

California Joe, the Mysterious Plainsman

Colonel Prentiss Ingraham

Table of Contents

<u>California Joe, the Mysterious Plainsman</u>	1
<u>Colonel Prentiss Ingraham</u>	2
<u>CHAPTER I. THE FOREST PHANTOM</u>	3
<u>CHAPTER II. THE UNSEEN GUIDE</u>	5
<u>CHAPTER III. "JOE"</u>	7
<u>CHAPTER IV. PREPARING FOR THE WORST</u>	10
<u>CHAPTER V. JOE MAKES A GRAND CAPTURE</u>	12
<u>CHAPTER VI. JOE'S LITTLE GAME</u>	14
<u>CHAPTER VII. JOE STRIKES A BARGAIN</u>	17
<u>CHAPTER VIII. THE BROKEN PROMISE</u>	19
<u>CHAPTER IX. A LEAP LIFE</u>	21
<u>CHAPTER X. SEARCHING FOR JOE'S SCALP</u>	24
<u>CHAPTER XI. JOB AT BAY</u>	26
<u>CHAPTER XII. THE DEATH-CAVERN</u>	28
<u>CHAPTER XIII. A RECONNAISSANCE</u>	30
<u>CHAPTER XIV. JOE'S REVENGE</u>	33
<u>CHAPTER XV. THE FATAL CHASE</u>	35
<u>CHAPTER XVI. A NOVEL ESCAPE</u>	37
<u>CHAPTER XVII. THE BOY PIONEER</u>	39
<u>CHAPTER XVIII. A FAVOR RETURNED</u>	42
<u>CHAPTER XIX. THE SAME "JOE."</u>	45
<u>CHAPTER XX. THE BANDIT TRAILER</u>	47
<u>CHAPTER XXI. CALIFORNIA JOE</u>	50
<u>CHAPTER XXII. JOE VISITS OLD FRIENDS</u>	52
<u>CHAPTER XXIII. THE CHEYENNES RANSOM</u>	54
<u>CHAPTER XXIV. JOE'S FATE</u>	56

California Joe, the Mysterious Plainsman

Colonel Prentiss Ingraham

This page copyright © 2001 Blackmask Online.
<http://www.blackmask.com>

- CHAPTER I. THE FOREST PHANTOM.
 - CHAPTER II. THE UNSEEN GUIDE.
 - CHAPTER III. "JOE"
 - CHAPTER IV. PREPARING FOR THE WORST.
 - CHAPTER V. JOE MAKES A GRAND CAPTURE.
 - CHAPTER VI. JOE'S LITTLE GAME.
 - CHAPTER VII. JOE STRIKES A BARGAIN.
 - CHAPTER VIII. THE BROKEN PROMISE.
 - CHAPTER IX. A LEAP LIFE.
 - CHAPTER X. SEARCHING FOR JOE'S SCALP.
 - CHAPTER XI. JOB AT BAY.
 - CHAPTER XII. THE DEATH-CAVERN.
 - CHAPTER XIII. A RECONNAISSANCE.
 - CHAPTER XIV. JOE'S REVENGE.
 - CHAPTER XV. THE FATAL CHASE.
 - CHAPTER XVI. A NOVEL ESCAPE
 - CHAPTER XVII. THE BOY PIONEER.
 - CHAPTER XVIII. A FAVOR RETURNED.
 - CHAPTER XIX. THE SAME "JOE."
 - CHAPTER XX. THE BANDIT TRAILER.
 - CHAPTER XXI. CALIFORNIA JOE.
 - CHAPTER XXII. JOE VISITS OLD FRIENDS.
 - CHAPTER XXIII. THE CHEYENNES RANSOM.
 - CHAPTER XXIV. JOE'S FATE.
-

CHAPTER I. THE FOREST PHANTOM.

"Who was California Joe?"

Kind reader, that question I cannot answer more than can I the queries: "Who was the Man of the Iron Mask!" "Who wrote the 'Junius Letters'?"

But from the time he entered upon the eventful career of a border boy, when he was in his seventeenth year, I can write of him, and many a thrilling tale of his adventures can be told.

But go beyond that night when he first appeared to a wagon-train of emigrants, and became their guide, and all is a mystery, as though a veil had been drawn between him and the years that had gone before, for of himself this strange man would never speak.

One night—nearly half a century ago—a train, westward bound, was encamped just where the prairie met the woodland and hills.

It consisted of a score of white-tilted wagons, drawn by oxen, half as many stoutly-built carryalls, to which were hitched serviceable horses, and the stock of the emigrants, comprising horses, cattle, sheep, and hogs.

Perhaps half a hundred souls were in the train, half of them being hardy, fearless men, and the remainder their wives and children, seeking homes in the border land.

When the camp had been pitched for the night, an hour before sunset—for the train traveled slowly, retarded as it was with their stock—a few of the younger men took their rifles for a stroll through the woodland above, hoping to knock over a few wild turkeys and squirrels for the evening meal.

They were quite successful, and lured on by the sport, they penetrated the hills for a couple of miles, and only thought of returning when the evening shadows warned them that night was at hand.

"Heaven above! Look there!"

The cry came from the lips of one of the party and all were thrilled with the sudden exclamation, which told of something more worthy of attention than a wild turkey or even a bear.

All glanced in the direction in which the one who had made some startling discovery was gazing, and every eye became riveted at once in a manner that proved the thrilling cry of their comrade had not been uncalled for.

There, some hundred paces distant from where they stood, was what appeared to be a horse and rider.

The animal was snow-white, and stood as motionless as though carved from marble.

The rider was dressed in deep black from boots to hat, and sat silent and still.

Even in the gathering gloom his face, seemingly very pale, was visible, and it was beardless.

Across his lap lay a rifle, also seemingly painted black, and a belt of arms of the same somber hue was about his waist.

The horse was saddle and bridleless, and stood with head erect gazing upon the party.

This much all of the young immigrants saw.

But who was this strange being and his ghost-like horse?

One remembered to have heard their guide tell the story how a phantom horse and rider had been seen by old hunters and trappers in that forest of late months, and none knew aught of him.

All then recalled the story and felt that they beheld the same mysterious being.

The guide had died a few days before, and been buried by the roadside, and the train was continuing its way upon the indistinct memory of one of the wagoners who had before been over the trail, rather than delay for weeks until another plainsman could be found to lead them.

They therefore could not ask the guide, upon their return to camp, to describe again the Phantom of the Forest, which he and others had seen; but that this must be the horse and rider that had won such fame, there could be no doubt in the minds of the young emigrants.

The guide had said, they remembered, that he allowed no one to approach near him, and this they would now solve the truth of.

After a moment of hesitation, passed in low, earnest conversation, they decided to hail the seeming Phantom.

California Joe, the Mysterious Plainsman

"Ho, stranger!" called out one of the number.

But no reply came, and neither horse or rider moved.

"Stranger, who are you?"

Again was the call unanswered.

"Ho, stranger, we are lost; our train is on the prairie, under the red bank cliff, and we would thank you to show us back to camp."

One of the arms of the mysterious horseman was raised and beckoned to them as though to follow, and the white horse turned and walked slowly away, though no reply came from the rider.

"Come, boys, let us follow him," cried one, and taking their game they did.

Arriving at the spot where they had just beheld the seeming Phantom standing, they halted suddenly.

And no wonder, for they stood in the midst of a dozen graves.

The grass had not yet covered them, which proved they had not long held their occupants, and no head-boards marked them.

But a well-worn path led from the spot sacred to the dead up the hillside.

But this path was not the one the mysterious horseman had taken, as he had turned short off down the hillside.

As he saw the party of emigrants halt among the graves, he again beckoned them on, and once more they followed him, silent and wondering.

Slowly the shadows deepened around them, and night came on; but as though to still allow them to keep him in sight, the silent horseman dropped back until the white steed could be seen winding his way through the timber.

At last he halted, and allowed them to approach almost up to him, and then the white horse bounded away and disappeared in the gloom.

They called to him, yet no answer came back, and soon the fall of the hoof-strokes were no longer heard.

Reaching the spot where they had last seen him, a cry broke from the lips of all, for there, right below them, they beheld the cheerful glimmer of their camp-fires

He had guided them truly, and five minutes after they were in camp, telling over and over again the strange story of the Forest Phantom.

[Back]*Even if the real name of California Joe is unknown, some saying that it was Joseph Milmer, others that it was Joseph Hawkins. A few assert that he was a distant relative of Daniel Boone. Of where he was born, his parents and early boyhood life, he never spoke and he died leaving all a mystery behind him.--THE AUTHOR

California Joe, the Mysterious Plainsman

CHAPTER II. THE UNSEEN GUIDE.

WHEN the dawn broke upon the camp, the emigrants were somewhat startled to discover a stick in front of the center fire, sticking up in the ground, and with a piece of paper fastened to it.

The captain of the train read what was written thereon aloud, and it was as follows:

"WARNING:

"If this train is bound for Sunset Settlement it is on the wrong trail.

"If they do not fear to trust the one who writes his, let them follow the wrong trail."

This was all, but it set the entire train of emigrants to thinking. They had little confidence in their amateur guide, for the simple reason he had less in himself, and had only guaranteed to go the way he thought was right.

Now he said that he might be wrong, and he advised the captain to follow the staked trail.

But who was their unknown informer?

He had passed the guards, that was evident, and had entered the camp unseen, for who else had put the stake there with its warning?

Then some one came in with the information that a large number of small sprigs had been cut from a tree near by, and another reported that one was staked out just beyond the camp.

Instantly the captain went to this stake, and it had evidently been placed there under cover of the night just passed.

Afar off a close scrutiny showed that another stake had been placed, and then it was decided to follow the trail they marked out.

The order to move was given, and the train pulled slowly out of its camping-place.

Following the stakes, which were placed about a mile apart, with a bunch of prairie grass upon the top of each, that they might be the better seen, the train continued on its way until the noon halt.

Then the mysterious affair was talked over and the fact made known that the trail of a single horse had been left from stake to stake.

Could it be the Forest Phantom? Such was the question asked by all.

It must be, many thought, for had he not faithfully guided the hunters back to their camp the night before?

After an hour's halt the train again moved, and passed through a valley that divided the range of hills out upon the prairie beyond.

Not caring to go away from a good camping ground, to perhaps make a dry camp* out upon the prairie, the captain of the train called a halt in the shelter of the hills, although there had been but about fifteen miles made that day.

And as soon as night came on, and all gathered around the camp fires, the subject of conversation was about their unseen guide.

Placing the guards, the camp again sunk to rest, and no sound disturbed them through the night; and the guards neither heard nor saw anything of a suspicious nature to alarm them.

But, strange to say, when the dawn came, there, in front of the captain's tent, was the stake, driven into the ground under the shadow of the night, and upon it was a piece of paper, evidently torn, as had the other piece been, from off an old letter, and written in pencil.

The writing was legible, but by no means written by a scribe.

This second note read:

"You are doing right! Follow the staked trail."

And all through the day the train did follow the staked trail, for the stakes were still placed to guide them, though they were further apart than the day before.

At dark the train reached a small stream, and in the shelter of the few willows and cottonwoods upon its banks went into camp.

Hardly had the fires been lighted when, far off upon the prairie, a light was visible.

California Joe, the Mysterious Plainsman

That it came from a camp—fire was evident, and the emigrants gazed at it long and earnestly, for who could have built it unless it was their unseen guide?

Some wished to go and see, but this the train captain would not allow, as he knew well he was in dangerous country, for both train robbers and Indians were to be dreaded in that border land.

After blazing for half an hour the distant fire died out, and then all was blackness upon the prairie.

At an early hour the train again pulled out, and the staked trail led directly over the spot where had been seen the fire the night before. A few charred sticks were visible right on the bank of a tiny stream, and there were only a dozen cottonwoods near to form a shelter for a camp.

But there, evidently, had their unseen guide camped, for they could see where blankets had pressed down the grass beneath the trees and where a horse had fed about the lonely camp.

On through the day pulled the train, until they came to a spot that was an excellent camping—ground, and here they halted.

Again were fires built, and after supper the emigrants assembled around them for a talk, the one topic of conversation being about their unseen guide.

Then there were croakers in the party, for some would say if he was honest he would show himself.

Others feared he was leading them into a trap, until at last the general opinion was against the unseen guide.

But his staunch friends were the hunting—party whom he had guided back to camp.

They all maintain that he was true, what—ever he was, or it was, ghost or man.

Some too believed they were being led by a spook, for superstition held a great sway over the minds of people two—score years ago, and even now many believe in the supernatural.

At last, after a warm discussion upon the subject, it was decided not to follow the staked trail the following day, but to take their bearings as well as they were able, and endeavor to find their way to Sunset Settlement as best they could.

Hardly had they come to this conclusion, and were about to separate for the night, to go to respective quarters, when suddenly into their midst came a white horse, and upon his back was the rider in black.

A few of the women screamed, men sprung to their feet, and at once all was a scene of excitement, as they gazed upon the snow—white steed and his sable—clad rider.

[Back]*A camp with no water near.

California Joe, the Mysterious Plainsman

CHAPTER III. "JOE"

THAT the four guards had been stationed about the camp, the number nightly placed on duty, all the emigrants knew, and yet through the line, apparently unseen by them, the white horse and the sable-clad rider had come.

All gazed upon him an instant in silence, and he at them, as though awaiting for them to speak.

They beheld a snow-white steed of perfect symmetry, his mouth unrestrained by a bit, and his back not weighted by a saddle.

Instead of the former was a long lariat about his neck, and in place of the latter were several blankets fastened on with a surcingle.

The rider was a youth of seventeen perhaps, strange to say, clad in a suit of black broadcloth that looked as though it might have done service for his father's Sunday wear, or upon the form of some itinerant person.

The coat was buttoned up close, as though to hide the absence of a shirt, and the boots into the tops of which the pants were stuck, were four sizes too large for the wearer.

The hat was a black felt, and it too seemed never to have been intended to fit the head upon which it rested.

He carried a rifle large enough for a man of full size, and a pair of revolvers, knife, and hatchet in a horse-hair belt.

To the emigrants he appeared to be like one who had found his clothing and arms separately, and his appearance seemed to tell the story, in connection with the graves in the forest where the party of hunters had first seen him, of one who might be the only survivor of some fearful massacre of some little settlement or wagon train, and had gone back after flying for his life, to find all he loved ones dead, and had picked up for himself just what he could find.

So it seemed to those who saw him, and his pale face rather added to this surmise being true.

It was a bold, fearless face, a trifle reckless, with earnest black eyes, full of fire, and that seemed to look straight into one's soul. His form was well-built, sinewy and supple, and yet he looked like one who had been ill, or else met with some great sorrow. Seeing that the emigrants were too much surprised at his unexpected appearance to speak, the strange youth said bluntly:

"Good-evening, folks."

