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by Margaret Burnham

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THE GIRL AVIATORS ON GOLDEN WINGS

By Margaret Burnham

CHAPTER I

THE GREAT ALKALI

"And so this is the great Nevada desert!"

Peggy Prescott wrinkled her nose rather disdainfully as she gazed from the open window of the car out over the white, glittering expanse--dotted here and there with gloomy-looking clumps of sage brush--through which they had been traveling for some little time past.

"This is it," nodded her brother Roy; "what do you think of it, sis?"

"Um--er, I shall have to wait a while before I answer that," rejoined Peggy judicially.

"Well, here's Jimsy; let's ask him," cried Roy, as a lad of his own age, accompanied by a slender, graceful girl, came down the aisle of the car and approached the section in which the two young Prescotts were sitting.

"Jimsy Bancroft," demanded Roy, "we are now on the great Nevada desert, or on the edge of it. Does it meet with your approval?"

"There's plenty of it anyhow," laughed Jimsy, "and really it's very much like what I expected it would be."

"I feel like a regular cowgirl or--a--er--well, what the newspapers call a typical Westerner already," said Jess Bancroft, Jimsy's sister.

"Only typical Westerners don't protect their delicate complexions from dust with cold cream," laughed Peggy, holding up a finger reprovingly. "As if any beauty magazine won't tell you it's a woman's duty to take the greatest care of her complexion," parried Jess. "Roy and I have been sitting out on the observation platform on the last coach--that is, we sat there till the dust drove us in."

She shook the folds of a long, light pongee automobile coat she wore and a little cloud of dust arose. They all coughed as the pungent stuff circulated.

"Ugh," cried Roy, "it makes your eyes smart."

"That's the alkali in it," quoth Jimsy sagely, "alkali is--"

"Very unpleasant," coughed Peggy.

"But as we are likely to have to endure it for the next few weeks," struck in Roy, "we might as well lose no time in getting accustomed to it."

"Well girls and boys," came a deep, pleasant voice behind them, "we shall be in Blue Creek in a short time now, so gather up your belongings. I'll take care of the aeroplane outfits and the other stuff in the baggage car," he went on, "and here comes Miss Prescott now."

The lady referred to was a sweet-faced woman of some fifty years of age, though it was easy to see that the years had dealt kindly with her during her placid life in the village of Sandy Beach, on Long Island, New York, where she had made, her home. Miss Prescott was the aunt of the two Prescott children, and since their father's death some time before had been both mother and father to them--their own mother having passed away when they were but small children.

As readers of the first volume of this series know, Mr. Prescott had been an inventor of some distinction. Dying, he had confided to his son and daughter his plans for a non-capsizable aeroplane of great power. His son had promised to carry on the work, and had devoted his legacy to this purpose.

In that volume, which was called "The Girl Aviators and the Phantom Airship," it will be recalled, it was told how Peggy had been of material aid to her brother in his plans and hopes, and had, in reality, "saved the day" for him when he fell into the hands of some enemies. This occurred on the eve of a great aeroplane contest in which Roy had entered in the hopes of winning the first prize. With the money thus obtained he planned to pay off a mortgage held on Miss Prescott's home by an unscrupulous old banker, whose son was the prime mover in the plots against Roy.

One of the means adopted to force him to sell his secrets was the manipulation of a phantom aeroplane which, for a time, sadly puzzled the lad and his sister. The mystery was solved in a strange way, however, and almost at the same time, the baffling problem of what had become of Mrs. Bancroft's jewels was also unraveled. All this did not take place without many adventures being encountered by the four chums. Among these was the encounter with the old hermit, Peter Bell, who, through Peggy's agency, was restored to his brother, James Bell, the millionaire western mining man.

James Bell became much interested in the Prescotts and their aeroplanes. Finally he made an advantageous proposal to Roy to travel West and operate for him a line of aeroplanes from some desert mines he had discovered on a trip which almost cost him his life. As autos could not cross the alkali, and transportation of the product by wagons would have been prohibitive in cost, as well as almost impossible to achieve, Mr. Bell had hit on the happy idea of conveying the precious product of his property by aeroplane.

At the same time, it so happened that Mr. Bancroft, the father of Jess and Jimsy, was summoned West by an important railroad deal. This being the case, Jess and Jimsy at once set to work plotting how they could gain their father's consent to their accompanying Peggy and Roy. It was finally gained, although Mrs. Bancroft shook her head over the matter, and, at first, would by no means hear of such a thing. But Mr. Bancroft urged that it would be a good thing for the children to see the great West, and that as Miss Prescott was to accompany the party, there would be no risk of their running wild.

But while the youngsters had all been so eager for the time to come for starting on their long journey that they could hardly eat, much less sleep, Miss Prescott had viewed with alarm the prospects ahead of her. In her mind the West was a vague jumble of rough cowboys, Indians, highwaymen and desperate characters in general. But there was no help for it. In addition to feeling it was her duty to accompany her young charges, her physician had also recommended her to seek the dry, rarefied air of the great Nevada plateau.

"It will be the very thing for your lungs, my dear madame," he had said; "they are by no means as strong as I could wish."

"Oh, but doctor, the Indians, the--the--" Miss Prescott had begun, when the physician cut her short.

"The only Indians left in the West now are all busy working for Wild West shows," he said, with a laugh; "and as for any other fancied cause of alarm, I dare say you will find the Western men quite as chivalrous and courteous as their Eastern brethren."

And so it happened that the dust-covered train was rolling across the arid solitudes at the edge of the great alkali desert with our party of friends on board. All were looking forward to adventures, but how strange and unexpected some of the happenings that befell them were to be not one of the party even dreamed.

The only member of the adventurous little band not now accounted for is Peter Bell, the former recluse. Peter was forward in the smoking car enjoying his old black pipe, which was his delight and solace and Miss Prescott's particular abomination. Among Peter's other peculiarities, acquired in a long and solitary life, was a habit he had of sometimes making his remarks in verse. He entered the car just as the conversation we have recorded was in progress.

"Soon, my good friends, o'er the desert, so bold, we all shall be flying with excellent gold."

A general laugh from the young folks greeted him, and Roy struck in with:

"That's if we don't fall to the earth from the sky, and land up in a smash on the white alkali."

The merriment that greeted this was cut short by the raucous voices of the trainmen.

"Blue Creek! Blue Creek!"

Instantly the liveliest bustle prevailed. Belongings of all sorts were hastily bundled together. So intent, in fact, was our party on its preparations for its plunge into the unknown that not one of them noticed two men who stood watching them intently from the opposite end of the car.

"So we've run the old fox into the ground," remarked one of them, a tall, heavily built fellow with a crop of short, reddish hair that bristled like the remnants of an old tooth brush. He was clean-shaven and had a weak, cruel mouth and a pair of narrow little eyes, through which he could, however, shoot a penetrating glance when anything interested him. Both he and his companion, a sallow, black-haired personage with a drooping pair of moustaches, were just then, seemingly, much engrossed.

"Yes, some place off thar'," rejoined the black-haired man with a wave of his hand toward the west--in which the sun, a ball of red fire, was now dropping, "some whar off thar, across that alkali, Jim Bell has his golden-egged goose."

"Hush, not so loud, Sam; one of those kids is looking at us."

"Pshaw, they hain't got sense to suspect nuthin'," was the scornful reply. "Wonder if Buck Bellew will be hyar ter meet us."

As he spoke the train wheels ceased to revolve and the cars came to a standstill in Blue Creek, a sun-bitten outpost of the "Big Alkali."

CHAPTER II

AT THE NATIONAL HOUSE

Blue Creek was experiencing a spasm of excitement unusual to it. As a general thing, the dwellers on the edge of the great alkali wastes--once the bed of a mighty inland sea--were by far too much occupied in keeping reasonably cool, to betray even a passing interest in anything; except the arrival of a train of desolate-looking mules bearing gold from the barren, melancholy hills that rimmed the far-reaching alkali solitudes.

But the dust-whitened train, which twice a day puffed into Blue Creek and twice a day puffed joyfully out again, had, on this

particular afternoon, set down a party which had caused unusual speculation among the Blue Creekites.

"Thar's Jim Bell, frum out the desert, an' an old gent who looks like he might be some kin to Jim, and then thar's them likely lookin' lads an' those uncommon purty gals. Never know Jim hed a fam'ly afore. Ef he hez he's kep it mighty quiet all these ya'rs."

These remarks emanated from the throat of Cash Dallam, owner of the National House, Blue Creek's leading, and likewise only, hotel. The National was a board structure, formerly painted--with some originality of taste--a bright orange hue, relieved with red trimmings round doors, windows and eaves. But the sun had blistered and the hot desert winds had cracked and peeled its originally gaudy hues, and it was now a melancholy monotone of dull, pallid yellow. Here and there the paint had vanished altogether, and the bleached boards showed underneath. Like most of the other structures in Blue Creek--which boasted a general store, post office and Chinese laundry and restaurant combined the National House was coated with a thin layer of gray alkali dust, the gift of the glittering desert beyond its gates.

Cash Dallam's companions on the porch, which faced the railroad station and so was a favorite lounging place for the prominent citizens of Blue Creek and the guests of the hostelry, seemed only languidly interested.

"Thet's a powerful pile of baggage they're toting round," observed "Shavings" Magoon, who owed his nickname to the peculiar color and length of his hair, which looked as if it might have been gathered up bodily from the floor of a carpenter's shop and transferred to the top of his wrinkled countenance, about which it hung like a dubious aureole.

"You say that the tall chap yonder is Jim, Bell?"

The question, asked with some appearance of interest, came from a slender, dark-haired man in a blue shirt and leather "chaps," his face overshadowed by a big sombrero, who up to this time had not spoken. He had been leaning against the front wall of the National, thoughtfully removing some more of its paint by scraping it with the big rowelled Mexican spurs which he affected. These spurs, heavily mounted with Silver, together with a red sash he wore in the Mexican style about his waist, rather marked him out from his fellows on the National's porch.

Cash Dallam looked round as if in astonishment at the voice.

"Why hal-lo, stranger," he said, "whar you bin hidin' all these moons? Yes, that's Jim Bell, sure enough. Wouldn't think he wuz a millionaire ter look at him, would yer?"

The other shook his head.

"Can't most always sometimes tell," he remarked humorously; "that's a right pretty gal yonder, too. Any of you heard what Jim Bell's doing in Blue Creek?" The question came abruptly.

"Don't rightly know," was Cash's reply, "but I heard that before he went Fast Jim Bell worked his way further inter ther desert than any man has ever bin. What he wuz arter I dunno, but it wouldn't be like Jim Bell ter risk his life fer muthin'."

"Do you reckon it was gold?"

The slender young man's dark eyes kindled in the word he used there was some potent fascination for him.

"Donno 'bout gold," said Cash, thoughtfully; "Thar's silver, yes, and platinum back younder. So ther Injuns say anyhow. But thar's mighty few white men hes ever got thet fur, an' if they did, they never come back to tell." He gazed out over the crystalline, quivering desert, burning whitely as a spangled Christmas card under the scorching sun. In his day Cash had seen many set out across it who never reappeared.

"Pity thar hain't no way of gitting thar without having ter use stock."

"Ortermobiles?" suggested a withered old man with the desert tan and wrinkles upon him.

"Tired 'em," struck in another of the same type. "No go. Sunk to ther hubs in mud holes an' then if it wusn't thet ther wuz ther sand to shove through and they hed ter give it up. No, ther vehicle or ther critter hain't invented that's goin' ter get away off thar back of beyond whar the gold lies--or whar they say it does," he added rather doubtfully. "When I was a kid back East my poor mother used ter tell me that gold lay at ther end of ther rainbow. I began huntin' it then and I've kep' it up ever since, an' will to ther end, I reckon."

"You say the vehicle isn't invented that will cross that stretch of alkali?" asked the tall young man, with a jingle of the metal ornaments hanging from the chased shank of his spurs.

"Thet's what. No rig, er devil wagon, er critters neither."

The reply was given with the emphasis of conviction.

"How about airships?"

The remark was dropped carelessly almost, by the spur-wearer.

"Airships! By ginger, thet's so!"

The pessimist spoke in a rather crestfallen tone.

"Seems ter me I read in an Eastern paper a while back suthin' about Jim Bell's bin at a place near New York and engaging a young chap ter build him some aeroplanes. Thar was a good bit of mystery about it. Say, boys, I wonder ef that's what Jim Bell's in Blue Creek fur?"

"Thar's one thing sartin," spoke up "Shavings" Magoon, "ef Jim Bell's got ther means ter git an aerial gold line he'll be safe enough from them ornery road agents like ther fellers thet stuck up ther Laredo stage only last week an' got away with the specie box from Red River Falls. I reckon thar ain't no stage robbers with acroplanes yet a while."

"Queer thing about that Laredo robbery," put in Cash thoughtfully, "thar was several inter it, an' it seems thet they've all got clar away."

"Good thing for them, eh?" said the stranger, jingling his spur ornaments harder than ever.

Cash sniffed.

"Good thing. Wall, stranger, I'd hate ter tell you what 'ud be the least of what 'ud happened to them, it would freeze your blood."

"Not an unpleasant thing to have happen to day," said the stranger, carelessly, and carefully flicking some gray dust from his "chaps" with his rawhide quirt, "so you think that Jim Bell means to start some sort of an air line from whatever he has discovered in the interior into this place?"

"Don't know nothing about it," snapped Cash, rather impatiently; "you're a heap interested in Jim Bell, stranger."

"Naturally. He's quite a famous man in his way. I suppose he is one of the greatest mining authorities in the West."

But at this point Cash perceived that Mr. Bell's party had finished seeing to the disposal of their piles of baggage and were headed for the hotel. The operation had been a long one, as they bestowed particular attention upon sundry wooden boxes of oblong shape which might have held almost anything. Whatever their contents might be they were evidently held in some esteem by the Bell party.

A few seconds after Cash had broken off the conversation so abruptly, he was greeting the new arrivals. The other porch loungers stood sheepishly at some distance, some of them uneasily twisting their fingers. The presence of the young girls in the party filled them with a bashful terror such as the had never experienced in the numerous adventures and perils through which most of them had passed.

"The young ladies are Miss Prescott and Miss Bancroft," Mr. Bell said, introducing his companions, after the fashion of the Western country, to the hotel proprietor; "this is Roy Prescott and his chum, Jimsy Bancroft, and this," indicating the man whose resemblance to himself had already been remarked upon, "this is my brother, Mr. Peter Bell."

"Glad ter meet yer, miss; glad ter meet yer all, I'm sure," sputtered out Cash with one of his finest bows, and Cash was reckoned to be "a right elegant chap" in that primitive society.

CHAPTER III

VOICES IN THE NIGHT

After supper--a queer meal to their Eastern tastes--the young folks were glad enough to retire to their rooms.

"Oh, what a funny place!" cried Jess, as she and Peggy, carrying a glass lamp which reeked of kerosene, entered their chamber. The walls were of rough boards with no attempt at ornamentation, a gorgeous checked crazy-quilt covered the bed--for though the days are hot on the desert, the nights are quite sharp. The floor, like the walls, was bare, and when the girls peered at themselves in the tiny mirror they gave little squeals of amused disgust. The heat of the sun, too, had drawn out the resinous qualities of the raw wood, and the room was impregnated with an aroma not unlike that of a pine forest under a hot sun.

"I expect we'll see some much funnier places before we get back East," said Peggy decidedly, and beginning to unpack her silver-fitted dressing-bag, which was the one luxury she had allowed herself.

"I expect so, too; and I think it's jolly to rough it," chimed in her chum; "but it's hard to get used to it all at once. Stepping right off a Pullman into this is rather a sharp contrast, you must admit."

"It is," agreed Peggy, heartily. She stepped to the window and gazed out on an uncovered porch outside. It was, in fact, the roof of the one below. On it flourished quite a little grove of scraggly plants of various kinds, which were carefully tended by Cash's wife. They were, perhaps, the only green things in Blue Creek.

But Peggy had little eye for all this. Her lips parted in a quick gasp of admiration as she gazed upon the night spell of the desert.

The dark sky was sprinkled with countless stars, large and luminous and beaming with a softer, stronger light than in the North. A brooding silence hung over the town--the silence of the desert. The hush was broken only by the droning notes of a song, accompanied on a guitar, which came from off in the distance on the outskirts of the little settlement. The music emphasized rather than broke the silence.

Jess came to Peggy's side, and upon her, too, descended the feeling of awe that the "Great Alkali" casts over all who encounter it for the first time.

"Peggy," she said at length, "I'm--I'm the least bit frightened."

Her chum felt a slight shiver run through the girl as she pressed against her.

"Frightened, girlie? Frightened of what?"

"I don't just know. That's what makes it feel so bad. I guess it's the silence, the sense of all that loneliness out beyond there that upsets me. It feels almost as if there were some living presence off over the alkali that meant us harm."

"I think I know what the matter is," said Peggy gently, "you're tired and overwrought. Come, let us get to bed, for Mr. Bell has ordered in early start in the morning."

Just how long afterward it was the awakened Peggy had no means of telling, but as she lay sleepless she felt a longing to look out over the light-shrouded desert once more. Arising she tiptoed to the window, and drawing the shade without making more than the merest rustle of noise she looked out. As she did so Peggy almost uttered a startled exclamation, which, however, she instantly checked.

Three men had just emerged upon the balcony from an adjoining window. They brought chairs with them and sat there smoking. Peggy could catch the rank, strong odor of the tobacco.

"It's better out here and we can talk more quietly," said one of them, as they sat down. "You say that Bell and his outfit start to-morrow?"

"That's what I overheard him say when I was listening to 'em talking arter supper," struck in another voice, "so I guess it's the early trail for us, too."

"Reckon so," came in a third speaker; "Jim Bell is going to travel fast. He's got the best horses and mules in this part of the country, and he won't spare 'em."

"You mean the alkali won't, I guess," put in the first speaker with

an unpleasant laugh; "but he won't go far with ther stock. At the last waterhole he'll leave 'em and go on by aeroplane."

"You're crazy!"

"Never more sensible in my life. I--"

"Hush! Don't make such a racket. Fer all we know some of them may be awake and hear us. Now the old Steer Wells trail--"

But here the speaker sank his voice so low that it was impossible to hear his further words. But Peggy, as she crept back to bed with her heart throbbing a little bit fast, felt vaguely that the conversation boded some ill to the mining man and his party of gold seekers.

"I'm sure I recognized one of those voices," she said to herself; "it was that of the tall, dark young man with the immense spurs and that picturesque red sash, who was eyeing us so at supper. Jess and I thought he looked like a romantic brigand. What if he should turn out in real earnest to be a desperate character?"

Determining to speak to Jim Bell in the morning about the conversation she had overheard, Peggy dropped off into a deep slumber at last, but her dreams were disturbing ones. Now she was traversing the Big Alkali, with its pungent dust in her nostrils and her feet crunching its crusty surface. She was lost, and would have cried out had she been able to open her lips. Then she was dying of thirst. Her lips were parched and cracked and the sun beat pitilessly down. So the hours passed till the stars began to pale and a new day was at hand. Before sunrise the party had been called, and, filled with excitement, made the wooden walls of the National Rouse resound with the hum of preparation.

Now, though Peggy at midnight had fully determined to tell Mr. Bell all she had overheard, Peggy, in the bright, crisp early dawn, felt that to do so would be absurd. After all, the men might merely have been chatting about the party, whose expedition was surely an adventurous and interesting one. It might make Mr. Bell think her a victim of girlish fancies if she went to him with the story, so Peggy decided to remain silent. Afterward she was sorry for this.

As arrangements had been made with the ubiquitous Cash for burros and ponies before the party left for the West, there was little or no delay in getting started. The girls uttered delighted exclamations as their little animals were led up to the hotel steps by a long-legged Mexican who was to accompany the party to Steer Wells, where the ponies were to be abandoned and a permanent camp formed. From that point the dash into the alkali would be made by aeroplane.

For Peggy there was a lively little "calico" animal which both girls pronounced "a darling." But Jess was no less pleased with her

little animal, a bright bay with a white star on its forehead. For the boys similar animals had been provided, while Miss Prescott's mount was a rather raw-boned gray of sedate appearance. In her youth Miss Prescott had done a good deal of horseback riding, and the manner in which she sat her mount showed that she had not forgotten her horsemanship. Mr. Bell and his brother bestrode rather heavier animals than the rest of the party, while Juan, the guide, contented himself with a remarkably small burro. When in the saddle his lanky legs stuck out on either side of his long-eared steed and appeared to be sort of auxiliary propellers for the creature.

Six pack burros had been obtained, and on two of these the camp equipment and utensils were carried. The remainder of the little animals carried the wooden cases in which the three monoplanes were packed, and the boxes containing mining instruments and tools. One of these was painted red, and in it was carried a supply of "giant" powder--a kind of dynamite used in mining operations.

"I shall keep my eye on that particular burro," remarked Jimsy, "and if he ever runs away I shall gallop off in the opposite direction."

But Mr. Bell explained that the explosive stuff was packed in such a manner that even the most violent shock would not set it off.

"Still, we won't experiment," declared Roy.

Ten minutes after the cavalcade had drawn up in front of the hotel, attracting the attention of the entire population of Blue Creek, the party was ready to set out on the first stage of their adventurous journey. The girls looked very natty in corduroy skirts, neat riding boots, with plain linen waists and jaunty sombreros. The boys, like Mr. Bell and his brother, were in khaki, and each carried a fine rifle, the gift of Mr. Bell. Miss Prescott had at first wished to resuscitate her old riding habit, but instead, before she left the East, the girls had persuaded her to have an up-to-date one made of cool, greenish khaki.

"You look like a modern Diana," said Mr. Bell, with a gallant bow, which brought the color Miss Prescott's blooming cheeks.

"Really, Mr. Bell, that is too bad of you, when you know I am trying to grow old gracefully," retorted Miss Prescott.

"And now," said Mr. Bell, running a watchful eye over the entire outfit, "we are all ready to start."

A cheer, which the girls took up, came ringing from the boys' throats.

"Hooray!" they shouted.

"Good luck!" cried Cash Dallam from his porch, and several in the

crowd caught up the cry..

Juan uttered a series of extraordinary whoops, and working his legs like the long limbs of a seventeen-year locust, he dashed to the head of the procession. The next minute they were off, the pack burros trotting behind in a sedate line.

But just as they started an odd thing happened. Peggy experienced that peculiar feeling which sensitive persons feel when they are being watched. Glancing quickly round she encountered the penetrating glance of the tall, dark young man who had formed one of the group on the porch the previous evening. He turned his eyes away instantly as he perceived that his interested gaze had been intercepted. As he did so, Peggy, despite the heat, felt a little shiver run through her.

But the emotion passed in a moment under the excitement of the dash forward. Before long, the rough habitations of Blue Creek lay far behind them, and in front there lay, glittering under the blinding sun, the far-reaching expanse of the desert. Off to the southwest hovered what seemed to be a blue cloud on the horizon. But they knew that in that direction lay the Black Rock hills, a desolate chain of low, barren mountains.

As if by instinct they all drew rein as the solitudes closed in about them. Rising in his stirrups Mr. Bell pointed into the distance. "Yonder lies the end of the rainbow!" he exclaimed with a touch of rude poetry.

"And back there are the wings to fetch forth the pot of gold," laughed Jess, indicating the packing cases on the burros' backs.

"Yes, the golden wings," struck in Peggy, but there was a wistful note underlying her light tone. The spell of the desert, the unreclaimed and desolate, was upon her.

CHAPTER IV

THE DESERT HAWKS

While our little party had been making its way so arduously across the almost impenetrable waste of sand and alkali, another party equipped with tough, desert-bred horses and a knowledge, so intimate as to be uncanny, of the secret ways and trails of the sun-bitten land, had made preparations for departure.

It had been no fancy on Peggy's part when she imagined that she heard the partial details of a plot against Mr. Bell on the night

during which she had lain awake in the rough hotel of Blue Creek. Had the party possessed the power of seeing through partitions of solid timber, they would have been able to behold within that room a scene transpiring which must, inevitably, have filled them with uneasiness and even alarm.

Red Bill Summers, one of the best known of the desert hawks, as the nefarious rascals who ply their highwayman's trade on the desert are sometimes called, had been one of the passengers on the train whose keenly observing eyes had surveyed the little party as they disembarked. His companion, the man with the drooping moustache was likewise invested with a somewhat sinister reputation. But probably the worst of the trio who foregathered that night at the National House was the romantic looking young man with the red sash and the silver spurs whom the others called Buck Bellew.

Mr. Bell and his expedition into the desert formed the topic of their conversation. It was evident, as they talked, that their main desire was to trap or decoy him on his way, but as they discussed plans this intention gradually changed.

"He's got kids with him, and young gals, too;" said the dark-mustached man, who seemed to be a little less ruffianly than his companions, "we don't want to do them no harm."

"Not if we can help it," rejoined Red Bill Summers, wrinkling his low forehead, "but I ain't goin' ter let them stand in our way."

