. Out from cover leaped the miners, and swarming grimly forward over the blackened debris that lay everywhere, they massed themselves behind the parapet, and on the timbered slopes to right and left of the stream.

The dynamite had done its work well. A ragged, yawning hole was where the bridge had been, and a considerable part of the embankment was blown away on each side. The only route now open to the soldiers was the bed of the stream, and this promised to be as terrible a valley of death as that into which rode the Six Hundred of historic fame.

In breathless silence the miners waited the next move of the game. Murdoch was on the right of the barricade, sheltered by a high flat rock. Larry and Lascelles were posted to right and left, where they could be under his watchful eye.

The suspense was of brief duration. Though the troops were at first dazed and confused by the blowing up of the bridge, and by the numbers and determined attitude of the miners, they quickly recovered their nerve. In obedience to the clear notes of a bugle they swarmed out of the trucks and down the slope to the shallow channel of the stream, where they fell into line. They numbered six full companies—three hundred trained and disciplined men.

What followed may be briefly dealt with. The officer in command of the troops was Captain Belt, a rigid, obstinate man with thirty years' experience as a fighter. He fearlessly advanced to within fifty feet of the barricade, and ordered the miners to disperse. Murdoch made a brief reply, warning the troops not to interfere, and assuring them that their advance would be stubbornly resisted.

Captain Belt's face flushed with anger.

"I will teach you riotous dogs a lesson," he growled. "Your blood be on your own hands if you dare to fire on United States soldiers. My orders are to take possession of Red Rock and restore order there, and I intend to carry them out at any cost."

These stern words were received in ominous silence by the rioters, and turning on his heel the officer rejoined his men.

A moment later the bugle sounded the advance, and the troops marched resolutely forward. Murdoch's face was a study just then. He was evidently waging a severe mental struggle. But his hesitation was only momentary. His eyes flashed, and the command to fire dropped sharply from his lips.

Instantly the carnage began. The fatal step was taken beyond recall. From every nook and cranny of the barricade, and from the timbered slopes was poured the deadly fire. Hundreds of rifles roared through the ravine, and the puffs of smoke blended in a dense bluish cloud. Larry and Lascelles fired with the rest, but purposely aimed high. They caught the excitement of the moment, and joined in the hoarse cheer of defiance. Most of the rioters, in fact, aimed too high, but more than one shot found its billet in a blue uniform.

It is doubtful if the troops really expected to be fired upon. They delivered a straggling volley in return, then they wavered, broke ranks, and fled in panic to the shelter of the timber. The retreat was justifiable, for it would have been sheer madness to try to storm the barricade.

The rioters were not disposed to exult over their victory. They were awed by the sight of a dozen dead bodies that lay here and there in the stream—the blue uniforms stained with crimson. Nor had the fire of the troops been futile. Two miners lay dead in the timber, and several were wounded.

What next? was the question on every lip. An answer speedily came. Two or three soldiers dashed up the slope, and took possession of the locomotive. They escaped the lively fusillade that was opened on them by Murdoch's orders, and the next instant the train was backing down the track, gathering speed as it went, until it vanished swiftly around the curve. What this move meant the rioters could only conjecture. They were not seriously alarmed, for at the worst they apprehended nothing more than the arrival of reinforcements. They were confident of holding their position against a regiment.

An hour went by in utter silence while the hostile forces waited under arms, each invisible to the other. Then the rumble of the train was heard once more in the distance. It slowed up this side of the curve—an engine and one truck. The latter was full of soldiers, who hastily jumped down and dragged after them two bulky

objects. Then all disappeared in the timber, only to reappear five minutes later on the edge of the stream, and within fifty yards of the barricade.

Well might the rioters quail now. A Gatling gun, and a small piece of artillery stared them menacingly in the face. Captain Belt's forethought had wisely led him to provide for the present emergency by bringing this heavy ordnance up from Fort Benton.

If the rioters expected another parley or the reading of the riot act they were woefully disappointed. Captain Belt was in a merciless, bloodthirsty humor, and he did not allow Murdock time to issue a single order to his followers. The cannon was trundled into a nest of bowlders that lay in midstream, and offered a good protection to the gunners, who whisked to and fro for an instant with bags of powder and rammers. They paid no attention to the straggling fire that now opened on them from the barricade.

Boom! the black muzzle spit out flame and smoke. Crash! a five-pound ball tore through the barricade, sprinkling Larry and Lascelles with chips and dust. A brief cry of agony burst from Rogan, who was close behind them. Then he lay in a crimson pool, mangled and lifeless.

The horror of that first cannon shot lay heavy on the miners for an instant. But they rallied quickly, and with ferocious yells poured a furious fire against the little iron monster that faced them so calmly down the ravine. Useless, all useless! Untouched by a single ball, the gunners renewed their deadly work. They alternately shifted the muzzle of the piece, and the iron missiles brought death alike to those among the trees and behind the barricade. A panic fell on the miners. To lie quietly within range of that terrible cannon, and without a chance of reprisal, was more than they could stand.

They felt themselves at the mercy of the troops. Some few dropped their arms and ran, but the main body stubbornly held their ground, blazing away, meanwhile, at the clump of rocks which protected the gunners.

Larry and Lascelles were in a critical position, for they dared not stir from Murdock's side. The latter was in a desperate mood, and as yet showed no intention of giving up the struggle.

But Captain Belt had observed the demoralized condition of the enemy, and he knew that one straw would turn the scales. He now played his last card, and

played it well. A score of soldiers suddenly grabbed the Gatling gun, and rushed it up the bed of the stream, over logs and stones, and through shallow pools of water. They daringly advanced to within thirty yards of the barricade, disregarding the straggling fire that dropped two or three of their number. Then, in the twinkling of an eye, the tables were turned. The iron monster spluttered and roared as it vomited forth its leaden shower. The quick, oscillating movement sent the raking fire to right, to left, straight ahead—everywhere. There was no standing up before it—no dodging the death-laden balls. In immediate flight lay the only hope of salvation for the rioters.

A ball took the cap from Lascelles' head. Another pierced Murdock's arm. He dropped his rifle, and spun round and round.

"Malediction!" he roared. "I'm wounded."

Then he made off at full speed, dodging behind rocks and trees as he ran. The flight of the leader was the signal for a general rout. Shouting, cursing, and howling, the panic-stricken mob straggled up the ravine, fighting like tigers to escape from the raking fire in their rear. Some threw their guns away; others used theirs to hew a path for themselves through the tangle of squirming bodies, striking heavy blows right and left.

The crackle of the Gatling gun suddenly ceased, and the notes of a bugle ran clear and shrill above the tumult. Out from the timber poured the troops, and up the ravine they charged with fixed bayonets, pressing close on the heels of the retreating miners.

Larry and Lascelles were in the thick of the rush. No one paid any attention to them, and they fought their way blindly on. A sudden pressure from behind separated them, and Larry lost sight of his comrade. There was no time to deplore this misfortune. To loiter meant death. He struggled on frantically, but had barely advanced a dozen feet when he tripped on a stone and fell. The tail end of the mob trampled him under foot, and as he arose to his knees, dizzy and bruised, he felt a sharp pain in his head, and lights flashed before his eyes. Then consciousness left him, and he toppled over on his face.

CHAPTER XXXI

When Larry opened his eyes the blackness of night was all around him, and the recent terrible events seemed but a vague and shadowy dream. Every bone in his body ached, and he was intensely dizzy, but nevertheless he managed to sit upright. On each side of him was a big rock, and to his surprise he found that a moist bandage was tied about his head. As he strove to remember what had happened a footstep fell on his ear, and Lascelles stalked out of the gloom. He carried a capful of water, which he pressed to Larry's lips, and made him drink.

"How do you feel now?" he inquired, anxiously.

"Better," replied Larry, in faint tones. "How did I get here, Miles, and what is the matter with my head? I—I don't seem able to remember."