"Good-evening, my young friend," returned the captain pleasantly, while the others nodded at the salutation, and then the Train Boss continued:

"May I ask your name, my friend?"

"Joe."

"Joe?"

"Yes, Joe."

"But you have another name?"

"Isn't Joe name enough?"

"Certainly, if you do not care to be known by any other."

"I don't," was the frank reply.

Captain Reynolds was both surprised and interested in the young stranger, so he said:

"I believe we are to thank you for staking a trail out for us the past two days?"

"Yes, you were going wrong; so if you were heading for Sunset Settlement."

"There is where we are going."

"Well, you were going wrong; so I put you right."

"You are sure you are right, are you?"

"I know," was the quiet rejoinder.

"Well, we do not; for our guide took sick and died some days ago, and we were going by aided by one of the teamsters, who had been over the trail before."

California Joe, the Mysterious Plainsman

"Guess is a bad trail to follow in these parts, stranger, and, as it is, you are in danger."

"Ha! Do you know of any danger threatening us?" quickly asked Captain Reynolds.

"Yes."

"You will of course tell us what it is?"

"That is what I came here for."

"You are very kind, and I am remiss in not offering the hospitalities of our camp."

"Dismount, and let us give you some supper."

"I have been to supper, sir, but I'll tell you that the red-skins have laid an ambush for you."

"Ha! That is news indeed!"

"But how know you this?"

"I rode upon their camp to-night."

"To-night?"

"Yes; they are about ten miles from here, and their spies have been watching you all day."

"They would have come nearer, but are afraid of me."

"Afraid of you?"

"Yes, they think I am a spook, or what they call an Evil Spirit." It was on the tip of Captain Reynolds's tongue to say:

"I don't blame them; for we half thought so too."

But he said instead:

"What makes them think so?"

"Because I live alone on the prairies, and in the forests and hills."

"Have you no home?"

"No."

"Where are your parents?"

"I have no parents," was the reply, in the same tone in which he had before spoken.

"But you have friends?"

"I have no friends."

"And you live in this wild land alone?"

"Yes."

"But, the Indians—"

"They don't harm me. I harm them," was the laconic response.

Captain Reynolds saw that he had a strange character to deal with, but was anxious to find out more about him, so asked:

"How long have you—"

"Say, stranger, I didn't come here to be asked questions, but to tell you that your train is in danger," abruptly said the youth, and he continued:

"My name, as I told you, is Joe, and I wander about the prairies, and that is all you need know about me; but I now that old Bad Blood and two hundred warriors are laying for your train."

"If you go on to-morrow, you run right into their ambush, but if you stay here, they will come to-morrow night and attack you."

"How do you know this, my young friend Joe?"

"I know Injuns' ways, and Bad Blood is on the war-path."

"If you went right on he would wait for you, but if you did not, he'd think you stopped for rest and attack you."

"And what would you advise?"

"My advice would be to lay a trap for Bad Blood."

"But how, Joe?"

"A mile further on is a stream with the prairie on one side and a bluff on the other."

"On the bluff is a thicket, and the hills rise beyond."

"You can camp on the prairie, making a corral of your wagons, make dummies about the fires, and put all the women and children in a dugout you can make, while you and your men can take the bluff and shoot down every Indian that comes into camp."

California Joe, the Mysterious Plainsman

"Well, Joe, you advise like a general and we will follow your advice.

"When would you say move?"

"Now, and I will guide you to the spot, and then when the Injuns attack you, I'll be around somewhere," was the very significant reply of the strange youth..

California Joe, the Mysterious Plainsman

CHAPTER IV. PREPARING FOR THE WORST.

SOMEHOW, all in the emigrant train, once they looked into the honest face of the mysterious youth who answered only to the appellation of Joe, trusted him..

The grumblers became silent, and the entire train was anxious to follow his advice.

He sat upon his horse watching the emigrants get ready for the march, and then rode on ahead as they pulled out of camp.

Captain Reynolds rode forward with him, and more and more interested in the strange youth, tried to draw him out to speak more of himself; but in vain, for Joe was reticent in a wonderful degree about himself, and made no account of why he was there in that wild region, the reason for his coming or whom he had come with.

In referring to the graves in the forest, by which he had been seen seated on his horse, when first discovered by the hunters, he made no reply.

"Whose graves are they, Joe?" asked Captain Reynolds, kindly.

Joe made no response.

"Poor boy, I fear those you loved are in them, and that they were victims of some massacre," said Captain Reynolds.

"How many fighting men have you got, cap'n?" asked Joe, as though he had not heard the foregoing remarks of his companion.

"Twenty—seven, men and boys that can handle a rifle well."

"Couldn't you drum up a few more?"

"There are several more boys that might be made useful."

"Boys are as good as men often, I guess," was the laconic response, and looking at Joe, Captain Reynolds felt that be at least he was.

"Well, then, I can make the force thirty—one."

"No women what know how to shoot a rifle?" asked Joe, with utter disregard for the proprieties of the Queen's English.

"Yes, but I wouldn't have them risk danger."

"Better risk it than make it certain."

"How do you mean Joe?"

"That if you got any women—folks that can shoot, take 'em on the bluff with you, and pour in a heavy fire the first time.

"Then if you've got any extra rifles and shot—guns, load 'em and lay 'em by the men to use, and the women can reload the other weapons.

"I tell you, cap'n, that Bad Blood is an old soldier for fighting, and he has got two hundred braves.

"But if you can knock about fifty under the first two volleys, and then pour the music in pretty lively, you'll see those Injuns dig out in style."

"You seem to be an old soldier, too, Joe, for your advice is good and I will follow it."

"I've seen some fighting," was the cool reply, and then Joe rode up to the stream and said:

"Now here is camp, and you can't find a better place."

So it seemed, for the stream made a bend just there, and the point ran in toward the bluff which formed the other bank.

This presented a space of about an acre for a camp, and the wagons were stationed right across from the stream on one side to the other forming thereby a breastwork.

The cattle were corraled in a circle formed by the vehicles, and the camp—fires were built near the bank beneath the bluff and under the shelter of a few trees that grew upon the point of land.

As the stream was not thirty feet in width, a tree was felled that made a bridge across it, and standing upon this, Joe very skillfully threw his lasso and caught the noose upon the branch of the tree growing upon the bluff

California Joe, the Mysterious Plainsman

forty feet above.

Up this he went with the agility of a sailor, and soon hauled up a rope ladder hastily constructed, and which he made fast to a tree–stump.

"That's called Gable Bluff, and there's no way to get on top excepting you go up as I did, by fastening your lasso on some tree growing near the edge.

"It's only a few acres in size, and the banks are steep all round, so it would be a good place to hide the children and women," said Joe.

Then he gave advice about not having the guards set the following night, but to keep the stock feeding all the next day near by upon the prairie but to fasten them securely in their corral of wagons at sunset.

"And the dummies you spoke of, Joe?" asked Captain Reynolds.

"Oh, yes; you must keep your camp–fires burning brightly, and dress up plenty of clothes to look like men lying under blankets, for they will be what the reds will go for.

"Now I must go, but I guess I'll be round near when the Injuns come," and without another word Joe was turning away to mount his patiently waiting white horse that had stood unhitched near, when Captain Reynolds's little girl of five years old came up to him and said:

"You doin' away?"

"Yes," and Joe looked down upon the pretty little golden–haired cherub, with a smile that lighted up his pale face and made it really handsome.

"Kiss Maddie dood–by," she lisped.

He bent over, raised in his arms, and kissed her, sat her down once more.

Then springing upon his horse, with the ease of a circus rider, he rode out of camp at a sweeping gallop, unhearing, or unheeding the request of Captain Reynolds for him to remain with them as their guest.

California Joe, the Mysterious Plainsman

CHAPTER V. JOE MAKES A GRAND CAPTURE.

FROM Captain Reynolds down to the smallest child in the train, all were pleased with their camp, when daylight came to show them its natural strength of position.

The appearances of having scaled the bluff were all removed before dawn, so that any Injun's watchful eye that might be upon them, could not detect that any extraordinary efforts for caution and defense had been made by the emigrants, and during the day the hunters went off as far as they dared in pursuit of game.

Yet there was a feeling of anxiety resting upon all, for none knew what the night would bring forth.

One young hunter had detected afar off, over a roll of the prairie, a head peering at him, apparently, and he had noticed that it was a redskin and he reported it to Captain Reynolds, upon his return to camp; but this was all that was seen in the slightest degree suspicious.

As for Joe, he was nowhere visible during the day, but the captain had perfect confidence in the strange youth, and felt that he was somewhere about, and on the watch.

At last the shadows of night began to fall, the cattle were driven in to the corral of wagons, and nearly all the force set to work with a will, preparing for the work before them.

The wagons were ditched, so that they could not be easily moved, and dirt and boxes were piled against them as much as possible to shield the animals from the shots, and to prevent their breaking out of the inclosure in their fright, when the fight began.

Dummies representing human-beings were scattered here and there about the fires, having the appearance of man asleep, and the rope ladder being placed so that the trees kept the firelight from revealing it; the women and children were taken up to the bluff and placed in a secure retreat a few yards back in the timber.

By degrees the men, acting for the benefit of any watching red-skin eye that might be upon them, would throw themselves down upon the blanket beds about the fires and then crawl away in the darkness to gain the rope ladder leading to the bluff.

Reynolds and a few others lay longer, threw more wood upon the fire and retired to the few tents, to crawl out from the rear of them and seek safety upon the bluff.

Then not an eye, other than those of the smaller children, was closed in sleep.

The boys of twelve even had been brought forward to aid in the first volley, and so had a number of the women.

All the firearms — and there was a large supply in the train — had been laid along upon the edge of the bluff ready for use.

Soon all was as quiet as the grave in the camp and none would have believed but that peaceful slumber reigned supreme.

Slowly the hours dragged along, and then the watchers upon the bluff saw a dark form glide through the line of wagons into the inclosure. Then another and another, until several dogs, aroused by their presence, and which none of the emigrants had thought to carry upon the bluff with them, began to bark furiously and to fly at the intruders.

Then arose a wild, thrilling war-cry, and a hundred savage throats answered it, as the redskins sent a cloud of arrows flying into the camp at the supposed sleepers and into the tents, and rushed forward to begin the red work for which they had come.

The burning fires showed their buckskin-clad forms, painted faces, and gaudily bedecked heads, and as they reached the first line of blankets, yelling like demons, Captain Reynolds shouted:

"All together! Fire!"

Two-score rifles were discharged as one weapon, almost, and full half as many red-skins dropped dead in their tracks.

Then the line of the bluff seemed to be on fire, so constant were the rattling of the emigrants' rifles and revolvers, and the women and boys reloading, there was kept up a continual discharge upon the surprised

California Joe, the Mysterious Plainsman

red-skins, who, meeting no foe to grapple with and falling by the dozen under the merciless bullets of the pale-faces, broke and ran at all quarters.

"You men follow me!" cried Captain Reynolds, as he descended the rope ladder and crossed the fallen tree-bridge to the camp.

Quickly he was obeyed, and dashing over the dead and dying Indians lying here and there, he gained the wagon line of breastworks and poured a hot fire upon their flying foes, who seemed utterly panic-stricken at the terrific punishment they had met with, where they had expected an easy victory, plenty of scalps and quantities of booty.

But afar off on the prairie was seen the flash of a rifle, then other flashes and reports, as though coming from revolvers, and then came to the ears of the emigrants a rumbling sound like distant thunder.

The flying red-skins heard it too, and there were wild yells of fury, that proved something had gone wrong, and the next instant, along the trail leading by the camp, dashed a large drove of mustangs, saddled and bridled, but riderless.

And in their rear rushed a snow-white steed, with a rider upon his back, hooting and yelling like mad as he sped along.

Away past the camp rushed the drove, and as, the single rider in their midst went by, he shouted:

"I'm Joe, and I've captured their whole outfit of ponies.

"Look sharp, for they may be back on you, and I'll return in a couple of days to guide you to Sunset Settlement."

And on he passed, out of sight, driving the mustangs at full speed, and having by his grand capture dismounted old Bad Blood and his entire band.

California Joe, the Mysterious Plainsman

CHAPTER VI. JOE'S LITTLE GAME.

JOE, whatever time he had been upon the border, or whatever scenes he had passed through, before meeting with the Reynolds' emigrant train, had certainly been able to become a thorough prairieman. He could match Indian cunning any time, was able to take care of himself, and seemed to rather enjoy the thought that he was regarded as a spook, or evil spirit.

Though wholly uncommunicative regarding the past, and one, young as he was, who certainly had some mysterious history, some strange story to tell, would he but tell it, he was yet not taciturn, for once his lips were unlocked upon ordinary matters, he had plenty to say.

After having warned the train of their threatened danger, and guided them to a place of safety at the Bluff camp, he had ridden off at a gallop as though the kiss given him by little Maggie Reynolds had reopened wounds he had thought were healed.

He had not gone very far from the camp before he saw a form suddenly spring from the grass before him.

Then another and another, until two mustangs which had been lying down by the side of their masters, were flying away at full speed, and upon their backs were their riders.

But Joe did not hesitate at sight of them, but, on the contrary, let his horse increase his speed.

"They are Bad Blood's spies, and they know just who I am," he muttered.

After a while, as he gained rapidly upon the flying red-skins, he said: "If I was anybody else, I'd have got an arrow in me, but they're afraid of me."

Urging his white horse to a still greater speed, which the splendid animal seemed readily capable of, he soon drew within close pistol range of the two red-skins.

"It don't seem exactly right to shoot 'em, when they won't shoot back, thinking I'm a spook; but they'll report mighty soon that I was coming from the pale-face camp, and then they won't believe I'm an evil spirit, so I guess I'd better kill 'em.."

With this, Joe threw his hand forward quickly, and it held a revolver, a weapon at that time almost unknown upon the plains.

Instantly followed two sharp reports, and the two riders fell from their saddles without a cry, for Joe's aim was deadly.

Although relieved of their weight, the ponies were no match for the white animal Joe rode, who was alongside of them in a minute's time, and both were quickly caught.

Then back to where the Indians lay went the boy, and he found them just as he knew he would, dead.

It was but the work of a few minutes to place them upon the backs of their mustangs and make them fast, after which Joe started off on the course he had been going when he saw the red-skins.

A ride of several miles brought him to a range of hills and through them ran a swift stream, with high banks.

Here the boy halted, turned his own horse loose, with perfect confidence that he would not leave him, and staking out the ponies, relieved them of their ghastly loads.

To remove the two scalp-locks, with a dexterity that showed he had had practice in the art of scalping, was but an instant's work with Joe, after which he took their weapons and robes, and threw the bodies into the stream.

The current carried them swiftly away, and then the strange boy built a small fire in a ravine, cooked some dried meat upon the coals, and spreading the robes of his slain foes down upon the ground, rolled his blankets around him and was almost instantly asleep.