"Of course not," chimed in Buck Bellew, playing with the tassels on his red sash, and jingling his silver-mounted spurs in a somewhat dandified fashion, "pretty girls, too," he added.

"Ther point's just this," struck in Red Bill, apparently paying no attention to the other's conversation, "Jim Bell's got a desert mine some place out thar yonder. This young chap he had with him, what's his name--"

"Prescott," suggested Buck Bellew.

"Ay, Prescott, that's it. Wal, this yer Prescott has invented some sort of an air ship, I read that in the papers. It's pretty clear to my mind that this air ship is going to be used in getting the gold out of the desert. That's plain enough, eh?"

"Yes, if your first idee is right. If he's got a paying mine in reality," agreed Bellew.

"Oh, I'm satisfied on that point. Jim Bell's too old a fox to go inter the desert onless he had stithin' worth going arter."

"Well, what are we going to do about it?" asked the third man with a grin, "build an aeroplane, too. For myself I'm free to confess I ain't no sky pilot and don't never expect to be one."

"This ain't a minstrel show," scowled Red Bill.

"Couldn't help laffin' though," said the black-mustached one, "talkin' uv aviators reminded me of that story of the feller who went ter see I lier doctor and git some medicine. Ther doc he says, 'I want you to take three drops in water very day.' Ther young chap fainted. When he recovered they asked him what the matter was. He says, 'I'm an aviator. Three drops in water would finish me in a week.'"

"That'll do from you," grunted Red Bill, without the trace of a smile at this little anecdote, "let's git down to bizness. Those folks leave here to-morrow. They'll go early in the morning. "We can't follow them too close without excitin' suspicion. The problem is to keep track of them without they're knowing it."

"Don't they take any servants or help?" asked Bellew after a pause.

"Yes, they do."

"You're certain?"

"I made it my business to find out. They are going to take a guide. Have him engaged, in fact."

"Who is he?"

"Oh, a no good Mexican, a chap named Juan Baptista."

"Juan Baptista!" exclaimed Bellew slapping his leg, "that's fine. Couldn't be better."

"You know him?"

"So well that he'll have to do anything I say."

"You can make him obey you then?"

"I know of a horse stealing case in which he was mixed up. If he won't do what we tell him to I'll threaten him with exposure."

"Good. He is sleeping in the corral with their ponies. Let's go down there now and rouse him out. Then we'll have part of the business settled."

"I'm agreeable. Come on."

As noiselessly as possible the three plotters crept from the room and tip-toed down the corridors. Following a long passage they presently emerged into a star-lit stable-yard. In that part of the west doors are not locked at night, so they could go out without bothering about a key.

"Where's the corral?" whispered Buck as they came out of the hotel.

"Right over there. See that haystack. The greaser's asleep this side of it. Right under where that saddle is hanging on the fence."

"All right. Come on."

Led by Buck Bellew, whose spurs gave out an occasional jingle, they crept across the yard. Presently they came upon a dark bundle lying huddled at the foot of the corral palings.

Bellew stirred the inanimate bundle with his foot. The spurs gave out a tinkling, musical jingle. The thing moved, stirred and finally galvanized into life. It was finally revealed as the figure of a rather ill-favored Mexican, unusually tall for one of his race who are, as a rule, squat and small.

"Buenas tardes, Juan!" greeted Buck Bellew.

"Buenas tardes, senors," was the response. "But what for do you disturb me in thees way. Know that to-morrow with the rising of the sun I have to awake and saddle the beasts, and fare forth into the alkali with party of gringos."

"That's all right. That's what we came to talk to you about, Juan," said Bellew. He bent low and pushed his face almost into the Mexican's brown and sleepy countenance.

"Do you know me!" he grated out.

"Todos Santos! Caramba! It is the Senor Bellew!"

"Not so loud Juan. There may be somebody around who would recognize that name. It is enough that you know me."

"What do you wish with me, senor?"

The Mexican's voice shook. Evidently he feared this tall, good-looking, though dissolute, young Gringo.

"You are to escort a party of gringos headed by a Senor Bell as far as Steer Wells, are you not?"

"Si senor. As I said to-morrow before the rising of the sun must I be awake. I must saddle and pack, and--"

"All right. Never mind that. I have a little bit of work for you to perform, too. If you do it well you will be rewarded. If not--"

"If not senor--?"

"If not--well don't let us dwell on unpleasant subjects. I want you

to ride with these gringos. Listen to all that they say. Talk to them and learn from them all that you can."

"Of what?"

"Of their destination--of where they are going--what they are going to do when they get there, and so on. You understand?"

"Perfectly señor. But they have paid me well and promised more. Señor Bell is a good man. He is--"

"Will you do what I tell you?"

The voice was sharp and imperious.

"Señor, I would do much for you. But this--"

The Mexican spread his hands helplessly.

"I cannot. It would be too bad a thing to do."

"Very well. I'll call Cash Dallah. Tell him who you are and how it was you who was concerned in the theft of those horses from Diablo River. You know what would happen to you then. You know--"

But the Mexican was down on his knees. His hands were raised in mute appeal. His teeth' chattered like the busy heels of a clog dancer.

"No, no, señor. Santa Maria, no, no!" he begged.

"It's entirely up to you," was the cold response. "Now will you do as I say?"

"Yes, yes. A thousand times yes, señor. Anything you say--anything."

"I thought so," rejoined Bellew grimly. He turned with a look of triumph to the two silent spectators of the scene, who nodded smilingly. The Mexican's pitiful agitation seemed only to amuse those callous hearts.

"You will travel, as I said, with these gringos," pursued Bellew, "and glean all the information you can. Then, when you have found out all about where they mean to go, and how long they mean to stay and so on, you will find an opportunity to drop out of their company."

"Si señor," quavered the man, "and then--"

"And then you will be met by us. We shall take care of you."

"But Señor Bell and the señoritas?"

"We will take care of them, too," was the grim response.

It was not till the next day, at noon, that the three desert hawks left the hotel, long after the departure of the Bell party. They rode slowly in the opposite direction to that in which the other party had gone, till they had gotten out of sight of the little town. Then, taking advantage of every dip and rise in the surface of the plain, they retraced their steps and soon were riding on the track of the Bell outfit.

"Whar wa'ar you all ther forenoon?" asked the black-mustached man of Red Bill as they rode along.

"I was doing a bit of profitable business," was the rejoinder.

"Selling something?"

"No finding something out. Boys, Jim Bell's in our power."

"In our power," laughed the other, a laugh in which Bellew chimed in. "I reckon you don't know him yet."

"Don't eh?" snarled Red Bill, stung into acrimonious retort. "I reckon your brain works just a bit too quick, Buck."

"Waal, ef you know so much, let's hear it?"

The red-sashed, silver-spurred Buck Bellew reined in closer to his companions, rowelling his little active "paint" horse as he did so, till it jumped and curvetted.

"It's just this," said Red Bill Summers, unconsciously lowering his tone although there was no one about to hear but his companions, a few, blasted-looking yuccas and, far overhead, a wheeling buzzard.

"Jim Bell ain't never filed no location of ther mine with ther gov'ment."

If he had expected to produce a sensation, he must have felt justified by the results of this announcement. Buck Bellew whistled. The black-mustached man gave a low, long-drawn-out exclamation of:

"Wo-o-o-w!"

"Thought you'd sit up and take notice," grinned their leader. "Sounds foolish-like, but it's true. I searched ther records, but it ain't on 'em."

"Maybe he's filed a claim some place else," suggested the black-mustached man.

"There you go, throwing cold water as usual," snorted Buck Bellew.

"Taint cold water. It's common, ornery hoss sense. That's what it is. Do you s'pose that any man 'ud be foolish enough to locate a rich mine an' then not file a claim to it?"

"Heard of sich things been done," commented Red Bill. "Maybe he ain't over and above anxious fer anyone ter go in alongside of him afore he's had a chanct ter take up some more land. Maybe--"

"Waal, no use guessing at sich things," rejoined Buck; "fer my part I guess Red is right. Jim Bell ain't had the hoss sense te file a claim. And if he ain't--"

"That makes it all the easier fer us. Wonder ef thet feller Juan is learning much?"

Bill Summers was the speaker.

"He's sharp as a steel trap," volunteered Bellew, "when he wants to be."

"I guess arter that dressing down you giv' him las' night he'll want to be, all right," opined the black-mustached man.

"Guess so," grinned Buck; "if he ain't, it'll be the worse fer him."

As he spoke they topped a little rise. Over in front of them, and on all sides--the desert, vast, illimitable, untrod of man, lay, a desolate expanse of nothingness.

Far, far off could be seen a tiny blue cloud, resting on the horizon--the desert range.

"Thar's whar Jim Bell's mine is, I'll bet a hoss and saddle," said Bellew reining in his horse and pointing to the distant azure mass.

"Guess you'd win," nodded Red Bill Summers, "and," he added, his keen eyes narrowing to slits he gazed straight ahead, "and thar, I reckon, is Jim Bell himself and his party."

They followed the direction of his gaze. Far off across the glittering ocean of sand and alkali a yellowish cloud--almost vaporish, arose. It seemed to be a sort of water spout on land. It drifted lazily upward. The experienced desert hawks knew it for what it was. The dust cloud raised by a company of travelers.

As their glances rested on it intently, not one of the three figures toping the crest of the little rise, spoke.

Their tired horses, too, stood absolutely still. Men and animals might have been petrified figures, carved out of the desolation about them. There was a something impressive about them as they

stood there in the midst of the desert glare. Silent, hawk-like, and intent. Their very poses seemed to convey a sense of menace--of danger.

Suddenly they wheeled and turned, and their mounts, as the spurs struck their damp sides, broke into a lope. As they galloped, Red Bill burst into a song. A lugubrious, melancholy thing, like most of the songs of the plainsmen.

"Bury me out on lone prair-ee
Out where the snakes and the coyotes be;
Drop not a tear on my sage brush grave
Out on the lone prair-e-e-e-e-e!"

Then the others struck in, their ponies' hoofs making an accompaniment to the gruesome words:

"The sands will shift in the desert wind;
My bones will rot in the alkali kind;
I'll be happier there than ever I be
In my grave, on the lone prair-e-e-e-e-e!"

It began to sound like a dirge, but still the leader of the hawks of the desert kept it up. He bellowed it out now in a harsh, shrill voice. It rasped uncomfortably, like rusty iron grating on rusty iron.

"Maybe upon the judgment day;
When all sinners their debt must pay;
They'll find me and bind me and judge poor me;
All in my grave, on the lone prair-e-e-e-e-e!"

As the last words of this dismal chant rang out, an echo seemed to be flung back at the singer from behind a neighboring ridge, upon which the lone yuccas stood upright, like, so many figures of formed bits of humanity.

"Ye-e-e-e-e-e!"

It came in a long drawn out wail that fairly seemed to make the desert ring with its gruesome echoes. All at once it was taken up from another point. Then another echoed it back. It seemed to be proceeding from a dozen quarters of the compass at once.

Strong nerved as all three of the riders were, it appeared to make a strange impression on them.

"What in the name of Kit Carson wuz that?" demanded Red Bill drawing rein.

"Dunno. It sounded like someone havin' fun with that ther cheerful little song of yourn," said the black-mustached man.

"That's what it did. I'd like to find the varmint. I'd make some fun fer him."

The man scowled savagely. His nerves had been unpleasantly shaken by the wild, unearthly cries.

"It didn't sound human," he said at length; "tell you what, let's jes' look aroun' and see if we kin find any trace of who done it."

Buck Bellew said nothing but he grinned to himself. Plainly something amused him hugely.

"All right;" he said, "we'll look."

They rode about among the desert dips and gullies for some time, but they could discover no trace of any agency that could have produced the weird cries. Both Red Bill and the black-mustached man were plainly nonplussed.

"This beats all," opined Summers. "I don't even see a track any place."

"Nor don't I," rejoined his companion seriously. Both were superstitious men, a failing apparently not shared by Bellew, who stood regarding them, seated easily sideways in his saddle, with an amused look.

"Hey Bellew, why don't you come an' look. You alters wuz a good tracker?" demanded Red Bill looking up suddenly.

"Not fer me, thanks," was the easy response, "ef you want to hunt spooks--"

"Who said it wuz a spook or any such pack uv nonsense?" glared back Summers.

"I didn't," declared the black-mustached man with great positiveness.

"No more did I," angrily sputtered Red Bill "thar ain't no such things nohow."

"I dunno," said the black-mustached man seriously. "I do recollect hearing my old grandmother, back East, tell about a ghost what she seen once. Want ter hear about it?"

No one replied, and taking silence for consent, he went on.

"Grandmother was married to a decent old chap that was a teamster. He used to haul farm stuff to the city in the day and it was often pretty late afore he got out again. Well, on his way he had to pass a cemetery, a buryin' ground you know, and I tell you he didn't like it. It sort of got on his nerves to think that some night one of

them dead folks lying there all so quiet might arise from ther graves.

"It seems as how it allers haunted him ter think that some night as he wuz drivin' by that ther buryin' ground--"

"Yer said that once before," snapped Summers looking nervously about him, "get on with your story."

"Well I am, ain't I?"

"Not fast enough."

"Waal this is a ghost story and ghosts don't move fast."

"Ho! ho!" laughed Bellew hollowly.

"As I was sayin', grandpop didn't like the idee of some night seeing a tall form, all in white, come gliding down among them tombstones, and raising its hand cry to him in a solemn voice--"

"Wow."

The shout came from Summers. He had suddenly felt something light on his shoulder. Thence it had crawled to neck and laid clammy feet upon him. It was an immense dragon fly, but he had evidently mistaken it for something else, to judge by the start and exclamation he had given.

"Ain't gittin' on yer nerves, be I?" asked the black-mustached man innocently.

"No, no. Get on with your fool story for goodness sake."

"You wuz a sayin' thet your fool grandpop wuz supposin' that ef something said to him as he wuz-oh, go on and tell it yourself!"

"All right. Well then grandpop was jes' a thinkin' how awful it 'ud be ef anything like that ever did happen. He'd come home and talk to grandma'am at nights about it. I tell you his nerves was powerful upsot. Suthin' like yours."

"Like mine, you long-legged lizard!"

"I mean like yours might hev bin ef you'd bin in my grandpop's place, Red."

"Oh, all right. Perceed. What nex'?"

"Waal, one night jes what he'd bin a dreadin' did come ter pass. He was goin' by ther graveyard when he hearn the awfulest screech you ever hearn--"

"Yow-e-ow-ee-ow-ow!"

Red Bill Summers started and turned pale. It was a repetition of the cry that had interrupted his song. Without wasting time on ceremonies, he dug his spurs into his horse and dashed off. The narrator of the ghost story, as badly scared as his companion, followed him at post haste. Ther Bellew laughing heartily, turned and followed them. But at a more leisurely speed. From time to time, as he pursued the flying forms, his big frame shook with mirth. Somebody once said that a man who gives a hearty laugh was not all bad. If this is true, there must have been considerable good in Buck Bellew.

After about a mile of riding he overtook the other two.

"What's the hurry?" he inquired easily.

"Nuthin', nuthin'," said Summers, still a bit shaky, "my pony scairt at suthin, I reckon, and jes' naturally dashed off. I had a hard job te pull the cayuse in."

"Same hyar, same hyar," said the black-mustached man.

"Rot!" laughed Bellew. "In my opinion, you're both a pair of cowards. Don't pull your gun on me, Summers. You wouldn't fire at me, and you know it."

Summers sullenly put up his gun.

"Say, what's ther matter with you, Buck?" he asked grumpily.

"What's the matter with you two, you mean? Why, you dashed off like a girl in a red sweater with a bull on her heels."

"I tole you ther ponies ran away," said Summers, shifting his little eyes. Somehow he couldn't look Bellew in the face.

"Yes, and I guess what made 'em run was suthin' like this--"

A quizzical look stole over Bellew's lean, handsome features. All at once the air became filled with the same mysterious sounds that had so alarmed Summers and the other man.

"Ye-e-e-e-e-e-ow-w-w-w-w-e-e-eeee!"

"Buck! You consarned old ventriloconquest!" shouted Summers, vastly relieved as Bellew burst into a roar of hearty laughter.

"Forgot I used to be ventriloquist with a medicine show, eh?" chuckled Bellew, rolling about in his saddle. "Come in handy sometimes, don't it?"

"Waal, next time yer goin' ter practice, jes' let us know in

advance."

Summers' face held rather a sheepish grin as he spoke. The black-mustached man looked even more foolish.

"Make a good signal, wouldn't it?" asked Bellew presently.

"Yes. By the way, reckon you could imitate a coyote, Buck?"

"Easy. Listen!"

A perfect imitation of a coyote's yapping, hyena-like cry rang out.

"Great. Maybe we can use that sometime."

How soon that cry was to be used, and to what disastrous effect on our little party of adventurers, we shall see as our story progresses. But the next time Buck Bellew gave that thrilling, spine-tightening cry, was to be under far different circumstances, and with far different results--results fraught with great importance to our young adventurers.

CHAPTER V

THE DIVINING RODS

"What wonderful clouds. They remind one of the fantastic palaces of the Arabian Nights!" exclaimed Miss Prescott.

It was at the close of the noonday halt that she spoke, reclining with the rest of the party under a canvas shelter, beneath which lunch had been eaten.

Off to the southwest the clouds she referred to had been, in fact, gathering for some time. Domed, terraced and pinnaced, they rose in gloomy grandeur on the far horizon. But Miss Prescott had not been the first to notice them. For some reason Mr. Bell, after gazing at the vaporous masses for a few minutes, looked rather troubled. He summoned Juan, who was feeding his beloved burro, and waved his hand toward the clouds, the same time speaking rapidly in Spanish.

"What is it? Is there a storm coming?" asked Jess, noting Mr. Bell's somewhat troubled look.

"I do not know, and Juan says he is not certain yet either," was the response. "Let us hope not, however."

"I don't see why it should trouble us," said Peggy. "We have good

tents and shelter, and as far as a good wetting is concerned I should think it would do this dried up place a lot of good."

"That is not what was worrying me," confessed Mr. Bell with a smile; "if it was to be an ordinary Eastern storm I should not mind any more than you. But the desert has many moods--as many as--you will pardon me--a young lady. Even the storms of the Big Alkali are not like others. They are dry storms."

"This would be no place for an umbrella dealer then," remarked Jimsy airily.

"No, I am speaking seriously," went on Mr. Bell; "frequently such storms do great damage through lightning, although, during their progress, not a drop of rain falls. The electrical display, however, is sometimes terrific. That is what I mean when I say 'a dry storm.'"

"I can't bear lightning," cried Jess; "I always go in the cellar at home when it comes."

"Never mind, Jess, Roy and I will dig you one if the storm hits us," put in her brother gallantly.

"And one for me, too, please!" cried Miss Prescott; "I'm dreadfully afraid of lightning."

"Well, let us hope that we shall none of us have any cause for alarm," put in Peter Bell, the former hermit. "When I lived my solitary life I often used to wander out in the height of a storm. It was beautiful to watch the lightning ripping and tearing across the sky. The lightning and the thunder did not scare me a bit. But--."

"You'd soon have changed your mind if by lightning you'd been hit," struck in Jimsy before the old man could complete his verse. A good natured laugh, in which Peter Bell joined as heartily as the others, followed this bit of improvisation.

"Well, let us be pressing on," said Mr. Bell presently; "we are not carrying any too heavy a water supply, and I am anxious to replenish it by nightfall. By the way, that means a new experience for you youngsters. You will get your first taste of alkali water."

"But how are you going to get water in this desert?" exclaimed Roy wonderingly.

"You will see before many hours," was the reply with which they had to be content.

All that afternoon they pressed on without anything of interest occurring. The distant clouds grew more imposing and blacker in hue, but they seemed to draw no closer. The heat, however, was

oppressive, and the glare of the desert hurt Peggy's eyes.

"If they didn't look so hideous, I wish I'd brought along those old smoked glasses I wore on the beach at Atlantic City," she thought more than once.

Sundown found the party skirting along the foot of rough, broken hills clothed with a scanty vegetation. Juan nodded approvingly and at once suggested making the camp there.

"We'll see if there is any water first," said Mr. Bell.

"It looks as if you need not take the trouble," declared Roy, "it's as dry as a week-old crust."

"Not quite so fast, young man," laughed Mr. Bell, "appearances are often deceitful, especially on the desert."

He dismounted, and reaching into one of the packs drew forth a slender forked stick. Then, while they all gazed in a puzzled silence at his actions, he passed it hither and thither over the dry floor of the desert.

"Oh, I know what it is now!" cried Peggy suddenly. "It's a divining rod!"

"A divining rod?" echoed Roy. "What's that?"

"Oh, look!" cried Jess, before Peggy could answer; "it's moving!"

The slender switch held by Mr. Bell was certainly behaving in a very odd manner. It could be seen to bend and sway and hop and skip about as if it had been suddenly endued with life. Mr. Bell, who was by now at some distance from the party, looked up with a satisfied expression.

"Get a shovel and dig here!" he ordered Juan. But the Mexican had fallen into a deep slumber from which it took not a little effort to awaken him. When he was finally roused and made to understand what was required of him, he set to work with a will, however, and made the dirt fly.

The boys pitched in, too, and before long quite a deep hole had been excavated. The girls, peeping cautiously over its edge, gave a delighted cry. Actual water was beginning to drain into it from the side. True, it was not of the color or temperature they had been used to associating with the fluid, but still the sight of it was welcome enough to the travel-stained wayfarers.

"You can come out now, boys, and leave the hole to fill up, which it will soon do," declared Mr. Bell.

The interval of waiting for the water to flow in a goodly quantity

was spent in adjusting the girls' tent, and in setting the camp to rights generally. A sort of blue-colored bunch grass grew in considerable quantities about the water hole, and this the burros seemed to find quite palatable. The ponies and horses, however, would not touch it, and had to be regaled on the pressed hay and grain which were carried for the purpose.

In the midst of all this there came a sudden sharp cry from the water hole, followed by a loud splash.

"It's old Mr. Bell! He's fallen into the water hole!" shrilled Peggy.

"Head over heels, too. Hurry and we'll get him out," cried the boys.

Roy seized up a lariat, and followed by the others started for the hole. It was as they had guessed. Venturing too close to the brink of the excavation, old Mr. Bell had slipped, and the former hermit was floundering about like a grampus in the water when his rescuers appeared. Luckily, it was not deep, and they soon had him out of it and on his feet. The old man, with great good nature, declared that he had rather enjoyed his involuntary bath than otherwise. He was so mud-stained and drenched, however, that it was necessary for him to make an immediate change of clothes. When he emerged from his tent with dry apparel, the aged recluse felt moved to compose a verse, which he did as follows:

"Within the mud hole's watery depths,
A grave I almost met,
But luckily I was pulled out Alive, but very wet."

"Well, Peter," laughed his brother, "you certainly are a poetic philosopher. But now, if you are quite finished with the water hole, we will draw some for our own use, and then Juan can let the stock have a drink."

As the first bucket for camp use was drawn, Peggy hastened up with a cup and extended it.

"Oh, do let me have a drink," she exclaimed; "I'm dying with thirst and can't wait for tea."

"Same here," cried Jess, eagerly.

Mr. Bell smiled and eyed them quizzically.

"I wouldn't advise you young ladies to try it till it has been boiled," he said, "but of course if you insist--"

"We do," cried both girls.

"Fill the cups, Juan," ordered Mr. Bell.

The guide did so, and Peggy and Jess eagerly raised the receptacles. But hardly had they taken a swallow before they hurriedly ceased drinking.

"Oh, what awful stuff!" sputtered Peggy, while Jess simply gasped.

"Bah! It tastes like aged eggs added Roy, who had also taken a swallow. "Is it poisonous?"

"Not a bit of it," laughed Mr. Bell; "it is simply alkali water, and when you have drunk as much of it as I have you'll be used to it and not mind it. But I must admit that on first introduction it is rather trying. It is better when it is boiled, though. It seems to lose that acrid flavor."

And so it proved; and Miss Prescott declared that she had never enjoyed a cup of tea so much as the one she drank that evening at supper on the desert. As dusk fell, Juan produced a battered guitar from a case which was strapped to the back of his saddle, and seating himself cross-legged in the midst of a semi-circle of enthusiastic listeners he banged out a lot of Spanish airs.

Then Jimsy danced a jig with incomparable agility and Roy did some tricks with cards and handkerchiefs that were declared superior to anything heretofore seen. But the little entertainment was to come to an abrupt conclusion. So engrossed had they been in its progress that they had not noticed that the sky had clouded over, and that it had suddenly grown insufferably oppressive.

All at once a red glare enveloped the camp. It lasted only for the fraction of a second, but in its brief existence it displayed some very white and alarmed faces.

The electric storm that Mr. Bell had dreaded was upon them.

CHAPTER VI

A DRY STORM

In describing what immediately followed, Peggy has always declared that her sole impression was of continuous "flash and crash."