"Don't try to remember," said Lascelles. "I can tell you all in a few words. When the miners rushed up the ravine we were separated in the crush. As soon as I discovered this, I climbed into a thick pine tree, and from this safe place I watched the troops dash by in pursuit of the panic-stricken miners. They soon came back, and are now encamped just below here. I waited in the tree until dusk. Then I ventured down to look for you, and soon found you among a lot of dead bodies! At first I thought you were dead, too, but a closer examination showed that you were merely stunned. A bullet had plowed its way along one side of your head, making a painful but not dangerous wound. I dragged you up here among the stones and timber, and then I had to leave you, for it was necessary to find out what was going on, and what danger we were in. I played the spy for an hour, and returned here a few moments ago. I hope you are able to travel, for I have a plan in my head that must be carried out."

"Well, I am ready to go with you," replied Larry. "The stiffness will soon go away when I have walked a little. But what did you find out, Miles, and what is your plan?"

"I discovered everything," answered Lascelles, as he threw himself down beside his companion. "In the first place, Murdock succeeded in checking the panic, and rallying his men. The whole force—except the dead, which number about thirty—are intrenched in a stronger position than before, just beyond that pass which leads up the mountain side. The gorge is very narrow here, and they have

built a barricade ten feet high. The soldiers know this, and are therefore resting under arms until morning, when they will renew the attack. The miners are foolish enough to think that their position is now tenable, but in the morning the artillery will speedily demolish this barricade as it did the other one. I can easily see what will happen then. The enraged and routed mob will surge back to Red Rock, and pillage, burn, and murder to their heart's content, out of pure revenge, before the troops drive them to the hills. Mr. Dimsdale and his companions will certainly perish."

"Is there no way to save them—to warn them?" asked Larry.

"Ah! now you come to the point," replied Lascelles. "If you are willing to lose sight of your own safety for the present, I think we can rescue these imperiled men. We will creep up the gorge to the pass, ascend to the mountain top, and make our way along the ridge until we are directly above the Dimsdale cottage. We will creep down the slope, and when the sentries challenge us we will give them a message purporting to come from Murdock, to the effect that they are to immediately abandon the cottage, and hasten down the ravine to help defend the barricade. If this ruse works—and I have no fears on that score—we will warn Dimsdale and his party of their danger, and advise them to join the soldiers by retracing our path. We will accompany them as far as the top of the ridge, and then bid farewell to this dangerous locality."

"By Jove, what a clever plan!" exclaimed Larry. "Shall we start at once? I am ready."

"Hold on!" replied Lascelles. "I don't want to lead you into this thing blindly. You must understand that we run a certain risk in trying to save these men, whereas, if we choose to leave them to their fate we can easily accomplish our own escape by following the pass into the heart of the mountains. I have no right to let this whim of mine drag you into danger."

"It is not a whim," replied Larry, half indignantly. "I am not so selfish as to let those poor fellows perish when we have the power to save them. Lead off, Miles. I'm with you."

He arose to his feet, and was delighted to find that he could walk without much pain or difficulty.

"I knew that would be your answer," said Lascelles. "You are a brave and

unselfish lad. Heroes are made from such stuff as you. Now we must be off, and if we keep our eyes and ears open we will pull through this scrape all right.”

They crept down from the timber, and forded the stream to the opposite side of the valley. Not a sound came from the darkness below, where the soldiers were encamped, waiting the light of dawn. Larry shuddered several times, as he stumbled over the dead body of some unfortunate miner. He stopped to bathe his face in the cool water. This refreshed him considerably, and, with Lascelles’ assistance, he got along fairly well.

In order to avoid any sentries which Murdock might have posted below the barricade, they climbed the slope, and followed the edge of the track. They reached the pass in safety, and began to ascend the mountain, picking out the precarious trail as well as the gloom would permit. When they were several hundred feet above the level of the stream they could see, far below them, the ruddy gleam of the miners’ camp-fires. In the distance a few twinkling lights showed where Red Rock lay. But scarcely a sound broke the stillness of the night. Murdock evidently had his men under thorough control.

The ascent of the pass was a terrible ordeal to Larry, unarmed though he was. Lascelles carried a rifle in one hand, and with the other he lent his companion as much aid as possible. At last they reached the summit of the mountain, and after a brief rest they started along the ridge. Twenty minutes found them directly above the village, and they easily located the cottage by the yellow glimmer that shone through the closed shutters. The inmates were probably up and awake.

“Here is the place to descend,” whispered Lascelles. “Suppose you wait on the ridge until I return.”

“No; I will go with you,” replied Larry, stoutly. “I’m not played out yet, by any means. My head pains me some, but I don’t mind that.”

Lascelles made no further remonstrance, and they went cautiously down the rugged face of the mountain, over big stones and thickets of stunted undergrowth. At the end of half an hour the house was only a short distance below them, and they made a detour around it, so that they might appear to have come directly up the valley. As soon as they struck the steep footpath which led from the village street to the house, they threw off all caution, and advanced rapidly and fearlessly. The cottage now stood plainly out from the gloom—a

two-story frame building surrounded by a portico. The shutters were closed above and below, but rays of light streamed through the chinks.

Suddenly a stalwart figure arose from behind a rock, and barred the path. A rifle hammer clicked, and a surly voice demanded:

“Who’s there?”

“Hold on!” exclaimed Lascelles. “Don’t shoot. We are friends. We have a message from Murdock.”

The sentry lowered his rifle, and came a step or two down the path.

“Well, what is it?” he demanded, gruffly. “Is Murdock’s new position in danger? I ain’t heard no shooting.”

There was an indefinable something in the fellow’s voice that seemed to strike a familiar chord in Lascelles’ memory—and in Larry’s, as well.

“You fellows have received news of the fight, have you?” said Lascelles. “Well, the troops are preparing to attack the new position, and Murdock needs every man to defend it. You and your companions are to abandon the cottage, and hurry down the valley as rapidly as possible.”

“Hold on there!” growled the sentry. “There’s something wrong about this. Why, only half an hour ago we were told to stay here, no matter what happened, and at that time Murdock didn’t expect an attack before morning. Who are you fellows, anyhow? Your voices air mighty familiar.”

With a quick and sudden movement he struck a match, and as the blaze flared up Larry and Lascelles were horrified to recognize the brutal features of the very last man whom they expected to find here—Bart Rakestraw.

CHAPTER XXXII

The recognition was mutual. As the match dropped to the ground Rakestraw uttered a snarl of rage, and, springing back a step or two, he lifted his rifle and took deliberate aim at Larry, but Lascelles was on the alert, and, swinging his own weapon upward by a single-handed movement, he struck the ruffian's arm smartly. The consequence was that the bullet whizzed harmlessly over Larry's head, and the next instant Rakestraw lay stunned and bleeding on the ground, sent there by a terrific blow from the stock of Lascelles' rifle.

The night now rang with shouts of alarm from the other sentries, who were drawn up in a cordon around the cottage, at intervals of twenty or thirty feet. Several hurried forward, anxious to know what the rifle shot portended.

"Rush for the house," whispered Lascelles, as he clutched Larry's arm in a grip like iron. It's our only chance now. If we take to the mountain, we will be overhauled."

With great strides they dashed straight up the rugged path, dodging from side to side in the gloom. Several rifles cracked behind them, but they sped on unharmed. Just as they sprang up the steps of the porch a shot was fired from a loophole under one of the windows, and Lascelles heard the bullet whistle past his ear.

A few steps brought them to the door, and with clinched fists they hammered on the stout panels.

"We are friends, Mr. Dimsdale," cried Larry. "Let us in, or we will be shot down in cold blood."

Almost as he spoke the noisy footsteps of the approaching foes were heard and two bright flashes blazed athwart the darkness. One ball struck the porch, the other imbedded itself in the door.

It was a terrible situation, but the suspense of the fugitives was happily not prolonged. Footsteps and whispered voices were heard inside the house. Then came the rattle of bars, and the door was opened, first a tiny crack and then far enough to let Larry and Lascelles rush through. It was slammed and barred just

as the foremost of the sentries stumbled against the porch.