The coming of dawn did not seem to disturb him in the least, but when the sun rose, he got up, cooked his breakfast, and, leading his two captured ponies, started on up into the hills.

At last he gained a point of observation from whence he could see the distant bluff and camp of the emigrants, and, after a close observation of the surrounding country, he again settled himself down to rest.

When the sun drew near the western horizon, he mounted his horse, and, leading the ponies, started to descend to the prairie once more.

California Joe, the Mysterious Plainsman

It was dark when he gained the level lands, and, as though resolved upon his course, he went off at a lope in the direction of the emigrant camp. A ride of several miles brought him in sight of the camp— fire, and, then he went along at a slower pace.

Drawing nearer, he at length came to a halt and looked ahead of him for a long time in silence.

"They're coming!"

He uttered the words in a matter-of-fact kind of tone, and, dismounting, at once ordered his horse to lie down.

The intelligent and faithful animal at once obeyed and then Joe went to one of the ponies and ordered him down too.

Whatever the brute might have done for his redskin, master, he certainly would not for his pale-face captor.

But in an instant he was hobbled and thrown upon his side in a manner that proved to him he had a master in this youth.

Then Joe took something from a pouch and besmeared his face with it, and next pat upon his head the feather bonnet of one of the dead Indians, and about his shoulders a blanket.

"We'll go now, pony," he said, at the same time throwing himself upon the back of the other mustang.

Leaving his own horse lying flat down in the long prairie grass, and the mustang hobbled, Joe rode on directly toward the emigrant camp, the fires of which were burning brightly, not two miles distant.

After riding considerably nearer, he halted and waited.

With the same patience that would have been shown by an Indian, Joe sat upon the mustang watching and waiting.

Suddenly he saw forms pass between him and the light of the fires, and he knew that Bad Blood and his warriors were preparing for the attack. Slowly he drew nearer and he saw that the warriors had dismounted, and, as he had felt assured, were approaching the camp on foot.

Then Joe turned to the right—about and went rapidly back to where he had left his horse and, the hobbled mustang.

Quickly he got them both up, and hiding the white animal under robes and blankets, he mounted him and rode toward the camp once more.

Passing the spot where he had before halted, he continued on until he could near the snorting and stamping of the red-skins' mustangs, and again he stopped and staked out the three horses.

At a run on foot he approached the herd, and gained their midst without attracting the attention of any of the guards, who were little dreaming of danger from that point, and were taken up wholly in watching and waiting for the attack of their comrades, which was to bring them scalps and plunder.

From horse to horse Joe glided, his sharp knife severing the lariat near their necks, and in a few moments' time he had set free the lot, excepting the few near the guards, who, five in number, were grouped together waiting to hear the sound of conflict begin.

The Indians had left their horses over a mile from the camp, so that no neigh or sound should alarm the guards, and this distance they had to go on foot, and moving with the greatest caution, it gave Joe nearly an hour in which to perfect his little game.

At last the ringing war-cry, for the charge upon the emigrant camp, broke on the air, and immediately after came the terrific yells of the red fiends as they rushed upon what they supposed were their victims. Then, like a deer, Joe ran back toward his horses, threw the robes and blankets off of his own animal, and leading the two mustangs by long lariats, dashed toward the ponies of the red-skins.

Firing his pistol, yelling, and at fully speed he charged the herd and at once, as he had foreseen began a wild stampede.

The guards in vain tried to check their flight, and over them the frightened animals dashed, driven straight toward the camp.

As he neared it, by the flaming up of the fire, Joe saw that the red-skins had been badly hurt, and were flying too, and he increased the racket behind the charging mustangs.

Not, for an instant believing that their own animals were stampeded, and fearing that they were charging soldiery, the red-skins fled from their ponies at first, until too late they discovered their mistake.

And on by the camp rushed the frightened ponies, held at their speed by Joe, to disappear in the darkness

California Joe, the Mysterious Plainsman

beyond, though the thunder of their hoofs was long heard by the emigrants in the camp, and the enraged and skulking Indians, as they fell back on foot toward their own village, too utterly demoralized for their savage chief to bring them again to the attack.

California Joe, the Mysterious Plainsman

CHAPTER VII. JOE STRIKES A BARGAIN.

THE sentinel at Fort ----- was considerably surprised the next morning, after the attack on the emigrant train, while waiting to be relieved from duty, to see, what he at first supposed, was a regiment of cavalry coming toward him.

A closer look however showed him that though the equine portion of a regiment was there the bipeds were wanting.

In other words the horses were riderless.

At a slow, weary trot they came on over a distant roll of the prairie, nearly, two hundred in number, and they, were heading directly for the fort.

The sentinel sung out for the corporal of the guard, and made his report and that worthy reported to the sergeant, and so on to the officer of the day, which sent the news flying through the fortress that:

"A drove of wild horses was coming."

Officers at once ordered out their swiftest steeds, seized their lassoes and scouts and hunters joining them, all dashed out from the stockade inclosure to suddenly descry that the herd had a driver.

What could it mean?

There was but one man behind them and he was waving his hat as though for those at the fort to head them off.

A line was quickly formed, and the herd was headed straight for the corral, and were at once secured, while all seemed anxious to see the single driver of so many ponies that had upon them the bridle and saddles they knew belonged to red-skin masters.

As this person rode up he saluted the officers and said bluntly: "Them are Injun ponies."

"So I see, my young friend; but who are you?" asked the major in command of the fort, and a thorough sportsman he had come out for a wild horse chase as he had supposed.

"Oh! I'm Joe, was the quaint reply.

"Joe who, or Joe what?" asked the major with a smile looking fixedly at the strange youth before him.

"Either one or t'other, for it's all the same to me."

"But no matter about me, for I've brought you some ponies I'll sell to you for the sogers if you wants to buy 'em, and if you don't, I guess I'll give 'em to you."

"I think it would be cheaper for me to say I don't care to buy," answered the major.

"Guess it would, so you can have 'em, all but my white here," was the cool response.

"No, my young friend, I will buy them of you, for we are sadly in need of stock just now.

"How many have you?"

"I tried to count 'em as I was driving 'em: but one time I made a thousand, next time only seventy, and then I run 'em. up to eight hundred, so I don't know: but I guess there are about two hundred, more or less."

"Well, I'll give you thirty dollars a head for them."

"I take it," was the frank response,

"But where did you get them, my young friend?"

"I captured them from old Bad Blood and his braves."

"When and where did this happen?" and it was evident that the words of Joe created great excitement!

"Fifty miles from here at Gable Bluff, and last night several hours before daybreak."

"And you dismounted old Bad Blood and his warriors you say!"

"No, they dismounted themselves, and I drove their ponies off while they were attacking a train."

"This grows most interesting, young man.

"Come, tell me all about it, as we ride toward my quarters."

Joe told his story as it had happened, but not a word regarding himself could the major get from him, that is of his antecedents.

California Joe, the Mysterious Plainsman

He refused all hospitality extended to him by the generous and kind-hearted major, and telling him to keep his money for the ponies for him until he called for it, he mounted his white horse and rode away from the fort, leaving the impression with all who had seen him that he was a mysterious person.

But the services he had rendered in dismounting Bad Blood and his band, made him a hero and the major at once ordered a squadron of cavalry off on the trail of the old chief and his braves, for Joe had told them how to go to head them off on their way to their village, which he knew that they would at once make for to get a remount, as an Indian who is a good horseman, feels as though he had lost a part of himself in losing his pony.*

[Back] *The Comanches and several other tribes, are most cowardly when dismounted, but the bravest of the brave on horseback. –THE AUTHOR.

California Joe, the Mysterious Plainsman

CHAPTER VIII. THE BROKEN PROMISE.

THE morning following their successful battle with the Indians, the emigrants were greatly elated over their victory, and yet most anxious for the future, as they knew not what was in store for them. Every trace of their foes, excepting those who lay dead in and about the camp, had disappeared.

But those who had fallen, and they lay from the camp—fires back to the wagon line: lay a ghastly reminders of the night's red work.

There were nearly half a hundred of them for them, for the emigrants had fired with true aim, and the red—skins had been massed together for a full minute, in the full blaze of the fires.

An arrow wound or two was all to report upon the side of the pale—faces, excepting a few stock killed by stray bullets, and injured in their fright and desperate efforts to escape.

"And all this we owe to that noble boy," said Captain Reynolds with feeling, and there was no dissenting voice, though many were anxious regarding his safety.

The dead braves were quickly buried on the river bank, and the camp placed in order, after which the works were strengthened to meet another attack, should one be intended.

The cattle were driven out upon the prairie to feed, and securely guarded against receiving a surprise, and those in camp looked to their arms, which had served them so well.

Thus the day passed away and Joe did not return.

But he had promised to do so, and none doubted that promise.

Night coming on, the women and children were taken upon the bluff once more, and the men nearly all stood guard.

Excepting the howl of a wolf upon the prairie no sound broke the stillness of the night, and dawn came once more, greatly to the relief of the emigrants.

But Joe came not with it, and all began to feel anxious about him.

"Do you think he intended coming back?" asked one.

"He promised to do so, and to guide us to the settlement, and if he is alive he will keep that promise," said Captain Reynolds firmly. Again the day was drawing to a close, and still Joe's promise had not been kept.

But suddenly a cry was heard from one of the men driving in the cattle:

"He is coming!"

All eyes looked across the prairie, and far off, just over a toll of the prairie, was visible a white horse and rider.

A shout of joy at once went up from every voice in camp at this joyful sight.

But almost instantly it was changed to cries of terror and a scene of excitement.

"Indians!"

"Red—skins!"

"To your posts—all!"

Such were the cries, as, following the horseman, were visible scores of other riders.

They were coming on at an easy pace, and heading directly for the camp. Quickly the women and children ascended to the bluff, and the fighting members of the train arranged themselves to resist attack.

"They are soldiers!"

This cry from one of the men quickly relieved all fears, and a closer look now revealed the fact that they were indeed not Indians, but gallant troopers.

It was just sunset as they rode up to the camp, and Captain Reynolds met the officer in command.

It was Van Dorn, the same officer who had Purchased from Joe the herd of Indian ponies.

"I am glad to see you, sir; and, as you may observe, we were prepared to give you a different welcome, believing you to be Indians. Dismount, please, with your men, slid accept the hospitalities of our camp," said Captain Reynolds pleasantly.

California Joe, the Mysterious Plainsman

"Thank you, sir; I shall accept your invitation with pleasure, as it is camping-time.

"Let the men go into camp, Captain Stewart," said the commander, and dismounting, he continued:

I am Major Earl VanDorn,* sir, commander of Fort ———, and learning of the attack upon you, through a mysterious youngster, I went in pursuit of old Bad Blood and his dismounted warriors, and gave them a severe whipping."

"Yes, sir, we owe it to that mysterious boy—"

"Joe."

"Yes, Joe is what he calls himself, and we owe it to him that we were not all massacred," and Captain Reynolds gave Major Van Dorn the story of their being guided and warned by Joe.

"But who is he?" asked the major.

"I cannot tell you, sir, more than having heard our late guide speak of a mysterious horse and rider often seen back upon the trail, and whom they called the Forest Phantom."

"I, too, have heard camp-fire-yarns about such a person, and am glad to know that it turns out to be real flesh and blood. But you say the boy has not returned?"

"No, sir, he has not, although he promised to do so, and to act as our guide on to the Sunset Settlement."

"I will give you an escort then, sir, for there are other bands of red-skins roving about. but I hope no harm has befallen the youth." Captain Reynolds then learned of the visit Joe had made to the fort, and that he had left there to return to the train.

"This looks bad, for the boy would not have broken his promise unless harm had befallen him," said Captain Reynolds.

But the night passed away, and under escort of the soldiers the train pulled out for its destination, for Joe had not returned.

"When I reach the fort I will put my best scouts upon his trail and search for the boy," was the major's remark to Captain Reynolds, as he left the train well, on its way to the settlement, and under a good guide to conduct it there.

[Back]*Afterward Major-General Earl Van Dorn of the late Confederate Army. He was shot by one of his staff-officers the third year of the Civil War. —THE AUTHOR

California Joe, the Mysterious Plainsman

CHAPTER IX. A LEAP LIFE.

WHEN Joe left the fort he headed directly for the camp of the emigrants, for he was anxious to get back and guide them out of the dangerous country into which their being without a guide had led them.

He had gone but a few miles when he crossed a trail that he was convinced was made by Indians.

The tracks showed that it was a large force and the trail was so fresh that he determined to follow it and see just who had made it, as the direction in which it led he knew would head off the emigrant train on its way to Sunset Settlement.

If he could discover that the Indians, hearing in some way of the coming train, had determined to lay in wait for its coming by a certain point, by knowing where they would place their ambush, he could flank them and thus put them at fault.

It was with such determination that he struck the trail and cautiously followed it.

He had not proceeded very far before he knew that there were fully a hundred horses that had left their trail; but, whether all of these were mounted, or not, he could not discover until he saw them.

He saw that the trail led towards a high range of hills, and into a most wild country; but he unhesitatingly pressed on until darkness hid every trace from view and he was compelled to camp. In darkness and silence he ate his frugal supper, and then lay down upon the open prairie to sleep, his horse, which he had given no name whatever, feeding around him, and not held by the lariat, for he knew that the faithful animal would not leave him.

With the first peep of day he was up and on the trail once more, and two hours after had reached the foot-hills.

There he came upon the camp of those he followed, and a glance was sufficient to show him that they were red-skins, as one at all familiar with encampments can readily detect the difference between a pale-face and Indian halting place for the night.

He knew by the still burning fires that the enemy could not be far in advance, and acquainted with the nature of the country, he determined to seek a high hill which would give him a view for miles around.

From the position he had in view he knew that he could see whether the red-skins took a trail that would enable them to head off the emigrant train, or crossed the prairie beyond to the mountains miles away, where they had their village.

Turning short off from the beaten track, Joe began to climb the hillside, and for once his keen eyes failed to detect halt a dozen horsemen coming back upon the trail, and with heads bent down as though they were searching for something that had been lost, and which he had, for it was the sacred pipe of a chief and his necklace of bear claws, which the youth had picked up in the deserted camp, though attaching little value to them.

Back to their night camping ground went the warriors, and not finding the pipe and necklace, they started upon their return, still searching the trail, when the eyes of one of them fell upon something that attracted his attention.

A call brought his five comrades to his side and after a few words they left the trail and branched off up the hill; and it was Joe's trail that they had discovered, and were following.

Up the hill they went, until they came to a narrow ridge, and along this Joe had gone, and they followed.

As for that mysterious youth, he was standing upon the edge of a cliff, the point of lookout which he had sought, gazing down into the valley below, and across the lower range of hills to the prairie beyond.

Far down the valley his quick glance had caught sight of the Indians, filing along; and directing their way across, and not up it, as he had feared.