The first red glare, as a jagged streak of lightning tore across the sky, was followed by an earsplitting thunder roll. Almost instantly the entire heavens became alive with wriggling serpents of light. The criss-cross work of the bolts ranged in hue from a vivid eye-burning blue to an angry red. And all the time the thunder

roared and crashed in one unceasing pandemonium. A smell of brimstone and sulphur filled the air. The tethered stock whinnied and plunged about in mad terror.

"Juan, look to the stock!" shouted Mr. Bell above the turmoil. But Juan, at the first crash, had flung himself face downward on the sand and lay there trembling and praying.

As there seemed no possibility of getting him up, the boys and Mr. Bell set to work on the by no means easy task of securing the terrified animals more carefully.

In the meantime, the girls, in Miss Prescott's tent, were having a hard time to convince that lady that the end of the universe was not at hand.

"Oh, dear, why did we ever come out here!" cried the terrified woman; and then the next minute:

"Just hark at that! We shall all be killed! I know it! Oh, this is terrible!"

"It will soon be over, aunt, dear," exclaimed Peggy bravely, though her own head ached and her eyes burned cruelly from the glare and uproar.

"Yes, dear Miss Prescott," chimed in Jess; "it can't last; it--"

There was a sudden blinding glare, followed by a crash that seemed as if the skies must have been rent open. With it mingled a loud scream from Miss Prescott and cries and shouts from outside the tent.

"Something in the camp has been struck!" exclaimed Peggy rushing to the tent door.

"It's Juan's burro!" cried Jess, who had followed her; "look at the poor thing, off over there."

In the radiance of the electric display they could see quite plainly the still form of the little animal lying outstretched on the ground. Juan heard the girl's cry, and for the first time since the storm had begun he moved. Directly he perceived the motionless form of his mount he appeared to lose all his terror of the storm, and sprinted off toward it on his long legs. As he ran he called aloud on all the saints to look down upon his miserable fate.

But as he reached the side of his long-eared companion, the creature, which had only been stunned by the bolt, suddenly sprang to its feet and, no doubt crazed by fear, began striking out with its hind hoofs. As ill luck would have it, poor Juan came within direct range of the first kick, and was sent flying backward by its force.

Behind him lay the water hole, and before he could stop the cowardly guide found himself over the brink and struggling in the muddy water. His cries for help were piercing, but as Mr. Bell and the boys were busy, and as they knew that the Mexican was in no actual peril, they left him there for a time.

In the meantime, the first terrific violence of the storm had subsided, and before long it passed. As it growled and muttered off in the distance, lighting up the desert with an occasional livid glare, Juan came scrambling out of the mud-hole. He did not say a word, but went straight up to his burro. He saddled it in silence, strapped his old guitar on its back and, swinging himself into the saddle, dashed off across the alkali, his long legs working like pendulums on either side of the little creature. It actually seemed as if he were propelling instead of riding it.

The boys wanted to know if they should set off in pursuit of their errant guide, but Mr. Bell said that it would be the best thing to let him go if he wished.

"He was more of a hindrance than a help," he declared, "and he and his burro between them ate far more than their share of food."

"But won't the poor man become lost or starve?" asked Miss Prescott, who, now that her alarm had passed with the storm, had joined the group.

"Not much danger of that," laughed Mr. Bell, "a fellow of Juan's type can subsist on next to nothing if he has to, and his burro is as tough as he is, I suspect."

"At any rate, he must have thought so when he got that kick," laughed Peggy.

"It reminded me of a verse I once heard," put in the former hermit.

And then, without waiting for anyone to ask him to repeat the lines in question, he struck up:

"As a rule, never fool
With a buzz saw or a mule."

"I expect that's excellent advice," laughed the old man's brother, "but now, ladies and gentlemen, as the excitement of the night seems to be over, I think we had better retire. Remember, an early start to-morrow, and if all goes well we ought to be at Steer Wells by nightfall."

"If we steer well," muttered Jimsy, not daring to perpetrate the pun in a louder tone of voice.

Fifteen minutes later, silence entrenched the camp, which seemed

like a tiny island of humanity in the vast silence stretched round about. As they slumbered, the girls, with their silver-mounted revolvers--gifts from Mr. Bell--under their pillows, the clouds of the dry storm rolled away altogether, and the effulgent moon of the Nevada solitudes arose.

Her rays silvered the desolate range of barren hills and threw into sharp relief the black shadows which marked the deep gulches, cutting the otherwise smoothly rounded surfaces of the strange formation.

Suddenly, from one of the gulches, the figure of a man on horseback emerged and stood, motionless as a statue, bathed in moonlight on an elevation directly overlooking the camp. For perhaps five minutes the horseman remained thus, silent as his surroundings. But suddenly a shrill whinny rang out from one of the horses belonging to our party, who had seen the strange animal.

Instantly the figure turned and wheeled, and when Mr. Bell, ever on the alert, emerged from his tent to ascertain what the noise might portend, nothing was to be seen.

"That's odd," muttered the mining man, "horses don't usually whinny in the night except to others of their kind who may suddenly appear. I wonder--but, pshaw!" he broke off; "the thing's impossible. Even if our mission were known nobody would dare to molest us.

"But just the same," he continued, as, after a careful scrutiny, he returned to the tent he shared with his brother, "but just the same I'd like to know just why that animal whinnied."

Whoever the watcher of the camp had been, he did not reappear that night, but while old Mr. Bell prepared breakfast, and the girls were what the boys called "fixing up," the mining man summoned the boys to him and observed that he wished them to take a little stroll to see if better grass for the stock could not be found in the hills. This was so obviously an excuse to get them off for a quiet talk that the lads exchanged glances of inquiry. They said nothing, however, but followed Mr. Bell as he struck off toward the barren range.

As soon as they were out of earshot of the camp the mining man informed them of his suspicions and of what he had heard the night before.

"On thinking it over I am more than ever convinced that somebody must have been hovering about the camp last night," he declared, "but it is no use alarming the others unnecessarily, and, after all, I may be mistaken. In any event, from now on, we will post ourselves on sentry duty at night so as not to be taken by surprise in the event of any malefactors attacking us."

"Then you really think, sir, that somebody may have wind of the

object of our journey and molest us?" inquired Roy soberly.

"I don't know; but it is always best to be on the safe side," was the rejoinder; "the towns on the edge of the desert are full of bad characters and it is possible that in some way the reason of our expedition has leaked out."

By this time they had walked as far as the mouth of one of the bare canyons that split the range of low, barren hills. Roy, whose eyes had been thoughtfully fixed on the ground, suddenly gave a sharp exclamation.

"Look here, Mr. Bell," he exclaimed, pointing downward, "what do you make of that?"

He indicated the imprints of a horse's hoofs on the dry ground.

"You have sharp eyes, my boy," was the reply; "those hoof-prints are not more than a few hot old, and certainly clinch my idea that someone on horseback was in the vicinity of the camp last night."

Jimsey looked rather grave at this. Roy, too, had a troubled note in his voice as he inquired:

"What do you make of it all, Mr. Bell?"

"Too early to say yet, my boy," said the mining man, who had been studying the hoof-prints, "but I can tell you this, that only one man was here last night."

"We have nothing to fear from one man," exclaimed Jimsey.

"I know that," was Mr. Bell's response, "but this lone visitor of last night may have been only the scout or forerunner of the others, whoever they may be."

"That's so," agreed Roy, "at any rate he must have had some strong object in spying on us."

Nobody would come out into this desolate place without an aim of some sort."

"No question but that you are right there," agreed Mr. Bell, whose face was grave, "I have half a mind to turn back and not bring the ladies further into what may prove to be a serious situation."

"So far as Peggy is concerned you'd have a hard time trying to get her to turn back now," declared Roy; "her mind is bent upon helping to get the air line from the mine into working order, and I guess Jess feels the same way about it."

"It would be a sad blow to them to have to go back now," agreed Jimsey; "suppose, Mr. Bell, we wait and make our suspicions more of a

certainty before we decide upon anything."

"Perhaps that would be the best course," agreed the lad's elder, "but I must confess I feel sorely troubled. It is agreed, is it not, that not a word of our suspicions are to be breathed to the ladies?"

"Oh, of course," agreed Roy; "after all," he added cheerfully, "the man who left those tracks may have been a prospector or a desert traveler of some kind, and have had no sinister motives."

"I am inclined to think that, too," said Mr. Bell, after a pause; "after all, nobody could have any object in attacking us at such a time."

CHAPTER VII

PROFESSOR "WANDERING WILLIAM"

The ponies, and the larger steeds ridden by the elders of the party, were pushed forward at a rapid gait all the morning. As had been explained by Mr. Bell, it was necessary for them to reach Steer Wells by sundown, as they could not hope to encounter any more water holes till they gained that point.

In the meantime, water was carried by means of an ingenious arrangement of Mr. Bell's. This was nothing more or less than two large bags of water-proof fabric, which could be filled and then flung on the pack burros' backs. In this way enough was carried for each of the animals to have a scanty supply, although there was none too much left over. That day's luncheon halt was made near a stony, arid canyon in the barren hills, along whose bases they were still traveling.

While the others set about getting a meal, Peggy and Jess linked arms and wandered off a short distance from the camp, bent on exploring. All at once Peggy gave a sudden, sharp little cry.

"Oh, Jess, look! What a funny little creature!"

"Ugh, what a horrid looking thing! What can it be?" exclaimed Jimsy's sister.

"It's--it's like a large spider!" cried Peggy suddenly, "and what horrid hairy legs it has, and--oh, Jess--it's going to attack us!"

"I do believe it is o-o-o-h!"

The cry was a long drawn out one of shrill alarm as the "large spider," as Peggy had termed it, tucked its legs under its fat,

hairy body and made a deliberate spring at the two girls. Only their agility in leaping backward saved them from being landed upon by it. But far from being dismayed apparently, the creature was merely enraged by this failure. It was gathering itself for another spring when:

Crack!

There was a puff of smoke and a vicious report from Peggy's little revolver, and the next instant the thing that had so alarmed the two young girls lay still. At the same moment the rest of the party, frightened by the sound of the sudden shot, came running up.

"A tarantula!" cried Mr. Bell, "and one of the biggest I have ever seen. It is fortunate for you, young ladies, that he did not bite you or there might have been a different tale to tell. Which of you shot it?"

"Oh, Peggy of course," cheerfully admitted Jess; "I can't pull the trigger yet without shutting my eyes."

"Hurrah for Peggy Prescott, America's premier girl rifle and revolver shot!" shouted Jimsy in blatant imitation of a show man.

"What a pair of fangs!" cried Roy, who had picked up the dead tarantula and was examining it carefully.

The girls could not repress a shudder as they looked at the dead giant spider, lying with its great legs outstretched, on Roy's hand.

"The Mexicans have a superstition that even if one does not die from the effects of their bites that the tarantula can inoculate a person with dancing poison," said Mr. Bell.

"Dancing poison?" they all cried in an astonished chorus.

"Yes," explained the mining man, "that is to say, that its poison will cause a sort of St. Vitus's dance."

"Good gracious! How unpleasant!" cried Jess. "I'm awfully fond of dancing, but I wouldn't care to come by my fun that way."

"Better than being bitten by the kissing bug anyhow," teased Roy mischievously.

The episode of the tarantula furnished plenty of conversation through the luncheon hour, and caused Miss Prescott many shudders. The poor lady was beginning to think that more dangers lurked in the desert than on any of her most dreaded street crossings in New York.

But little time was spent over the midday meal, and then the final "leg" of their dash across the alkali to Steer Wells began. The sun was low, bathing the desert in a crimson glow, when Mr. Bell, who

was riding in advance, gave a sudden shout and pointed ahead to a patch of forlorn looking trees in the distance.

"Steer Wells," he announced.

The boys gave a cheer and plunged forward, with Peggy and Jess close behind. But the others advanced more sedately.

But as they drew closer to the clump of trees standing so oddly isolated amid the waste of alkali, they noted with surprise that they were not to be the only persons to share the hospitality of the oasis. From amid the foliage a column of blue smoke was rising, betokening the presence of other wayfarers. Instantly speculation became rife among the young folks. Who could be the sharers of their excursion into the untraveled wastes? They were soon to discover.

A strange figure stepped from the trees as the ponies, in a cloud of dust, dashed up. It was that of a tall, angular man with a pair of iron-rimmed spectacles perched on a protuberant nose. He was clean shaven, except for a goatee, and his wrinkled skin was the color of old leather. Long locks of gray hair hung lankly almost to his narrow, sloping shoulders. Above these straggly wisps was perched jauntily a big sombrero of regulation plainsman type. But the strangest feature of this strange personage lay in the remainder of his attire, which consisted of a long black frock coat hanging baggily to his knees and a pair of trousers of the largest and most aggressive check pattern imaginable. His feet were encased in patent leather boots, over which were gaiters of a brilliant yellow.

Under the trees could now be seen a small wagon painted a bright red, which bore upon its sides the inscription:

"Professor Wandering William, Indian Herb Remedies. They make the desert of life to bloom like the Rose Gardens of Mount Hybla. 50 cents per bottle or half a dozen for \$2.50."

The professor's angular mule team were browsing on the scanty grass that grew within the circle of trees, while above a fire of chips and twigs there hung an iron pot, which evidently contained the professor's supper. As for the professor himself, he clearly stood revealed in the person of the strange character who now, taking off his sombrero, waved it three times around his head in solemn rhythm, and then, raising a high pitched voice, shouted:

"Welcome! Thrice welcome to this fertile spot amid the stony desert. Like the Great Indian Herb Remedy, it blooms like the Rose Gardens of Hybla. Ahem!"

The conclusion of this speech was a dry cough, after which the professor solemnly readjusted his hat, and coming forward, said in quite ordinary tones:

"Howdy-do."

By this time the remainder of the party had galloped up, and arrived just as the young folks, hardly knowing what to say, had responded "howdy-do" likewise.

"I hardly expected to find anyone else here," said Mr. Bell, and then by way of introduction, he rattled off their names, the professor bowing low as each was presented.

"And now," said he, "allow me to present myself, Professor Wandering William, proprietor and originator of the Great Indian Herb Medicine, good alike for man or beast, child or adult. Insist on the original and only. Allow me," and the speaker suddenly whisked round with unexpected agility and darting toward his wagon opened the back of the vehicle and presently reappeared with several small bottles. He handed one to each of the new arrivals.

"Samples!" he explained, "and free as the birds of the air. If you like the samples, make a purchase. Money back if not exactly as represented."

With as grave faces as they could assume, they all thanked this queer character, and then Mr. Bell asked.

"May I inquire what you are doing in the desert, Professor. I should think you would find this part of the country a most unprofitable field."

"My dear sir," rejoined the professor, "twice a year I make a pilgrimage into the desert to gather the ingredients of The Remedy. You behold me now almost at the conclusion of my labors. In a few days I shall return to the haunts of civilization and gladden the hearts of mankind by disbursing The Remedy on my terms as quoted on the wagon yonder."

The professor lent a hand in unsaddling and unpacking the stock of the adventurers, and proved to be of great assistance in several ways. Evidently he was an experienced plainsman and he suggested many ways in which their equipment might be lightened and adjusted. His odd manner of talking only possessed him at intervals, and at other times he seemed to converse like any rational being.

This put a queer idea into Peggy's head.

"I wonder if he's acting a part?" she thought to herself. But the next minute the professor's exaggerated gestures and tones convinced her to the contrary. Although his manner was as outlandish as his choice of clothes, still there was a certain something about it which negated the idea of its being assumed, unless the professor was a most consummate actor. He informed the party that he had set out to cut across the desert from California and had had several

narrow escapes from death by reason of lack of water.

He appeared much interested when Mr. Bell informed him that the party had started out from Blue Creek, adding--as he deemed wisest--that they were a party of tenderfeet anxious to explore the desert at first hand.

"So you were in Blue Creek recently, eh?" he said, with an entire lack of his exaggerated manner, but in crisp tones that fairly snapped; "didn't hear anything there of Red Bill Summers, did you?"

With a half smile Mr. Bell replied that they had not had the pleasure of the gentleman's acquaintance.

"Don't know about the pleasure part of it," shot out the professor, "he's the most desperate crook this side of Pikes Peak. I'd give a good deal for a look at him myself. I--I have a professional interest in him," he added, with a queer smile which set his eyes to snapping and crackling.

"A medical interest, I suppose?" inquired Mr. Bell, "you think he'd make an interesting study?"

"Most interesting," was the reply in quiet, thoughtful tones.

But the next instant the professor was back at his old pompous, high-flown verbal gymnastics, and after supper he entertained them till bedtime with tales of his experiences, to which both boys and girls listened with wide-eyed astonishment.

"The oddest character I have ever encountered," declared Mr. Bell, as the professor, after bowing low to the ladies and apostrophizing the male portion of his audience, retired to his red wagon, within which he slept.

They all agreed to this, but Peggy said rather timidly:

"Somehow I don't think he's quite as odd as we think him."

"What do you mean, my dear?" asked Mr. Bell.

"Why, when he spoke about that Red Billy whatever his name was, did you see how different he looked? Younger somehow, and--and oh, quite different. I don't know just how, but he wasn't the same at all."

"Oh, Peggy's trying to work up a romantic mystery about the professor," teased Jess; "maybe he's a wandering British lord in disguise or the interesting but wayward son of a millionaire with a hobby for socialism."

The others burst into laughter at Jess's raillery, but Miss Prescott gently said:

"There is a great deal in womanly intuition, my dear, and for my part I had the same feeling as you. I mean that that man was not just what he appeared to be, namely, a chattering, ignorant quack."

"Well, as we may have him for a neighbor for some days we shall have a chance to watch him closely," said Mr. Bell.

But in this the leader of the party of adventurers turned out to be wrong, for when they awoke the next morning the grove did not contain the professor or his red wagon. Only the ashes of his fire were there to tell of his sojourn. But on one of the trees they found pinned a note.

"Sorry to leave so abruptly, but circumstances compelled. Perhaps we shall meet again. Who knows!"

And that, for many days, was to be the last they saw of the professor. When they re-encountered him--but of the surprising circumstances under which this was to take place we shall learn later.

CHAPTER VIII

A DESERT FIGHT

There was too much before them for the party to spend much time in speculation concerning the professor's sudden disappearance. Immediately after breakfast Mr. Bell called the boys aside and said:

"How long will it take to get an aeroplane ready?"

The question came briskly, as did all Mr. Bell's speeches.

"I think I can promise to have a machine ready for flight by noon," was Roy's rejoinder after a brief interval of thought.

"Good! In that case we will waste no time in getting to work. I am anxious to reach the mine and stake it out properly for claim filing purposes. The less delay the better."

It was news to both boys that the definite legal claim to his discovery had not yet been made by Mr. Bell.

"Well, at any rate you are not likely to be bothered by claim jumpers away off here," commented Roy.

"No, I hardly think so," was the response, "but in these matters one cannot be too careful. Since the news spread that I have struck it

rich there are men capable of enduring any hardship if there exists a possibility of wresting it from me."

"I should have thought that in order to be on the safe side you would have filed your claim before you came East," put in Peggy, who had joined the little group of consultants.

"I would have done so were it not for the fact that to have filed my claim and given the location would have set on my track the entire, restless gold-seeking horde that hangs about desert towns," said Mr. Bell, with some warmth. "It is an outrageous thing, but nevertheless a fact, that the moment one files a claim it becomes public property. In my opinion the government should protect the locator of a gold find."

"But would that be quite fair to the others," said Peggy softly. "Shouldn't everybody have an opportunity to develop natural resources?"

Mr. Bell gazed at her admiringly.

"You are right, my dear, and I'm a selfish old bear," he said, "but just the same, not all gold-seekers make desirable neighbors. Many desperate men are among them."

Peggy's mind wandered back to that midnight conversation she had overheard on the porch of the National House. But the same dread of ridicule that she had experienced then still held her, and she refrained from mentioning it.

By noon, with such good will did they work, that not only was one of the monoplanes erected and ready for flight, but a second was partially assembled, and only required the finishing touches to be in readiness for its aerial dash. While the boys, with the girls eagerly helping them, worked on the flying machine, Mr. Bell carefully studied a map he had made of the mine's location, and tested his compass. This done he--as sailors say--"laid out a course" for himself. From the springs the mine lay about due southeast and some hundred and twenty miles away.

In case of accidents the mining man traced carefully a second map, which was to be left behind in the camp so as to be constantly available in case anything happened to the first one, it had been decided that Jimsy, who by this time had become quite a skillful aviator, was to accompany Mr. Bell in the preliminary flight.

Roy and Mr. Peter Bell were to be left in charge of the camp, and in the event of the first aeroplane not returning that night the second, one was to be dispatched in search of it.

As an old plainsman, Mr. Bell had not laid his plans without taking into consideration the possibility of accident to the aeroplane, and none realized better than he did what serious consequences such an

accident might have.

In the chassis of the machine with the travelers were placed a stock of canned goods, a pick and shovel and several hundred feet of fine but tough rope. A supply of water in stone jars and an extra stock of gasoline were also taken along. At the conclusion of the noon meal the motor was started and found to be working perfectly. Nothing then remained to be done but to bid hasty "au revoirs" and wing off across the barren wastes.

"If all goes well we may be back to-night," said Mr. Bell as he slipped into the seat set tandem-wise behind Jimsy.

"And if not?" inquired Roy.

"In that case," and Mr. Bell's voice held a grave note, "in that case you will take the other monoplane and start out to look for us."

The roar of the motor as Jimsy started it drowned further words. Blue smoke and livid flames burst from the exhausts. The structure of the flying machine shook and quivered under the force of the explosions. The next instant the first aeroplane to invade the Big Alkali scudded off across the level floor of the desert, and after some five hundred feet of land travel soared upward. In fifteen minutes it was a fast diminishing speck against the burnished blue of the Nevada sky.

There was some feeling of loneliness in the hearts of those left behind as they turned back toward the camp under the straggly willows. But this was speedily dissipated by that sovereign tonic for such feelings—namely, work. Much was to be done on the remaining monoplane, and with the exception of brief intervals of "fooling" the young people spent the rest of the day on finishing its equipment. Sunset found the machine ready for flight and the girl aviators and Roy very ready indeed for the supper to which Peter Bell presently summoned them by loud and insistent beating on a tin pan.

You may be sure that as the sun dipped lower, the sky toward the southwest had been frequently swept by expectant eyes, but supper was served and eaten, and the purple shadows of night began softly to drape the glaring desert and still there came no sign of the homing aeroplane.

"Reckon they don't want to risk a night flight and so have decided to camp at the mine," suggested old Peter Bell in response to Miss Prescott's rather querulous wondering as to the reason of the non-return.

"That must be it," agreed Roy easily, demolishing the last of a can of chicken.

Truth to tell, inwardly he had not expected the travelers back that night, and perhaps there lingered, too, in his mind, a faint desire to test out the other aeroplane in a task of rescue, in the event of the one Jimsy was driving breaking down.

But when morning came without a sign of the missing monoplane speculation crystallized into a real and keen anxiety. It was determined to delay no longer but set out at once in search of it. To this end the recently equipped airship was stocked with food and water, and shortly before noon Roy finished the final tuning up of the engine. The others watched him anxiously as he worked. It seemed clear enough that some real accident must have occurred to the other machine.

"James would never keep us in suspense like this," said Mr. Bell, "if he could reach us and relieve our anxiety."

Roy was just about to clamber into the chassis when Peggy and Jess, who had been missing for several minutes, emerged from their tent. Each girl wore an aviation hood and stout leather gauntlets. Plainly they were dressed for aerial flight. Roy gazed at them quizzically.

"I hate to disappoint you girls," he said, "but I've got to play a lone hand in this thing."

"No such thing," said Peggy in her briskest tones; "what if anything happened to you? Who would run the machine if we weren't along?"

"That's quite true, Roy," struck in Jess, "and besides if--if anything has gone wrong with Jimsy who has a better right to be near him than I?"

Roy looked perplexed.

"What am I to do, Aunt Sally?" he appealed, turning to Miss Prescott.

To Peggy's astonishment, as much as anyone else's, Miss Prescott did not veto their going.

"I think it would be great folly for you to go on an expedition of this kind alone," she said, addressing Roy. "As Peggy says, if anything went wrong what could you do alone?"

"Oh, aunt, you're a dear!" cried Peggy, giving the kindly old lady a bear hug.

"But I make one condition," continued Miss Prescott, "and that is, that whatever you find, you do not delay, but report back here as soon as possible. I could not bear much more anxiety."

This was readily promised, and ten minutes later the three young

aviators were in the chassis of the big monoplane. After a moment's fiddling with levers and adjustments Roy started the motor. Heavily laden as it was the staunch aeroplane shot upward steadily after a short run. As it grew rapidly smaller, and finally became a mere black shoe button in the distance, Miss Prescott turned to old Peter Bell with a sigh.

"Heaven grant they all come back safe and sound," she exclaimed.

"Amen to that, ma'am," was the response, and then unconsciously lapsing into his rhythmical way of expressing himself, the old man added: "Though flying through the air so high they'll come back safely by and by."