No attack followed, though the occupants of the house prepared for it by extinguishing the lights. After an interval of profound silence Mr. Dimsdale lighted a lamp, and rather curtly demanded of his visitors the object of their intrusion. Lascelles acted as spokesman, and hastily told his story, explaining how he and Larry had fallen into the hands of the rioters while bound across the mountains on a prospecting expedition. He made no concealment of the part they had subsequently been forced to play, since he believed that the truth was bound to come out sooner or later. He finished the narrative by telling what he had forgotten to mention before; namely, the rescue of young Rodney Dimsdale from the assassins who had tried to prevent him from reaching Fort Benton.

Mr. Dimsdale's manner changed when he heard this last piece of news.

"If this is true," he said, cordially, "I owe you a double debt of gratitude. The noise of the battle down the gorge was plainly heard here this afternoon. This told me that the troops had arrived, and that Rodney had therefore reached the fort in safety. When the shot was fired out here, and you pounded on the door a moment later, I thought Rodney had returned, and I was still under that impression when you entered the house. Your companion bears a striking resemblance to my son."

He paused, and glanced keenly at Larry, whose face was turned to the full glare of the lamp.

"You say you were in the front of the fight?" he added, addressing Lascelles. "Did you see anything of Rodney among the troops?"

"Not a trace," replied Lascelles. "But that was quite natural. He was probably in the rear, where he would be out of harm's way."

"No doubt that is true," assented Mr. Dimsdale, in a relieved tone. "And now the next thing is to consider some means of getting out of this scrape. I shall not forget the peril you and your friend have gone through tonight for my sake, and if I can serve you in the future I will gladly do so. I am satisfied that your estimate of the situation is correct. Dawn will witness another fight, and a second defeat for the rioters. They will swarm back to the village, maddened and desperate, and their first thought will be to revenge their injuries on me. It was unfortunate that your scheme for removing the sentries from the cottage should

have failed. I hardly know what course to take now. Do you think we can gain the mountain in safety, if we make a bold rush?"

Lascelles glanced at Mr. Dimsdale's companions, who were six in number.

"I am afraid we would be shot down, if we tried that," he replied. "There are at least twenty desperate men outside, and after what has just happened they will be more on the alert than ever."

Before Mr. Dimsdale could respond, a shout was heard close to the house, and as the echoes died away a hoarse, confused tumult arose in the distance, swelling louder and nearer on the night air. The sentries began to yell excitedly, and husky cries answered them from nearby points along the hill, and from the upper end of the street.

The little group within the cottage stared at one another in questioning silence. Several turned pale.

Mr. Dimsdale ran to one of the side windows, and removed a small block—eight inches square—that had been cut in the shutter for purposes of observation.

"The worst has come!" he cried, hoarsely. "The mob are swarming up the street, firing the buildings as they advance. Already flames are leaping from a dozen points. In five minutes the rioters will be here."

A general rush to the window followed these alarming words. Alas! it was all too true.

Red flames were leaping and crackling among the doomed houses, and their light revealed the maddened body of rioters pressing onward in their destructive course. The night rang and vibrated with ferocious, blood-curdling cries, and loud above the general din could be distinguished shouts of: "Revenge! Revenge! Burn the cottage! Murder Dimsdale! Cut their throats!"

The cordon of sentries joined in with husky yells, and anticipating the purpose of the mob, they swarmed closer to the house and opened a lively rifle fire.

Mr. Dimsdale pushed the block into place, and turned calmly to his companions.

"There is only one course open to us," he said. "We must defend ourselves

against these scoundrels until the troops arrive and relieve us.”

These courageous words were greeted with murmurs of approval. The mine owner’s companions were evidently men to be depended upon in such an emergency. Four were common workmen, who had proved faithful to their trust when the strike broke out. The other two—Coulter and Brown—had been engaged on clerical work and bookkeeping.

Mr. Dimsdale hurriedly gave orders for the defense, and in a short time all the available furniture was in position against the doors and windows on the lower floor of

the house. Mattresses and other things were brought from upstairs and added to the barricade.

Meanwhile a straggling rifle fire was poured against the front of the cottage, but without any visible effect, for the timbers and planks were all of immense thickness. The house had prudently been built of logs, weather-boarded, and thus it had the appearance of a frame structure.

Some surprise was expressed at the unexpected arrival of the rioters since the utter absence of firing showed that no attack had been made by the troops. But Lascelles had a ready explanation for this, and doubtless a correct one.

“The rascals probably concluded that it would be useless to try to hold their new position against another attack,” he said, “so they decided to return to the village and do all the damage they could while they had a chance. Murdock, no doubt, lost all control over them. Their actions now show that they are entirely without a leader. However, their shrift is likely to be short. The light of the conflagration will be seen down the valley, and as soon as Captain Belt discovers what has happened he will hurry his men forward with all speed.”

“Well, they can’t arrive too soon,” replied Mr. Dimsdale. “We are in great peril—it’s no use to deny the fact. But don’t lose your heads, men. Courage and nerve will pull us through, if anything will. Make good use of your rifles, and obey orders.”

Just then a burst of ferocious yells showed that the rioters were nearing the cottage, and a moment later a rain of bullets pattered against the front wall. Mr. Dimsdale extinguished the lamp, and there proved to be plenty of light without

it. Through every chink and crevice shone the ruddy gleam of the conflagration that raged in the street below.

Though Larry's head throbbed with pain, he obstinately insisted on taking his part in the defense. Mr. Dimsdale had provided him with a Winchester repeating rifle, and a plentiful supply of shells. It was a strong point in favor of the besieged men that they did not lack an abundance of weapons and ammunition.

The mob were now surging about the cottage, the main portion of them being concentrated in front. For several minutes they vented their fury in bloodthirsty yells, and rained bullets unceasingly against the stout timbers. Finding these tactics of no avail, they proceeded to more promising measures.

A rush of heavy footsteps was heard on the porch, followed instantly by a rending, smashing sound, as several of the pillars supporting the top of the portico were torn bodily from their fastenings. Armed with these formidable battering-rams the ruffians opened a terrific attack on one of the windows. The stout shutter quivered, splintered, and finally swung inward, revealing to the anxious defenders a dozen savage faces framed in the flamelit breach.

CHAPTER XXXIII

But before the enemy could follow up their advantage their daring received a terrible check.

“Fire!” roared Mr. Dimsdale, and from behind the barricade, where the sturdy little band were crouched, a leaden volley was poured forth that dealt death and injury to the rioters. With cries of rage and agony they fell back, and before they could rally, the breach was effectively closed up with a table and two mattresses.

An excited cheer broke from Larry’s lips, and the others joined in heartily.

“That was well done,” cried Mr. Dimsdale. “But the fight is only beginning. Be ready for the next move.”

It came a moment later. This time the door was violently assailed, but its timbers and hinges were so stout, and the barricade behind it was so strong that the battering-rams had little or no effect. At the end of five minutes the attempt was abandoned, and a fresh assault was begun on one of the side shutters. It was soon beaten in, and as on the first occasion the rioters were repulsed with loss of life, and the breach quickly closed with what furniture could be spared from the barricade at the door. Now the attack shifted to one of the rear windows, and here the same scenes were enacted. At each fresh repulse of the foe the defenders felt more encouraged and hopeful.

But still there was no sign of the expected soldiers, and the rioters were now in such a raging condition that they would dare anything to revenge their dead and wounded comrades. Their hoarse cries were deafening, and they surged close to the house, firing incessantly at the shutters. No further attacks were made with the pillars, and this very fact sounded a note of warning to the besieged men.

“They will try some new deviltry next,” said Lascelles. “Jove, what a terrible temper they are in!”

“I hardly see what they can do,” replied Mr. Dimsdale, “unless they set fire to the house.”