He saw now, too, that they numbered but fifty warriors, and that the other ponies were laden down—with game, showing that they were a party of hunters returning to their village. Satisfied that the emigrant train was not their object, but that they were making a flank movement to avoid any soldiers that might be out scouting from the fort, Joe mounted his horse and started to retrace his way.

California Joe, the Mysterious Plainsman

Hardly had he ridden a hundred yards before he beheld before him the six warriors.

They halted at sight of him, and he drew rein upon seeing them. How many more were behind him he knew not; but he did know that there were just six more than he cared to see at that time, and in such a locality.

He knew well that the ridge ended in a sheer precipice, sixty feet high. Far below was a pool of water, surrounded by willows and cottonwood, but the depth of which he did not know.

Upon either side of the ridge he knew a man on foot could not ascend or descend, and to think of such a thing as attempting it upon horseback would be madness.

To charge upon the six warriors and attempt to break through their ranks, would be next to seeking death, for the ridge was not a hundred yards wide at its best, and where they had halted was in the narrowest part, and in the roughest, which would prevent his horse going at full speed.

They were ready for him, he could see, and had evidently followed him, knowing that he had gone into a trap.

To make matters worse for him Joe had in his hand the sacred pipe he had picked up, and about his neck the bear-claw neck-lace, and the keen eyes of the red-skins detected this.

Joe's rifle lay across his horse in front of him and he had quickly thrust the pipe in his blanket, and ready for the death struggle. The Indians were armed with bows and arrows, excepting one who carried a musket.

Joe took in the chances against him at a glance, and they did the same. If it was night, and they were red-skins who had heard of him, or knew him, as an evil spirit would have played the spook business

But it was in the broad glare of day, and they could see that he was fully armed and well mounted though his horse did look ghostly and wore no bridle.

"I've got to take the chances of the leap over the cliff," said Joe coolly to himself, and then he added in the same tone:

"But I guess all of that gang won't live to see if it kills me."

He threw his rifle forward as he spoke, determined no longer to delay, after he had made up his mind as to his course, and with the crack a warrior dropped from his horse.

A shot from the musket and a shower of arrows were sent in response, accompanied by wild yells: but they fell short, or failed in their aim, and Joe hastily began reloading his rifle.

This the red-skins discovered, and knowing the deadly aim of their foe, and that their chance lay in charging directly upon him, they urged their ponies into a run.

Joe had not finished reloading his rifle when they started; but he coolly did so, threw it to his shoulder, after adjusting the cap with a band that did not tremble, and again its sharp report was heard, and down fell a second brave.

To draw his revolvers and meet them, Joe knew would end in his death, even though he might kill a couple more, for they would send their arrows through him at close range.

So he wheeled about quickly, and a yell sent his horse into a swift run. On he bounded, straight for the cliff, and to urge him to the leap Joe pricked the noble animal with the point of his knife.

Right upon his heels came the red-skins, determined to force him over, and then ride around the ridge and secure his scalp; but their reins were held firmly in hand to check their own ponies before they went too near.

As he drew near the precipice, Joe slung his rifle upon his back, settled himself well upon the back of his horse, and drew a revolver. His face was calm and fearless, and it was evident, that having taken the chances of the leap, he intended meeting his fate boldly, even should it be death.

With a yell to his horse he went over, and when the now frightened, maddened animal shot away from the brink, Joe turned quickly, dropped his revolver upon a red-skin and drew trigger, as he cried:

"Take that bull as my parting present, red-skins!"

The shot, in spite of the situation of peril of Joe was sent to kill, and struck a brave fairly in the heart, as he reined his horse up on the brink.

Up went his arms, and from his lips broke forth the death-cry, and Joe shot downward out of sight.

California Joe, the Mysterious Plainsman

California Joe, the Mysterious Plainsman

CHAPTER X. SEARCHING FOR JOE'S SCALP.

IT must be admitted that poor Joe had the idea in his mind that death was certain, when he glanced below him at about the spot he would fall.

As I have said, there was a pool at the base of the cliff, and its depth Joe did not know, but judged that it was over the head of his horse.

Around the pool grew a number of willows and cottonwoods almost met in the center, and here is where Joe had aimed to go through, feeling assured if his horse did not turn over in his downward flight, he would strike the water fairly, and if not killed, or crippled, would soon bear him to safety.

But the white had not struck the cliff at the exact point, where Joe had intended he should, and the result was that he went crashing through the tops of the cottonwoods, making the splinters fly and tearing the limbs and foliage to atoms, and at the same time having his snowy sides pierced deeply at half a dozen different points. Once he half turned over, yet Joe still kept his seat, and then a limb caught him under the neck, and checked the turn, so that he went down feet foremost into the pool.

Joe was still seated upon his back and sunk with him while the splash sounded like the explosion of a heavy gun. As the horse did not rise, Joe pushed himself quickly to the surface, a couple of strokes of his strong arms sent him to the shore, where he sat amazed, dazed and considerably shaken up by the fall.

His horse was killed, he knew, and that he had not been surprised him greatly.

As it was his feet and legs had been scratched up pretty badly ; but he was yet whole, with no bones broken, and in such condition felt himself equal to at least a couple of red-skins.

He glanced up through the foliage and saw three heads peeping over the cliff and looking and wondering while they talked. They had heard the crashing branches, and even Indian nature had not the heart and nerve to look down then, nor until half a minute after the plunge.

Then they did so, and they felt assured the horse and boy were both dead.

Joe understood enough of their language to hear one of them say:

"Pony and pale-face both dead."

The two others grunted assent.

"I guess not," muttered Joe, who could see them, though they could not see him.

"Get pale-face scalp," said the first speaker.

The two others gave a kind of war-whoop, so tickled were they at this.

"I'll be there when I'm scalped," muttered Joe, grimly.

Then the heads disappeared, and Joe set to work to look at his weapons. The rifle had only powder in it, for he had not had time to put in the bullet, and this he knew he would have to clean out well, as the rifle had gotten a ducking.

Then Joe examined his revolvers, and smiled.

He had over the cylinder of each, from the barrel back to the stock behind the hammer, a hood of oil-silk, with elastic at each end that held it in place, thus preventing the caps and powder from getting wet—for those were not the days of metallic cartridges.

"These are dry, and I guess I'll wait and see them Injuns take my scalp," said Joe, for he had become revengeful on account of his noble horse.

He could easily have gotten away before the red-skins appeared, but he concluded to wait, and hence he made his preparations accordingly. His first act was to leave his fire arms upon the bank and dive down in the pool, knife in hand.

He soon reappeared with his blankets, and to, which were attached his haversack of provisions and ammunition pouch, the latter being also enveloped tightly in oil-silk.

"Good!" said Joe, as he saw that the ammunition was dry.

Then he cleaned his rifle, dried it as thoroughly as he could under the circumstances, and loaded it.

California Joe, the Mysterious Plainsman

"Now I'm ready to receive company," he muttered, as he took up a position that would command the approach to the pool around the cliff. And his company soon appeared in sight, three in number.

"They've buried the others, but I kilt 'em" he said, as coolly as though he did not expect the slightest trouble.

Indians are by nature as cautious as coyotes and these three came on with wary advance, though they felt sure that the youth was dead.

As they got within easy range Joe drew a bead upon the one in advance with his rifle, selected his head as his point of aim, and pulled the trigger.

The cap snapped, the weapon failing to explode.

But it checked the advance of the red-skins, and sent them back to cover with ludicrous suddenness.

"Holy smoke! My rifle's failed me!" cried Joe, and as troubles seldom come singly, at that moment he beheld, a score of mounted Indians coming up the valley not half a mile away.

Evidently they were some of the same band coming to see what delayed their comrades so long.

Joe thought quickly and he came to the conclusion that that was no place for him.

Seizing his wet blankets, he threw them across one shoulder, and with his rifle in his hand, bounded around the edge of the pool, and keeping the clump of cottonwoods and willows between him and his foes, ran with the speed of a deer along the base of the cliff.

He heard no yell, indicative of his flight being discovered, but did not tarry on this on this account in his rapid run until he had placed the point of the ridge between him and his foes.

Seeing a ravine a short distance before him, he turned into this and was soon brought to a halt by its terminating abruptly.

He was about to retrace his way when the ringing war-cries from the direction of the pool told him that his flight was discovered, and he knew then that his situation was desperate.

California Joe, the Mysterious Plainsman

CHAPTER XI. JOB AT BAY.

THOUGH matters certainly did look desperate for Joe, he did not lose his presence of mind. His eyes scanned the sides of the cliff in his front, but he saw that a squirrel could not scale them.

Then he caught sight of what appeared to be a break in the solid wall, and toward this he bounded.

It was where the ravine turned, but the walls were so alike, that Joe had believed he was at the end of the canyon, or gulch.

Now he saw that it went beyond where he stood several hundred feet, but there certainly did end, though the yawning mouth of a cavern extended on beneath the hill.

It took Joe but an instant to reach the cavern and dart into it.

Once within its dark shelter and he turned to look back over his track, to see if his foes were in sight, and to his delight he discovered that they were not, though he could hear them coming upon his trail like a pack of hounds.

Before reconnoitering his quarters, Joe set to work upon his rifle. He knew he had no time to draw the charge, so he began to pour powder into the nipple, beating it down into the barrel by thumping it with his fist.

Steadily he worked at this, although a loud, echoing shout told him the red-skins were close upon him.

The next moment they appeared around the bend of the canyon and came to a halt, pointing at the cavern and gesticulating wildly.

But Joe kept on with his priming until the tube would hold no more, and then he placed a cap upon it, and laying it down took up his revolvers. From each nipple the cap was removed and a close examination made, and in several a few grains of powder were placed.

"Now, I guess I'm ready," said the plucky boy as he laid his weapons down ready for use, and, rising, unfolded his blankets and hung them upon the cavern walls, to let the water drip from them.

In the mean time his foes, a score in number, had all appeared in sight, and Joe recognized those he had seen upon the cliff, and who seemed to be now the ringleaders of the others.

They seemed to be urging the others to make a rush upon the cavern, for they had followed the boy's trail and knew he could be nowhere else.

"I guess that fellow on the spotted pony is wanted in the Happy Hunting-grounds," said Joe to himself, and he stooped for his rifle.

But hardly had he done so when a perfect shower of arrows came flying into the cavern, the Indians having cunningly fitted them to their bows unseen by Joe, and at a word from their leader, fired them.

Had the boy not stooped for his rifle as he did, and which was laid upon one side of the cavern, he would have been pierced by half a dozen arrows.

But, as it was, not one touched him, though several came dangerously near.

With this volley of arrows the red skins started upon a charge for the cavern, and instantly the boy's rifle went to his shoulder, his eyes caught the sights, and his finger drew on the trigger.

This time there was no misfire, and the warrior on the spotted mustang went down.

"I knew they wanted him," said Joe, as he whipped up his revolvers and began to fire away.

One, two, three shots, and no more were necessary, for the red-skins knew not then what the deadly revolver was, and imagined they had run upon other foes than the brave boy whom they had brought to bay.

A mustang killed, another with a broken leg, and a brave wounded, Joe saw were the results of his pistol practice, and he could not restrain a burst of mocking laughter, as the red skins ran helter-skelter for the bend in the ravine.

They sent a revengeful volley of arrows back into the cavern, and then disappeared, but knew that they had by no means given him up.

"They'll not comeback right off, I guess, so I'll look around and see where I am," muttered Joe, as he reloaded his rifle and then looked about him..

California Joe, the Mysterious Plainsman

A short distance back from the entrance all was darkness; but Joe was provided with a tin box full of matches, and he quickly gathered the arrows, heaped them together, whittled off a splinters to kindle with, and behind a jutting point of the cavern lighted his fire to have a look around him.

In spite of Joe's free-and-easy air in danger, and his great nerve, what he beheld by the aid of the fire-light, caused a cry of horror to break from his lips.

California Joe, the Mysterious Plainsman

CHAPTER XII. THE DEATH-CAVERN.

AFTER his first cry of horror at what he saw in the cavern, when his little fire blazed up, Joe uttered a light laugh, for he was not one to be nonplused for any length of time.

"Holy smoke ! I but the dead folks did scare me for a minute," he said, and then coolly glanced around upon what he so suddenly and unexpectedly met his gaze and disturbed his equanimity for the once.

What he saw were rows of corpses in an almost mummy state of dryness, ranged along upon scaffolding on either side of the cavern.

He knew that he was in an Indian burying ground, and from what he understood of those red-skins in the canyon, he was aware that it was not a belonging of their tribe, even if they knew aught of its existence, which was doubtful.

"I'd like to give 'em a scam that would last 'em," said Joe and he at once became lost in thought a sure sign with him that he was plotting mischief.

At last he laughed, and that settled it that he had decided what to do. The air of the charnel house was loathsome in the extreme, but for this Joe did not then care.

Looking up the ravine, to see that the Indians were not in sight, he swung his blanket before him to catch the arrows they might fire at him, and at once set to work.

Throwing his lasso up over a pole of the scaffolding, he clambered up alongside of the dead Indians and took a quiet survey of them by the light of his fire.

He saw that they were ranged in rows upon each side of the cavern, the platform of poles upon which they were placed beginning about fifteen feet back from the entrance.

Selecting a dozen of the worst-looking corpses –those from which the flesh had fallen from their skulls, leaving the bony face bare and white–Joe lowered them to the floor of the cavern with his lasso, one end of which he then made fast to the pole on one side nearest the entrance and descending himself, he next fastened the lariat to the opposite side.

With strips of buckskin and blankets, the belongings of the red-skins, he then began to tie the corpses upon the lariat, so that they seemed to be standing up.

Here and there he placed a pole at the back of a corpse to keep the lariat from sagging too much, and soon had his ghastly row of dead bodies extending across the cavern.

It certainly was a hideous sight, but it amused Joe immensely, and he then gathered enough wood from the scaffold poles to make a large fire. This he built in a niche of the cavern in such a way that he could wholly shut out the light with his blankets, to the bottom of which he attached lines made of buckskin and carried them to the scaffolding overhead, where he took up his position, with his rifle and revolvers ready.

It was now dark outside, and Joe knew that his foes only waited its gloom to creep upon him.

He understood Indian cunning enough to see that they meant for him to believe that they had gone, as they did not show themselves again; but he knew that they would not depart, leaving their dead comrade in the ravine for him to scalp when they had left the canyon.

Lighting his fire, and seeing that its blaze was wholly concealed by the blankets, Joe drew himself upon the scaffold and perched there, his weapons lying before him ready for use, and one hand holding the lines attached to the bottom of the blankets, the other grasping the lariat which, by pulling upon it would make the ghastly corpses seem to dance.

With a patience not surpassed by Job, the boy waited, watched and listened.

Without he could see that it was light enough for him to discover any one approaching the cavern, and there he kept his eyes.

Presently a dark form came before his gaze, and then another, and another.

They trod as softly as a panther creeping upon its prey, and soon a score or more stood in silence before the cavern entrance.