And then, while old Peter shuffled off to water the stock, Miss Prescott fell to continuing her fancy work which the good lady had brought with her from the Fast. An odd picture she made, sitting there in that dreary grove in the desert, with her New England suggestion of primness and house-wifely qualities showing in striking contrast to the strange setting of the rest of the picture.

CHAPTER IX

AGAINST HEAVY ODDS

"Any sign of them yet, Roy?"

Peggy leaned forward and gently touched her brother's arm.

"I can't see a solitary speck that even remotely resembles them," he said. "It looks bad," he added with considerable anxiety in his tones.

Peggy took a peep at the plan which was spread out before Roy on a little shelf designed to hold aerial charts. Then she glanced at the compass and the distance indicator.

"We must be close to the place now," she said; "it's somewhere off there, isn't it?"

"There" was a range of low hills cut and slashed by steep-walled gullies and canyons. In some of these canyons there appeared to be traces of vegetation, giving rise to the suspicion that water might be obtained there by digging.

Roy nodded.

"That's the place, and there's that high cone shaped hill that the

plan indicates as the location of the mine."

"But there's not a trace of them-oh, Jimsy!"

Jess's tones were vibrant with cruel anxiety. Her face was pale and troubled. As for Peggy, her heart began to beat uncomfortably fast. But she wisely gave no outer sign.

"Don't worry, girlie," she said in as cheerful and brisk a tone as she could call up on the spur of the moment, "it will be all right. I'm sure of it."

Circling high above the range of barren hills they took a thorough survey of them. There was no sign of the missing aeroplane or her occupants, but all at once beneath them they saw something that caused them all to utter an astonished shout.

In one of the shallower gullies there was suddenly revealed the forms of an immense pack of animals of a gray color and not unlike dogs.

"Wolves!" cried Peggy.

"No, they are coyotes," declared Roy; "I recollect now hearing Mr. Bell say that these hills were frequented by them."

While they still hovered above the strange sight, a sudden swing brought another angle of the gully into view, and there, hidden hitherto by a huge rock, was the missing aeroplane.

But of its occupants there was not a trace.

"We must descend at once," decided Roy.

"But, Roy, the coyotes!"

It was Jess who spoke. The sight of the immense pack of the brutes thoroughly unnerved her. As they swung lower, too, they could hear the yappings and howlings of the savage band.

"I don't think they will bother us," said Roy. "I've heard Mr. Bell say that they are cowardly creatures."

"If they do we'll have to fly up again," said Peggy; "but we simply must examine that aeroplane for some clue of the others' whereabouts. Besides we have our revolvers."

"And can use them, too," said Roy with decision. "Now look out and hold tight, for I'm going to make a quick drop."

The gully seemed to rush upward at the aeroplane as it swooped down, coming to rest finally, almost alongside its companion machine. Luckily, the big rock before mentioned concealed the new arrivals

from the view of the pack gathered further up the gully.

No time was lost in alighting and examining the machine, but beyond the fact that none of the food or water had been disturbed there was no clue there. Another puzzling fact was that the rifles Mr. Bell and Jimsy had brought with them still lay in the chassis. This seemed to dispose of the theory that they had been attacked. But what could have become of them? Was it possible that the coyotes--? Roy gave an involuntary shiver as a thought he did not dare allow himself to retain flashed across his mind. And yet it was odd the presence of that numerous pack all steadily centered about one spot.

"I'm going to try firing a shot into the air," said Roy suddenly; "if they are in the vicinity they will hear it and answer if they can."

"Oh, yes, do that, Roy," begged Jess. "Oh, I'm almost crazy with worry! What can have happened?"

The sharp bark of Roy's pistol cut short her half hysterical outbreak. Following the report they listened intently and then:

"Hark!" exclaimed Peggy, her eyes round and her pulses beating wildly. "Wasn't that a shout? Listen, there it is again!"

"I heard it that time, too," exclaimed Roy.

"And !!" cried Jess.

"It came from down the canyon where those coyotes are," went on Peggy.

"That's right, sis, and it complicates our search," said Roy, "but we've got to go on now. You girls wait here for me while I investigate, and--and you'd better take those rifles out of the other aeroplane."

"Oh, Roy, you're not going alone?" Peggy appealed.

"I'm not going to let you girls take a chance till I see what's ahead, that's one sure thing," was the rejoinder.

Before another word could be said the boy, revolver in hand, vanished round the big rock. Hardly had he done so, when there was borne to the girls' ears the most appalling confusion of sounds they had ever heard. The bedlam was, punctuated by several sharp shots, and Roy appeared running from round the rock. His hat was off, and as he approached he shouted:

"Get back to the aeroplanes! The pack's after us!"

At the same instant there appeared the leaders of the onrush. Great, half-famished looking brutes, whose red mouths gaped open

ferociously and whose eyes burned wickedly.

But Roy had hardly had time to shout his warning before an accident, entirely unexpected, occurred. His foot caught on a stone and he came down with a crash. The next moment the pack would have been upon him, but Peggy jerked the rifle she had selected to her shoulder and fired into the midst of the savage horde. With a howl of anguish one of the creatures leaped high in a death agony and came toppling down among his mates, a limp, inanimate mass. This checked the surging onrush for an instant, and in that instant Roy was on his feet and sprinting briskly toward the girls.

Straight for the aeroplanes they headed. Reaching them they entrenched themselves in what they could not but feel was an immensely insecure position.

"Thank you, sis," was all that Roy, with a bit of a choke in his voice, was able to gasp out before the leaders of the pack were on them.

More by instinct than with any definite idea, the young people began desperately pumping lead into the seething confusion of gray backs and red gaping mouths.

All at once poor Jess, half beside herself with terror, gave a throaty little gasp.

"I think I'm going to faint," she exclaimed feebly.

Peggy gave her a sharp glance.

"You'll do no such thing, Jess Bancroft," she said sharply, although the pity in her eyes belied the harshness of the words, "if you do I'll--I'll never speak to you again!"

The words had their calculated effect, and Jess made a brave rally. At almost the same instant a shot from Roy's rifle brought down the largest of the creatures of the desert, a big hungry looking brute with tawny, scraggy hair and bristling hackles. As he rolled over with a howl of anguish and rage a sudden wavering passed through the pack. It was like a wind-shadow sweeping over a field of summer wheat.

"Hooray, we've got them beaten!" shouted Roy, enthusiastically.

The lad was right. Their leader fallen, the remainder of the pack had seemingly no liking for keeping up the attack. Still snarling they began to retreat slowly--a backward movement, which presently changed into a mad, helter skelter rush. Panic seized on them, and down the dry arroyo they fled, a dense cloud of yellow, pungent dust rising behind them. In a few seconds all that remained to tell of the battle in the gulch were the still bodies of the brutes that had fallen before the boy and girl aviators' rifles.

They were contemplating the scene when, from further up the gully, there came a sound that set all their pulses beating.

It was the shout of a human voice.

"Thank heaven you were not too late!"

While they were still standing stock still in startled immobility at the recognition of Mr. Bell's voice, there came another hail.

"Hello, Jess! Hello, Peggy and Roy!"

Emerging from the cloud of dust which was still thick, there staggered toward them two uncanny looking figures in which they had at first some difficulty in recognizing Mr. Bell and Jimsy Bancroft. But when they did what a shout went up!

It echoed about the dead hills and rang hollowly in the silent gully. An instant later the reunited adventurers were busily engaged in exchanging greetings of which my readers can guess the tenor. Then came explanations.

"On arriving in the arroyo," said Mr. Bell, "Jimsy and I decided to set out at once to examine the mine site, and lay it off for purposes of proper location with the United States government. I must tell you that the mine--or rather the site of it--is located in that cavern yonder further up the arroyo."

"Why it was round the entrance to that that the coyotes were gathered when we first dropped!" cried Peggy.

"Exactly. And very much to our discomfort, too, I can tell you," rejoined Mr. Bell dryly.

"They had you besieged!" exclaimed Roy.

"That's just it, my boy. They must have been famished, or they never would have gathered up the courage to do it, for, as a rule, one man can put a whole pack of the brutes to flight. I suppose, however, they realized that they had us cornered, for, with a sort of deadly deliberation, they seated themselves round the mouth of the cavern, seemingly awaiting the proper time for us to be starved out or driven forth by thirst. Luckily, however, we had canteens with us and a scanty supply of food, otherwise it might have been the last of us."

Jess shuddered and drew very close to Jimsy.

"And you had no weapons," volunteered Roy.

"Ah, I see you encountered our guns in the chassis of the aeroplane. No, foolishly, I'll admit, we omitted to arm ourselves for such a

short excursion. Of course we never dreamed of any danger of that sort in this lonely place, and least of all from the source from which it came. But I can, tell you, it was an ugly feeling when, on preparing to emerge with some specimens of the ore-bearing rocks, we found ourselves facing a grim semi-circle, banked dozens deep, of those famished coyotes. They greeted our appearance with a howl, and when we tried to scare them off they just settled down on their haunches to wait."

"Their silence was worse than their yapping and barking, I think," struck in Jimsy.

"It certainly was," agreed Mr. Bell; "both of us tried to keep up good hearts, but when the night passed and morning still found the brutes there, things began to look bad. Of course we knew that you would set out to look for us when we did not return, but we did not know if you would reach here in time."

"But you did," cried Jimsy, regarding the dead bodies of coyotes the vanquished pack had left behind.

"And excellent work your rifles did, too," declared Mr. Bell warmly.

"Our rifles and--the Girl Aviators," said Roy, and proceeded to tell the interested listeners from the cavern some incidents which caused them to open their eyes and regard our girls with unconcealed admiration.

CHAPTER X

RESCUED BY AEROPLANE

"What's that down there?"

Roy pointed downward from the aeroplane to a small black object crawling painfully over the glistening white billows of alkali far below them.

The lad, his sister and Jess were on their way back from the arroyo in which the battle with the coyotes had occurred. Mr. Bell and Jimsy had been left behind, for the former was anxious to "prospect" his mine as thoroughly as possible in order to ascertain if it gave indications of living up to its first rich promise. A brief inspection of the cave had thoroughly disgusted Peggy and Jess.

"Is this a rich gold mine!" Jess had cried, indignantly regarding the dull walls on which the torches had glowed unflatteringly; "it looks more like the interior of the cellar at home."

"All is not gold that glitters," Mr. Bell had responded with a smile. At the same moment he had flaked off a chunk of dark colored metal with his knife.

"There, Miss Jess," he exclaimed, handing it to the girl, "that is almost pure gold, and I am in hopes that there is lots more where that came from."

And they had been kind enough not to laugh too immoderately at Jess's discomfiture.

A short time later, having located a water hole and partaken of a good lunch, Roy and his companions had re-embarked and started back to camp with the joyful tidings that the missing adventurers had been found. They had been under way but a short time when Roy's attention had been attracted by the moving dot which had caused him to utter the exclamation recorded at the beginning of this chapter.

Against the flat, baking, quivering expanse of alkali the crawling splotch of black showed up as plainly as a blot of ink on a sheet of clean white blotting paper. Peering over the edge of the chassis they all scrutinized it closely.

"It's--it's a man!" cried Jess at length.

"So it is!" declared Peggy, "and on foot. What can he be doing out in this desert country without a horse?"

"He's in trouble anyhow," declared Roy, excitedly. "See, he's staggering along so painfully that it looks as if he couldn't go a step further. I'm going to drop and find out what the trouble is."

As he spoke the boy threw in the descending clutch, and the big monoplane began to drop as swiftly as a buzzard that has espied some prey far beneath him.

As they rushed downward the whirr of their descent seemed to arouse the being so painfully crawling over the hot waste beneath them. He looked up, and then, extending his hands upward in a gesture of bewilderment, he staggered forward and the next instant stretched his length on the alkali, falling face downward.

"Oh, he is dead!" shrilled Jess, clasping her hands.

"I don't think so," was Roy's grave reply, "but we must get to him as quickly as we can."

There was no need to tell Peggy to get the water canteen ready. Her busy little fingers were fumbling with it. As they touched the ground she leaped nimbly from the chassis and sped over the burning desert floor to the side of the recumbent wayfarer. A second later Roy and Jess joined her. Very tenderly they turned the insensible

man upon his back and dashed the water upon his face.

He was a short, rather stockily built man of middle age, and obviously, from his mahogany colored skin and lank black hair, a Mexican. He was dressed in a tattered shirt with a serape thrown about the neck to keep off the blazing rays of the sun. His feet were encased in a kind of moccasins over which spurs were strapped. Evidently, then, he had been mounted at some time--presumably recently, but where was his horse? How did he come to be wandering under the maddening heat of the sun over the vast alkali waste. But these were questions the answers to which had to be deferred for the present, for it began to appear doubtful if they had arrived in time to fan the wanderer's vital spark back into flame.

But at length their ministrations met with their reward. The man's eyelids flickered and a deep sigh escaped his lips. Before long they could press the water canteen to his mouth. He seized it with avidity and would have drained it.

"Only a little," cried Peggy; "I read once how a man, dying of thirst, was killed outright when he was given too much water to drink."

So Roy wrenched the canteen from the prostrated man's feeble grasp before he had drained more than a mouthful or two. But even that had revived him, and he was able to sit up and gaze about bewilderedly. All at once his eyes rested on Peggy, and he seemed to regard her as the means of his salvation from a terrible death on the alkali. Kneeling down he cried out in a pitifully cracked voice:

"You missie angel from heaven. Me Alverado your servant always. No go away ever!"

"By ginger, Peggy, you've made a conquest!" cried Roy, half hysterically.

Now that the strain of the struggle between life and death was over Peggy flushed and looked embarrassed. She was not used to the exaggerated character of the Mexican. But if she feared another outburst it did not come. Far too much exhausted to say more, Alverado--as he called himself--sank back once more on the alkali.

"Quick! Carry him to the aeroplane and get him into camp," cried Roy, raising the half-conscious Mexican's head. "You girls take his feet and we'll put him in the bottom of the chassis on those cushions."

Consequently, when the aeroplane once more took the air it was to fly lower than usual under its additional burden, but in the hearts of all three of its American occupants there rang the joy of having saved a human life from the unsparing alkali.

"Aunt Sally! Aunt Sally! Everything's all right and we've got a patient for you," was Peggy's rather uncomplimentary greeting as the aeroplane alighted and came spinning across the dusty expanse toward the willow clump.

Miss Prescott threw up her hands and old Mr. Peter Bell hastened from amidst his beloved horses.

"Everything's all right but you've got a patient!" cried the New England lady, who looked very prim and unwesternlike in a gingham gown and sun bonnet to match.

"No time for explanations now," cried Roy. "Come on, Mr. Bell, and help us get our sick man out and then we'll tell you all about how we found Jimmy and Mr. Bell at the mine."

With Mr. Bell's assistance it did not take long to transfer Alverado from the aeroplane to a cot, and Miss Prescott, who, as Roy said, would "rather nurse than eat," ministered to him to such good effect that by nightfall he was able to sit up and tell his story. In the meantime the excited youngsters had related their narratives, which Miss Prescott interrupted in a dozen places by: "Land's sakes!" "Good gracious me!"

"Oh, what a dreadful country!" and much more to the same effect.

All the time he was relating his story Alverado kept his eyes fixed on Peggy's face, with much the same expression as that worn by a faithful spaniel. At first this fixed gaze annoyed the young girl not a little, but soon she realized that it was entirely respectful and meant as a tribute, for the Mexican evidently regarded her as his rescuer in chief.

Alverado's story proved vague and sketchy, but he could not be induced to enlarge upon it. In brief his tale was that some years before, when crossing the desert on his way from a mine he owned, he had been attacked by a band of highwaymen. They had wrecked his wagon and murdered his family, who were traveling with him. They had attacked him because of their impression that he was carrying much gold with him, whereas, in reality, he had secured nothing but a living from his desert mine. In their rage at being thwarted, the miscreants had wiped out the Mexican's family and left him for dead with a wound in his skull.

But a wandering band of Nevada Indians had happened along while the Mexican still lay unconscious and, reviving him, carried him with them over the border into California. He had parted from them soon after and drifted down into Mexico. In time he accumulated a small fortune, but the thought of the wrong he had suffered never left his heart. At last his affairs reached a stage where he felt justified in returning to Nevada to try to find some trace of his wrongers, and demand justice. He had set out well equipped, but, a few days before the young aviators encountered him, his water burro had

stumbled and fallen, and in the fall had broken the water kegs it carried. From that time on his trip across the alkali had been a nightmare. First his pony had died, and then his two remaining pack burros. He had obtained a scanty supply of thirst quenching stuff from the pulpy insides of cactus and maguey leaves, but when the aviators had discovered him he had been in the last stages of death from thirst and exhaustion--the death that so many men on the alkali have met alone and bravely.

"Do you know the name of the men who attacked you and treated you so cruelly?" asked Peggy, breaking the tense silence which followed the conclusion of the Mexican's dramatic narrative.

A dark look crossed the man's swarthy features.

"One name onlee I know, mees," he said, with a snarl which somehow reminded Peggy of the coyotes of the arroyo.

"And his name was?"

"Red Beel Soomers!"

"Red Bill Summers!" they all echoed, except Miss Prescott and old Mr. Peter Bell, the latter of whom had fallen into a reverie.

As if they had been emblazoned in electric lights, the words of Professor Wandering William flashed across Peggy's brain.

"The most desperate ruffian on the Nevada desert."

And at the same time, with one of those quick, flashes of intuition which growing girls share with grown women, Peggy sensed a vague connection between that sinister conversation she had overheard on her wakeful night at the National House and the dreaded Red Bill.

CHAPTER XI

THE HORSE HUNTERS

Bright and early the next day the aeroplane whizzed back to the arroyo, carrying a fresh supply of food and water, for Mr. Bell had decided to investigate his "prospect" thoroughly while he had an opportunity. To his mind, he had declared, the lead, or pay streak, ran back far into the base of the barren hills, and might yield almost untold of riches if worked properly. Among the supplies carried by the aeroplane, therefore, was a stock of dynamite from the red painted box.

In the meantime Alverado had to be accepted perforce as a member of the party. In the first place, he showed no disposition to leave, and in the second, even had he done so, there was no horse or burro that could be spared for him to ride. When Mr. Bell heard of the new addition to the camp he was at first not best pleased. Every additional mouth meant an extra strain on their supplies, but he surrendered to the inevitable, and finally remarked:

"Oh, well, I guess he'll be useful enough about the place. Anyhow, if we need him we can put him to work in the mine."

Peggy and Jess had accompanied Roy over in the aeroplane to the mine, but Mr. Bell insisted on their returning. "This is not work for women or girls," he said, much to Peggy's inward disgust.

Jess, with her daintier ideas, however, was nothing averse to the thought of getting back to the creature comforts of the permanent camp in the willows.

"But who's going to get you back, I'd like to know," exclaimed Mr. Bell, shoving back his sombrero and scratching his head perplexedly; "it's important, for reasons you know of, that I should prospect this claim so that I can record it to the limit, and to do that I'll need Roy. Maybe after all, you'd better stay."

Peggy's eyes danced delightedly, but Jess spoiled it all by saying:

"Why, Peggy can run the aeroplane better than either Roy or Jimsy, Mr. Bell."

"O-h-h! Jess!" shouted Roy derisively.

"Well, she can, and you know it, too," declared Jess loyally.

"Why that's so, isn't it?" cried Mr. Bell, glad of this way out of his difficulty. After that there was nothing for Peggy to do but to give in gracefully.

The two girls were ready to start back when Mr. Bell reached into his pocket and drew forth a bit of carefully folded paper.

"I'll entrust this to you," he said to Peggy; "it's for my brother. It's a correct description of the mine's location so far as we have explored it. The plan is a duplicate one, and I'll feel safer if I know that, beside the original, my brother has a copy. In the event of one being lost a lot of work would be saved."

Soon after this, adieus were said, and the aeroplane soared high into the clear, burning air above the desolate ridges. Under Peggy's skillful hands the plane fairly flew. At the pace they proceeded it was not long before the willows, a dark clump amid the surrounding ocean of glittering waste, came into view. A veteran of the air could not have made a more accurate or an easier landing

that did Peggy. The big machine glided to the ground as softly as a feather, just at the edge of the patch of shade and verdure which made up Steer Wells.

That afternoon, after the midday meal, a cloud of dust to the southward excited everybody's attention. After scanning the oncoming pillar closely Alverado announced that it was caused by a party of horsemen, and it soon became evident that the willow clump was their destination.

"Oh, mercy, I do hope they aren't Indians and we shall all be murdered in our beds!" cried Miss Prescott in considerable alarm. The good lady clasped her hands together distractedly.

"We might be murdered in our hammocks, aunt," observed Peggy, indicating two gaudy specimens of the hanging lounges which had been suspended under the shade; "but only very lazy people could be murdered in bed at two o'clock in the afternoon."

"You know perfectly well what I mean," Miss Prescott began with dignity, when Alverado, who, like the rest, had been watching the advancing cavalcade eagerly, suddenly announced:

"They vaqueros--cowboys!"

"Cowboys!" shrilled Miss Prescott. "That's worse. Oh, dear, I wish I'd never come to the land of the cowboys!"

"You speak as if they were some sort of animal, aunt," laughed Peggy. "I daresay there is no reason to be alarmed at them. I've always heard that they were very courteous and deferential to ladies."

"What would cowboys be doing away out here where there isn't a cow or a calf or even an old mule in sight?" inquired Jess.

"Maybe on wild horse hunt," rejoined Alverado with a shrug.

"Are there wild horses hereabouts then?" asked old Mr. Bell, and then quite absent-mindedly he began murmuring:

"Masseppa, Masseppa tied to a wild horse;
In the way of revenge, as a matter of course."

"Plentee wild horse," was the Mexican's rejoinder. "They cross the desert sometimes to get fresh range. Cowboy trail them and cut them off and lasso them. Then they break them to ride."

"Oh, what a shame!" cried Peggy, impulsively.

"No shame go-od," declared the Mexican stolidly; "bye an' bye wild horse all gone. Good."

"I think it's hateful," declared Jess; "just the same I should like to see a wild horse hunt," she added with girlish inconsistency.

"So should I if they'd let them all go again," agreed Peggy.

Old Mr. Bell laughed, for which he was gently reproved by Miss Prescott.

"I shall bring this matter to the attention of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals back home," she said somewhat snappishly.

But there was no opportunity to exchange more remarks on the subject.

Uttering a shrill series of "ye-o-o-ows" the riders bore down on the little desert camp. From the heaving sides of the ponies, plastered with the gray alkali of the desert, clouds of steam were rising. Their riders, with mouths screened from the biting dust with red handkerchiefs, were seemingly engaged in a race for the willow clump where water and shade awaited them.

"Yip-yip-y-e-e-e-e-e!"

The sound came raucously from behind a dozen bandaged mouths as the band swept down oil tile camp. And then suddenly:

Bang! Bang! Bang!

A volley of revolver shots resounded as the jubilant horse hunters--as Alverado had shrewdly suspected they were--dashed forward.

"Oh, Land of Goshen!" screamed Miss Prescott, as, with her fingers in her ears, she fled into her tent and pulled the flap to. Peggy and Jess stood their ground boldly enough, although Jess's face turned rather pale and her breath heaved in perturbation.

"Keep still, honey, they won't hurt you," comforted Peggy amid the uproar.

Suddenly the leader of the horsemen drew his pony up abruptly, throwing the cat-like little beast almost back upon his haunches.

"Boys! Ladies!" he shouted.

Instantly every sombrero came off and was swept round each rider's head in a broad circle. It was a pretty bit of homage and the girls bowed in acknowledgment of it.

"Hooray!" yelled the horsemen as they flung themselves from their steaming but still active little mounts.

"They're not so bad after all," breathed Jess, still, however,

clinging to Peggy's shirt-waisted arm.

But the leader, hat in hand, was now advancing toward the two girls. The others hung back looking rather sheepish. They were not in the habit of meeting ladies, and to encounter two young and pretty girls in the midst of the alkali was evidently a shock to them. The leader was a stalwart figure of a man, who might have stepped from the advertising matter of a Wild West show. Leather chaparejos encased his long legs. Round his throat was loosely knotted the red handkerchief which they all wore when riding to protect their mouths and nostrils from the dust. His shirt was once blue, but it was so covered with the gray of the alkali that it was difficult to tell what color it might have been originally. For the rest he wore a big sombrero, the leather band of which was spangled with stars worked in silver wire, and a pair of workmanlike-looking gauntlets covered his hands.

"Beg pardon, ladies, for makin' sich a rough house," he said hesitating, "but, yer see, ther boys wall we didn't hardly expecter fin' ladies present."

"I'm sure we enjoyed it very much," rejoined Peggy quite at ease and her own cool self now "It was like--er--like Buffalo Bill--"

"Only more so," put in Jess, with her most bewitching smile.

"Um--er--quite so," rejoined the plainsman, rather more at ease now; "ye see, we're a party that's out on a horse hunt. We got on ther tracks of the band ther other side of ther San Quentin range, and figgering that they'd cut across here ter git to ther feeding grounds on ther Pablo range on t'other side of ther desert we stopped in here fer water an' shade."