Prophetic words! Hardly had they been spoken when the confused bawling of

the mob turned to audible and distinct shouts of: “Burn the cottage! Roast every man of them ! Blow them up with dynamite!” Then the cries changed to frenzied yells of delight and exultation.

The imprisoned men looked at one another with pallid and startled faces. The silence within the room was more ominous than words.

Mr. Dimsdale was the first to speak.

“Our lives depend on the soldiers,” he said, solemnly. “Unless they speedily arrive we are lost. We must either perish in the flames, or court a more merciful death by facing the mob.”

This was the situation in plain words, and all realized the fact. Nor was more convincing proof lacking. A rasping sound told that the rioters were tearing up the planking of the porch, and presently this was followed by a succession of dull thumps as the lumber was thrown in a heap at one of the front angles of the house. Then the cries of the mob suddenly arose to a still higher pitch; they seemed to be fairly insane with joy.

“The fire must be already lighted,” exclaimed Mr. Dimsdale.

A moment later he was seen to be right. The crisp crackle of flames could be distinctly heard, and the breeze wafted little puffs of smoke through the chinks of the wall. It was impossible to reach the spot where the fire had been started. The flames must be permitted to take their course.

At this critical moment the feelings of the doomed men were beyond the power of description. It was horrible to think that they must wait calmly for the end, unable to lift a finger to save themselves. And what a fate!—death in its most awful form, amid flame and smoke—a death of ignominy and suffering, like helpless rats caught in a trap. Yet those brave men faced their fate with heroic fortitude. Pallid cheeks and glassy eyes told of heartfelt suffering, but there were no futile words of rage or despair.

The flames crackled on, and the yellow puffs of smoke came faster and faster.

True, there was one alternative. A dash through the doorway, a brief stand in the face of death, and then—oblivion by the rifles of the enraged mob.

“Anything will be better than this,” cried Lascelles, in a ringing voice. “Let us die in the open air like men—not like brutes and cowards, cooped up in this deathtrap.

Larry seconded the proposal. His cheeks were the hue of ashes, but his expression was stern and set, and his eyes glared with the desperation of hopelessness.

“What do you say, men?” cried Mr. Dimsdale. “Shall we face the fury of the mob, and show them of what stuff we are made?”

“Yes, yes!” shouted the brave fellows. “Tear down the barricade! Open the door!”

But before this final act of the tragedy could be played the scene changed with the swiftness of a lightning flash.

A tremendous explosion rent the air, and every man in the room was flung violently to the floor. When they staggered to their feet, dizzy and stunned, but uninjured, they saw clouds of smoke and dust curling away from a great jagged hole in the very angle of the room where the fire had been lighted from without. Through the gap, and some yards away, appeared the brutal faces of the rioters, themselves no less astonished than the inmates of the house. Some one had slyly thrown a dynamite cartridge into the fire, and thus unwittingly destroyed the very object of the mob; for the explosion had blown the flaming planks in all directions, and scarcely a vestige of the fire remained.

Mr. Dimsdale was the first to grasp the altered situation, and to see a ray of hope.

“Fill up the breach,” he roared. “Be ready with your rifles. We have another chance for life.”

His words inspired the men to action. Willing hands flung chairs, tables, and bedding into the gaping fissure, through which streamed the red flame-glow from the burning houses in the street.

But ere the task was half finished the rioters came leaping forward like tigers on their prey. The air rang with hoarse yells, and scores of rifles poured a leaden rain into the yawning breach. But the sturdy little band of defenders had dodged behind the barricade in time to escape the pelting death, and now they returned

the fire with desperate vigor.

The foe wavered, and fell back momentarily, leaving dead and dying in their track. Only for an instant, however. Now they prepared for a grand rush that must carry everything before it, and end the desperate siege. Now they were sweeping onward, firing and yelling as they came.

“This is the end,” cried Mr. Dimsdale, and the forlorn little handful of men, grimy with powder and perspiration, clutched their heated rifles with firmer grasp, bent on delivering one last volley. With eyes turned to the gaping breach they waited, but the foe did not come. The hoarse shouting was in a different key now, and as the crack of the nearby rifles ceased, a sharper fusillade arose shrilly in the distance. What did it mean? Could it be possible that help had arrived in time to drag back the doomed men from the very threshold of eternity?

Mr. Dimsdale was the first to arise from behind the barricade, and when the others followed his example they could have wept for joy at the scene which their eyes beheld. With yells of fear the mob were fleeing in all directions, while close at their heels, up the rugged hillside, came a column of blueclad soldiers. Clear and sweet on the air rang the bugle charge, and now a serried line of bayonets struck deeper terror to the panic-stricken fugitives.

No words can portray the delight of that brave little band, who had faced certain death but a moment before. With eager hands they tore at the barricade, but before they could remove it Rodney Dimsdale came scrambling through the breach, and threw himself into his father’s arms.

“Thank Heaven we came in time,” he cried, when the first greetings were over. “I feared we would be too late. Our party joined the other troops at the lower end of the street, and we made a combined attack.”

“Your party?” questioned Mr. Dimsdale, in surprise. “Were you not with the soldiers down the valley?”

“Of course not,” replied Rodney. “Captain Belt took that route, while Lieutenant Parsons and myself, with three companies of infantry, left the Missouri at the mouth of the valley which leads to Silver Ledge, and took a short cut over the mountains, intending to strike Red Rock from the upper end, and thus have the strikers between two fires. We would have been here long ago had we not lost our way. Back in the next valley we were joined by two Englishmen, who were

on their way here from Silver Ledge. I met one of them before—on my voyage down to Fort Benton—why. hello! Here's a happy surprise!"

He stared fixedly at Larry and Lascelles, and then eagerly shook hands with them.

"You are the fellows that saved my life," he exclaimed. "I'm awfully glad to see you—but—but I wish you were anywhere but here just now."

He turned, and looked anxiously through the gap.

"What do you mean, Rodney?" demanded Mr. Dimsdale. "We owe these brave men a double debt. They came here tonight at the risk of their lives—came to warn us of our peril."

"Worse and worse," muttered Rodney. "That is still another reason why I wish they were miles away. Come over here, and I'll explain."

He walked toward the rear room, beckoning his father, Larry, and Lascelles to follow him.

CHAPTER XXXIV

“These men are in danger, father,” began Rodney. “Not from the mob, but from the soldiers.”

“Because of the part they were forced to play in the fight, I suppose you mean,” replied Mr. Dimsdale. “They can’t be blamed for that. It was compulsory.”

“But I don’t mean that,” said Rodney. “I mean something more serious.”

Turning to Larry and Lascelles, he added:

“Don’t be afraid to speak out. I know the truth, and my father will think none the less of you when he knows it. We will do all in our power to save you.”

Mr. Dimsdale was greatly puzzled.

“What is all this mystery about?” he exclaimed. “I don’t understand it.”

“I will tell you,” said Lascelles. “Your son refers to the fact that we are deserters from the United States Army. He does not exaggerate our danger. We are liable to be arrested at any moment.”

“Yes, that’s just it,” spoke up Rodney. “On my way to Fort Benton I met a boatload of soldiers who were coming up the river to look for you. They described your appearance so closely that I knew right away who they were after. If they find you here you will be arrested.”

“But they shall not find them here,” exclaimed Mr. Dimsdale. Turning to Larry and Lascelles, he added: “I know something about the army, and I don’t doubt that you had sufficient provocation to desert. However, it would make no difference to me if you had committed a greater crime. The least that I can do in return for your services is to save you from arrest. I think I can accomplish that. Wait a moment.”

He walked into the front room, and found it empty. The others had gone outside to join the pursuit after the rioters. He hastily returned, and led the fugitives upstairs, and into a neatly-furnished room containing two beds.

“I don’t think your presence here will be suspected,” he said. “Rodney and myself are the only ones who know it. As soon as possible I will send you something to eat, and when the danger is over, I will notify you.”

He closed the door, and went quickly downstairs.