California Joe, the Mysterious Plainsman

Their bodies were bent, their heads pressed forward in the act of listening, and as still as bronze statues they stood.

That was Joe's moment to begin his performance, and a strong pull, with one hand upon the lariat, set the row of corpses to away and nod, while with a quick jerk upon the lines he sent a blaze of light into the cavern, revealing the ghastly sight to the gaze of the red-skins, just as they were about to spring into the dark cavern with their knives in hand to meet whatever foe they there might find.

But that which their eyes fell upon, illumined by the red glare of the firelight, was more than superstitious natures could stand, and they darted from the place with howls of terror, and fled with the speed of the wind down the canyon, each red-skin striving to lead in the mad race from the death cavern.

California Joe, the Mysterious Plainsman

CHAPTER XIII. A RECONNAISSANCE.

THE sudden scampering of the frightened red-skins tickled Joe immensely, and half in enjoyment of the fun, half to urge them on to greater speed and not to stop, he set up a series of most unearthly yells, as though to make the savages believe that they had invaded the infernal regions.

"If they only knew who I was, that the Injuns below on the river call me a spook, this would help me tip-top, for I even am scared myself," said Joe.

But to keep his foes still going Joe ran after them, yelling as he went, and reaching the abrupt bend in the canyon found that they had not tarried there.

But at the entrance of the ravine they had, and Joe discovered that they had been reinforced by the entire band of hunters, who had doubtless been sent for to hurry back.

They were building camp-fires, with evident intention to stop for the remainder of the night, and here and there, in the fire-light, Joe beheld knots of red-skins discussing the fearful sight they had witnessed, and telling their comrades.

"They'll not come again until morning, and then they'll come with a rush, or roll logs before 'em, which I can't shoot through.

"They have camped for business, and I've got to do something mighty quick, if I wants to keep my hair, and I do."

Cautiously Joe left then his place of reconnaissance, and proceeded back to the cavern, for he saw the utter impossibility of getting out of the canyon.

One thing gave him hope, and that was the wind came through the canyon, and the smoke from his fire had been blown back into it, and in some way disappeared.

If it did this there must be another opening, and he must find it. His blankets had dried by the heat of the fire, and he rolled them up and strapped them up, with his other belongings, upon his back.

Securing his lariat, he left the mummy-like corpses where they fell, lying in rows across, the cavern entrance, and then, with a torch he manufactured, he set out upon his reconnaissance.

He followed the cloud of smoke through several winding passageways, and discovered that the cavern was indeed a perfect charnel house, or huge -tomb, for hundreds of bodies were there.

"Holy Smoke! hain't I scared," he said to himself, as he glanced upon the grim lines of dead Indians, yet he did not certainly act as though he were very much frightened.

After walking full a hundred yards, he came to a large chamber, or rotunda, and here he halted, holding the torch over his head to have a look around him.

"Whew! this is the high mucky muck of all, and it looks as if the whole tribe had died sudden like and been buried here.

"Wonder if 'twas small-pox they had!

"If 'twas I'm in for it.

"Well, well! I've seen old Injuns and squaws, young Injuns and papposes Injuns along the sides, but this is where the high-toned bucks camp out.

"Guess they are all big warriors in here," and in spite of his assumed fright, he glanced coolly around upon the scaffolds with their weight of dead, and saw by the robes, necklaces, feathers, bonnets and weapons that there the head men only had found burial, such, burial as it was.

"I guess this must be where Kit Carson buries his dead Injuns," said Joe, and then he added grimly:

"I've started in putty well myself in the killin' line, and I may have a graveyard as big as Kit's, when I get to be away in years.

"But if I don't get out of this, I'll have only a grave."

He saw that the smoke went up over his head, just where he was standing, and a crevice was visible in the vaulted roof Placing his torch some distance off he then returned and looked upward. To his delight he saw the

California Joe, the Mysterious Plainsman

stars, and he knew that there was an opening there large enough for him to pass through.

It seemed round, and about the size of a well, and could not be less than a hundred feet to the top.

But how was he to get there? That he soon decided upon, for he set to work building a fire and soon had a bright blaze.

By its light he saw that there was a natural chimney-like opening in the roof, and remembering the height of the hill, he knew that it must be many feet to the top.

Measuring the width with his eye, he saw that it was just wide enough for him to reach each side, by stretching his legs far apart, and his hands too.

"I've been down a well and up again, and I guess, I can make it, if the sides ain't smooth as glass," he said.

"Now to make something I can climb upon.

"Injuns, I'm sorry to disturb your rest, but I think more of myself living than I do of you all dead.

"So here goes!"

He jerked one of the scaffolding poles out as he spoke, and with a crash and heavy thuds, a score of dead bodies came down to, the rocky flooring.

Joe sprung aside to escape being buried, while he cried: "It's raining corpses, hard."

But the bodies were not exactly what he was after, though he made use of some of them for props for the poles.

Selecting three of the longest poles, he tied the tops together, and then stood them up like Gipsy camp-sticks, the center being directly in the opening in the vaulted roof, which they just reached.

The bodies at the base kept the poles from slipping, and throwing aside the pack on his back, he climbed up one of the uprights as nimbly as a cat could have done.

Standing on the tops, he glanced upward, and when his eyes became accustomed to the darkness, he saw to his delight, that the well-like opening continued about the same size all the way through, and that its sides were so uneven and rough that he could manage to make his way to the surface by stretching his feet and hands across it, and thus working his way along.

Descending once more, he tied his lariat to his rifle and belt of arms, and then attached to that a longer line, made from strips he cut from the buffalo and bear robes he found with the dead warriors.

Two long lines he thus made, one for his weapons, the other for his blankets and traps, and then he fastened them to his waist.

But he did not intend to help the red-skins find him, and about the base of each pole he built a large pile which met in the center, so that it would make one grand fire when he got ready to ignite it. Taking some light sticks for kindling, he fastened them to his pack, and then started upon his ascent of the poles, having divested himself of his huge boots, as he knew he could not climb with them on.

Reaching the top of the poles, he spread himself so to speak, across the well-like opening, and found that he could cling there.

"It's going to be a tough job," he said, realizing fully the great strain it would be upon him, and that a false step would hurl him back to death.

He knew too, should his strength fail him, back he must fall.

But the Indians would visit upon him a worse fate, he well knew, so up he started.

Slowly, first one hand, and then a foot, and so on he went.

The strain now began to tell on him, and in places he had only the rough rocky side for a footing or hold, instead of as in other places a slight projection, and in each instance it took all his strength to keep from falling.

The smoke too, came up about him, nearly blinding him, and that with the foul air of the huge tomb were suffocating in the extreme.

But on he went, slowly, surely, the sweat dropping from him in great beads, his feet and hands blistering, and the nails of his toes tearing to the quick as he clung to the rough rocks.

Nearer and nearer the top he drew, and yet the way seemed interminable. No resting-place, his muscles strained raw sore, his blistered hands and feet wearing and bloody, and his weight seeming to be hundreds of pounds.

But Joe had a will of iron, and a nerve not to be subdued, and with shut teeth, and blinded eyes, for the smoke made it impossible for him to see, he struggled on upward.

California Joe, the Mysterious Plainsman

At last he put his hand out as usual, and he nearly fell, for it met no resistance.

Quickly he felt around him, and knew that he was at the top.

Then he made a violent effort and drew himself over the ledge.

He was safe, but so worn out that he could not move, and lay where he had dragged himself.

He was so blinded that he could not see; but he was content to wait.

The cool air soon revived him, the smokeblinded eyes were soon able to look about, and he found himself upon a high ridge, overgrown with dwarfed trees.

The stars were shining brightly, and the air was chill, after his experience in the cavern.

But he shook himself together, and seizing the line that was fastened to his arms, lay down upon the rock and glanced below.

The foul air and smoke almost stifled him, and he wondered how he could have lived through it.

Slowly he drew on the line and up came his weapons to the top.

He could hardly repress a shout of joy when he grasped them.

Then the blanket-pack was drawn up, and laid beside the rifle, and Joe gathered the faggots, which were like tinder, lighted them, and lowered them quickly to the pile below.

Instantly they blazed up, and a hot roaring fire was the result.

"Rather, hard on the dead Injuns, I guess," he said, with some sympathy for those in the tomb.

Ever and anon he looked down, and saw that the fire was creeping up the poles and, that they would soon be consumed, and all below present no appearance how an escape had been made from the cavern.

Joe was foot-sore, weary, in fact utterly worn out but he felt it incumbent upon him to place as much distance as possible between him and his foes by morning, so he drew on his over-large boots, wincing with the pain it gave him and then started upon his way.

But each step was agony to him and at last he knew he must rest, be the consequences what they might to him.

California Joe, the Mysterious Plainsman

CHAPTER XIV. JOE'S REVENGE.

A FEW moments' rest served to make Joe feel so much better that he decided to move on.

Shouldering his pack and rifle once more he did so.

But the effort was most painful and he soon came to a halt.

It was evident that some bright idea had flashed through his mind, for he stood an instant in deep thought.

Then he said:

"I guess I might as well ride, for there are a hundred ponies over yonder," and he nodded in the direction of the Indian camp which was about a mile from where he then stood.

Whether the pain was forgotten in the thought of carrying out his plot, he hardly knew himself; but he managed to hobble down the ridge, gain the valley and make round to the timber in front of the canyon, where he had so nearly lost his life.

He had been forced to rest several times, but he smiled grimly, when he came in sight of the camp-fires.

It was almost dawn he knew, and he was anxious to lose no time, as darkness was his only hope.

His knowledge of Indian life made him pitch at once upon the locality where they would be most likely to leave their ponies, and thither he went.

It was upon the side of a bill, where the grass was plenty, and not a hundred yards from the camp-fires, around which he could see groups of warriors squatted, some of them too anxious about what had been seen in the cavern to go to bed.

It was evident that they did not suspect danger, or believed that there were any foes near, other than the one, or those in the cavern, for they could not account for the several rapid shots fired, unless there were more men than Joe there.

Joe reconnoitered carefully, and he selected in his own mind just about where the Indian guards were stationed over the ponies.

He saw that the vale in which they were had steep sides, and narrowed toward a canyon which he knew led out upon the prairie some few miles beyond, for once before he had passed through that way.

The guards, therefore, would naturally be toward the canyon, as none were needed on the steep sides of the vale, or toward the camp.

"This helps me immensely, and I guess if my legs hold out, I'll just revenge myself a little," he said in a whisper to himself.

Taking from his pack a buckskin bag of red paint, he smeared it over his face.

Then he drew out a war-bonnet of feathers, quite a gorgeous affair, and dropping a blanket about his shoulders, most cautiously began to go down the steep side of the hill.

He came near the first pony, and saw by him the saddle of packed meat. To what he needed he coolly helped himself.

Then he cut the lariat that held him to the stake and passed on to the next, repeating the same trick he had with the herd upon the prairie. The ponies did not know they were free, and in this was his safety.

From mustang to mustang he went, until he drew near the end of the herd, and he dared not go further, as he was aware the guards were near, asleep though they might be.

Then he crept back to the upper end, and saw that dawn would be upon him in less than half an hour.

Selecting the pony of the herd, which in the darkness suited him best, he put upon it the Indian saddle and bridle that was near, and mounting began to slowly drive those that were nearest him down the valley toward the canyon.

Slowly they went at first, then in a trot, until feeling that the stampede was started, Joe whipped out his revolvers, uttered wild yells, and fired several shots. As one horse the freed mustangs sprung forward, and at once began a wild run.

Into their midst Joe rode, lying low upon the back of his horse, not to be seen by the Indian guards, and like

California Joe, the Mysterious Plainsman

the roll of thunder resounded the hoofs upon the hard ground.

In vain did the guards strive to check their advance, and turn them back, for they could not stem the mad current, and were forced to fly up the sides of the vale for their lives.

In wild alarm the camp arose behind the equine torrent, and fleet-footed braves rushed in pursuit.

But in vain, the stampede had begun well, and the stakes of those animals which Joe had not freed, were drawn up by the pressure, and the whole herd almost was set going.

Past the guards they swept, Joe in their midst, and lying low to escape an arrow if seen, and unseen by them, the red-skins could not understand the cause of the sudden stampede.

They had heard the few shots and terrific yells that set the herd going, and then no sound followed to betray the presence of an enemy. And away dashed the herd, with Joe in their rear, chuckling at his triumph and his revenge upon his foes.

California Joe, the Mysterious Plainsman

CHAPTER XV. THE FATAL CHASE.

Joe knew well that he had not gotten every pony of the herd, and he only wondered that he had gotten so many, while he readily understood that as soon as the Indians recovered from their amazement they would mount those mustangs that remained and come in chase.

Should he at once, upon reaching the prairie, desert the herd and save himself upon his own horse, or rather the one he had selected for himself?

Or, if he did so, would not the whole band, as soon as their ponies were recaptured, give up their game and come hot on his trail, to avenge the wrong?

While he was dashing along in the rear of the drove, thinking what was best to be done, in spite of the thunder of the hoofs in front of him, he heard the clatter of hoof-falls behind.

Instantly he drew rein and listened.

"One, two, three." He counted them slowly, as he recognized from the sound how many there were.

"There may be more behind them, so it won't do any harm if I just give 'em a hint I don't want to be crowded."

So saying, he wheeled his mustang behind a small tree which had slipped down from the bank above, and waited while the herd dashed on.

Soon an Indian came in sight, then another and another.

They had mounted bareback, as Joe could see in the now breaking dawn, and were pushing their ponies hard.

Another thing he discovered was the sound of many feet.

"The whole gang is coming on foot, by the Holy Smoke!" he said.

Then up went his rifle, as the Indian was almost upon him, and the crack followed.

Joe never missed if he had half an aim, and off tumbled the red-skin, while the pony dashed on after the herd.

The other two Indians quickly attempted to wheel their ponies to the right-about, and one succeeded in doing so, but the other had a hard mouthed animal, and he was anxious to go on after his companions, and before he could stop him, Joe darted out of his hiding-place upon him.

"Injun, I want you," he yelled, and his revolver flashed.

But the startled pony reared up just then and got the bullet in his brain and, falling back heavily upon his rider, pinned him beneath him.

Joe spent no time in looking after his foe, but sped on after the herd, just as two score red-skins, running at full speed, came in sight.

"Farewell, Injuns," he shouted, waving his hand and looking back.

As they came to the single rider left of their band, Joe saw the brave pulled suddenly off of his pony, and a chief bedecked with feathers spring upon his back.

"That's the Raging Chief, I guess, and he is after me hot as blazes," coolly said the boy, as he sped along, loading his rifle as he went.

"Yes, it's me he wants," he continued, as the chief—for so his war-bonnet proclaimed him—urged the pony in pursuit.

"And the others are running a foot race to see the show," continued Joe, as the warriors on foot again bounded forward.

"Come, Injun pony, that feller's got a gun," he cried, urging the mustang on.