"My name's Bud Reynolds," he volunteered tentatively.

Peggy took the hint conveyed.

"And we are part of a scientific exploring party," she said.

"College gals, by gee!" breathed Bud in what he thought was an inaudible aside.

"The party is in charge of Mr. James Bell. This is his brother, Mr. Peter Bell--"

"Glad ter meet yer, I'm sure," said Bud with a low bow as the poet hermit stepped forward.

"I am Miss Margaret Prescott; this is my chum, Miss Bancroft, and there is my aunt, Miss Sally Prescott--"

Peggy, with a perfectly grave face, indicated Miss Prescott's tent, from between the flaps of which that New England lady's spectacled

countenance was peering.

"Come out, auntie," she added.

"Oh, Peggy, is it perfectly safe?" queried Miss Prescott anxiously.

"Safe, mum!" exclaimed Bud expansively. "If it was any safer you'd hav ter send fer ther perlice. Jes becos we're rough and ain't got on full evenin' dress you musn't think we're dangerous, mum," he went on more gravely. "I'll warrant you'll fin' better fellers right here on ther alkali than on Fit' Avenoo back in New York."

"Oh, do you come from New York," cried the romantic Jess, scenting what she would have called "a dear of a story."

"A long time ago I did," rejoined Bud slowly. "But come on, boys," he resumed with a return to his old careless manner, "come up an' be interduced."

The others, hats in hand, shuffled forward. It was plainly a novel experience for them.

"And now," said Peggy cheerfully, when the ceremony had been concluded, "you all look dreadfully tired and hot. The water hole's right over there. When you've got off some of that dust we shall have something for you to eat and some coffee."

This announcement took the horse hunters by storm. With yips and whoops they dashed off to the water hole, while Miss Sally and old Peter Bell began to prepare a hasty meal for the unexpected visitors.

CHAPTER XII

THE WATER THIEVES

It was an hour or more later when, having inspected the aeroplane and marveled much thereat, the horse hunters arose to take their leave. They would have to press on, they explained, to reach the rendezvous of the wild horses in the San Pablo range. These hills lay far to the northeast. Bud perspiringly made the farewell speech.

"Thankin' you one and all," he began, with perhaps a vague recollection of the last circus he had seen, and there he stopped short.

"Anyhow we thanks you," he said, getting a fresh start and jerking

the words out as if they had been shots from a revolver. "It ain't every day we has a pleasure like this here hes bin--"

"Hooray!" yelled the other horse hunters, who, already mounted, stood behind their leader at the edge of the willows.

"An'--an'--wall, ther desert hes dangers uv its own an' if at any time Bud Reynolds er ther boys kin help yer out send fer them to ther San Pablo Range and if we're thar we'll be with yer ter ther last bank uv ther last ditch."

With a sigh of relief Bud flung himself upon his pony and drove the spurs home. Amidst a tornado of yells and shouts the rest, waving their sombreros wildly, dashed off after him. In a few moments they were only a cloud of dust on the alkali.

"I declare I feel kind of sad now they're gone," said Miss Sally after an interval of silence.

"Rough diamonds," opined old Mr. Bell guardedly.

"But they've got warm, big hearts," stoutly declared Peggy. "I wish "

She stopped abruptly.

"Wish what, Peggy dear?" asked Jess, noting the troubled look that had crept over her chum's face.

"Oh, nothing at all," rejoined Peggy. But she was not speaking the whole truth, for the girl had been thinking what a bulwark of strength Bud and his followers would have been against the vague menace of Red Bill.

It was late that night--after midnight as well as Peggy could judge--that she was awakened by Jess bending over her cot in the tent that both girls shared.

"O-h-h! Peggy, Peggy! I'm frightened!" wailed the girl aviator's chum.

"Frightened? Of what dear?" asked Peggy wide awake in an instant.

"I--I don't just know," quavered Jess, "but, Oh, Peggy, you'll think I'm an awful 'fraid cat, but I'm absolutely certain I heard footsteps, stealthy footsteps outside just now."

"Nonsense, girlie. It must have been a nightmare," rejoined Peggy with sharp assurance.

"I might have thought so," went on Jess, "but I looked out through the flap of the tent to make sure and I'm certain as that I'm standing here now that I saw some figures on horseback over by the water hole."

"Perhaps another party of horse hunters," suggested Peggy soothingly.

"But, Peggy dear, they made hardly any noise. That is, the horses I mean. I heard men's footsteps, but after a minute they mounted and rode off, and--oh, it was too ghostly for anything--they made no noise at all."

"You mean you couldn't hear any sound of the ponies' hoofs?" asked Peggy incredulously.

"No, they moved in absolute silence. Peggy, you don't think it was anything supernatural, do you?"

For answer Peggy drew her revolver from under her pillow and tiptoed to the tent flap. It faced the water hole and in the bright white moonlight a clear view of it could be obtained. But after a prolonged scrutiny Jess's plucky chum was unable to make out any objects other than the usual ones appertaining to the camp.

"Imagination, my dear," she said, with positiveness. But Jess still shuddered and seemed under the influence of some strange fear.

"It was not imagination, Peggy. It wasn't it really wasn't."

"Well, we'll look in the morning and if we find tracks we shall know that you are right, and we'll get the boys back for a while anyhow," reassured Peggy.

But in the morning it was Alverado who came to the tent and in an excited voice asked to see "misse" at once.

Peggy hastily completed dressing and emerged, leaving Jess still asleep. Something warned her that it would be best not to arouse her chum just then.

"What is it, Alverado?" she asked, as the Mexican, betraying every mark of agitation, hastened to her side.

"Santa Maria, missee," breathed the Mexican, "water almost all gone!"

"The water is almost all gone?" quavered Peggy, beginning to sense what was coming.

"Yes, missee. Me go there this morning and--Madre de Dios--the water hole almost empty."

"Were there any tracks?" inquired Peggy anxiously.

"Plenty tracks, but the man's had the cavallos' feet bundled in sacks so make no noise--leave no tracks."

"Let me have a look."

With Alverado at her side Peggy hastened toward the water hole. She could hardly repress an exclamation of alarm as she gazed at the hole. Bare six inches of muddy water was on the bottom, where the day before there had been a foot or more. All about were vague blotchy-looking tracks which showed plainly enough the manner in which the marauders had concealed all noise of their movements. The muffled hoofs would naturally give forth no sound.

"So Jess was right after all," breathed Peggy softly; "but who could have done such a thing? And why?"

But the latter question had not framed itself in her mind before it was answered. Without water they would not be able to exist at Steer Wells for twenty-four hours. A retreat would be equally impracticable. It was all horribly clear. The theft of the water was the first step in a deliberate plan to drive them out. The motive, too, was plain enough in the light of the overheard conversation at the National Hotel. The men who wanted Mr. Bell's mine had waited till he had located it before striking their first blow. What would their next be? Peggy's pulses throbbed and the grove seemed to blur for an instant. But the next moment she was mistress of herself again. Clearly there was only one thing to do. Lay the whole matter before Mr. Bell.

"Alverado," said Peggy quietly, "after breakfast I am going to the range over yonder. You must guard the camp."

"Yes, missee," replied the Mexican; "I take care of him with--with my life."

"I am sure you will," said Peggy in her most matter-of-fact tones, "and in the mean time say nothing to anyone else about what you have found. Bring up the water for breakfast yourself and don't let Mr. Bell come near the water hole if you can help it."

"It shall be as the senorita wishes," rejoined Alverado in low tones; but there was a ring in his voice that told Peggy that she could trust the brown-skinned "Mestizo" to the utmost.

CHAPTER XIII

DANGER THREATENS

Somewhat more than two hours later Peggy brought her aeroplane to the ground in the arroyo which had been the scene of the battle with

the coyotes. The girl could not help giving an involuntary shudder as she thought of the narrow escape they had had on that occasion. But in the light of the other and more serious menace which now hung over them like a storm cloud, the adventure with the wild beasts faded into insignificance. Human enemies, more deadly perhaps than any of the animal kingdom, threatened, and if signs counted for anything it would be no long time before they would strike.

Peggy had not been able to leave the camp without some resort to strategy. Naturally Jess had been anxious to come. But a quick flight had been imperative, and the presence of even one other person in the monoplane detracted somewhat from its speed. Then, too, Peggy had ached with her whole being to be alone--to think. She wanted to reconstruct everything in her mind so that when she told all to Mr. Bell there would be no confusion, no hesitancy in her story.

Three sharp toots on the electric signaling horn the aeroplane carried--connected to a set of dry cells--resulted in an outpouring from the mine-hole of the three prospectors. Very business-like they looked, too, in khaki trousers, dust covered shirts and rolled up sleeves.

"Well, well! Early visitors," exclaimed Mr. Bell jocularly, and then struck by Peggy's sober expression as she stepped from the car of the aeroplane he stopped short.

"My dear child, what is it?" he demanded. "Where are the twin fairies of light that used to dance in your eyes?"

"My goodness, Mr. Bell, you ought to have been a poet like your brother," laughed Roy coming forward with Jimsy to meet his sister.

And then, like his senior, he, too, was struck by Peggy's anxious look.

"What's the trouble, sis; bad news?" he asked.

"Anything happened?" demanded Jimsy.

"Oh, no, no; set your minds at rest on that," responded Peggy.

"Everything is all right, at least--at least--"

Her voice wavered a bit and Mr. Bell gently led her to a stool in front of the rough camp they had set up in the arroyo.

"Now then, my dear," he said, "what is it?"

Peggy faced her eager listeners, and, recovering from her momentary tremor, told her story from beginning to end in a clear, convincing way.

"Do you think I did right in coming?" she concluded. Her gaze fell

appealingly upon Mr. Bell. She did not wish this sinewy, wiry, self-reliant man to think that she was a victim of a school girl's hysterical fears. But the mining man's words speedily set her at ease on this point.

"Think you did right!" he echoed, while a rather serious expression came over his face; "my dear girl, if you had not come to me I should have thought you did very wrong. You have made only one mistake and that was in not telling me before this time about what you overheard at the National House. This Red Bill, as they call him, is one of the most unscrupulous ruffians that cumber the face of the Nevada desert. In any other community he would have been brought up with a round turn long ago. But here," he shrugged his shoulders. "I suppose after all," he went on, "it's the old story of who'll bell the cat."

"Do you think that we are in serious danger?" inquired Jimsy. His eyes were round as saucers and his usually good natured face look troubled.

"Well, not in serious danger, my boy," rejoined Mr. Bell; "but, just between us four, mind, it behooves us to use all speed in getting the title of this mine recorded. This Red Bill is as resourceful as a fox, and what Miss Peggy has told us shows that he is closer on our trail than I should have imagined possible. The draining of the water hole is unfortunate in two ways. If, as I now suspect, he is camped in the hills to the east of the camp, it is plain that he has secured a supply of water sufficient to last him for some time. And this cuts both ways, for his gain in that respect means our loss. The more water he has the less we have. That much is clear."

"Clear as mud," said Jimsy ruefully; but his tone robbed the words of any humorous significance.

"You have reached a decision, Mr. Bell?" asked Roy. The boy had not spoken yet.

Mr. Bell's mouth closed in a firm line and his chin came out in what Peggy described to herself as "a fighting bulge."

"Yes," he said with characteristic vim, "I have. Steer Wells will not be safe after daylight to-day for the women of the party. Red Bill is dastard enough, through an attack on them, to try to intimidate me. We must shift to try to camp at once."

"But where?"

The question came blankly from Jimsy.

"Here. We have a moderate supply of water and there is feed of a kind. Enough at least to keep the stock alive till our work is completed. You see," he continued, turning to Peggy, "the boys and I have struck a very interesting lead. How far it goes I have no

idea, but my mining experience teaches me that it is an offshoot of the mother lode. Until we have tapped that I don't want to file a claim."

Peggy nodded her head sagely.

"I see," she said, "you don't want to file your claim and then have somebody else squat down beside you and win the biggest prize of all."

"That's it exactly," said Mr. Bell, "but the question in my mind is whether I am right in exposing you, Miss Bancroft and Miss Prescott to what may be peril. And yet--"

He broke off and a troubled expression crept over his weather-beaten face.

"And yet," Peggy finished for him, "there's no way for us to go back now without abandoning the mine."

"That's it. But if you--"

"I vote to stick by the mine."

There was no hesitation in Peggy's voice now.

Mr. Bell's keen gray eyes kindled.

"You're a girl of real grit," he said, "but the others?"

"I'll answer for them. Miss Prescott need not know anything of the danger. After all, it may amount to nothing. As for Jess, she has as much, and more, nerve than I have."

"When it comes to eating ice cream," put in Jimsy irrelevantly.

Peggy, glancing about her, could not but reflect at the moment what a strange contrast the scene about them offered to the peaceful landscape and commonplace adventures of hum-drum Long Island. Not but what the Girl Aviators had had their meed of excitement there, too, as readers of the "Girl Aviators and the Phantom Airship" well know. But in the scoriated hills with their scanty outcropping of pallid wild oats, the fire-seared acclivities and the burning blue of the desert heavens above all, she beheld a setting entirely foreign to anything in her experience.

"It's like Remington's pictures," she thought to herself as she gazed at the roughly clad group about her, the shabby tent, the mining implements cast about carelessly here and there and the smoldering fire with the blackened cooking pots beside it.

Only one sharply modern note intruded-the two big, yellow-winged monoplanes. Even they appeared, in this wild, outre setting, to have

taken on the likenesses of giant scarabs, monsters indigenous to the baked earth and starving vegetation. She was roused from her reverie by Mr. Bell's voice cutting incisively the half unconscious silence into which they had lapsed.

"Roy, you and your sister will take the monoplane in which Miss Peggy rode over and bring Miss Prescott, Miss Bancroft and my brother over at once."

"But the stock and Alverado?"

The question came from Peggy.

"Alverado, as you call him, can drive the stock across the desert. It should not take him more than twenty-four hours if he presses right ahead. We can send out an aeroplane scouting party for him if he appears to be unduly delayed."

After some more discussion along the same lines Roy, nothing loth for an aerial dash after his hard work in the mine hole, made ready for the trip. From a locker he drew out his solar helmet and goggles and advised Peggy to don her sun spectacles also. But Peggy, as on several previous occasions, declined positively to put on the smoked glasses designed to protect the eyes from the merciless glare of the desert at noon day.

"They'd make me look like a feminine Sherlock Holmes," she declared stoutly.

"I hope that you won't take it amiss if I say that you have already proved yourself one, and a good one, too," laughed Mr. Bell as the brother and sister clambered into the chassis.

But as Roy adjusted his levers for the rise from the depths of the sun-baked arroyo Mr. Bell held up his hand.

"One moment," he said, "bring back some of the dynamite with you. We're almost out of it and it's needed badly. We've got to blast through that streak of hard pan."

"We'll bring it," nodded Roy, "although I'm not going to tell Aunt Sally about it. I guess she wouldn't be best pleased at the idea of traveling in company with such a dangerous cargo."

As he spoke the propeller began to whirl, and after a brief run, the monoplane took the air, rising in a graceful angle toward the burning blue. As they rose above the hills a reddish haze that overspread the horizon became distinctly visible. Peggy viewed it with a little apprehension.

"I hope that doesn't portend another electrical storm," she said rather anxiously, leaning forward and addressing her brother.

Roy shook his head.

"Guess it's just heat haze," he decided. "Mr. Bell says that those dry storms don't often come twice in one season."

"Well, let's be thankful for small mercies anyhow," said Peggy with a return to her former cheerfulness.

The news that camp was to be broken at once and the base of operations removed to the hills, came as a shock to those left behind in the camp. Somehow the pleasant shelter of the ragged willows had become a sort of makeshift home to them, and the idea of winging to the barren hills was not pleasing. Miss Prescott, however, was the only one who made an open wail about it. Old Mr. Bell took it as stoically as he did most things. Only, as he hastened about the camp making preparations for the departure, he could have been heard humming:

"We've got to go far, far away,
To the mountains, so they say;
I hate to leave the willows' shade,
But Brother James must be obeyed."

Alverado received his instructions with a silent shrug. He informed Roy and Peggy that there was just enough water left to fill the bags for the dash across the desert. He said no more, but there was a curious kind of reticence in his manner, as if he was holding back something he did not wish to express outwardly. It was not till everything was packed ready for the start, and old Mr. Bell and Miss Sally had been hoisted and dragged into the chassis, that he drew Roy apart and spoke. Peggy was included in the confidence.

"While you gone I follow up tracks from the water hole," he said;
"bime-by I come to place where sacks slip off one pony's feet. Then I see a track that I make stick in my memory long, long ago. That day they leave me for dead on the desert."

He stooped and drew the outline of a peculiarly shaped hoof on the Alkali-impregnated dust. The boy and girl watched him curiously.

"Well?" asked Peggy, and she and her brother hung on the answer.

Alverado's face became overcast by a black look. His eyes glowed like two live coals.

"I think then I never forget that track. I think the same to-day. The pony that made that track was ridden by Red Bill."

LOST!

Good news awaited them on their return to the camp in the arroyo. Mr. Bell and Jimsy, while working in a desultory fashion on the vein while awaiting their return, had struck what is known in desert parlance as a water-pocket. They had at once set to work excavating a fair-sized hole in the floor of the mine tunnel, and by the way in which the water gushed in it appeared as if there was a plentiful supply to draw upon.

It is hard to convey how much this bit of news raised their spirits.

"Isn't it queer to think how just finding a little water will make you feel good out here, while at home all we had to do was to turn a faucet and we got all we wanted and never dreamed of being thankful for it," observed Jess philosophically.

"Wish we could strike an ice-cream soda pocket," observed Jimsy, who was vigorously scouring the dust off his classic lineaments. "Say, girls, how would you like right now to hear the cool, refreshing 'fiz-z-z-z' of a fountain, and then hear the ice clink-clinking against the sides of a tall glass of say--lemonade or--"

"Jimsy Bancroft, if you say any more we'll duck you head first in that water hole," said Peggy with decision.

"Go ahead," answered Jimsy quite unperturbed, "a cold plunge would go fine right now."

"Well, we shall have to think up some other punishment for you," decided Jess; "a quarter mile dash across the desert, for instance."

"Well, isn't that the utmost," snorted Jimsy; "here I try to cool you girls off by describing the delightful surroundings of a soda fountain and then you threaten me with bodily violence. 'Twas ever thus," and Jimsy, with an assumption of wounded dignity, strode off to where old Mr. Bell was already busy over the cooking fire.

The midday meal passed off more brightly than might have been expected considering the circumstances in which the adventurers found themselves.

"At all events, we can't starve an the desert," Jimsy, "even if we do run short of water."

"How is that?" inquired old Mr. Bell innocently, although the twinkle in Jimsy's eye had put the others on their guard.

"Because of the sand-wiches there," rejoined the lad with a laugh, in which the others could not help joining.

"I don't care about sandwiches, particularly ham ones," struck in Miss Prescott ingenuously, which set them all off again.

"Looks to me as if there might be a jack-rabbit or two in these hills," observed Mr. Bell after the meal had been dispatched. "I know it's not good form in the West to eat jack-rabbits, but they're not so bad if you kill them when they are young. Anyhow, it would be a change from this everlasting canned stuff."

"I'll go," Roy declared; "I'll take that twenty two rifle and Peggy can carry that light twenty-gauge shotgun. It's just the thing for girls and children."

"Oh, indeed," sniffed the embattled Peggy scornfully; "I suppose you think I can't handle a man's size gun?"

"I didn't say so, my dear sister, and I humbly beg your pardon for anything I may have said which may have hurt your feelings," said Roy with a low and conciliatory bow; "what I meant was that the light twenty-gauge doesn't kick so hard and, moreover, won't blow a rabbit to pieces if you happen to hit him."

"Happen to hit him!" shouted Jess, going into a convulsion of laughter.

"Oh, you know what I mean well enough," protested Roy, coloring somewhat under his tan.

"Want to come, Jimsy?" he asked, after a moment's pause.

"Tramp over those old hills that look as baked as a loaf of overdone bread?" snorted Jimsy. "No, thank you. I'm going to stay home and read a nice book about Greenland's icy mountains."

"And I," declared Jess, vivaciously, "am going to persuade Aunt Sally to make us some vanilla and strawberry ice cream."

So Roy and Peggy set off alone on their tramp in quest of game. It did not look a promising country for hunting; but, as Mr. Bell had pointed out, an occasional jack rabbit might be met with. It was rough going over the rocks and heavy sand, but Peggy stuck to it manfully, and as a reward for her perseverance, had the honor of bringing down the first game--a small jack rabbit, young and tender, that bounded almost under her feet from the shade of the sage brush in which he had been lying.

This put Roy on his mettle, and brother and sister wandered further than they had intended, urged on by the hope of further success. But no more game of any kind was put up, if we except one distant view they had of a sage hen. This bird was "sage" enough to take wing long before they came within shot of her.

"Good gracious, that sun is lower than I thought," exclaimed Roy,

suddenly awakening to the fact that they had wandered a considerable distance from the camp. Several of the monotonous ground-swells of the desert hills, in fact, separated them from it.

"We'd better hurry back," declared Peggy, "they'll be worrying about us at the camp."

But to talk about hurrying back and doing it were two different things. Roy discovered, to his dismay, that not only had he lost the location of the camp, but that their footsteps, by which they might have retraced their path, had been obliterated in the shifting sands. He said nothing to his sister, however, for several minutes, but plodded steadily on in the direction in which his judgment told him the arroyo of the gold mine lay.

It was Peggy herself who broke the ice.

"Roy, do you know where you are going?"

Roy stammered a reply in what was meant to be a confident tone. But he felt it did not deceive the gray-eyed girl at his side. Evasion was useless.

"Frankly, I don't, sis. Everything seems to have twisted around since we came this way earlier in the afternoon. I thought we could use the tops of the rises for land marks, but they all look as much alike as so many sea-waves."

A sharp shock, which was actually physically painful, shot through Peggy at the words. The sun, a red-hot copper ball, hung in livid haze almost above the western horizon. On every side of them were scoriated hills, desolate, forbidding, sinister in the dying day, and all fatally similar in form.

"We must try shooting. Perhaps they will hear us," suggested Peggy, a sickening sense of fear--fear unlike any she had ever known--clutching at her heart.

Roy blazed away, but the feeble reports of the light weapons they had did not carry to any distance. Indeed, it was only the necessity of doing something that had impelled Peggy to make the suggestion.

All at once an uncanny thing happened. A big, black desert raven flew up with a scream, almost under their feet, and soared above their heads, screeching hoarsely. To such a tension were their nerves strung that both boy and girl started and hastily stepped back.

"Ugh, what a fright that thing gave me," exclaimed Peggy with a shudder that she could not control.

"Nasty looking beast, and that cry of his isn't beautiful,"

commented Roy in as easy a tone as he could assume.

"Alverado told me that those desert ravens were inhabited by the souls of those who had lost their way and perished on the alkali," shivered Peggy.

"Say, sis, don't be creepy. You surely don't believe all the rot those superstitious Mexicans talk, do you?"

"No, not exactly--but--oh, Roy," even plucky Peggy's voice broke and quavered, "it's so lonely, and whatever are we to do?"

The last words came wildly. Peggy was not, as we know, a nervous girl, but the situation was enough to unstring the nerves of the most stolid of beings.

CHAPTER XV

THE PERILS OF THE HILLS

Suddenly Roy gave a sharp exclamation. Something about a cone-shaped peak to the west of them appeared familiar.

"The camp is in that direction, I'm sure of it," he declared, "come on, Peg, we'll strike out for it, and in half an hour's time we'll be telling our adventures over a good supper."

By this time Peggy was willing to start anywhere if she was moderately sure the camp lay in that direction, and Roy's enthusiasm was contagious. Filled with renewed hope the brother and sister struck out for the cone-shaped peak. Its naked base showed violet in the evening shadows, while its sharply rounded top was bathed in a rosy glow of light. Even in her agitation Peggy could not help admiring the wonderful palette of colors into which the dying day transformed the dreary desert sea.

Beyond the range the vast expanse of solitude spread glitteringly. All crimson and violet, with deep purple marking the depressions in its monotonous surface, and here and there the dry bed of one of its spasmodic lakes, showing almost black in its obscurity. These lakes were water-filled only in the early spring, and their moisture had long since died out of them. Under a noon-day sun they showed like shallow bowls filled with scintillating crystals.

But, had they known it, Roy and Peggy were striking out on a course precisely opposite to that which they should have taken. Every step of the advance to the sugar-loaf shaped peak was a step in the wrong direction. Like many other travelers, whose bones whiten on the

alkali, they had become confused by the monotonous similarity of one feature of the dreary hills to the other.

The true extent of their blunder did not dawn upon them till they had reached the foot of the queer peak, and even the most minute survey of their surroundings failed to show them any trace of the camp. No cheerful glow of a fire illumined the fast darkening sky. For all the signs of human life they could discover, they might have been alone in a dead world. In fact, the scenery about them did resemble very closely those maps of the moon--the dead planet--which we see in books of astronomy. There were the same jagged, weird peaks, the same dark centers, dead and extinct, and the same brooding hush of mystery which we associate with such scenes.