“At last I feel that I can draw a safe breath,” exclaimed Lascelles. “Cheer up, Larry. Our troubles are over. Mr. Dimsdale will pull us through. How do you feel by this time?”

“All right, except for a splitting headache,” replied Larry. “A few hours’ sleep will make me as well as ever. By the way, I wonder what became of Rakestraw. Think of that scoundrel turning up here. I thought he was safe at Fort Snelling.”

“He must have given Detective Steelyard the slip,” answered Lascelles. “As soon as he was free, he struck for this part of the country, where he intended to go in the first place, I believe. I suppose he has been on guard here at the cottage ever since the strike began, and that explains why we did not discover him to be among the rioters. I don’t think he will give us any more trouble. As yet he can hardly have recovered from that blow on the head.”

“It would be a good thing if he didn’t recover from it at all,” replied Larry. “But I don’t want to talk about him any longer. It makes me shiver. Suppose we take a peep outside.”

They went to the window, which faced the front of the house, and partially opened the shutters. As the interior of the room was dark, they felt safe from discovery. There was plenty to be seen and heard, and they gazed out into the night with deep interest. The dispersal of the mob was by this time complete. They had fled in all directions up the mountain, and the pursuit had been so far abandoned that only an occasional shot was heard. The soldiers had no desire to add any further bloodshed to their victory. In fact, the bugle was now sounding the recall, and they came trooping back in squads and groups, some lingering about the cottage, others pushing on to the valley, where a large force of their comrades were laboring to check the conflagration. The flames still raged in half a dozen places, but the worst was over. The soldiers were tearing down the buildings adjoining those that were on fire, and their efforts promised to be successful.

But to the two watchers the scene in front of the cottage offered the greater

attraction. By the aid of lanterns the soldiers were carrying the dead bodies of the rioters to a corner of the porch. Several wounded men they took inside the house, and from the lower floor arose a babel of voices and scuffling feet. Suddenly Larry uttered a sharp cry:

“Look!” he cried. “There is Rakestraw!”

“So it is,” muttered Lascelles. “That means fresh danger. Don’t expose yourself so much. We will be seen.”

They drew a little back from the window, and riveted their eyes on a group of three who were slowly approaching the cottage. The central figure was indeed Bart Rakestraw. He had lost his cap, and his hair and forehead were smeared with blood. He walked reluctantly between two soldiers, occasionally making a feeble effort to break loose.

As soon as the group mounted the porch, Lascelles tiptoed across the room, softly opened the door, and led Larry out to the head of the stairs.

“Don’t make a sound,” he whispered. “We must hear what transpires below.”

They did not have long to wait. At the foot of the stairs sat an officer wearing a lieutenant’s uniform, and close by stood Mr. Dimsdale and Rodney. The next instant the prisoner was led up to them, and the whole scene was in full view of the two anxious watchers crouching in the darkness at the top of the stairs.

“We found this fellow hidden out here between two rocks, Lieutenant Parsons,” said one of the soldiers. “He belongs to the rioters, for his hands are powder-stained, and he has an ugly wound on the head.”

“One of the rioters, eh?” exclaimed the officer. “Well, he will get his deserts in good time. Take him away—no, hold on! By gracious! I recognize the scoundrel. He deserted from Fort Snelling with those two other fellows whom we were searching for a day or two ago. He is the worst of the three, too. I wonder how the deuce he got here.”

“It’s a lie,” snarled Rakestraw. “I never saw Fort Snelling, and I had nothing to do with the rioters. They knocked me down because I wouldn’t join them.”

“Come, don’t play that game,” replied the officer. “When I visited Fort Snelling

a year ago you were pointed out to me as the worst chap in the regiment. I'll swear to your identity. Your name is Rakestraw. Don't deny it."

The ruffian realized that his subterfuge would be of no avail. His eyes gleamed for an instant, and then a smile of malignant hate lighted up his face.

"All right," he muttered, "I see you've got the drop on me. I know when to give in, I do. But I can tell you something that will make your eyes sparkle, lieutenant. Them other two deserters ain't far away. They're in this very house now. Curse 'em, I'll be revenged fur the way they treated me."

Mr. Dimsdale and Rodney exchanged glances of alarm. The officer arose excitedly to his feet.

"Is this true?" he demanded of the prisoner, "or is it only another of your tricks?"

"It's true as gospel," snarled Rakestraw. "Lascelles and Redmayne are in this house. They sneaked by me while I was doin' sentry duty out here, an' Lascelles knocked me down with his rifle. They was safe inside the house when I come to my senses, and they ain't come out yet, because I was watchin' all the time from behind the rocks. If you don't believe me, look for yourself. Better not lose any time, for they're slippery fellows."

The officer turned to Mr. Dimsdale, whose agitated face was sufficient proof of Rakestraw's declaration.

"You don't object to my searching the house?" he asked, sharply.

Mr. Dimsdale hesitated.

"If—if you think best," he stammered. "I have two guests upstairs—two brave men who helped me defend the house. But they are sleeping soundly, and must not be disturbed at present."

"Pardon me, but I must see them," replied the officer.

"Not now, Lieutenant Parsons," cried Rodney, springing partly up the steps, and barring the way. "Let the poor fellows have their sleep out, I implore you."

"Out of the road, young man!" exclaimed the officer, sternly. He caught

Rodney's arm, and swung him to one side.

At this critical moment the fugitives, crouching in the gloom above, did not entirely lose hope. The window offered a last chance of escape, and with fleet and noiseless steps they glided back into the room. They flung the shutters wide open and stared out. Too late! Half a dozen soldiers, just approaching the house, heard the creaking noise and looked up.

The next instant Lieutenant Parsons burst into the room, a revolver in each hand.

"Throw up your arms, or I'll fire," he cried, sharply.

Three or four soldiers swarmed in behind him, and the deserters were quickly overpowered, and conducted downstairs.

CHAPTER XXXV

Larry and Lascelles realized that this last and crowning misfortune was irremediable, and that their wisest course would be to accept the situation with the best grace possible. They deported themselves with a dignity and calmness that won the admiration of all present, for the lower floor of the cottage was now full of soldiers, the last to arrive being Captain Belt.

But Mr. Dimsdale and Rodney could not help showing their sorrow and regret at what had occurred, and their indignation arose to a violent pitch when Rakestraw, bent on adding yet another touch to his revenge, maliciously declared that the prisoners had been the very ringleaders of the riot.

Mr. Dimsdale assured the officers that this statement was false, and gave a graphic description of the night's events. Then Rodney told how the prisoners had saved him from the assassins at the risk of their own lives, and the narrative produced a marked effect. In fact, the sympathies of Captain Belt were enlisted to such an extent that he offered Lascelles a chance to speak in behalf of himself and Larry. Lascelles gladly availed himself of the opportunity, and related all that had happened from the time he left Fort Benton in a modest, straightforward way that made a truthful impression on his hearers.

"I don't doubt the story these fellows tell," said Captain Belt; "but all their late heroism and worthy conduct don't alter the fact that they deserted from Fort Snelling last August, after assaulting several officers in a most ferocious manner. They must stand their trial and punishment."

Rakestraw heard these decisive words, and his eyes sparkled with exultant malice. His own fate was almost forgotten in the joy of a successfully achieved revenge.

The resolute bearing of the prisoners almost failed them, when Rodney and his father strove to cheer them by sympathy and well-meant consolation.

"I would be ungrateful, indeed, did I not do all in my power for you," said Mr. Dimsdale. "I will leave no stone unturned to mitigate your lot. Surely something can be done."

“I fear not,” replied Lascelles; “but Larry and I appreciate your kindness none the less. You would understand our situation better if you knew the whole story. I will tell it to you, if I find an opportunity.”

“I will be glad to hear it,” replied Mr. Dimsdale. “I shall then know better what steps to take. Captain Belt,” he added, turning to that officer, “may I accompany you to Fort Benton? I wish to see Colonel Maberly, and intercede with him in behalf of these two prisoners.”