But the animal on which the chief was mounted seemed the speedier of the two, for he gained steadily.

"I guess I'll muss his feathers for him," and so saying, Joe came to a halt, wheeled about and brought up his rifle.

The chief saw the act and quickly fired, but without effect, as the bullet flew over the boy's head.

Then he threw himself upon the side of his pony, so as to protect himself, and reloaded his old musket with marvelous skill and quickness, while the animal circled around at a gallop.

Watching his chance, Joe was about to fire when, before he could do so, a second shot from the chief came,

California Joe, the Mysterious Plainsman

and down dropped his horse, just as his finger pressed the trigger of his rifle.

California Joe, the Mysterious Plainsman

CHAPTER XVI. A NOVEL ESCAPE

ALMOST any one, under the circumstances in which Joe found himself would have given up for lost.

But the boy did not. He first, as he caught himself upon his blistered, bleeding feet, when his mustang fell dead beneath him, turned his eyes upon his foe to watch the effect of his shot.

The shout that broke from his lips proved that it had not been a miss. Nor had it been a death-shot.

The arm of the chief, over the neck of the pony, had caught the bullet, and the Indian, no longer able to hold on had dropped to the ground, while his horse had bounded on down the canyon.

A shriek of rage broke from the wounded, foiled chief, and wounded though he was he bounded toward Joe. But that worthy youth comprehended his danger fully.

And he looked to take advantage of anything that might present itself in his favor.

He saw the flying pony, and knew that the nature of the ground would bring him within thirty feet of him.

To the Indian saddle on the pony he had, was a lariat fastened, and to seize this and get it ready was a second's work.

Then, as the chief's horse dashed by he threw it, and with such precision, that, though the animal shied badly, it settled over his neck.

Instantly the mustang was brought to his knees, and almost down, and Joe gave another yell of joy.

But he noticed that the lasso had torn from its hold nearly, by the jerk, and that the first bound of the animal would tear it loose.

For him to attempt to bold the animal, by catching the lariat, would be utterly useless, he was well aware, so he bounded toward the mustang to throw himself upon his back.

But, quick as he was, the pony was quicker, had regained his feet, and the lariat was torn loose, just as Joe reached his haunches.

For the flash of a second all seemed lost, for Joe was suffering greatly with his feet, and the chief and his warriors were not far away; but his quick eyes detected the long tail of the mustang, held up with excitement and instantly he grasped it with a grip that was not to be shaken off.

With a wild snort of rage and fright the mustang bounded away down the canyon.

But Joe was with him. With his good left hand he held on like grim death, and with his rifle grasped in his right he went along at great bounds.

His feet seemed as though they would split open at every bound, his hand that held the tail seemed on fire, but yet he clung for dear life.

The red skins sent showers of arrows after him as they ran, and several stuck in the haunches of the mustang, urging him on the faster, and one buried itself in Joe's arm.

Still he did not let go, and as he bounded along in great leaps, he yelled:

"Yell away, you red devils! but here we go and no one to head us off!" Maddened with fright and pain, the mustang ran on, yet still could not shake off the weight behind him.

And the speed at which he went soon dropped the fastest warriors far behind, greatly to the delight of Joe.

At length the mustang overtook the herd and dashed into their midst, and Joe had just strength enough to grasp the mane of a small pony, as he came alongside, and drag rather than throw himself upon his back.

The sigh of relief he gave was like an escape of steam from an engine; and limp and worn, out he sat upon the animal, as it ran along in the rear of the herd.

But soon he regained his breath, and as the drove struck the prairie, yelled himself hoarse to keep them going.

And go they did at a long, sweeping gallop, which put them several miles away upon the prairie when the warriors reached the end of the canyon and behold them.

Looking back at them, Joe said, sympathizingly:

"It's a pity they don't know English so that they can cuss, for I know they is that mad to make me sorry for 'am."

California Joe, the Mysterious Plainsman

Whether Joe was sincere in his pity or not I cannot say; but that he was in earnest in pressing on there was no doubt, for he kept the herd at apace that put many a mile behind them before night.

The direction in which he had to go, however, was away from the camp of the emigrant train and he regretted this; but having captured another herd, he determined to carry them first to the fort, thinking that the train would remain encamped until his return.

Suffering as he was with his bands and feet, the latter especially, alone, exhausted after all he had gone through, Joe knew he had a hard task to watch his herd.

But he let them come to a walk, and picked out an animal which he had observed was the best of the lot, and mounted him.

Coming to a stream he allowed them to halt for a rest, and he took advantage of it to bathe his wounds, for the arrow shot in his arm gave him pain also and was swelling.

But Joe was as hardy as a pine knot, and again rushed on, after an hour's rest, and allowing the herd to go at their own gait, managed to snatch a little sleep.

Two days after, tied upon his horse half lying down with a high fever upon him, he drove his ponies up to the fort, and was taken from the back of the animal nearer dead than alive, and most tenderly cared for by Major Van Dorn, who had returned only a short while before from his search for the brave boy.

California Joe, the Mysterious Plainsman

CHAPTER XVII. THE BOY PIONEER.

IT was weeks before Joe came around to be himself again, for he had a severe illness of it.

He had at first raved about his promise to Captain Reynolds, which he had been unable to keep; but Major Van Dorn told him that he had sent a guide and escort with them, and they had arrived in safety at Sunset Settlement.

"And Maggie?" Joe had asked.

"Who is Maggie, Joe?"

"Little Maggie Reynolds," he answered, referring to the little golden-haired girl that had kissed him good-by. And then his mind would wander away in delirium, and he would make those who nursed him laugh at the tricks he imagined he was playing upon the Indians.

Yet never once did he refer to his past life, from whence he had come, to his parents, or to one act of his boyhood before his life upon the plains.

Once did Major Van Dorn bear him say in his sleep:

"I am going back to the old Kentucky home."

"Joe," he said to him, as the boy was getting better; "Joe, are you from Kentucky?"

"I never said so when I was out of my head, did I, major?" was the strange question.

"No, Joe."

"Then I'll not say so now, major," was the calm response, and the major refrained from questioning him further.

At last the boy got on his legs once more. His wounds had healed under the surgeons care, and he said he was ready to go.

"Go where, Joe?" asked Major Van Dorn.

"Anywhere."

"Why not stay here?"

"Why?"

"Well, you have proven yourself a great Indian-fighter, Joe, and I would engage you as a scout for the fort and give you good pay."

"What would I do with the money, major?"

"Is there not some one you could give it to?"

"No."

"Well, some day there may be!"

"Yes, there may be."

"I'll keep what I've got; but how much is it?"

"I allowed you the same price for the last ponies, Joe, and sent them to head quarters, where they were needed, so I have for you, or the Paymaster has, just a six thousand and sixty dollars."

"Whew! I'm rich!"

"Yes, quite well off, Joe. But you can accumulate more as a scout."

"No, major; I'm going west."

"Well, Joe, I was under the impression that this was west, and a long way west," said the major, with a smile.

"Not west enough for me."

"I am going to the Rocky Mountains."

"In Heaven's name! what are you going there for, Joe?"

"Trapping, hunting, and looking around," was the cool reply.

"You'll never get there."

"I guess so."

"You'll be killed."

California Joe, the Mysterious Plainsman

"I guess not."

"Well, you wish to take some money with you?"

"No, I have enough."

The major looked at the strange youth in surprise. He could not make him out, and the more he saw of him, the more of a mystery he became.

He seemed to have an air of refinement about him at times, which he also seemed to endeavor to hide.

He spoke naturally one day, and in border slang the next. Here was an opportunity for him to remain at the fort, where he had won the esteem of officers and soldiers alike, and was looked upon as a hero.

And yet he was going to leave, and though alone, friendless apparently, coolly said his destination was the Rocky Mountains.

"What shall I do with your money, Joe, if you do not return?" asked the major.

"Oh! I'll be back someday," was the confident response.

"But in case of an accident..."

"You mean if I get killed?"

"Yes."

"Give it to Maggie, and tell her Joe left it for her."

"Maggie Reynolds!"

"Yes."

"She is but a little child?"

"Yes, only four or five years old; but I guess she'll grow."

"No doubt of it, Joe."

Well, I'll give it to her if you do not return."

"Now, major, don't be in too big a hurry about it, for I'll come sliding back some day."

"I'll wait three years, and if I should be ordered away from the post I will leave it with the commander who follows me, and so on."

"Better make it five years."

"So be it, Joe."

And this financial matter being settled, Joe set about his preparations for his departure.

He had the pony he had selected from his herd, and the major said that he had shown great speed, as the men had raced him several times while Joe was ill.

Then he added:

"But Joe, I've got a horse I wish you to accept as a present from me, and he shows his heels to anything on the border, so far.

"Then I have a rifle, a new patent, and a small one, I wish you to have.

"You can use your mustang as a pack-animal, and the men say you shall go well stocked with stores from the commissary and the sutler, so you'll want for nothing."

Joe seemed touched at the kindness shown him, and several days after mounted the splendid animal given him by Major Van Dorn, and with his mustang well loaded and in lead, rode out of the fort to a tune from the band and a cheer from the entire garrison.

All watched him until he got some distance off, and saw him head due west.

And many predicted that he would lose his scalp before a week went by, while others confidently asserted that he would yet be back and give a good account of himself.

"He'll dismount a whole Indian tribe yet and be back with the mustangs," said the major with a laugh, and as the youth was yet in hearing he continued:

"Now, men, three ringing farewell cheers for Joe, the Boy Pioneer!" With a yell they were given, and Joe was seen to turn in his saddle and raise his hat in response.

California Joe, the Mysterious Plainsman

California Joe, the Mysterious Plainsman

CHAPTER XVIII. A FAVOR RETURNED.

What became of Joe, after his departure from the fort, no one ever knew, for several years passed away before those who had known him than heard of him again.

Some said he had indeed gone to the Rocky Mountains, and had passed a year or more roaming through its wilds, and others reported that a youth answering to his description, had been guiding trains over the Santa Fe trails, and had won a name in Upper Mexico as a most daring Indian-fighter, and a man whom few of the desperadoes of the plains cared to meet.

But one night he came suddenly before several who had known him at the fort, when he brought his captured herd in, and it was in this way. Major Van Dorn had been pushed further west with his command, for the Star of Empire would not allow the border to remain long in one locality, as the march of civilization beat the red-skins further and further toward the Land of the Setting Sun.

About his outpost Major Van Dorn had been annoyed a great deal with a gang of desperadoes, who were road agents, horse thieves and all else that was vile and he had offered a reward for their capture dead or alive.

One night he had gone over to a small settlement, a few miles from the outpost he commanded, to witness the marriage of a young trapper to a settler's daughter; and as there was just then a number of his troopers off on a raid, he had been accompanied only by one of his officers and two cavalymen.

The trapper was a handsome young man, but there was that in his face which neither the girl's father nor the major liked; but the maiden had fallen in love with his good looks, and plainly told her father that he did not like her lover because he wanted her to marry the old fort sutler, who was rich.

The settler gave his consent, however, to the marriage, and the day had been set, or rather the night, for the ceremony.

Promptly at sunset the young groom arrived, accompanied by several wild-looking comrades, who he said had come down from the bills to see him "spliced," as he termed it.

The major saw these friends, and liked their looks less than he did the groom's, and, as more of them dropped in, until there were nearly a dozen present, he determined to be on his guard, well knowing that was a locality for characters of a most dangerous kind.

One of the guests attracted the attention of the major in particular, and he was about to walk over to where he stood and ask him where they had met before, when, as though divining his purpose, the young man left the cabin abruptly.

"Did you see that man, Stewart?" asked the major of his brother officer.

"Yes, major, and a dashing looking fellow he was, with an eye like an eagle," was the reply.

The one to whom they referred was six feet in height, superbly formed, and had a mass of brown curls hanging down his back.

His face was full of daring, resolute, and his eyes were black, lustrous, and in repose sad, while a slight mustache was just shading his lip.

He was dressed in a full suit of buckskin, fringed and beaded, and even in the settler's cabin wore a black sombrero, the broad brim turned up in front.

Around his waist was a belt made of a panther-skin, and in it were a pair of revolvers and a long bowie-knife.

"I have met him somewhere before, Stewart."

"So it seems to me, major," and the two officers tried to recall where and when the young man had crossed their paths in the past.

At length the bride came in, upon the arm of her father, and her lover and his pards entered from outside the cabin, where they had been joking and frolicking with each other in a somewhat rude manner.

It was evident that they had all been drinking, and the lover, whose name was lost under the border appellation given him of Bowie Bob, said in an insulting tone, as his eyes fell upon the major:

"This hain't no military wedding, and I wants them blue coats and brass buttons to git."

California Joe, the Mysterious Plainsman

His pards cheered at this; but the settler, Seth Kenton, stopped forward and said:

"Bob, these gentlemen are my friends, and their being on this border prevents our homes being burned and our families massacred, and I invited them here to see Mollie married."

"Waal, I say no, old man," was the rude reply.

"Pardon me, Mr. Kenton, but I do not wish to be a stumbling block in the way of your daughter's marriage, so I will retire, and Captain Stewart will accompany me," said Major Van Dorn quietly.

The old settler evidently feared his intended son-in-law, and knew not what to say; but Mollie Kenton spoke up and said:

"For shame, Bob, to insult my father's friends."

"I'll do more than that, gal, if they don't travel quick.

"Come, git out o' this and lively too, or I'll make it lively fer yer," cried the bully.

Major Van Dorn was no man to be driven, and facing Bowie Bob he said sternly:

"Young man, you are going too far, and I warn you that I will not be bullied by you, nor shall I now leave this house to please you."

The bully winced a little at this bold front shown him, but after a glance at his pards, he said:

"You won't go, yer say?"

"I will not, nor can you force me to do so." "Come, pards, let's clip his spurs," shouted the bully and he moved toward the major.

"I guess not."

A form suddenly bounded forward and confronted the bully, and in each hand he hold a revolver.

It was the same young man that the major had said he had seen before.

"Look a-heur, Joe, what in thunder's up, thet you plays that tricky hand?" whined Bowie Bob, not liking the change affairs had taken.

"It are a leetle game I hes intended springin' outer yer for some time, yer cussed cutthroat, an' of yer hands don't by up like windmills durned suddint, yer toes will," was the cool and threatening response.

"Pards, does yer all stand this heur music?" cried the bully.

"I guesses they heurs ther tune I are shriekin', an' hesn't got ther narve ter set another hold on thar, Pant'er Pete!"

A ringing report followed as quick as a flash, and the man addressed as Panther Pete fell dead in his tracks, a bullet in his forehead, sent from the unerring pistol of the man who so boldly faced the gang of desperadoes, while, with only the interruption of the shot and the fall, he continued in the same cool way:

"Yer see, pards, I set another tune, an' none o' yer hed ther nerve ter jine in ther chorus, an' it's all well yer didn't, fer I hev every durned gerloot o' yer kivered, an' 'leve more fun'ral in these weepins, while you only counts nine."