Somewhere off in the distance a coyote howled dismally as the sun rushed under the horizon and the world was bathed in sudden darkness.

Peggy turned to her brother with a low little moan. She caught her arms about his neck and hung there sobbing. In his solicitude for her, Roy forgot his own dismay and misery, which was perhaps a good thing, for by the time Peggy recovered herself, the boy was already casting about for some means of passing the night as comfortably as possible.

"We'll stick it out till daylight some how, Peg," he promised, "and I'm confident that by that time they'll send up one of the monoplanes, and from up in the air they'll have no difficulty in locating us."

The thought was a comforting one, and Peggy's first flush of passionate grief and fear gave way to calmer feelings. No doubt it would be as Roy had forecast. After all, she argued, it was only one night in the open, and they had their weapons and plenty of ammunition.

By a stroke of good luck, Roy had stuffed his pockets full of the hard round biscuits known as "pilot bread" before they left the camp. He also had matches and a canteen full of water. Poor Peggy still carried the lone jack-rabbit, the trophy of her gun, and Roy at once set about grubbing up sage brush and making a fire with the oleaginous roots as he had seen Mr. Bell do.

Before long a roaring blaze was ready, and then the boy began the task of skinning and preparing the rabbit for cooking. Peggy turned away during this operation, but summoned up fortitude enough to gaze on while her brother spitted the carcass on the cleaning rod of his rifle and broiled it in primitive fashion.

"First call for dinner in the dining car forward!" he announced in as gay a voice as he could command when the cooking seemed to be finished.

"The first course is broiled jack rabbit with pilot bread and delicious, sparkling alkali water. The second course is broiled jack rabbit with--"

"Oh, Roy, don't," cried Peggy half hysterically; "it reminds me of the train and the good times we had on the way out from the East. We didn't think then that--"

"Let me give you some broiled jack-rabbit," proffered Roy, gallantly extending a bit of smoking meat on the end of his knife.

Peggy bit it daintily, expecting to make a wry face over it, but to her surprise she found it not half bad. Between them, the two hungry young people speedily reduced that rabbit to first principles.

"And now for dessert," exclaimed Roy, in a triumphant voice. "No, I'm not joking--look here!"

He drew from his pocket a flat, pink box which, on being opened, proved to contain several cakes of chocolate of Peggy's favorite brand.

"Oh, dear," sighed Peggy as she nibbled away at the confection, "if only I knew positively that we were going to come out all right I'd really be inclined to enjoy this as a picnic."

"Hooray! here comes the moon," cried Roy, after an interval, during which the chocolate steadily diminished in quantity.

Over the eastern horizon, beyond the desolate peaks and barren "ocean" of the desert, a silver rim crept. Rapidly it rose till the full moon was climbing on her nightly course and flooding the alkali with a soft radiance almost as bright as subdued electric light. Against the glow the weird, ragged peaks stood out as blackly as if cut out of cardboard. One could see the tracery of every bit of brush and rock outlined as plainly as if they had been silhouetted by an artist at the craft.

All at once Peggy gave a frightened little cry and shrank close to Roy. The firelight showed her face drawn and startled.

"Oh, Roy, over there! No, not that peak--that one to the right!"

"Well, sis, what about it?" asked Roy indulgently.

"Something moved! No, don't laugh, I'm sure of it."

"A coyote maybe or another jack rabbit. In that case we'll have a chance at a shot."

"No, Roy, it wasn't an animal." Peggy's tones were vibrant with alarm--tense as a taut violin string. "What I saw was a man."

"A man. Nonsense! Unless it was someone from the camp looking for us."

"No, this man was watching us. He may have been crouching there for a long time. I saw the outline of his sombrero black against the moonlight behind that rise. Oh, Roy, I'm frightened."

"Rubbish," declared Roy stoutly, although his heart began to beat uncomfortably fast. "What man could there be here unless it was Alverado, and he couldn't possibly have arrived by this time."

"But, Roy, it wasn't my fancy. Truly it wasn't. I saw a man crouching there and watching us. When I looked up he vanished."

"Must have been a rock or something, sis. Moonlight plays queer tricks you know. Don't let's make the situation any worse by imagining things."

"It was not imagination," repeated Peggy stoutly.

But Roy, perhaps because he did not wish to, would not admit the possibility of Peggy's vision being correct.

A long, loud cry like the laughing of an imprisoned soul cut the stillness startlingly.

"Ki-yi-yi-o-o-o-o-o-o-o!"

"Coyotes!" laughed Roy, "that's what you saw."

Peggy said nothing. The sudden sharp sound had rasped her overwrought nerves cruelly.

"Ki-yi-yi-o-o-o-o-o-o-o!"

The demoniacal laughing, half howl, half bark, cut the night again.

This time it came from a different direction. From other grim peaks the cry was caught up. It seemed that the creatures were all about them.

"Surrounded!" muttered Roy a bit nervously. He had not forgotten the fight in the canyon, although, as he knew, coyotes, only on the very rarest occasions, when driven desperate by hunger, attack mankind.

The cries appeared to come from all quarters now. And they were drawing nearer, course lay to the eastward there was no mistaking that.

"They are closing in on us, sis. Better load up that gun."

As he spoke Roy refilled the magazine of his little twenty-two rifle.

"Ki-yi-yi-yi-o-o-o-o-o-o!"

This time the cry was quite close and behind them. Roy switched sharply round. The surroundings, the uncanny cries, the solitude were beginning to tell on his nerves, too. His self-control was being wrought to a raw edge.

Was it fancy, or as he switched abruptly about did he actually see a dark object duck behind a rock? An object that bore a strange resemblance to a sombrero.

"Good gracious, I musn't become as shaky as this," the boy thought, making a desperate effort to marshal his faculties, and then he sniffed sharply.

"What is it, Roy?" asked Peggy strangely calm now in the face of what she deemed must prove an emergency.

Roy's answer was peculiar.

"I smelled tobacco just now, I'm sure of it," he whispered in a low tone. "I guess you were right, sis."

"But the coyotes?"

"Are men signaling to each other and closing in on us."

As he spoke the boy scattered the fire, and seizing Peggy by the arm dragged her into the black shadow of the cone-shaped peak.

CHAPTER XVI

RED BILL SUMMERS

A keen chill, sharp as if an icy wind had swept her, embraced Peggy. It was succeeded by a mad beating of her heart. Roy said nothing but clutched his rifle. He jerked it to his shoulder as, out of the shadows, a figure emerged sharp and black against the moonlight. As if she were in a trance Peggy saw Roy's hand slide under the barrel of the little repeater and then came the sharp click of the repeating mechanism, followed by the snap of the hammer as it fell forward.

But no report followed.

"Jammed!" exclaimed the boy desperately.

At the same moment the figure approaching them, which for an instant had vanished behind a shoulder of rock, emerged boldly, the moonlight playing on a revolver barrel pointed menacingly at the brother and sister.

"No foolin' thar, youngsters," came a harsh voice; "we've got you where we want you."

Coincidentally from all about them the rocks seemed to spawn figures, till half a dozen men in rough plainsman's garb stood in the moonlight. Resistance was useless; worse, it might have resulted in a calamity more dire than the one that had overtaken them.

But curiously enough the very hopelessness of their situation inspired in Peggy a far different feeling to the terror that had clutched at her heart a moment before. She was conscious of a swift tide of anger. In one of the figures she had recognized the renegade guide.

"Juan--you!" she exclaimed in tones in which scorn struggled with indignation.

The guide turned away. Even his effrontery wilted before the young girl's frank contempt. It was all clear enough to Peggy now. Evidently, Juan had been bribed by these men to stay with the party till he had learned their plans, which he was then to betray to the band. For, in the moonlight Peggy had had no difficulty in recognizing the men whose conversation she had overheard at the National House.

There was the red-headed man, with his coarse, bristling crop of hair, and the mustache like the stumpy bristles of an old tooth brush, the tall, dark young fellow with the red sash and the silver spurs, poor Peggy's "romantic brigand," and the hawk-nosed man with the drooping mustache, who had formed the red-headed one's companion on the train.

"Hearn of Red Bill Summers, I op-ine," shot out the man with the red hair in a voice that rasped like a file on rusty iron.

"I think so," rejoined Roy quietly, and Peggy rejoiced to hear her brother's calm, steady tones.

"Wall, I'm him. You treat me right and don't make no fuss an' we'll git along all right. If not--"

He paused significantly.

"Whar's Buck Bellew?"

The red-headed one gazed about him. From the shadows stepped

Peggy's "romantic brigand."

"Buck, you put a couple of half hitches about them kids."

"The gal, too?" hesitated the silver-spurred one addressed as "Buck."

"Sure. Didn't I tell yer to."

"Wa-al, I won't. That's flat. I ain't never persecuted women folks an' I ain't goin' ter start now."

Red Bill Summers paused and then grumbled out:

"All right, then. She kin ride the greaser's horse. Juan, you yellow-skinned bronco, go git ther ponies."

Juan flitted off and presently reappeared, leading half a dozen wiry little ponies. In the meantime the remainder of the band had gathered about Roy and Peggy, regarding them with frank curiosity. Except that their weapons were taken away from them no harm was offered them however, and Roy had not, so far, even been tied up.

"This isn't a bit like the story-book hold-ups", thought Peggy. "If it wasn't for their rough clothes and fierce looks these men wouldn't be so very different from anyone else."

"Now, miss, I'll help you to mount. Sorry we ain't got a side saddle, but we don't hev much use fer such contraptions with our outfit."

It was the red-sashed man speaking. He held out a stirrup for Peggy, and the girl, perforce, mounted the pony. She caught herself wondering as she did so what her friends at home in the East would have thought if they could have seen her at the moment. It was Roy's turn next. Brother and sister were permitted to ride side by side. Juan, to Peggy's secret satisfaction, was compelled to give up his burro to one of the outlaws while he tramped along.

"Serves him right," thought the girl.

The man whose pony Roy bestrode leaped nimbly into the saddle behind Buck Bellew.

Hardly a word was spoken, but their captors closed in silently about the boy and the girl prisoners.

"Death Valley," ordered Red Bill briefly, swinging himself into the saddle. Peggy guessed that the sinisterly named place must be their destination.

Amid the maze of pinnacles, minarets and spires of the desert range the horsemen forged slowly forward. From the fact that they

traveled toward the newly risen moon Peggy surmised that their course lay to the eastward . But presently it shifted and they began moving north.

"Where can we be going?" Peggy found an opportunity to exchange a word or two with Roy. Owing to the rough nature of the ground their rear guard had, of necessity, fallen back a bit.

"No idea, sis. One thing seems certain, however, they don't mean to harm us, at least not yet."

The rear guard closed up again, necessitating silence once more. All night they traveled, ambling at the plainsman's "trotecito" when opportunity offered, and then again slacking to a crawling walk where the baked ground grew uneven and criss-crossed with gullies and arroyos.

At last, when Peggy's head was beginning to sway with exhaustion, the eastern sky began to grow gray. The coming day lit up the desert wanly, as if it had been a leaden sea. But with the uprising of the sun the familiar glaring white of the alkali blazed out once more. They had left the pinnacled hills and were now traveling over undulating country overgrown with rough brush. It was a sad, drab color, and smelled pungently where the ponies' hooves trampled it.

But presently they broke into a different country. It was flatter than that which they had already traversed and, if possible, more desolate, sun-bleached and parched. The ponies stumbled over loose shale, raising clouds of suffocating dust that tingled in the nostrils. Down they rode into its basin-like formation. All about the depression arose the craggy, stripped hills. Their jagged peaks seemed to shut out the rest of the world and compress the universe into this baked, burning basin in the desert.

Across the bottom of it the alkali swept in little vagrant puffs, proceeding from the gaps of the hills. It piled in little gray heaps like ashes. The air hung steady and still as a plumb line dropped from the sky.

"We've got ter git across hyar muy pronto, (very quickly)," grunted the red-headed man, whose perspiring, fat face was coated gray with dust and alkali. "What a hole fer white men ter be in."

"It's like a busted heat-blister on a big piecrust," commented Buck Bellew, whose jauntiness had wilted. His red sash was of a piece now with the rest of his garments-a dirty, dull gray.

After a while a hot wind sprang up. It felt like the heated blast from an opened oven door. It tore in mad witch-dances about the dismal basin, sending whirling dust-devils dancing over that dreary place.

They spread, gyrated, swelled to giant mushroom shape, and died down

in a monstrous ballet. Peggy felt her senses slipping under the strain. But she kept a tight rein on herself.

"I must brace up for Roy's sake," she thought.

She stole a glance at her brother. Roy, despite his plight and the dust which enveloped him, was tight-lipped and defiant. No sign of a breakdown appeared on his features, for which Peggy breathed a prayer of thanks.

"After all, God is near us even in this dreadful place," she thought, and the reflection comforted her strangely.

Across the bottom of the bowl men and animals crawled like flies round the base of a pudding basin. From time to time the water kegs on the back of Juan's burro were sparingly tapped. At such times Buck Bellew never failed to be at Peggy's side with a tin cup of the warm, unpalatable stuff. But at least it was liquid, and Peggy thanked the man with as cheerful an air as she could assume.

But, unending as the progress across the red hot depression seemed to be, it came to an end at last, and the ponies began to climb the steep walls on the further side. At the summit, a surprise was in store for them--for Peggy and Roy that is. To the others the place was evidently familiar. Some rough huts, half of canvas and half of brush, showed that it had long been used as a rendezvous by the band.

The spot was a perfect little amphitheatre in the barren hills. Green grass, actual green grass, covered its floor and wild oats grew on the hillsides in fair plentitude. From the further end of the enclosed oasis arose clouds of steam which they afterwards learned came from boiling hot springs. But the waters of the hot springs soon lost their heat, and in the course of years had watered this little spot till it literally--in comparison with its surroundings--blossomed like the rose.

Red Bill Summers threw himself from his pony and, lying full length beside the creek that trickled through the valley from the springs above, he reveled in the water. When he had drunk his fill he stood erect.

"Wa-al," he drawled, running his hand through his stubby red crop, "I reckon we're home again."

CHAPTER XVII

A FRIEND IN NEED

From one of the huts at the upper end of the miniature valley an odd figure emerged. It was garbed in a blue blouse and loose trousers of the same color. Embroidered slippers without heels caused a curious shuffling gait in the newcomer. As he drew closer Peggy and Roy perceived that he was a Chinaman. His queue was coiled upon the top of his skull, giving a queer expression to his stolid features, over which the yellow skin was stretched as tightly as parchment on a drum.

"Here you, Ah Sing, hurry muchee quick and cook us a meal," roared Red Bill as he perceived the newcomer.

"Alee litee," was the easy-going response, "me catchum plentee quick."

The Oriental, who was by this time quite close, allowed his slant eyes to rest curiously on the two young prisoners. His mask-like face, however, betrayed no emotion of any kind, and with a guttural grunt he was off; apparently to set about his preparations for obeying the orders of the outlaw leader.

Red Bill turned to Peggy and Roy, who had dismounted.

"I'll speak to you two after we've eaten," he said; "in the meantime the young lady kin take that hut thar." He indicated a tumble-down structure near at hand.

"It ain't a Fift' Avenoo mansion," he grinned, "but I reckon it'll hev ter do."

Then he switched on Roy.

"You boy," he growled, "you kin hev thet other shack. If you want ter wash up thar's a bucket. We've hot and cold water in these diggin's, too, so take yer choice. Hot's above, cold's below. An' one thing. You ain't goin' ter be closely watched. It ain't needful. You rec'lect that red-hot basin we come through?"

As the questioner seemed to pause for an answer Roy nodded.

"Wall the country all around hyar's jes' like that, so thet if yer moseyed you wouldn't stand a Chinaman's chance of gittin' away alive."

Red Bill, with a vindictive grin, turned on his heel abruptly and stalked off, followed by the others. Peggy and Roy were left alone. Seemingly no restraint was to be put upon them. In fact, it appeared, as Red Bill had pointed out, that an attempted escape could only result fatally for them.

"Whatever will Aunt Sally and the rest be thinking?" exclaimed Peggy as the rough looking group, talking and gesticulating among

themselves, made toward the upper end of the valley.

"Poor aunt! She must be in a terrible state of mind," rejoined Roy dejectedly. "If only we could have got word to her or Mr. Bell--"

"In that case we could have taken it ourselves," wisely remarked Peggy; "well, brother mine, there is no use in borrowing trouble. Let's make the best of it. I've an idea that that redheaded man means to offer us some sort of a proposition after dinner."

"Wish he'd offer us some dinner first; I'm ravenous."

"Well, I couldn't eat a thing till I've got some of this dust off me, so please get me a bucket of water."

"Say, look at that Chinaman eyeing us," broke off Roy suddenly; "wonder what's the matter with him?"

"Guess he isn't used to visitors," suggested Peggy. "So this is where this gang, we heard talked about in Blue Creek, have been hiding themselves. No wonder the sheriff couldn't find them."

"It's an ideal hiding place," agreed Roy, "far too ideal to suit us. I don't see how we'd ever get out of here without help."

"Oh, as for that, I kept careful track of the way we came. I noted all the landmarks, and I really believe I could pick up the trail--is that the way you say it?--again."

"Good for you. I hope we have a chance to try out your sense of observation. But I'm off to get that water. Say, that Chinaman's staring harder than ever. What do you suppose he wants?"

"I haven't an idea. Opium perhaps. Don't they eat it or do something with it and then have beautiful dreams? I've heard--oh, Roy," the girl broke off breathlessly, "I've got it! You know that little jade god that Clara Cummings brought back from China with her when her father resigned as consul there?"

"Yes. But what--"

"Well, look here, you silly boy, I've got it on now. Look on my watch chain. I wonder if that could be what--what that Mongolian was regarding so closely?"

"Maybe," responded Roy carelessly, "but now I'm really off to get that water. Hot or cold?"

"Both!" cried Peggy.

The spirits of youth are elastic, and even in their predicament Peggy found her heart almost singing within her at the beauty of the green little valley after their long, dusty journey over the alkali

barrens.

"After all," she assured herself, "I don't believe they mean us any real harm and--oh, what an adventure to tell about when we get home again."

A refreshing wash and a hasty adjustment of her hair before a mirror in a tiny "vanity box," which shared the watch charm snap with the little jade god, served to still further raise Peggy's spirits.

Red Bill Summers and his followers ate at the upper end of the valley, but the Chinaman brought food on an improvised board tray to the captives. Having set down two dishes of a steaming stew of some kind, flanked with coffee, sweetened and flavored with condensed milk, and real bread, the Oriental glanced swiftly about him. Red Bill and his companions were noisily convivial, and paying no attention to what was transpiring at the lower end of the valley. Like a flash the Chinaman slid to his knees and extending his hands above his head touched his forehead to the ground three times in front of Peggy.

Then rising he exclaimed:

"Melican girl, gleat joss, mighty joss. Ah Sing he come bymby. Goo'bye."

He turned swiftly and silently in his silken slippers and glided off without a backward look.

"Well, what do you make of that?" wondered Roy.

"Oh, Roy, don't you see. He was worshiping this joss, as he calls Clara's little jade god. Just think, this may be a way out of it. If we can make him believe that--that--"

"That we stand in with his josh--joss--what do you call it?--you mean that we can scare him into letting us have horses to-night and escaping.

"How you do run ahead, Roy. I hadn't thought of that yet. But it might be done. He said he was coming back by and by. I wonder what he wants?"

"Maybe your blessing," grinned Roy. "But come on. Let's tackle this stew while it's hot. It looks great to me after that jack-rabbit supper."

"And this is bread--real bread, too!" cried Peggy, following Roy's example of "tackling the stew."

It was ten minutes after the last mouthful had disappeared that the tall, red-sashed young outlaw came toward the shack in front of which brother and sister were seated.

"The boss wants to see you," he said briefly, and signed to them to follow him.

Red Bill Summers sat alone before the remains of the Chinese cook's dinner. The other outlaws were busied staking out their ponies and removing the dust and perspiration from the little animals' coats. Far off, like a lost spirit, the treacherous Juan with his burro, could be seen.

From time to time he cast a covert glance toward Peggy and Roy. In his own country treachery such as he had shown would have been visited with death even if the avenger had to die for it himself the next minute.

The outlaw chief looked up as his dapper follower came up with the young Easterners.

"Grub all right?" he asked.

"Not bad at all," responded Roy non-committally. He didn't want to show this red-headed law-breaker that he was afraid of him.

"Wa-al, thet's jes' a sample of ther way I'm willin' ter treat yer as long ez you're here. I've got a hard name around ther alkali, but I ain't ez black ez I'm painted."

To this the two young prisoners made no reply, and Red Bill looked at them searchingly, but if he expected to read anything from their faces he was speedily undeceived.

"Now, then," he went on, "as you'll have guessed, I didn't kidnap you two fer fun. I did it fer infermation. I reckon' you know pretty well the location of Jim Bell's mine.'

"No better than you do," responded Roy boldly; "I guess that scoundrel Juan told you all you wanted to know."

"Oh, as fur as thet goes," rejoined Red Bill easily, "I could ride right frum hyar to yer camp. But what I'm gittin' at is this: You've seen the papers Jim Bell is goin' ter file. You know ther exact location. Thet's what I want. Give it to me an' I'll hev my men take yer as close ter yer camp as it's safe ter go without kickin' up a rumpus."

"In other words, you wish me to betray Mr. Bell's plans to you before he--"

Roy stopped. He had been on the verge of saying, "Before he's filed the claim himself." just in time, however, he recollected that this might be news to the outlaw, and he stopped short. But Red Bill was as astute as a desert fox.

"Before he files the claim himself, you wuz goin' ter say, I be-lieve," he drawled, purposely accentuating his words so that they fell like drops of ice water from his cold lips.

Roy could have bitten his tongue out. Quite unmeaningly he had betrayed a secret which might prove of tremendous import in the desperate game Red Bill seemed bent on playing.

"I said nothing about the filing or not filing of a claim," parried Roy, after a pause.

"Yer don't hev ter say everything ter make yerself understood, younker," snarled Red Bill, facing the boy and blinking his little red-rimmed orbs into Roy's honest open countenance.

"Thet's somethin' you've foun' out anyhow, Bill," drawled the red-sashed young outlaw, drawing his thin lips back in a sarcastic smile.

Roy felt himself turning red with chagrin. He had intended to play a cunning game with Red Bill, but the outlaw seemed to be capable of reading his mind. Steeling himself to be more careful in the future he awaited the further questions of his inquisitor. Upon the manner in which he answered them he felt that not alone his safety and Peggy's depended, but also the security and possibly the lives of the party in the distant arroyo.

CHAPTER XVIII

AH SING'S JOSS

"That'll be all on that line," said Red Bill presently. He turned to his companion.

"Got a pencil and a bit of paper, Buck?" he asked.

The red-sashed one produced the required pencil--a much bitten stub and then set off toward the cook house for a bit of paper. He returned with the fly leaf out of an old account book.

"Good enough," said Red Bill. "Now then younker," turning to Roy, "you take this pencil, lay that paper on that flat rock and write as I tell you."

Wondering what was coming, Roy obeyed, while Peggy with wondering eyes looked on anxiously at the strange scene. It had grown quite still in the little valley. The only sounds that occasionally interrupted the hush were the shouts of the men tethering the ponies

and the harsh scream of a buzzard swinging high against the burning blue of the desert sky.

"Mister Bell, dear sir," began Red Bill, dictating in his rasping voice.

"All right," said Roy, transcribing the words to the paper. The boy had an inkling of what was to come, but he didn't wish to make trouble before he actually had to.

"Got that, did you?"

'Yes.

"Very well. Now write this: 'Me an' my sister is in the hands of those who are our friends at present. It depends on you if they remain so. The messenger who brings you this will arrange for the transfer of the location papers of the mine to these parties. If you don't do this they will--'"

Red Bill paused and shoving back his sombrero scratched his rubicund poll.

"Make it 'they will-take other measures.' Jim Bell's no fool an' he'll know what's meant by that," concluded the outlaw of the alkali.

"Why you ain't bin writing what I tole yer," he whipped out suddenly, just becoming aware that Roy's pencil had been idle. Peggy breathed hard. There was menace in the man's very attitude.

Roy looked up boldly.

"You don't suppose that I'm going to be party to any scheme like that," he demanded with flaming cheeks.

Peggy, watching the little drama closely, saw that the ruffian was plainly taken off his feet by this. He had not expected--or so it seemed clear--that he would encounter any opposition in carrying out his rascally plan of playing off the safety of a boy and a girl who had never wronged him for the sake of gaining the title to a mine.

"What, you won't write it!" he bellowed at length. The great veins on his neck swelled. His little pig-like eyes gleamed malevolently.

Roy stood his ground firmly, although his heart was beating far faster than was pleasant, and a mist swam in front of his eyes. But he had seen Peggy watching, and knew that her trust in his integrity and honor had never faltered. Right then Roy took an inward oath that he would not destroy her faith.