“I warn you now that your intercession will be useless,” responded the captain; “but of course you may do as you see fit. No doubt Colonel Maberly wishes to talk with you concerning the strike, and I am happy to inform you that the condition of affairs at present warrants you in absenting yourself for a day or two. The fire is under control, and the rioters are utterly dispersed. I apprehend no further trouble from them. We have a few prisoners, and Murdock, the instigator and leader of the strike, is one of them. He was shot through the arm in yesterday’s fight. I propose to return to Fort Benton to-morrow morning with part of my force, but I will leave four companies of infantry behind to protect your property until peace is fully restored. By the way, there are several Eastern capitalists down at the fort looking about for mining properties. If you felt disposed to sell out now—”

“That’s just what I am most anxious to do,” interrupted Mr. Dimsdale. “I am afraid I can never learn to manage these miners as my partner did. Now that it is too late, I see more than one mistake. If I can get a fair price, I will gladly sell out.”

“I approve your decision,” said Captain Belt. “I will tell you very candidly that it was bad policy to take on non-union men. The law was on your side, but you had not the means to enforce it.

“And now, Dimsdale,” he added, “suppose you assign me a room where I can put these deserters under strong guard. I will thank you for a few straps, also, as I don’t intend to take any chances. Such a haul as this is not to be made every day.”

“You can put your prisoners in that rear apartment,” replied Mr. Dimsdale, with a sigh. “It is doubtful if I have any straps, but I will look.”

“Rope will do just as well,” suggested Captain Belt.

As he spoke footsteps were heard on the porch, and two men entered the room. One was Hugh Corwallis, the young Englishman who had befriended Larry and Lascelles. His companion was plainly of the same nationality—a tall, bronzed young man of about thirty, with a handsome and aristocratic face.

The stranger stared about him.

“Can you tell me—” he began, addressing Captain Belt. Then he suddenly spied Lascelles, and his face shone with joy and thrilling emotion. He sprang forward, and clasped him by the hand.

“Berkeley, my dear fellow, have I found you at last?” he cried, hoarsely. “Thank Heaven for this meeting. I believed you were dead. I have vainly hunted you for a year.”

Lascelles turned deathly pale and reeled backward. But he instantly recovered himself and returned the other’s greeting with constrained but heartfelt warmth.

“Gordon St. Maur!” he exclaimed, “I knew you as soon as you spoke. It gave me a shock at first, and brought back old ties that were broken seven long years ago. What brings you here, and at such a time?”

“Good news, of course,” cried St. Maur. “Can you not guess? Sir Arthur Berkeley, allow me to be the first to congratulate you. You have fallen heir to your uncle’s title and estates. Your troubles are over, my dear fellow. Honor and wealth await you at home.”

A groan of agony burst from Lascelles’ lips. He tottered back against the wall, and covered his face with his hands.

It was a thrilling and impressive scene, and one that was never forgotten by those who witnessed it. Corwallis and St. Maur were dumb with amazement, and Larry, who divined the situation, thrilled with pity for his unfortunate friend. Rakestraw was equally quick to understand, and his rage and consternation were terrible.

For an instant the silence was intense and dramatic. Then Lascelles slowly looked up. His lips were set and rigid, and his face was stamped with unutterable despair and remorse.

“Gordon, is this thing you tell me true?” he demanded, huskily. “Is my uncle dead?”

“He died three years ago,” replied St. Maur.

“And my Cousin Lucius?” asked Lascelles.

“He was killed in a hunting accident two years ago.”

“And what of my brother?”

“Philip was shot last October while leading his regiment against a dacoit stronghold in Upper Burmah,” replied St. Maur. “Pardon my brutality, old fellow. I should have broken the news more gently.”

He looked at the circle of wondering faces around him, and suddenly realized that something more serious than he had supposed was wrong.

“Berkeley, what does this mean?” he demanded, anxiously. “Are you in any trouble?”

“Yes, he is in serious trouble,” spoke up Captain Belt. “In fact, he is my prisoner on a charge of deserting from the United States Army.”

Convallis and St. Maur stared incredulously at the officer.

“Berkeley, is this true?” asked St. Maur, in a troubled voice.

“All true!” groaned Lascelles. “You have found me too late. A few weeks ago this news would have made me the happiest man in the world. Now a long term of imprisonment stares me in the face.”

“Don’t despair, my dear fellow.” cried St. Maur. “Plenty of influence can be brought to bear on your case. You will speedily return to England a free man.”

“We shall see about that,” muttered Captain Belt, grimly. “An English baronet has no more right to violate the laws of this government than a plain, ordinary American citizen.”

He cut the painful scene short by ordering the three prisoners to be taken into the

rear room. An instant later the door closed upon them and their guards.

St. Maur was at first disposed to storm and bluster, but Convallis succeeded in calming him down. They gleaned a clearer knowledge of the situation from what Mr. Dimsdale and Captain Belt could tell them. This was but little, however, and the captain was finally persuaded to allow St. Maur an interview with Lascelles.

This lasted nearly an hour, and when St. Maur came out of the room he seemed considerably cheered.

“I am satisfied that I can procure the liberation of my friend,” he said. “He is in a pretty bad scrape, but I can rely upon strong influence at Washington. The British Minister is a relation of the Berkeley family.”

“Possibly you are right,” replied Captain Belt. “I knew from the first that this man Lascelles had fallen below his station. Is he really a baronet?”

“Most assuredly,” rejoined St. Maur. “He is Sir Arthur Lascelles Berkeley. Both his parents died when he was quite young, and he and his elder brother Philip were brought up by their uncle, Sir Henry Berkeley, who had one son, Lucius. According to the English law of entail, Philip acquired the greater part of his father’s wealth. Arthur inherited quite a pile of money from his mother, but he ran through it rapidly during his course at Oxford, where he and I were close friends. He got deeply into debt, and became involved in several scrapes. Philip selfishly refused to help him, and, seeing no way out of his difficulties, he suddenly disappeared. That was seven years ago, and since then he has been knocking about in all parts of the globe. Meanwhile his uncle died; then his Cousin Lucius, and finally his brother Philip. This gave Arthur the title and the estates, and I determined to find him, if he was still alive. The history of my search is a long one, and I won’t tire you with it. My friend here assisted me through it all, and at last we found a clew in the United States—several of them, in fact. Corwallis prosecuted one in the East, while I came on to Silver Ledge, where Arthur was said to have lived at one time. I learned that he had gone away three years ago, and when Corwallis joined me the other day, and reported no better success I was quite in despair. By pure accident we crossed the mountains tonight, being curious to see something of the strike. We fell in with the soldiers—and the rest you know. The strangest part of it is that Corwallis actually fell in with Berkeley on his way up the river, but never having seen him he did not suspect his identity. It was a bitter stroke to find my friend under such

circumstances as these.”

St. Maur’s narrative created quite a sensation, and general sympathy was expressed for Lascelles.

After the recent exciting events sleep was out of the question, and the gray light of dawn found the inmates of the cottage still awake.

CHAPTER XXXVI

Two days after the stirring scenes recorded in the last chapter, the leading actors therein were assembled in Colonel Maberly's snug quarters at Fort Benton. It was five o'clock in the afternoon, and the setting sun streamed through the windows which faced the parade ground. Those present were Colonel Maberly, Captain Belt, Lieutenant Parsons, Hugh Corwallis, Gordon St. Maur, Mr. Dimsdale and Rodney, Larry Redmayne, and Miles Lascelles—for so he shall be known to the end.

Bart Rakestraw was absent, for his lifeless body lay at that moment in the guardhouse. He had been shot down an hour before, while attempting to escape from the soldiers who were taking him off the steamer. The atrocious ruffian well merited his fate, and thus he disappears from the closing pages of this narrative.

Larry and Lascelles had been conducted to Colonel Maberly's quarters as soon as they landed at Fort Benton, and the object of the military sitting which we now find convened here was to permit the friends of the prisoners to make certain statements in their behalf, and also to probe the disastrous strike at Red Rock.