"Come, Joe, is yer gone mad?" asked the expected bridegroom.

"Nary, but Pant'er Pete hev gone somewhar an' you'll foller if yer drops them hands o' yourn.

"Up with yer throat-cutters and gold-stealers yer varmints o' Satan, or I'll play the Dead March!"

Those he addressed knew to whom he referred, and up went the hands of the desperado gang.

"Oh, Lordy, anybody lookin' in through the winder w'u'd think we were havin' a pra'er meetin' in hour fer sartin.

"Now, major, jist call in yer sojers an' ther gang shell be tuck in slick as grease."

"I care not to arrest them, my fine fellow," said the major.

"Thar yer is all wrong, major, fer yer hev offered a reward fer these very gerloots."

"Ha! who are they?"

"Bowie Bob, are ther capt'in o' ther gang, an' they is knowed as-- Look out thar! "

With the last word a second shot rung through the cabin and another of the men, who had, lowered his hand quickly to draw a weapon, fell his length upon the floor.

"As I were sayin'," coolly went on the young man, "when thet dead pilgrim were so onperlite as ter interrupt me, this hear convention o' gerloots is knowed as ther Midnight Riders."

"Ha! that robber band?" cried the major, now drawing his revolver, while Captain Stewart followed his example and both stepped to the side of the man who made the bold assertion.

California Joe, the Mysterious Plainsman

"I talks Gospil, major, fer I hes been fer three months with ther gang, layin' fer jist this heur moment o' joy."

The honest settlers present now also stepped forward. and wholly at the mercy of their captors, the band of outlaws offered no resistance, and were soon secured beyond all possibility of escape."

"Now, my friend , whom have I to thank for this night's good work" said Major Van Dorn, as he stopped up to the daring borderman who had been the means of saving his life and also of having captured the very band of outlaws he had tried so hard to hunt down.

"My name are Joe, major," was the quiet reply.

"Joe! By heaven, but I see it now!

"You are Joe the Stampeder, as the boys called you at the fort?"

"I guess I are the one thet were thet Joe," and Joe grasped the hand warmly that was extended to him, and that night accompanied the major and his prisoners back to the fort; but not one word could they get him to tell them of where he had been, and what adventures he had known since three years before he had ridden off alone as the Boy Pioneer, bound for the Rocky Mountains.

California Joe, the Mysterious Plainsman

CHAPTER XIX. THE SAME "JOE."

WELL, Joe, why don't you tell us what you have been doing since we saw you last" asked the major, for the twentieth time, as they rode on toward the fort that night, accompanied by Captain Stewart, and with the outlaw, bringing up the rear guarded by two soldiers.

"I hev been rovin', major."

"But where?"

"About ther kentry."

"Did you got to the Rocky Mountains?"

"Yes."

"And have met with many thrilling adventures, I'll wager?"

"Yer's win yer money, fer I hes been through some leetle advenfer in my way," was the quiet reply.

"But bow did, you strike the trail of the Midnight Riders?"

"I were a-ridin' along the trail one day an' comed across your dockiment stuck on a tree."

"What was that, Joel"

"Tellin' how yer's give dust fer ther Raider Cap's an' his gang whether the'r toes were turned up or kickin'

"I jist thoughted I'd like ther job, an' I lays round loose, got ther run o' bow ter meet an' then fined ther gang with a tale o'

"I been put through thet made 'em weep fer me.

"Yer knows ther balance, major, an' that I jist saved thet putty gal from bein' a outlaw's bride; but wimmin is sich queer folks I dunno of she don't cuss me fer it, arter all."

"No, Joe, she said " God bless you I many times."

"Waal, I hopes He will, major; but does yer know I hev lost thet horse yer give me?"

"No; how did you do that?" and the major hoped to draw the young man out to tell something about himself.

"And ther mustang, too."

"You lost your mustang, too?"

"Yas."

"But how?"

"They got kilt."

"Indeed! How did it happen?"

"They got shooted."

"In a fight, I suppose?"

"Yes, it were a. kind of a scrimmage like."

"But I were sorry to lose your horse, and yer rifle got tuk from me."

"Tell us how it happened, Joe?"

"I hes been among ther Injuns, an' they hain't over honest," was the significant reply, and with this his hearers were compelled to be satisfied.

"But you are well mounted and armed now, Joe."

"Yas, this critter hain't slow I an' she kin keep movin' as long as any of 'em."

"Well, Joe, the paymaster of the fort hasn't paid over your money yet."

"No, ther time hed not passed."

And you'll have some to add to it, as you'll get your reward for those outlaws back there."

"Major, I trades in horse-flesh, I swaps rifles, revolvers, knives or buckskin, but I don't take dust for human blood.

"Yer is welcome ter them pilgrims, an' kin hang 'em fer all I cares, but I don't sell 'em ter yer.

"I heerd yer name spoke as I were passin through this kentry, an, I seen yer dockymint, an' I sets out to return yer kindness, an' thar Is ther gerloots; but don't talk dust ter me for human flesh an' bones."

California Joe, the Mysterious Plainsman

"Well, Joe, I meant but to give you what is your just due."

"Divide it with the sogers of yer regimint, major,"

"And the money I have of yours, Joe?"

"Keep a keepin' on it, major, until yer heur from me ter give it away."

"But I expect soon to be ordered away from here , Joe."

"Waal, leave it with ther one who takes yer place, subject ter my call."

By this time they had reached the fort, and when those who had known Joe before heard of his arrival, they pressed about him with warm greetings.

"Joe, you have grown as handsome as a picture,?" said a young officer.

"I has been told," was the innocent reply, and it caused a general laugh.

That night Joe slept in the fort, the guest of the major, and when the two were breakfasting together the next morning, and the officer was striving to get the young frontiersman to enlist as a scout, the startling news was brought in that the prisoners had all escaped, having, dug out from the guard house and under the stockade wall.

Squads of cavalry were at once sent in every direction in pursuit of the fugitives, while Joe mounted his horse and started off alone with the remark:

"I guesses I'll strike ther trail myself."

California Joe, the Mysterious Plainsman

CHAPTER XX. THE BANDIT TRAILER.

WHEN Joe left the fort, he did not attempt to strike the trail of the fugitives, as the soldiers had done.

He had heard that the outlaws had killed the guard over the horses, and –mounting the fleetest animals –had separated to each go his own way.

There were eight of them, and each one had been pursued by a squad of cavalry led by an officer and a good scout.

Joe however took his own way to follow them. up.

Having been a member of their baud, while he was plotting their capture, he at once determined to start for their retreat in the hills.

He rightly knew that when Bowie Bob had gone down to the settlement to marry pretty Mollie Kenton, he had left at the retreat a couple of pards, and plenty of arms and plunder, with a score or more of horses.

Though passing as a trapper, Bowie Bob was the captain of the gang of horse–thieves and murderers, and his handsome face and dashing way had won poor Mollie's heart, for she suspected not his vile character.

Therefore Joe, knowing what he did, struck straight for the retreat, and did not spare his horse in the least.

It was a hard six miles' ride, and the sun was nearing the western horizon, when Joe bid his tired horse in a ravine and went to the outlaw cabin.

"Hullo, Joe, whar's the rest o' ther boys?" said one of the two men who came out of the cabin as he approached.

It was a wild, desolate spot, and where few soldiers would care to follow a foe.

A rudely built, but stout cabin, a fenced in lot for stolen horses, and air out–house for plunder, comprised the outlaws' retreat, over which two villainous looking men held guard during the absence of the rest of the gang.

"They is comin' as last as they kin," truthfully answered Joe.

"Did ther Cap git fixed?"

"He did, Tom, durned well fixed."

"Waal, she are a prairie flower o' a but she'll shout of she ever finds out he are what he be; but what is yer lookin' fer?"

I most hev dropped my flask o' speerit as I coined up from where I left my critter."

"I'll go an' git it, Joe," volunteered one only too anxious to get the opportunity to drink half of it, and fill it up with water.

"Waal, my critter are dead beat, so I, left him in ther pine canyon.

"Ef it hain't in my saddle pocket, Tom, I guesses I hev lost it."

Tom started off rapidly in search of the treasured "speerit," and hardly had he gotten out of sight before Joe said:

"Maybe I hev a leetle drop in ther old jug, Jim, so let's see."

Jim followed him into the cabin, to suddenly find his throat in an iron grasp, and to see a revolver shoved into his face.

"Git down on yer knees, Jim, fer I intends ter tie yer."

"Don't kill me, Joe," whined the wretch, as the hold on his throat was released.

"I don't want ter sile my hands with yer, but I does intend ter keep yer from doin' no more deviltry."

With that, Joe gagged the outlaw, and then shoved him, all securely bound as he was, under one of the beds that occupied the four corners of the cabin.

Going to the door, he saw Tom coming up the hill with the flask in his hand.

A look at him was sufficient to see that he had been drinking heavily.

"Did yer take any, Tom?"

"No, Joe, fer yer see it are full."

"Yas, it are full o' water, an' you is full o' rum." and Joe grabbed the man in a grasp which had he been sober,

California Joe, the Mysterious Plainsman

he could not have shaken off.

With a dexterity that was remarkable, he bound and gagged him also, and he too was rolled under the bed to keep his pard company.

Joe then prepared his supper, and just as he sat down to eat it, in stepped Bowie Bob into the cabin.

Seeing who it was he confronted, Bowie Bob hastily drew a revolver and covered him, a weapon he had taken from the soldier he had killed.

Joe was evidently taken by surprise, for he had not expected that one of the escaped outlaws would be armed.

But not a muscle quivered as the bandit captain cried:

"Ha! you are here, traitor Joe, and I've got the dead drop on you."

"Yas, Bowie Bob, I are here, an' I are sorry ter see yer is sich a durned fool ter think I'd come alone.

"Yer has ther dead drop on me, I 'lows; but thar is some ahind yer, thet covers yer ugly carkis far all it are worth."

The outlaw lowered his weapon and turned quickly to look behind him. That was all Joe wanted, for in an instant he turned the tables, and he covered Bowie Bob with his weapon, while he said coolly:

"Drop that weepin, Bob!"

The outlaw obeyed.

"Now, I guesses you is tired sufficient ter want ter lie down on yer face.

"Down yer goes!"

With a curse the outlaw obeyed, and to bind and gag him was but the work of a minute, arnd he too was hustled out of sight.

Soon after there came the sound of hoofs without, and a voice cried: "Ho, Tom! Ho, Jim! are you abed?"

"No, come in!" gruffly answered Joe.

The bolt was removed from the door, which swung open and a man stepped in with the remark:

"Boys, there has been the devil to pay down in the settlements, for—"

"Thar devils ter pay up hear in the mountings, Josh," said Joe, stepping from behind the door and dealing the man a blow that sent him, reeling to the ground.

But, before he could follow up his advantage and bind him, two more of the outlaws entered, and seeing him, at a glance took in the situation.

One was armed with a knife, and the other seizing a chair rushed upon Joe.

"Back, pards, fer I'd a heap rather yer'd be hung then hev ter kill yer," he shouted.

"We'll take ther chances, yer cussed traitor," cried one.

But they were the last words he ever uttered, as he fell dead, shot through the heart.

But before Joe could fire a second shot the man he had been trying to bind, seized his arm, and instantly a desperate struggle began for the mastery, the other outlaw rushing to his aid.

Hearing the fracas Bowie Bob and his two bound and gagged companions rolled out from under the bed and made frantic efforts to speak and free themselves, so that the cabin was turned into a pandemonium for a few moments.

But Joe had the strength of a giant, and was as wiry as a cat, and rose, to his feet with his two foes clinging to him, and striving all their might to prevent him from using his weapons.

With a herculean effort he shook one off, and at once came the flash and crack of his revolver, and while one man fell dead, the other sung out lustily:

"Don't shoot me, Joe."

"I won't, pard, fer it is better that yer be hung; but yer'll excuse me ef I ties yer."

And tie him he did, after which he turned to Bowie Bob and the two others who had rolled out in a vain endeavor to join in the fight, and said:

"Bein' as yer rolled out, jist roll back ag'in."

They obeyed with an alacrity that pleased Joe greatly, and he said: "Thar is four more due an' they'll be along afore day, ef ther soger hasn't tuk 'em."

And before daybreak, one by one the four dropped into the trap and were made prisoners, after which Joe loaded the stolen horses in the corral with his captives and the two dead bodies, and set out on his return to the fort, where he arrived in safety.

California Joe, the Mysterious Plainsman

"Joe, you shall not leave this fort, for I will make you chief of scouts," said the delighted major at beholding him and his prisoners.

But in the morning Joe had gone, and none knew when, or whither.

California Joe, the Mysterious Plainsman

CHAPTER XXI. CALIFORNIA JOE.

In the same mysterious way in which he had before disappeared for several years, Joe again was lost sight of, after his departure from the outpost, the night of his capture of Bowie Bob and his gang.

There were stories told of a white man living among the Indians, and some of the soldiers set this down as Joe. Old trappers were wont to spin tales about a Hermit who lived in the Rocky Mountains, and the description of him tallied so well with what Joe was that many believed that it must be he.

Again, reports were circulated among the frontier of the doings of a man who went by the euphonious title of "California Joe."

It was said that he had guided one of the first parties of miners into what is now the Golden State, and had shown them localities where gold was to be found in a way that proved that he must have been there before, though he would never tell any of his comrades whether such was the case or not.

It was stated also that this Gold Guide had been named California Joe, and that he had few equals in strength, was a most desperate man in a fight, and could throw a bullet in the exact spot he meant it to go. Those who told camp-fire yarns about the mysterious man said he bore innumerable scars upon his body, legs and arms, but that his face was very handsome and unmarred.

One of the scouts who had been at the fort, and afterward the outpost when he was at them, was seized with the "gold fever," and made his way to California in company with several others.

Hearing of a mining camp in the mountains, where "dust" was panning out well, they sought its vicinity, and arrived just in time to witness a very exciting scene.

It seems that a man had been shot in his "find" the day before, and his brother, a mere boy, knowing who his murderer was, had avenged his death.

The murderer happened to be the leader of a desperate lot, and they at once swore to avenge their chief, and marched in force to the cabin of his slayer.

He had heard of their coming, and stood boldly at his door, his pistols in hand.

"We've come to hang ye, youngster, an' yer mou't as well drop them wepins," said one.

"I will defend my life, so I warn you off", was the firm reply.

"Come, boys, let's run on him, fer 'twon't do ter cheat ourselves out o' ther fun o' hangin' him by shootin' him."

This advice was about to be followed, when a man suddenly stepped between the youth and his foes.

"Waal?" said the leader, savagely.

"Waal?" echoed the man.

"What does yer mean?"

"I means his biz yer means ter hurt thet boy," was the cool reply.