"No, I will not," he flashed back; "I don't see how you could expect me to take part in a plan to trap and trick my own friends."

Red Bill's lip curled up, exposing a row of ragged yellow teeth.

"Not even at the cost of your own life?" he snarled.

Roy had half an idea that the ruffian was "bluffing" him. But even had he thought Red Bill in deadly earnest his reply would have been the same.

"No!"

The word was ejaculated like a pistol shot.

"Then listen. Your sister--"

To emphasize his words the outlaw launched his clumsy, thick-set frame forward. But the next instant he recoiled as if he had stepped on the edge of a fearful abyss. Simultaneously Roy and Peggy became aware of a curious buzzing, whirring sound like the rattling of dried peas on a griddle. A long dark body glided off through the yellow blades of sun-bitten grass.

"It's--it's a rattler!" gasped Red Bill.

He stooped as if to catch his ankle, and reeling fell in a clumsy huddled heap on the floor of the valley. As he fell a shot reverberated through the silent place. With one bullet from his revolver the tall young outlaw had dispatched the reptile, which had lain hidden in the grass.

"Get you, Bill?" he asked laconically stooping over his chief.

"Yes. I'm a gone coon I guess, Buck."

His red face, contorted and purple from pain, the stricken man slid backward. His lips parted and became ashen. The poison was coursing through his veins with terrific rapidity.

"Let me see. Maybe I can be of some use. Stand aside, please."

It was Peggy. The group of outlaws that had gathered about the recumbent man gave place respectfully. From a bag at her waist Peggy drew out a little oblong leather case. It had been a present to her from Mr. Bell before they set out to cross the reptile-haunted desert.

Opening the case she drew out a fairy-like little squirt, trimmed in silver. It was a hypodermic syringe. From a case she produced some crystals of a purplish color.

"A cup of water, please," she begged.

It was in her hand almost as quickly as she made the request. In

the meantime, with a handkerchief she had deftly bandaged the outlaw's leg above the bite. This was twisted tightly with a stick and prevented the poison circulating above the wound.

On Red Bill's ankle the reptile's bite was plainly to be seen. Two tiny blue punctures, fine enough to have been done with a needle. Yet through the fangs that gave the bite had been delivered enough poison to kill a strong man.

With flying fingers Peggy immersed the crystals in the water, turning it a deep crimson. Then filling the syringe she pushed its needle-like point under the outlaw's skin and just above the wound. Then she injected the antidote which she had mixed--permanganate of potassium--and old plainsmen will tell you there is no better opponent of a rattler's poison than the one Peggy used, the method of utilizing which had been opportunely taught her by Mr. Bell.

Red Bill's lips parted. His voice came through them painfully, hissing.

"Thank 'ee," he muttered, and then closed his eyes.

They carried him into a shack a little way up the valley and laid him on a cot.

"Anything else to be done, miss?" asked one of the outlaws in an awed tone.

"No," answered Peggy with quite the manner of a professional nurse; "he'll do nicely now. In an hour or so he ought to be better. You can call me then."

"Wa-al, I'll be all fired, double gosh-jiggered," Roy heard one of the men say as they left the shack and emerged into the late afternoon sunlight. The outlaws were all in the shack of their leader. All, that is, but the Chinaman, who had been an interested observer from the outskirts of the crowd. As the boy and girl came out of the shack he glided up to them as softly and silently as ever.

"Me see. You welly good. Allee samee doctor. Joss he helpee you," he said in a low voice. Then glancing about he sank his voice to a whisper:

"But you no flustee Led (Red) Bill. Him plentee bad mans. He feelee sick now. Him plentee thank yous. When he well he do you muchee harm."

"He could not be so ungrateful," exclaimed Roy; "my sister saved his life."

"Umph. That plentee big pity. Why not let him die. Good liddance," opined the cold-blooded Ah Sing. "Listen, Melican boy

an' girl, helpee you escape to-night you do one littlee ting for me."

"You'll help us escape?" echoed Peggy, the blood beating in her ears. "How? We'd need horses, water, food and--"

"Me catchee eblyting. Leve him all to Ah Sing, he git um."

A cunning smile overspread his features.

"But Ah Sing wantee some leward he do dis."

"Of course. Any money you want you shall have in Blue Creek," burst out Roy.

"Me no wantee monee. Me want lillee misses joss. Him plentee big joss my countlee. I have that joss I have plentee eblyting I want."

"He means the little god that Clara gave me," whispered Peggy. "All right, Sing, you shall have it. You shall have it when you are ready to send us out of the valley."

The Chinaman's face changed just the fraction of a muscle. That was as near as he came to permitting himself to show his gratification over the promise of the joss.

"Allee litee," he said, "bymby he get dark. You wait in missees shack. When I ready I give one, two, tree knocks-so!"

As silently as he had glided up he glided off again just as the crowd began pouring from the shack where the injured outlaw lay. Roy and Peggy could only exchange wild glances of astonishment at the surprising turn affairs had taken.

But presently Peggy spoke.

"I knew when I prayed in that terrible valley, Roy, that a way would be found," she said, and her voice was vibrant with reverence and faith as the brother and sister turned away.

CHAPTER XIX

THE ESCAPE AND WHAT FOLLOWED

"Roy! Roy! Wake up!"

Peggy shook the shoulder of her brother, who had dozed off in a rough chair formed out of an old flour barrel. She glanced at her

watch. It was almost midnight, and half an hour since the steady footfall of the sentry, who was keeping desultory watch on the captives, had passed the hut.

Roy was wide awake in an instant. He sat up staring wildly about, and then, casting sleep from him, he listened intently.

Tap! Tap! Tap!

The three raps came against the back wall of the shack, and then:

"Missee all ledee. Man who watchee you him go sleep. Me got ponies, water, ebyting. Make um number one quick."

With quick, beating pulses the brother and sister slipped from the door and out into the valley. It was moonlight-that is to say, the moon had risen, but a peculiar haze overcast the sky and the light of the luminary of the night only served to make the darkness more visible. Back of the shack stood a vague figure holding two ponies by the bridles. It was Ah Sing.

"You give me lilly joss now, missee?" he asked eagerly.

Swiftly Peggy stooped and unfastened the little jade god from far-off China.

"Here, Sing," she said simply, "and thank you."

The Chinaman bowed low three times before he took the precious symbol into his keeping. He slipped it inside his loose blouse.

"All ledee now," he said, holding a stirrup for Peggy to mount.

"But how will you explain it? Won't they kill you when they find the ponies are gone?" asked Roy.

The Oriental laughed the throaty, mirthless chuckle of his race.

"I tellee them you steal them," he said; "they no thinkee Ali Sing hab good sense enough to help you. All litee now. Good bye."

Before they were thoroughly aware of it, so swiftly had the actual escape happened, Peggy and Roy found themselves moving out of the valley on their desperate dash for freedom. The ponies went silently as wraiths. The astute Ah Sing had bundled their feet in sacks so that they made no more noise than cats.

In the faint light they could perceive the gateway of the little valley, and in a short time they had passed it and were beginning to traverse the gloomy stretches beyond. Suddenly there came a sound that sent every drop of blood in their bodies flying to their hearts, and then set it to coursing wildly through their veins again.

Bang!

The report, coming from behind them, cut the stillness of the night like a scimitar of sound.

"A pistol!" exclaimed Roy. "They've discovered our escape."

Peggy shuddered. Bending forward at the risk of the noise of their flight being heard, they began to urge their ponies faster. Behind them was pandemonium. Shouts, cries and shots mingled in a babel of sound.

"The kids hev got away!" That cry sounded above all the others, and then, with sinister meaning, came another shout:

"Saddle up and git arter 'em. Get 'em, dead or alive!"

Sounds of galloping followed this order, and then came the shrill voice of Ah Sing:

"Me see um. Me see um. They go that way! Over there! Over the hills!"

"Good for Ah Sing," breathed Roy; "he has thrown them off the track. He's told them we went the other way. Come on, sis; now's our time to make speed before they discover their mistake."

The two fugitives urged their ponies unmercifully over the shale. Fortunately, in the rarefied air of the desert, the nights are comparatively cool, and the tough little broncos sped along at a good gait without showing signs of distress. But it was a cruel race across the floor of the desolate valley, and when they e merged on to the comparatively easy going of the foothills of the barren range, the ponies were fain to slack up and draw long heaving breaths.

"Poor little creatures," cried Peggy; "you've got a long way to go yet."

By the moon, which showed through the haze in a sort of luminous patch, Roy gauged the way. Peggy's observations, too, made on the journey into the valley, helped. They kept the pinnacled steeps of the barren hills to their right and pressed forward among the undulating foothills. They had been traveling thus for perhaps an hour-pausing now and then to listen for sounds of pursuit when Roy suddenly became sensible of a change in the atmosphere. It grew warm and close and almost sticky. A puff of hot wind breathed up in their faces and went screaming off among the mysterious clefts and canyons above.

"Are we going to have a storm?" wondered Peggy.

"Don't know, sis, but the weather looks ominous. I don't like that wind. We must make more speed."

"I hate to drive these poor ponies any faster," protested Peggy

"But we must, sis. They'll have a good long rest when this is over. Come on."

So saying Roy brought down his quirt--the long raw-hide whip used in the West--over the heaving flanks of his pony. The little animal gamely responded and plunged forward at a quick lope. Peggy, perforce, followed suit, although it made her heart ache to press the animals at such a gait.

On and on they rode, while the weather every moment grew more peculiar. From the floor of the desert great dust-devils of white alkali arose and swirled solemnly across the wastes. In the semi-darkness they looked like gaunt ghosts. Peggy shuddered. It was like a nightmare. Once or twice she even pinched herself to see if she were awake.

The night, from being cool, had now become blisteringly hot. The wind was like the fiery exhalations of a blast furnace. Grains of sand caught up by it drove stingingly against their faces. Each grain cut into the flesh, smarting sharply.

"We must keep on."

It was Roy's voice, coming after a long silence.

Peggy answered with a monosyllable. A short distance further on they dismounted and allayed their thirst from the kegs Ah Sing had fastened to each saddle, and, then, although their supply was precious, they had to yield to the whinnied entreaties of the ponies. Into a small tin bucket each young rider emptied a modicum of the water and let the little animals drink. It seemed to refresh them--mere mouthful that it was--for they pressed on with more spirit after that.

But there was no denying the fact that something serious was at hand. From desultory puffs the wind had now increased to a steady blow, which drove a stinging hail of sand all about them blindingly. Eddies of hot wind caught up larger grains and dried cactus stems and drove them in terrestrial water spouts across the face of the desert. The moon was quite obscured now, and it was as black as a country church at midnight.

All at once Peggy's pony sank down, and with a long sigh stretched itself out upon the alkali. Roy's almost immediately did the same. As they did so the wind came more furiously. Half blinded and with nostrils, eyes and mouths full of sand particles, the two young travelers reeled about in the darkness. Suddenly what it all meant burst upon Roy with the suddenness of a thunder clap.

"It's a sand storm, Peggy," he cried.

A puff of wind caught up his words and scattered them over the desert.

The words sent a chill to Peggy's heart. She had heard Mr. Bell tell of the sand storms of the Big Alkali--how sometimes they last for days, blotting out trails and burying those unfortunate enough to be caught in them.

"Get your saddle off and keep your head under it," shouted Roy, recalling what he had heard Mr. Bell say of the only way to weather such disturbances.

Peggy, half dead with horror, did as she was told. By the time the work of unsaddling had been accomplished the wind was driving furiously. It was impossible to hear unless the words were shouted. The ponies, who had obeyed their first instinct at the initial warning of what was to come, turned their backs to the storm and laid out straight, with their noses to the ground. Roy and Peggy drew the big flapped Mexican saddles over their heads. Under this protection they were sheltered from the cruel fury of the wind-driven sand and brush.

It was suffocating under the saddle, but when Peggy protruded her face for even a breath of the superheated air, she quickly withdrew it. The wind was now a tornado in violence, and the sand stung like countless needles. Conversation was, of course, impossible, and they lay in silence while the suffocating gale screamed about them.

Once or twice Peggy had to scrape away the sand from the front of the saddle. She could feel it rising all about her. With the sensation came a terrifying thought. She had heard Mr. Bell tell of men whose bones had been buried in the sand only to be exposed long afterward, white and bleached, when the wind-formed sand dunes had shifted and exposed them.

All at once, above the wind and the steady roar of the furiously driven sand and alkali, Peggy thought she heard a wild screech or cry. It sounded like nothing human in its uncanny shrillness. Brave girl as she was, Peggy shuddered hysterically. Could she be losing her mind in the whirling confusion and elemental fury that waged all about her?

CHAPTER XX

THE PROFESSOR AGAIN

The evening before the sand storm, a red wagon had been crawling over the alkali toward the barren hills. It was the eccentric vehicle affected by Professor Wandering William, and was headed for the barren range of hills in which lay the valley of the outlaws.

Professor Wandering William, silently smoking, kept his keen eyes steadily fixed upon the distant hills as he drove, although from time to time he scanned the sky anxiously.

"Going to be a sandstorm sure," he grunted. "Well, if I can make the lee of those hills by sundown I reckon I'll be all right. Too bad though. It'll give that precious outfit a chance to put a still further gap between themselves and me--phew! but it's hot!"

The professor took off his big sombrero and placed it behind him in the wagon. He seemed to think a minute and then muttered:

"Oh, well, I guess it's no harm. Nobody to see but a few old buzzards anyhow, and they won't tell."

The professor, having concluded these self-addressed remarks, did a strange thing. He raised his hands to his head and the next instant his luxuriant long hair had vanished, revealing a close-cropped head of dark hair. This done, he removed his goatee with the same ease, and was revealed as a good-looking, forceful-faced young man of perhaps thirty-two or so.

"Ah-h-h-h!" he breathed with intense satisfaction, "that's a whole heap better. However, I guess the time's coming pretty quick when I can do without this make-up altogether. I shan't be sorry either. Git up!"

This last remark was addressed to the motive power of his jaunty red wagon. In obedience the wheels began to revolve faster. But press onward as he would, supper-time found the professor--so strangely shorn--still some distance from the hills.

"That storm's coming right up, too," he said to himself over his after-supper pipe; "well, no help for it. I guess we'll have to push on."

Watering his animals from a bucket previously filled at the spigot of a big water keg built into his wagon the professor hitched up and pressed on to his destination. Darkness came on, but still he drove steadily forward, seeking the shelter he knew he could find in the lee of the barren hills.

"Going to be a hummer and no mistake," he commented half aloud; "good thing-it-didn't catch me out in the middle of the alkali or Red Bill and his cronies might have had a new lease of life."

It was close upon midnight when the professor found a spot to his

liking, and by that time the first desultory puffs of the coming storm were sighing in the nooks and crannies of the barren hills. He tethered his team, gave them their hay in the shelter of the wagon, watered them and then, after a good-night pipe, prepared to turn in. He woke from a troubled doze to find the wind rocking the wagon within which he slept.

"Wonder what kind of weather the ponies are making of it?" he muttered, and rising he opened the canvas flaps at the front of the wagon and peered out.

At that instant he saw, or thought he saw, two dark objects move by in the flying smother of sand. But the next moment he told himself it must have been imagination.

"Guess being alone so much is getting on my nerve," he commented.

Having seen that his stock were lying down and turning their backs on the flying drift, Wandering William, as he called himself, retired once more. But he couldn't sleep for thinking of the strange illusion he had had.

"No, it wasn't an illusion either," he said stoutly to himself the next instant. "I'm prepared to swear that I really did see two figures on horseback, though what, in great ginger cookies, they were doing out in this I don't know. Appears to me though that they must have had to call a halt right around here some place. In that case I'm going to give 'em a hail, an' if they answer it invite 'em into the wagon. This is no weather to be out without an umbrella."

Chuckling a little at his joke, Wandering William arose and went once more to the front of his wagon.

Placing his hands to his mouth, funnel-wise, he sent a long, shrill cry vibrating out through the storm. Another and another he gave till he was hoarse, but there was no reply.

"Guess I was dreaming after all," remarked Wandering William retiring once more to his blanket.

A sickly yellow light struggling through the sand-laden air heralded the day. But the wind had died down and the particles still held in suspension were rapidly thinning out of the air.

Roy thrust his head from under his saddle like a turtle from its shell.

His lips were dry and cracked, his eyes smarted, his skin was irritated with the sand. The whole world seemed to have turned to sand. It was everywhere.

"Peggy!"

A similar turtle-like head projected from the other saddle. Poor Peggy, she would positively have screamed if she had known the appearance she presented. Her hair was tousled, her eyes red with irritation of the sand, and her lips dry and cracked like Roy's.

"Is--is it all over, Roy?" she asked a bit quaveringly.

"I think so. The wind has died down, and look, the ponies have gotten to their feet. I guess they know."

"Wasn't it awful. I never thought we should live through it."

"Nor did I. But there's one good thing, it has obscured our tracks. If any of Red Bill's gang tried to follow us now they'd have a lot of trouble."

"That's so," agreed Peggy, and then went on to tell Roy of the terrifying screeches and yells she had heard in the night.

"Nothing but the wind," opined Roy, with boy-like superiority. But the next instant it was his turn to start amazedly. Through the fog-like gloom that still overhung the desert a figure was making its way toward them. Roy's hand flew to the revolver with which the thoughtful Ah Sing had provided his saddle holster.

At the same instant the figure, seemingly that of a young man, turned, and wheeling quickly, ran backward and was swallowed up in the obscurity.

"Was that one of Red Bill's men?" gasped Peggy.

"Impossible. They could not have traveled through that storm. But who can it be?"

"What did he run like that for?"

"I'm going after him to find out," declared Roy pluckily; "maybe it's somebody who has become crazed from the sandstorm."

"Oh, Roy, a lunatic!"

Peggy clasped her hands. But the next instant a fresh surprise greeted them. A tall figure with flowing gray locks and gray goatee, topped off with a big sombrero, was seen approaching from the same direction as that in which the youthful figure had vanished.

"Wandering William!" exclaimed the two young adventurers in one breath.

"Yes, Wandering William. The precise individual," was the rejoinder; "and just in time to invite you to breakfast. There, there, no explanations now. You both resemble the output of a

threshing machine. But I have mirrors, soap, towels and water in my wagon. Come along, and if you feel ailing, for the insignificant sum of one dollar I will sell you a bottle of Wandering William's Wonderful Wonder Worker."

Exhausted as both boy and girl felt, they could hardly maintain their gravity in the face of this eccentric individual. The very suddenness and utter unexpectedness of his appearance seemed of a piece with his other odd actions. But suddenly Roy recollected the figure that had appeared and then vanished.

"I'd like to accept," said Roy, with vast cunning as he thought, "but what would your partner say?"

"My partner?" Wandering William looked frankly puzzled.

"Yes. That young chap who came toward us and then disappeared again when I came at him with a gun. Not that I blame him," Roy broke off with a laugh, "but I thought for a moment it was one of Red Bill's gang."

Wandering William's keen gray eyes narrowed into two little slits.

"What's that you're saying, boy," he exclaimed; "what do you know about Red Bill Summers?"

"A good deal too much for our comfort," exclaimed Roy, and then he rapidly sketched events of the last twenty-four hours as the trio walked toward Wandering William's wagon.

The strange vendor of medicine seemed to be deeply interested, although he confined his comments to "ums" and "ahs."

"But about that other man," said Roy, returning to the charge when he had finished his narrative, "didn't you see him?"

"My dear boy," said Wandering William seriously, "I think you had better invest in a bottle of Wandering William's Wonder Working Witch Oil for tired and shattered nerves. There is no one in the vicinity but our three selves."

Boy and girl stared at him blankly.

"But I saw him, too," said Peggy.

"I dare say, I dare say," and Wandering William patted his luxuriant curls; "you had a night of strain. What you need is breakfast--hot coffee and all that. Now go in and get fixed up while I attend to your ponies, or rather, Red Bill's."

The wind had by this time died down, and the sun struggled out through the clearing air. Nobody was in sight but themselves, and

fain to believe that their sand-sore eyes must have played them a trick, the boy and girl proceeded to "fix up" in Wandering William's really comfortably appointed wagon.

In the meantime one weight had been lifted from Peggy's mind. Wandering William had explained that it was he who had uttered the shouts and yells which had so alarmed her in the night.

"If only it wasn't for that man whom I'm certain I saw," thought Peggy as she combed the sand out of her hair, "I should feel quite relieved, but as it is--Roy, are you still certain you saw that man--the one you pointed the revolver at I mean?"

Roy looked dubious.

"I--don't know," he confessed.

"Oh, Roy Prescott," snapped Peggy, "I--I'd like to shake you."

CHAPTER XXI

OUT OF THE DESERT MAZE

Twilight was descending on the camp in the arroyo when Jimsy, who had been stationed with a rifle on a butte overlooking the desert maze, gave a sudden shout. The next instant his rifle was at his shoulder and he began shooting into the air as fast as he could. As the rapid staccato volley of sound rattled forth all became excitement in the arroyo.

The volley had been the signal agreed upon in case the young sentry caught sight of the missing ones. It came after a wearing night and a still more harrowing day. Following the non-arrival of Peggy and Roy in camp from their hunting excursion a search had at once been commenced, of course without result.

An ascent had even been made in one of the monoplanes, but even a bird's-eye view of the surrounding country failed to discover their whereabouts. Then came the sandstorm, and hope that the missing ones could have weathered it was almost given up. Nevertheless, James Bell, in whom hope died hard, had set Jimsy as sentinel on the lofty butte in the wild hope that after all the castaways might turn up.

And now, as the agreed signal rang out, there was a great outpouring from the camp. Aunt Sally, pale and red-eyed from weeping, Mr. Bell, with deep lines of anxiety scoring his face, Jess, troubled and anxious looking, and old Peter Bell, the former hermit, bearing

an expression of mild bewilderment. Last of all came Alverado, the Mexican flotsam of the desert. His inscrutable countenance bore no sign of the suffering he had gone through at the thought that harm had come to his worshipped senorita, but in his heart the Mexican had suffered as much as the rest. He had arrived in camp with the stock the evening before, and had, with difficulty, been restrained from setting forth at once on a search.

"Look!" cried Jimsy pointing as the others rushed up.

They followed the direction of his finger and saw slowly crawling toward the arroyo a red wagon, dust-covered and travel-stained.

In front of it were two young figures on horseback, waving frantically. As the volley rattled out they urged their little horses forward on a dash for the arroyo.

"Thank God!" breathed Mr. Bell huskily.

Aunt Sally fell into Jess's young arms and wept lustily while old Bell broke into a rhapsody:

"Out from the desert safe and sound;
Hooray! our boy and girl are found!"

But nobody paid any attention to his verses, either to laugh or admire just then. After the cruel anxiety of the past hours the relief was too great for any of them to trust themselves to speak.

But as Peggy and Roy--for of course our readers have guessed it was they--drew closer and their dust-covered features could be plainly seen, a great shout went up from the butte. And in it mingled the voice of Alverado, the unemotional.

The girl and boy were fairly lifted from their ponies and carried in triumph into the camp.

"Dig down into the stores," ordered Mr. Bell, "Get out all the delicacies we have been savin' for a big occasion."

"We'll never have a bigger one than this," declared Jimsy; "tell us all about it, Roy."

"Oh, Peggy, you darling, is it really you?" cried Jess for the 'steenth time, with brimming eyes.

As for old Mr. Bell, as Jimsy observed afterwards, "he just wrapped poetical circles round himself. You couldn't see him for rhythm."

"Hullo, folks!"

The voice came suddenly from the shadows. It was Wandering William. In the general excitement everybody had forgotten him, and he, had

driven up in his red wagon unheralded. But the warmth of his reception made up for any temporary slight. In fact, after supper, when Roy related their strange adventures, and told how, if it had not been for Wandering William, they might never have reached the camp, Wandering William's greeting reached an ovation.

But while all this was going on one figure had remained crouched in the circle of firelight--or, rather, just beyond it--whose dark eyes had not for an instant left the face of Wandering William. The interested observer was Alverado.

The Mexican puckered his brow as he gazed as if trying to recall something. But the effort seemed to be in vain, for at length he arose and, unnoticed, strode moodily off toward the ponies, which had been tethered high on the hillside and out of sight of the camp.

He was gone but a few minutes before he came bounding back into the camp.

"The ponies! The ponies are gone!" he shouted at the top of his lungs.

In an instant everybody but Aunt Sally and old Mr. Bell was upon his or her feet.

"Gone!" The exclamation came like a dismayed groan.

"Yes, gone! Every one of them! The lariats have been cut. Ah, the ladrone, the cursed thieves! The--"

"Some of Red Bill's work, for a million!"

The exclamation fell sharp and clear from Professor Wandering William's lips. The tones were so unlike his usual ones that everybody looked up at him. But only for an instant; the next moment the professor had--dropped back into his pompous, drawling way of speaking:

"It's a good thing we have a large supply of my wonder working remedies with us," he said; "they induce philosophy, smooth the thorny ways of life and make the old young and the young younger."