The latter affair was taken up first, and Mr. Dimsdale was questioned and cross-questioned for an hour. Captain Belt and Lieutenant Parsons were next called upon to tell what they knew, and the investigation went on by lamplight. Everything relating to the cause and effect of the strike was soon made clear to Colonel Maberly. He briefly deplored the unfortunate affair, and gave Mr. Dimsdale some sound advice. Then he dismissed the matter, and turned his attention to the prisoners.

"I will give you a hearing now," he said, "and I advise you to tell everything, without reserve. I shall be glad to learn why you deserted from Fort Snelling."

The colonel's manner was severe without being harsh, and Lascelles felt encouraged to proceed. He spoke for himself and Larry, and graphically described Captain Kenrick's tyranny, the escape from the fort, Rakestraw's treacherous conduct, and all that had happened subsequently, up to and including the riot at Red Rock.

Colonel Maberly cross-questioned both prisoners on the narrative, and seemed convinced that it was all true. He then allowed Mr. Dimsdale to plead in their behalf, and listened without comment to the mine owner's eloquent words, which dealt mainly with the heroism and bravery of the prisoners. Rodney spoke next, and then Corwallis, telling where and under what circumstances he had first met the prisoners.

Colonel Maberly's stolidity remained unshaken up to this point, but he exhibited suppressed excitement and interest when St. Maur spoke in behalf of Lascelles, and told the strange story of the wanderer who was now a British baronet.

The colonel tugged at his beard, and shifted his eyes restlessly from floor to ceiling.

"This is a most remarkable story from beginning to end," he said, finally. "It—if my position would allow it, I would er—er—express my sympathy with the prisoners. I am satisfied that their participation in the riot was compulsory, and therefore excusable. I am equally convinced that their companion, Rakestraw, was the perpetrator of the outrages at Fort Snelling. But even if the latter fact can be proved, I fear that military law will find these men guilty of all the charges against them. Of course, I have no jurisdiction whatever in the matter. I must see that the prisoners are sent down to Fort Snelling as soon as possible. Of course, they will have the benefit of the statements which you gentlemen have just made in their behalf. If Sir Arthur Berkeley is a British subject his conviction may lead to some international complications. I happen to have some knowledge of young Redmayne, and, in fact, his worthy uncle is in the fort at this moment, greatly distressed at the disgrace which has befallen him. It is the same old story of a wayward, willful boy led astray by evil company—"

Just then the colonel was interrupted by the entrance of an orderly, who announced, in distinct tones:

"Mr. Redmayne desires to know if he may see his nephew."

"Show him in," replied the colonel, and a moment later Mr. Matthew Redmayne walked briskly into the room, followed by his son Daniel. The banker's face wore a cleverly assumed expression of grief and sympathy. He advanced to the colonel's desk, and stood there for an instant, exposed to the broad glare of the lamp, until his eyes fell on Larry.

“My poor misguided boy,” he cried. “It pains me deeply to see you here. Is this the result of my paternal care and affection? Oh! why did you not heed my warnings in time?”

He lifted his handkerchief to his eyes, and wiped away an imaginary tear.

“Hypocrite!” muttered Larry, in an angry whisper.

There was silence for an instant—a silence that was broken by a hoarse and thrilling cry. The sound came from Mr. Dimsdale. He had risen to his feet, and was staring at Matthew Redmayne with flashing eyes and parting lips. His cheeks were pale as ashes, and he trembled in every limb. With two strides he was face to face with the banker.

“Am I mad?” he cried, in a ringing voice. “Or do the dead come back to life? But that face and voice! They can’t deceive me. Ah! I know you now, Matthew Raby. False friend! scoundrel, thief! I have you in my power.” His face grew purple with rage, and, seizing the banker with one arm, he shook him violently to and fro.

The scene created the greatest tumult and consternation, and for an instant no one interfered. Then the pair were forcibly separated, and held apart.

Matthew Redmayne trembled like a leaf, and a spasm of acute terror flashed across his pallid face. Twice he tried to meet the glance of his antagonist, and twice he essayed to speak.

“You—you—” he stammered, finally. “I thought you had died years ago, Wilmot Dimsdale.”

“But I am not dead, you scoundrel. I stand here today to confront you with your crimes—to demand an explanation of your perfidy, and deal out retribution.

“Gentlemen,” added Mr. Dimsdale, turning to those around him. “Let me justify myself in your eyes by giving you a brief history of this man who calls himself Matthew Redmayne. Nearly fifteen years ago I landed in my native city, New York, after three years of exile in South America, where I conducted a flourishing mercantile business. It was my wife’s ill health that compelled me to sell out and come home. She died three weeks after we reached New York, leaving me with two little boys, aged three and five. For their sakes I knew that I

must bear the blow bravely, and live and work. I decided to go West, partly by the advice of one whom I regarded as my oldest and best friend. That friend was Matthew Raby, the man who stands cowering before you. He was then the head partner in the well-known banking firm of Raby & Dakin, on Wall Street. For convenience and safe-keeping I placed my entire fortune in his hands—fifty thousand dollars. Moreover, I presumed on our friendship to ask a favor of him—namely, that he would care for my youngest boy until I was settled and could send for him. He willingly agreed to do this. His wife was dead, but a motherly woman kept house for him, and cared for his own son, who was the same age as mine. I went West with my eldest son Rodney, believing that my youngest boy and money were in safe hands. The first draft that I drew from the East was honored; the second came back protested, and a week or two later I learned the terrible truth. Raby & Dakin had embezzled the money intrusted to them, and fled from New York in a yacht belonging to the junior partner. It was supposed that their destination was Europe, and that they had previously deposited the stolen money in foreign banks under assumed names. On hearing of this misfortune I hastened to New York, only to receive a greater blow. The yacht had foundered in a storm in mid-ocean—in sight of another vessel, which was unable to render any assistance. Not a soul on board was saved. I supposed, of course, that Mr. Raby had taken his son and mine with him, and probably the nurse as well. At all events, I could find no trace of a single one of them in New York. Broken-hearted and almost penniless, I returned to the West with my boy Rodney. In the years gone by I have prospered, for everything I touched seemed to turn to gold. But I have never forgotten my lost child, and now the sight of that man brings back the old agony.”

He paused a moment, his features working convulsively.

Matthew Redmayne was a pitiable object as he stood limply between Captain Belt and Lieutenant Parsons. His face was stamped with guilt and despair, and no stronger proof was needed to convince all that he was really the fraudulent banker, long believed dead.

“Have mercy!” he groaned. “Have mercy!”

“Mercy!” echoed Mr. Dimsdale, harshly. “Before you plead for mercy give me back my son. What have you done with him? Where is he?”

The guilty man passed one hand across his forehead.

“Your son?” he exclaimed, in a surprised tone. “Why, he is here now. There he sits in front of you.”

With a trembling arm, he pointed to Larry, whose flushed and eager face showed that he had already divined the truth.

CHAPTER XXXVII

For a brief instant the color forsook Mr. Dimsdale's face, and he swayed to and fro. Then he sprang forward with a glad cry, and clasped Larry in his arms.

"Thank Heaven for this mercy!" he whispered, fervently. "I have found my long-lost boy at last. I was blind not to suspect it before. Rodney, this is, indeed, your brother."

The two lads embraced warmly, and now that they were together the striking resemblance was readily seen. The shock was almost too much for Larry. He dropped into a chair, pale and trembling. He felt his position keenly, for his face was stamped with conflicting emotions—thrilling joy and unutterable sadness. Tears came into his eyes, and rolled one by one down his cheeks.

Lascelles leaned over him from behind.

"Let me congratulate you, my dear boy, he whispered. This is an occasion for rejoicing—not sorrow. Be assured that your father will find a way to get you out of this scrape."