"Waal, we intends ter bang him."

"I guesses not."

"Yer does?"

"I does far sartin."

"Does yer mean ter go agin' us?"

"I means that boy is not ter be hurted, Tom Jones.

"Yer pard kilt his brother, an' ther boy shouted back in squar' fight, an' now yer says hang him, an' I says no."

"Waal, we'll do it, ef we hes ter kill yer ter git ter him," was the stern response.

"I guess not."

With these words the man whipped out two revolvers in the twinkling of an eye, and covered the crowd.

Some one fired, who no one knew, and that set the ball going, and in six seconds a score of shots were fired, and several men lay dead in their tracks, and the and the youth be defended stood in the door of the cabin unhurt, while their assailants had fallen back before an aim that never failed.

Such was the scene that the scout and his pards witnessed as they entered the mining camp, and one asked:

California Joe, the Mysterious Plainsman

"Who are that terror on legs, pard?"

"Thar pilgrim what made that cold meat just now? inquired the one addressed.

"Yes."

"They was durned fools ter push him ter it."

"But who are he?"

"Ther squarest man in this heur camp.

"Ther man who guided ther boys ter find ther dust heur, an' don't car' a durn fer diggin' it hisself."

"But what are his name?"

"Waal, yer hes ter ax me suthin' more easier, pard stranger."

"Don't he hev no name?"

"Yas, I hes heerd o' him, an' knows him," and the scout who had turned miner went up and renewed his acquaintance with Joe, who greeted him most cordially, and added:

"I is glad ter see yer ag'in, on' ther boys will give yer a blow– out ter–night, an' it are a pity them fellers was sich durned fools fer they'll miss a good time," and those he referred to as the ones who would "miss a good time" were the men he had killed only a few minutes before in defending his young pard.

California Joe, the Mysterious Plainsman

CHAPTER XXII. JOE VISITS OLD FRIENDS.

FROM the time of Joe receiving the prefix of "California" to his name, he began to be known from the Missouri to the Pacific.

At times he was a trapper on the streams of the border, and again a scout and Indian trailer with the advance guard of the army. Then he was heard of in the mines, and again haunted the settlements for awhile with apparently no aim in life.

At length he departed from his favorite haunts one day, and several weeks after he rode up to the door of a comfortable cabin in one of the most delightful of the border settlement.

It was Sunday afternoon, and before the door sat the settler, a fine-looking man with hair tinged with gray, while near him was his wife, a handsome woman of forty, with a sad face.

Several children were playing near the door, and together the scene was a homelike one.

"Dismount, stranger, and stop with us, for night is coming on soon!" cheerily called out the settler, as California Joe drew rein a short distance and drew rein a shot distance off.

"That are what I hev come for, Pard Reynolds" was the quiet response of Joe, as he dismounted and walked toward the cabin.

The settler saw before him a tall, handsome man with a bearded face and long, curling black hair.

He was clad in buckskin hunting-shirt, and leggings stuck in the tops of high boots, while he wore a black sombrero turned up in front.

"You know me, then, stranger?" said Mr. Reynolds.

"I does, or most rather did, pard; but that were long ago."

"And yet strange to say, I cannot recall you my friend; but you are welcome, and this is my wife, who will give you greeting, too."

"I know that, pard, fer she were as squar' as you is, and that are shoutin' Gospil; but whar are little Maggie?"

Instantly a shadow fell over the faces of the settler and his wife at this question, and the former said sadly: "She is gone, alas!"

"Dead?" asked California Joe, in a whisper.

"No, and yes, for we know not what has become of her, for one day, as was her wont, she went out hunting with her little rifle, and since then we have never seen her."

"There is streams about heur?"

"Yes, but she could swim well."

"Were thar Injuns about?"

"Yes, Indian signs were seen about that time, and we have heard that the Cheyennes had some captive children among their tribes."

"Waal, It may be so, an' ef it are, I'll find out."

"I guesses I won't sop ter-night, Pard Reynolds, but go on, fer I wants ter find leetle Maggie."

"But, my friend, who are you that takes such a kind interest in our poor lost little girl?" asked Mrs. Reynolds, laying her hand upon Joe's arm and looking up into his honest face with eyes filled with tears.

"I are Joe."

"Joe!"

"Joe!"

"Yas, I are Joe; California Joe they calls me now."

Words cannot describe the mingled amazement and joy of the poor parents at again meeting the one who, as a boy long years before, had saved them and the train from massacre.

"And you are that famous man, California Joe, of whom we have heard so much?" said Mr. Reynolds.

"Yes, I are California Joe, and I has come nosin' 'round heur ter see yer all an' leetle Maggie, an' I fotched her a leetle present ter wear round her putty neck. It are dust I dug myself out o' ther mines."

California Joe, the Mysterious Plainsman

He drew out a necklace, as he spoke, of nuggets of solid gold which he had made into a necklace.

"Now yer keep it fer her, fer I'll be back with her afore long," and all entreaties to remain longer California Joe refused, but started at once upon the duty he set himself to perform.

California Joe, the Mysterious Plainsman

CHAPTER XXIII. THE CHEYENNES RANSOM.

IN an Indian village — Cheyennes — for one long year had languished poor little Maggie Reynolds.

A child of twelve, at the time of her capture, she had been made the slave of the squaw of the head chief, Feather Face, and but for her plucky spirit and hope some day of rescue the girl would have died under the life of drudgery and abuse.

One day she beheld a pale-face ride into the village.

At that time there was a patched up peace between the Cheyennes and the whites, but Maggie had not seen any of the latter bold enough to come to the Indian camp.

She eyed the stranger curiously, as he came directly to the tepee of Feather Face, accompanied by several warriors.

"My red brother knows me," said the white man.

"Yes, the Feather Face has men the pale-face brave," was the reply.

"The hatchet is buried now; but the Feather Face would like to kill me."

The Indian hewed a ready assent.

"He has bore a pale-face pappoose."

"Will he sell her to me?"

"The Feather Face will sell her for the ears of the white warrior," was the fiendish reply.

"Good!" was the smiling reply.

"Let him take his scalping-knife and cut off my ears, and than give to me the pappoose."

"If the Feather Face lies then the soldiers will be ready to come upon him and burn his village."

"The white warrior has spoken."

"The Feather Face does not speak with a crooked tongue."

"The Feather Face is a natural liar," was the retort and the stranger stepped up to the chief and bared his head by removing his sombrero, while he added:

"But I wan the Cheyenne not to break faith with me."

Poor Maggie heard and saw all, and sat crouching in the tepee, not daring to utter a word.

But as she saw the cruel chief take his scalping-knife and seize the ear of the man to claim his ransom for her, she cried:

"No, no, let me stay here, for I am happy here; I do not wish to go home!"

"Thet are a screamin' lie, Maggie," said California Joe, for he it was, and turning again to the chief, he continued:

"Injun, do yer carvin'."

With a satisfied grunt Feather Face took the left ear in his fingers, and skillfully sliced the outer rim off clean.

California Joe did not wince, but said coolly, while Maggie gave a cry of terror:

"Now, t'other one, Injun."

The other ear was then cut in like manner, and Joe made a low bow, with the remark:

"Thankee, Injun.

"Some day I hopes ter do as much far you.

"Come. Maggie."

He took the weeping girl, and placing her upon his horse, sprung into his saddle and rode out of the Indian camp, leaving the chief laughing with fiendish delight over the ransom he had received for the captive girl.

And, two weeks after his departure from the Reynolds home, he returned one night, and Maggie accompanied him.

"Go said knock at ther door, Maggie, while I stake ther critturs out," he said.

The young girl obeyed, and great was the joy of her parents when she appeared before them.

But in vain was it they looked for California Joe, for, though he staked the horse, he had given her out upon

California Joe, the Mysterious Plainsman

the prairie, he had mounted his own animal once more and mysteriously disappeared.

California Joe, the Mysterious Plainsman

CHAPTER XXIV. JOE'S FATE.

KIND reader, it is only necessary to say that California Joe continued his wanderings about the border daily winning greater fame as a plainsman and Indian-fighter, until the promise he made Feather Face, to "do as, much for him," was faithfully kept, and more so, for he took that chief's scalp instead of his ears in a fight he had with him one day, after guiding a party of soldiers to his village, to punish him for slashing about with "the hatchet," when it was supposed to be buried.

When the civil war broke out, California Joe went with the Union Army as one of a band of Border Sharpshooters.

That his deadly aim did not fall him in army service, is proven from the fact that war-correspondent of Harper's Weekly sent a report of his having "picked off" a Confederate sharpshooter at the distance of fifteen hundred yards, when even artillery had failed to dislodge him.

After the war, in which he won the name of a long-range dead-shot, California Joe returned to the border, and one day came near losing his life, as he was on his way to make a visit to the Reynolds cabin, where he had not been since the night he had carried Maggie back to her parents.

He was riding along the river bank, when suddenly he beheld a canoe and an occupant, and turned just as a rifle was leveled at him. He spoke just in time to save his life. But as Joe related the story of that meeting with Maggie Reynolds—for she it was—to Captain Jack Crawford, the "Poet-Scout of the Black Hills,"* and he has told it in rhyme, I will give my readers a few of the verses, in their own pathetic words:

Beside a laughing, dancing brook.
A little cabin stood,
At weary with a long day's scout,
Spied it in the wood.
A pretty valley stretched beyond,
The mountains towered above,
While near the willow bank I heard.
The cooing of a dove.

T was one grand panorama;
The brook was plainly seen,
Like a long thread of silver
In a cloth of lovely green.
The laughter of the waters,
The coning of the dove,
Was like some painted picture
Some well-told tale of love.

While drinking in the grandeur,
And resting in my saddle,
I heard a gentle ripple,
Like the dipping of a paddle.
I turned toward the eddy—
A strange sight met my view:
A maiden, with her rifle,
In a little bark canoe.
She stood up in the center,
The rifle to her eye;
I thought (just for a second)
My time had come to die.

I doffed my hat and told her
(If it was all the same)

California Joe, the Mysterious Plainsman

To drop her little shooter,
For I was not her game.
She dropped the deadly weapon,
And leaped from the canoe.
Said she: "I beg your pardon,
I thought you were a Sioux;
Your long hair and your buckskin
Looked warrior-like and rough,
My bead was spoiled by sunshine,
Or I'd killed you, sure enough."

"Perhaps it had been better
You dropped me then," said I;
For surely such an angel
Would bear me to the sky."
She blushed and dropped her eyelids;
Her cheeks were crimson red;
One half-shy glance she gave me
And then hung down her head.

That blushing young huntress being Maggie Reynolds, dear reader, it need not be said that the romance of her life and that of California Joe ended in the reality of matrimony.

In his book, "My Life on the Plains," General Custer thus speaks of California Joe:

"In concentrating the cavalry which had hitherto been operating in small bodies, it was found that each detachment brought with it the scouts who had been serving with them. When I joined the command I found quite a number of these scouts attached to various portions of the cavalry, but each acting separately. For the purpose of organization it was deemed best to unite them in a separate detachment under command of one of their own number. Being unacquainted with the merits or demerits of any of them, the selection of a chief had to be made somewhat at random.

"There was one among their number whose appearance would have attracted the notice of any casual observer. He was a man about forty years of age, perhaps older, over six feet in height, and possessing a well-proportioned frame. His head was covered with a luxuriant crop of long, almost black hair, strongly inclined to curl, and so long as to fall carelessly over his shoulders. His face, at least so much of it as was not concealed by the long, waving brown beard and mustache, was full of intelligence and pleasant to look upon. His eye was undoubtedly handsome, black and lustrous, with an expression of kindness and mildness combined. On his head was generally to be seen, whether awake or asleep, a huge sombrero, or black slouch hat. A soldier's overcoat, with its large circular cape, a pair of trousers with the legs tucked in the top of his long boots, usually constituted the make-up of the man whom I selected as chief scout. He was known by the euphonious title of 'California Joe,' no other name seemed ever to have been given him, and no other, name appeared to be necessary.

"This was the man whom, upon a short acquaintance, I decided to appoint as chief of the scouts.

"As the four detachments already referred to were to move as soon as it was dark, it was desirable that the scouts should be at once organized, and assigned. So, sending for California Joe, I informed him of his promotion and what was expected of him and his men. After this official portion of the interview had been complete, it seemed proper to Joe's mind that a more intimate acquaintance between us should be cultivated, as we had never met before. His first interrogatory, addressed to me in furtherance of this ideal was frankly put as follows:

"See hyar, ginerall, in order that we hev no misonderstandin', I'd jist like ter ax ye a few questions. First, are ye an ambulance man er a hoss man?"

"Professing ignorance of his meaning, I requested him to explain.

"I mean," said he, 'do yer b'lieve in catchin' Injuns in ambulances or on hossback?'

"Still assuming ignorance, I replied, 'Well, Joe, I believe in catching Indians wherever we can find them, whether they are in ambulances or on horseback.'

"'Thet ain't what I'm a-drivin' at,' he responded. 'S'pose you're after Injuns had really want to hev a tassel with 'em would yer start after low on hossback er would yer climb inter a ambulance and be hauled after 'em? That's

California Joe, the Mysterious Plainsman

ther p'int I'm a-headin' far.'

"I answered that I would prefer the method on horseback, provided I really desired to catch the Indian; but if I wished them to catch me, I would adopt the ambulance system of attack.

"'You've hit the nail squar' on the head,' said he. 'I've bin with 'am on the plains whar they started out after Injuns on wheels jist as ef they war goin' to a town funeral in ther States, an' they stood 'bout as many chances uv catchin' Injuns ez a six-mule team would uv catchin' a pack of thievin' ki-o-tes, jist as much. Why, thet sort uv work iz only fun fer the Injuns; they don't want anything better. Yer ort to've see'd how they peppered it to us, and we a-doin' o' nuthin' all the time. Sum uv 'am wuz afraid the mules war goin' to stampede and run off with ther train and all our forage an' grub, but that wuz impossible; fer besides the big loads uv corn an' bacon an' baggage the wagons had in 'em, thar war from eight to a dozen infantry men piled into am besides. Yer ort to hev heard the quartermaster in charge uv of the train tryin' to drive infantry men out uv the wagons and git them into ther fight. I 'spect he wuz a Irishman, by his talk, fer he said to 'am: "Git out uv thim wagons; get out uv thim wagons; yez'll hev me thried for disobadieance uv orders for marchin' tin min in a wagon whin I've ord hers fer but ait."'

California Joe was killed, as was his friend Wild Bill, by the hand of an assassin.

He was seated in front of his cabin at Red Cloud, Dakota, on Dec. 5th 1876, cleaning his dearly loved weapons, when some foe fired at him from an ambush and shot him through the heart.

Who that unseen assassin, was no one ever knew, and the secret will doubtless remain unknown, unless the "still, small voice of conscience" may drive the murderer to confess the crime some day, for most truly, is it said that "murder will out."

THE END.