Larry was cheered by these words, and when he looked at Dan his own troubles were forgotten in a flood of pity. The poor boy was the picture of despair and shame, as he waited vainly for his father to deny the terrible accusations that had been heaped upon him.

Mr. Dimsdale was no less moved by the sight, and his face wore a softer expression as he turned to Matthew Raby.

"The way of the transgressor is hard," he said. "After all these years your fate has overtaken you, and at a time when you probably believed yourself most secure. I feel some pity for you, but nevertheless you must answer for your crimes before the bar of justice. Look at my poor boy standing there in the shadow of a military prison. You are the cause of his misfortunes, Matthew Raby. You deprived him of a father's love and care, and doubtless treated him with harshness and cruelty. Can you undo all this, and remove the stain and punishment that now threaten him?"

His voice assumed a sterner tone, and quivered with indignation.

Matthew Raby writhed under these stinging words, and held up his hands imploringly. He seemed to have aged ten years in the last few moments.

“Have mercy,” he pleaded. “I will confess all. I tried to do my duty by your son. I gave him a home, an education—everything that he could have wished. But he was headstrong and rebellious, and, at last, he ran away. I am ready to make all the reparation in my power, Wilmot. I will return your fifty thousand dollars with compound interest—”

“What do I care for the money?” cried Mr. Dimsdale. “I am rich without it. Don’t talk of reparation; it is beyond your power as far as I am concerned. But where have you been all these years? How did you escape the fate of your partner?”

“I was not on board the yacht,” replied the wretched man. “Dakin turned traitor at the last minute, and sailed without me. I was in despair at first, for I had made every preparation to leave. The two boys were hidden in the country with my wife’s old nurse. I disguised myself and joined them, and when the news came a week later that the yacht had foundered, and that I was believed to be among the lost, I knew that I was safe from detection. I went to Cincinnati, and engaged in business under an assumed name. In a month or two I sent for the boys and the nurse. She never learned the truth, for she could not read the papers. In a year or two she died, and I procured a governess for Dan and Lawrence. I would gladly have restored your son to you, Wilmot, but I believed you were dead. I read a paragraph in a Western paper, stating that you had been drowned in the Colorado River.”

“I remember the occurrence,” said Mr. Dimsdale; “but it was a mistake. A friend of mine was drowned, and the names got mixed. And now how about the vast sums of money that your firm embezzled? What became of them?”

“A portion went to the bottom of the Atlantic with the yacht,” replied Matthew Raby. “The balance was on deposit in London and Paris under different names, and from time to time I drew on it from Cincinnati. I am a rich man, Wilmot, and can pay back every dollar that was stolen. Don’t be hard on me. I am well up in years, and imprisonment will kill me. For the sake of your own son spare mine. A heritage of disgrace and dishonor will blast his young life.”

“You should have thought of all these things before,” answered Mr. Dimsdale. “I fear it is too late now, and that the power of mercy does not rest in my hands. I am deeply sorry for your son, and will serve him in any way possible. But if I consented to shield you from the consequences of your crime I should be liable to punishment myself for compounding a felony.”

“I am glad to hear you speak so firmly, Dimsdale,” said Colonel Maberly. “I pity this wretched man myself, but my duty is none the less plain. I must detain him here until word can be sent to the proper authorities in the East. I well remember his crime, for in 1877 I was stationed at Governor’s Island in New York Harbor. Many unfortunate people lost all their savings, and more than one business man was badly crippled. This was an unusually atrocious case, and justice must have its own. Captain Belt, will you see that Mr. Raby is put in a safe place and well guarded? You will probably find an empty room in the officers’ quarters. Let him have every comfort and convenience, but take every precaution against escape.”

The guilty man turned pale and trembled when he heard these words of doom. But he realized the utter futility of appeal. With bowed head he tottered from the room, leaning heavily on Captain Belt and Lieutenant Parsons. Dan followed after his father, weeping bitterly.

As the door closed behind the sad little procession those who remained in the room felt as though a great load had been lifted from their minds. The thrilling events which had just transpired were discussed with animation and interest. For the time being Larry and Lascelles forgot that they were prisoners. Mr. Dimsdale sat with his arm about his son, as he told the long story of his struggle with fortune, and the gradual successes that made him the owner of half a dozen ranches and as many valuable silver mines.

Then it came Larry’s turn to speak, and he related in a graphic way as much as he could remember of his past life. When the narrative was finished the sympathy that had previously been felt for Matthew Raby had dwindled to very small proportions, indeed.

“I wish I could offer you substantial consolation, Dimsdale,” said Colonel Maberly. “It is a bitter trial to find a lost child under such circumstances. The case is very similar to that of Sir Arthur Berkeley here. By the way, how old is your son?”

Mr. Dimsdale started, and slapped his hand to his brow.

“My boy is safe,” he said. “He will not be eighteen until the twentieth of next month. Being under the military age, his enlistment counts for nothing. A writ of *habeas corpus* will set him at liberty.”

“I think you are right, Dimsdale,” said Colonel Maberly. “I congratulate you with all my heart.”

The next instant all were trying to shake hands with Larry at one and the same time.

Here let the curtain fall. We have traced our heroes through many and perilous adventures, and it only remains to bid farewell to them as they stand on the threshold of a new life.

Five days after the stirring scenes that were enacted in Colonel Maberly’s quarters, the principal actors started on their voyage down the Missouri. The party comprised Mr. Dimsdale and his sons, Lascelles, Corwallis, St. Maur, and three private soldiers. The latter had charge of Larry and Lascelles, who were still prisoners, of course. Mr. Dimsdale had no intention of returning to Montana, for he had just disposed of his silver mines at Red Rock to a syndicate of Eastern capitalists, and his income from money and ranch property was now larger than he could spend.

Matthew Raby and Daniel remained behind at Fort Benton, to await the arrival of officers from New York. The authorities of this State had manifested an urgent desire to bring the prisoner to justice, and steps had already been taken to procure a requisition from the Governor of Montana.

Our party reached Fort Snelling in due time, and the friends of the prisoners purposely allowed them to stand their trial, which came off two weeks later.

Fortunately there was evidence to show that Rakestraw was wholly to blame for the misdeeds perpetrated on the night of the desertion. The court-martial found the prisoners guilty, with extenuating circumstances, and each was sentenced to a year’s imprisonment at Fort Leavenworth.

But in neither case was the verdict carried out. A writ of *habeas corpus* procured Larry’s release almost immediately, for Mr. Dimsdale was armed with proofs of

his son's age. St. Maur had made a hurried trip to Washington, and his blustering words about influence proved no idle boast. He returned with a full pardon for Lascelles.

The whole party journeyed to New York together, and here Larry and Lascelles parted sorrowfully, the latter sailing for England with his friends to enjoy his title and wealth.

Matthew Raby was brought back to the scene of his crimes, but he did not live to stand his trial. He died in prison, a prematurely aged and broken-down man. His property in Cincinnati proved barely sufficient to pay as many of the depositors of the defunct bank as could be found. Dan would have been left penniless but for the generosity of Mr. Dimsdale, who insisted on giving the lad the fifty thousand dollars which was assigned to him in the division. He offered him a home as well, but this was declined. Dan accepted the money with reluctance, and went to live with a distant relative in New England.

Soon after his arrival in New York Mr. Dimsdale purchased a handsome residence near Central Park. One of the first visitors to the new home was Mr. Barker, the kind-hearted Dakota ranchman, who came to New York on business, and was recognized on Broadway by Larry. He was entertained royally, and he and his hosts had many a laugh over the adventures and misadventures of that memorable night when he helped the deserters to escape from Detective Steelyard. The ranchman told how Bart Rakestraw had escaped on the following morning while being taken to Fargo.

And now it is time to say farewell in earnest, since we have seen Larry started on his new life. He and Rodney are devoted to each other and to their father. They expect to enter college in a year, but it is highly probable that they will take a trip abroad in the meantime, and pay a visit to Sir Arthur Berkeley at his fine old English home, Berkeley Court.

THE END