Mr. Bell looked at him sternly for an instant, and then apparently decided that the man was a harmless fool, for with a quick exclamation he strode off toward his tent, which lay at some distance from the camp. The others excitedly discussed the alarming turn events had taken, while Aunt Sally showed strong symptoms of hysterics. But Alverado, whose face had taken on a startled expression at Wandering William's quick exclamation, darted to the long-haired herb doctor's side.

"I know you now, senior, you are--"

Wandering William caught the man's gesticulating hand with a grasp of iron.

"Not so loud, Alverado," he whispered tensely, "the time isn't ripe for that yet."

"But, senor, you will capture them, and--"

The Mexican's manner had grown deferential, but Wandering William checked him with a glance from those keen eyes of his.

"Don't mention a word of this, Alverado. I rely on you."

"You can, senor. But hark! what is the matter with the Senor Bell?"

Evidently something serious was the matter with the mining man. He came bounding out of the dark shadows of the upper end of the canyon as the Mexican spoke. His face was black as thunder.

"More villainy!" he exclaimed as questions came pouring in upon him.

"Something else missing?"

It was Wandering William. His voice was as emotionless as if he had been a phonograph.

"Yes, I should say there was. The plans of the mine and its location as prepared for filing have been taken from my tent!"

"Stolen--oh!"

Peggy's voice quivered.

"Stolen," repeated Mr. Bell, "and undoubtedly by the same band of scoundrels that cut the ponies loose, knowing that we could not pursue them."

"But we can overtake them in an aeroplane."

It was Peggy who spoke. Her bosom heaved and her cheeks burned red with excitement.

"True, my brave girl," rejoined Mr. Bell, "but of what use would that be? They have the papers and will file them. Without the papers you could do nothing, and I have no memoranda to draw up fresh ones."

"But in my pocket--I'm cutting no capers--I have a set of duplicate papers!"

Old Peter Bell, triumphant and poetical, stepped forward, at the same time drawing from his inner-coat pocket a bundle. It was the duplicate set which Mr. Bell had given Peggy to deliver to the

former hermit, and which, up to that moment, had been forgotten in the excitement.

"Thank heaven!" exclaimed Mr. Bell, snatching at them; "Peter, you're a brick. Hooray, now we have a chance to beat the scoundrels at their own game."

"You mean if we can file those papers first they stand good in law?" asked Roy.

"That's just what I do mean, and I think that with the aeroplane we can do it."

"You can depend on it, Mr. Bell, that if there is a chance those papers get into Blue Creek first," cried Peggy ablaze with excitement.

"But we can't start to-night."

Roy's voice held a note of despair.

"That's all right, my boy. You need a good rest anyway. Red Bill--if it is his gang that has taken them--cannot get to Blue Creek for two days anyway. If you start at dawn to-morrow you can outwit them."

And so it was arranged. Roy and Peggy turned in early, while Jimsy worked all night getting the big monoplane in readiness. By earliest dawn all was ready and a hasty breakfast eaten. Then the monoplane was stocked with food and water and everything was ready for the dash across the desert.

Peggy and Roy had slipped into their linen coats and donned their hideous masks with the blue sun goggles, when a figure slipped up on the other side of the chassis and clambered unobserved into the box-like structure. It was not till half an hour later, when they were dashing through midair, that the figure revealed itself. Then the form of Wandering William crawled from under a bit of canvas used as an engine cover, and in answer to the amazed exclamations of the young aviators said:

"You'll have to forgive me. It'll be a good ad for my business to be able to say that Professor Wandering William has wandered along the aerial Pike."

CHAPTER XXII

MAROONED ON THE DESERT

There was nothing to be done but to accept the situation, little as either Roy or Peggy relished the eccentric "professor" for an aerial traveling companion. Only Peggy remarked with withering scorn:

"I think you might have waited till you were asked, don't you?"

The professor's reply was characteristic.

"My dear young lady, if I never sold anybody a bottle of my medicine except those that really wanted it I'd have a hard time getting along."

Roy was on the point of exclaiming "Bother your old medicine," when he suddenly recollected that had it not been for this queer personage they might not have been in the aeroplane at all. Instead--but Roy didn't care to think further along those lines.

Far below them suddenly appeared a giant halo of light. It hung above the desert, wheeling and gyrating about five feet above the glaring white of the alkali.

"A halo," remarked Professor Wandering William gazing over the edge of the chassis.

"A halo? Whose--Roy's?" inquired Peggy.

"No, it is one of those halos peculiar to the desert," was the professor's rejoinder; "it is caused by heat refraction or something of the sort. I recall I did read a lengthy explanation of it somewhere once, but I've forgotten it now."

"Does it portend anything?" asked Roy, turning round for a moment from his levers.

"No. not that I know of, at least--except that it's hot."

"Good gracious, we don't need a halo to tell us that," cried Peggy, and then regarding Professor Wandering William with that frank, straight "between the eyes" look, as Jimsey called it, Peggy remarked, "Do you know, Professor Wandering William, that you are a very odd person?"

"Odd, my dear young lady. How so?"

"Why at times you are quite different to--to what you are at others," stammered Peggy lamely. It wasn't just what she wanted to say, but as she told herself it expressed it tolerably.

"Almost human sometimes, eh?" chuckled Professor Wandering William with a very odd wrinkle of his gray eyes; "well, you are not the first person who has said that."

To herself Peggy thought, "I'm sure that if he'd cut his hair and

take off that dreadful goatee he'd be quite good looking. And his eyes, too, they twinkle and flash sometimes in a way very much out of keeping with his general appearance." But Professor Wandering William, seemingly quite oblivious to Peggy's frank gaze, was humming "Annie Laurie" to himself and gazing down at the flying desert as it flashed by below.

"At this rate we'll be in Blue Creek long before those other varmints," he observed at length; "that is, if all goes right. Wonderful things these aeroplanes. Great scheme for selling patent medicine. Why I could scatter my advertisements over a whole county in a day's time if I had one of these. That is unless I scattered myself first."

There was a sudden loud hissing sound from the motor. At the same instant the propeller ceased to revolve and the monoplane dashed downward with fearful force.

Roy worked at his levers desperately, while Peggy, white faced but silent, clung tightly to the sides of the chassis. Professor Wandering William did not utter a word, but his lips moved, as, from a pleasing rapid forward motion their course suddenly changed to that fearful downward plunge through space.

It seemed that in the molecule of time that intervened between the sudden stopping of the propeller and the moment that they reached the proximity of the ground that a whole lifetime flashed in front of Peggy. "Is this the end?" she caught herself thinking.

But it was not. Roy's skill averted that. He handled the disabled aeroplane so that as it struck the alkali its landing wheels sustained the shock. But even with all his skill he could not entirely ward off the shock. The monoplane struck the alkali in a shower of white dust that hurtled high above it like a breaking sea wave.

Peggy and the professor managed to hold on and resist the grinding shock, but Roy did not fare so well. Like a projectile from a catapult the shock flung him far. He came grinding down into the sand on one shoulder, ploughing a little furrow. Then he lay very still, while Peggy wondered vaguely if she was going to faint.

To scramble from the stranded machine was the work of an instant for the erratic professor, and he extended his hand to Peggy. With a supreme effort she pulled herself together and accepted his proffered help. But agitated as she was, she did not fail to notice a surprising fact, and that was that the professor's hair was on one side! The next instant he caught the girl's startled eyes fixed upon it, but in that space of time he readjusted it, so that he appeared exactly as usual. But to Peggy the recollection of that deranged hair was unforgettable.

"It's--it's a wig!" she gasped to herself, and then, casting all

other thoughts aside, sped to Roy's side.

"Roy! Roy! are you badly hurt, dear?" she breathed, going down on her knees in the rough surface of the desert.

The boy stirred uneasily and his eyes opened.

"Oh, is it you, Peggy? I guess I was knocked out for a minute. It's my shoulder. Ouch! Don't touch it."

The boy winced as Peggy's soft hand touched the injured member.

"Allow me. I've got a little skill at surgery."

It was Professor Wandering William's voice, and Peggy caught herself wondering that he didn't make some reference to his infallible bone set or wonder-working liniment. But he didn't. Instead, he knelt by Roy's side, and with a few deft strokes of his knife had cut away the boy's shirt and bared a shoulder that was rapidly turning a deep blue.

Tenderly as a woman might have, Wandering William felt the wound.

"Hurt?" he asked, as Roy winced, biting his lips to keep from crying out under the agony.

"Hurt?" echoed Peggy indignantly; "of course it does."

Professor Wandering William looked up with an odd air of authority in his keen eyes.

"Please fetch me some water from the aeroplane," he said, and Peggy had no choice but to obey.

Professor Wandering William, picking Roy up in his arms as if he were a baby, instead of a 165-pound boy, carried him after her and laid the injured lad out in the scant strip of shade afforded by the aeroplane. Then, with bits of canvas ripped from the cover which had served to conceal him when he entered the aerial vehicle, the strange wanderer skillfully bathed and then bandaged the wound.

"Nothing more than a bad sprain," he announced.

Roy groaned.

"And just as I was going ahead at such tiptop speed, too," he complained. "I won't be able to use this arm for a month the way it feels."

"Never mind, Roy, I can drive the aeroplane," comforted Peggy. But Roy was fretful from pain.

"What can a girl do?" he demanded; "this is a man's work. Oh, it's

too bad! It's--"

Suddenly the pain-crazed lad realized what he was saying and broke off abruptly:

"Don't mind me, sis. I'm all worked up, I guess. But if it hadn't been for this delay we'd have beaten them out. And now--"

"And now the first thing to do is to see what ails this old machine," said Professor Wandering William briskly. "Let me lift you into the what-you-may-call-um, my boy, and make you as comfortable as possible on this canvas."

The professor skillfully arranged the canvas from which he had cut the bandages, and making a pillow for Roy out of his own coat, he lifted the lad into the chassis.

"There now, you'll do," he said, as his ministrations were completed. "And now, young lady, as you know more about this thing than I do let's have a look at it and see what particular brand of illness it is suffering from."

A brief examination showed Peggy that the radiator--the intricate mesh-work of pipes in which the circulating water for cooling the cylinders is kept at a low temperature--was leaking, and that almost all their supply of water had leaked out. This had caused the cylinders of the motor to overheat and had stopped the aeroplane in midair.

"Bad--is it?"

Professor Wandering William noted the despairing look on Peggy's face as she discovered the cause of the stoppage.

"As bad as bad can be," the girl rejoined seriously; "it means if we can't get water and something to stop that leak with that we can't go on or go back. We're stuck right here."

"Phew!" Wandering William's lips puckered in a whistle. "I should just say that is bad."

He looked about him. On every side stretched the dazzling white alkali, with here and there a little dust devil dancing as if in mockery at their plight.

On all that vast expanse they seemed the only living things, and Wandering William knew the desert well enough to realize that it is not good to linger on its treacherous sands.

CHAPTER XXIII

BUD TO THE RESCUE

"I'm going to look for water!"

Wandering William spoke decisively after an hour or more of futile endeavors to start the motor with the little fluid they could spare from the water kegs. But even without the leaky radiator it would have been an impossibility to cool the cylinders with the small quantity they were thus able to command.

"Look for water!" Peggy echoed the words blankly.

In all that sun-blistered expanse it seemed to be an impossibility to even dream of discovering a drop of moisture. And they needed buckets full.

Wandering William, perhaps deeming it wise not to strain the over-wrought girl's nerves further by keeping up the conversation, strode off. Apparently he wandered aimlessly, but in reality his keen, trained eyes were on the alert every instant. To the desert traveler the most insignificant signs may betray the presence of the life saving fluid.

Peggy watched the strange figure till it vanished from view over a low rise, for although the desert seems flat on a superficial view, it is, in reality, no more level than the tossing sea. Rises and hollows make its surface undulating.

In the meantime Peggy ministered to Roy as best she could. With a spare bit of canvas she made a shelter to keep off the blazing rays of the sun. Roy thanked her with a smile. The first sharp keen pain of his injury had gone, but he felt weak and dizzy. Presently he begged for a drink of water, and Peggy, not daring to tell him how low the supply was gave it to him. The boy was feverish from his injury, and almost drained the canteen of luke-warm stuff she held to his lips. Then he lay back with a satisfied smile.

"Get the radiator fixed yet?" he asked presently.

Peggy had told him that it would not be long before they were under way again.

"Not yet, Roy dear. But don't worry about that. It will be fixed presently. Suppose you try to go to sleep."

The boy closed his eyes and tried to compose himself to slumber. Before long he actually did doze off and lay in that state while the long hours dragged slowly by. Wandering William had not reappeared, and Peggy wondered in a dull, vague sort of way if he ever would come back. Perhaps he had deserted them, she thought. But,

even this reflection brought no poignant sensation of despair. The girl had sunk into a sort of apathy in which nothing seemed to matter much. Only she fairly ached with thirst. But Roy would awake presently and want water. The little they had must be saved for him.

And so the hours wore on and the sun marched blazingly across the sky. It was mid-afternoon, and Roy had not awakened, when Peggy was startled from her gloomy thoughts by a loud hail.

"Hul-lo!"

Springing to her feet she looked across the desert. On the summit of a distant earth wave she saw the figure of Wandering William. He was gesticulating frantically and shouting something. He had his hands to his mouth, funnelwise, to make the sound carry better.

What was it he was crying out? It sounded like--yes, it was:

"Water! I've found it! Water!"

Peggy hastily snatched up the two buckets with which the aeroplane was equipped, and hurried toward the distant figure. She reached Wandering William's side in quicker time than she would have thought possible, such was the stimulating effect of the glad news. The strange "professor" said not a word, but took her by the hand and began striding in great steps across the sandy dunes.

They had walked about a quarter of a mile when they reached a spot where yuccas and prickly desert plants of different varieties grew thickly. At the bottom of this desolate little valley was a pool on which the sunlight shone glitteringly. It was shallow and warm, and the color of rusty iron, but it was water.

Taking the folding tin cup that Wandering William produced from one of his pockets, the girl drank eagerly. Never had sparkling spring water in the fruitful Eastern country tasted half so good as that tepid, dirty alkaline stuff that Wandering William had so providentially stumbled upon.

"How did you find it?" gasped Peggy.

Wandering William indicated a tumble down sign post a few paces off. To it was nailed board with sun faded lettering on it.

"Read it," commanded Wandering William.

"To the lost in the desert inferno," read Peggy, "water is twenty paces to the west."

"If it hadn't been for the white soul of the man who put that up there," commented the "professor," "we might have perished miserably. Heaven bless him, wherever he is."

"Amen," murmured Peggy.

They filled the buckets, and staggering under their weight, Wandering William led the way back to the aeroplane. Roy was awake and thirsty. He drank greedily of the turbid stuff they offered him.

"And now," said the professor, "let's get to work on that radiator."

But try as they would, they could not stop the leak. Indeed, so much water was wasted in their experiments that several more trips to the pool were necessary.

"Looks like we have run into the worst streak of hard luck I ever heard of," sighed Wandering William despairingly, after the failure of the twentieth trial to get the cooling system to hold water.

"We've just got to plug that leak somehow, or--"

He didn't finish the sentence. There was no need for him to do that.

Suddenly Peggy, who had looked up from the baffling task for an instant, gave a cry:

"Look! Look there! What's all that dust?"

"It's horsemen of some kind, and they're coming this way!" cried Wandering William.

As he spoke his hand slid to his hip, and he drew out his well-oiled and worn old forty-four.

"Do you think that they are--that they are Red Bill's men?"

"Don't know yet. The dust's thick and the light's bad."

"If they are?"

"Then we are in for a mighty bad quarter of an hour. Consarn the luck, everything seems to be going wrong at once."

On and on swept the dust cloud, growing close with great rapidity. With what anxious feelings the strange herb doctor and the girl watched its advance may be imagined. As for Roy, he lay on the floor of the chassis unaware of what was transpiring without.

There seemed to be several of the riders--a dozen at least.

"What beats me is, if those are Red Bill's men what are they doing in this direction?" said Wandering William, a puzzled look creeping over his weather-beaten countenance.

"Perhaps they have seen that the aeroplane is stranded and are coming to destroy it," hazarded Peggy.

"Maybe," rejoined Wandering William in a far-away voice. His eyes and mind were bent on the approaching cavalcade. If the riders were not Red Bill's men it meant succor and aid. If they were the outlaw's band, it meant-well, Wandering William did not care to dwell upon the thought.

"A few seconds will tell now," he observed as through the dust cloud the outlines of the horsemen became visible.

All at once a shrill series of cries rang out:

"Yip-yip-yip-yee-ee-e-e-e-e-e!"

There was something familiar in the sound to Peggy. She leaned forward, straining her ears. Suddenly an active little bronco seemed to separate from the ruck of the riders and dashed forward alone. On his back sat a familiar figure and not a beautiful one, but to Peggy no angel from heavenly regions could have appeared more, beatific just then, for in the rider she had recognized the redoubtable Bud, the leader of the horse hunters.

Bud swept off his sombrero as he dashed up, and was apparently about to make some jocular remark, but he stopped short at the sight of Peggy's pale, anxious face.

"Wa-al, what's all ther trouble hyar?" he demanded; "your sky bronco foundered? Why hello, thar's Wandering William. Didn't know as you was a sky pilot feller?"

"I'm not, I guess," rejoined Wandering William quietly. "I wish I were, and then may be I could help out on this difficulty."

"Wa-al, what's up?" drawled Bud, as his followers came loping up; "anything I kin do? We're on our way back to ther hills frum town," he explained. "We caught more than twenty wild horses and took'em inter Blue Creek. One of ther boys sighted you away off or we'd have missed yer I reckon."

"Now, miss, I ain't one ter fergit a blow-out like thet yer gave us at Steer Wells. Jes say ther word an' if you like we'll tow this here cloud clipper back inter town."

"Let's see if we can't hit on a way of fixing it first," said Wandering William; "you see," he explained to Bud, "the radiator--"

"Hyar, hold on thar. Talk United States language. What's wrong with this arrangement meter."

"It's sprung a leak," volunteered Peggy; "look here, you can see for yourself. The hole is tiny, but it's big enough to let out all the

water that we need to cool the cylinders."

"Humph," said Bud crossing his hands on the horn of his saddle and gazing abstractedly at the leak, "what you need is solder," he announced presently.

"If we'd had any we'd been out of here long ago," rejoined Peggy, as Roy, hearing the unusual noise, peered over the edge of the chassis.

"Hullo, kid; what's biting you?" demanded the breezy Bud.

"Guess I'm out of commission for a while," rejoined Roy bravely.

Peggy hastily explained the accident, and then, as she saw no harm in doing so, she gave Bud a hasty sketch of the events leading up to their being marooned on the alkali.

"So you're after that ornery varmint, Red Bill, are yer?" remarked Bud as she concluded; "wa-al I'll do all in my power to help you. I've bin a studyin' that thar leak while you was a talkite. What you need is suthin' to stop it up."

"Obviously," said Peggy with a trace of annoyance in her tone.

"Now don't git riled, fer I've hit on a scheme ter git yer out of yer troubles."

Bud shoved back his sombrero and gazed triumphantly at the astonished girl aviator.

CHAPTER XXIV

WHAT CHEWING GUM DID

"But, Bud, how?"

"Easy enough. Hyar," he exclaimed, looking back at the horsemen behind him, "whar's that dude Chick Berry?"

"Here I be, Bud," replied a small, freckle-faced cowboy with blue silk ribbons on his shirt sleeves and other marks of the cowboy dude about him.

"Got any of that thar gum you's always achewin' so as ter be agreeable to ther ladies?" demanded Bud.

"Shore, Bud," rejoined Chick, pulling off an embroidered gauntlet and extracting a pink package from his breast pocket.

"Wall, chaw some quick, and chaw it good. I need it."

Chick's jaws worked overtime. Presently he handed a small wad of glutinous gum to his leader.

"Na-ow then," announced Bud, dismounting, "I'm goin' ter show you a hurry up repair job."

He squatted, cow-boy fashion, in front of the radiator, and with deft fingers pressed the gum into the leak.

"Let it dry a minute an' I'll bet ye that what-you-may-call-um will be as tight as a drum. No, don't give me no credit fer ther idee. I seen a feller fix his gasoline gig that way one day when I was down in San Antone,"

At the expiration of a few anxious minutes, water was poured into the radiator, and, to their immense relief, Bud's hastily contrived bit of plumbing worked. The radiator held water perfectly and a few moments later Peggy started the engine.

But at the first revolutions of the propellers a strange thing happened. On the spot where, a second before, had stood a group of interested horse hunters, not one remained after the propeller had whizzed round a couple of times. They were scattered all over the desert, their ponies maddened beyond all control by terror at the noise and smoke of the aeroplane's motor.

Bud alone managed to spur his pony close to the throbbing machine.

"Good bye and good luck!" he shouted, and waved his hat. The next instant his pony swung round on its hind legs and dashed off to join its terrified companions.

With an answering wave of the hand Peggy threw in the clutch that started the aeroplane forward, and after their long enforced delay they once more took the air. But a day had practically gone--a day in which the fight for the mine might have been lost.

Never had Peggy urged an aeroplane to greater speed than she did the fast monoplane, at the wheel of which she was now stationed. The desert floor flew by beneath them in a dull blur. The roar and vibration of the powerful motor shook the car like a leaf. Wandering William said nothing, but he gazed rather apprehensively over the side from time to time. Also he might have been observed to clutch at his hair occasionally.

"Can you see anything of the town yet?"

The professor leaned forward and shouted the question in Peggy's ear. He had to do so in order to make himself heard above the roar of the engine.

Peggy shook her head, but motioned to a pocket in which were a pair of field-glasses.

Wandering William understood, and raising them, held them to his eyes.

The sun was low and a reddish haze overhung the desert. But presently into the field of the binoculars there swung a tall water tower. It marked the site of Blue Creek.

"I've got it," cried the observer; "swing off to the right a bit."

Obediently the big flying thing turned and rushed through the air toward the distant landmark.

"I can see the place now," cried Peggy. "Pray heaven we'll be in time."

She tried to put on more speed, but already the big monoplane was doing all it could, and a more. Under their hood the cylinders were smoking. There was a smell of blistered paint about the aerial craft. But Peggy never slackened speed for an instant. With the time that had been lost with the leaky radiator, she knew it was possible that Red Bill's men were already in the town.

If she had known that a speedy automobile had met the stealers of the location papers in mid-desert that afternoon and rushed them into Blue Creek she might have given up in despair. But, she knew nothing of Red Bill's ruse, and imagined that the trip with the stolen papers had been made on horseback all the way.

Fifteen minutes after the little settlement been first sighted the aeroplane soared roofs in a long, graceful swing, and then swooped to earth in front of the National House. Cash and the usual group of loungers came rushing out in huge excitement.

"It's an airship! Come and see the airship!"

The cry spread through the town like wildfire. In five minutes quite a large crowd was swirling and surging about the machine and its anxious occupants.

"Whar's the United States Assayer's office?" demanded Wandering William, above the hubbub and excitement.

"Why it's two blocks to the right an' down that alley," volunteered Cash; "you're the second party as has bin askin' fer it ter day."

Peggy's heart sank and Wandering William bit his lips. From the bottom of the chassis Roy demanded:

"Are we too late?"

"We don't know yet, Roy dear," Peggy found time to whisper, and then:

"Who else was looking for the assayer?"

"Feller in a big automobile. All dust-covered, too. Said he had a claim ter file."

Wandering William actually groaned. But Cash went on speaking.

"Funny, all this rush of business should come ter day."

"How's that?" inquired Wandering William for want of something better to say.

"Why 'cause ther assay office is closed up. Jim Dallam, as ran it, his mother is dead, an' he got leave ter go back East. Ther nearest assay office now is at Monument Rocks sixty miles east of hyar."

Straw of hope as it was they clutched at it eagerly. There might be a train leaving within a reasonable time:

"Can we get a train there?" asked Wandering William eagerly bending forward.

"Reckon ye're jes' too late; one pulled out half an hour ago."

"Did--did the man with the red auto catch it?" asked Peggy breathlessly.

"Yes, mum--miss, I mean. He allowed he was going ter git them papers filed or bust."

The blow had fallen. Peggy sat numb and limp in the chassis. But presently the necessity of attending to Roy aroused her from her lethargy. Under her directions the boy was removed to a bed in the hotel and a doctor sent for. The physician lived in the hotel, so no time was lost before he was at Roy's bedside. He had finished his examination and had pronounced the injury painful, but not dangerous, when, without ceremony, Wandering William burst into the room.

"We can make it yet! We can make it yet!" he was shouting.

The doctor looked up as if he thought he had another patient and a maniac to deal with.

"I--I beg your pardon," stammered Wandering William, "but this is a vital matter to this young lady and gentleman."

"Yes--yes, what is it?" asked Peggy eagerly. Her eyes burned with eagerness and suppressed excitement. Something in Wandering

William's manner seemed to say that he had found a way out of their difficulties.

"I've made inquiries," he repeated, "and I've found out that the train to Monument Rocks makes several stops. There's just a chance that we can beat it in the aeroplane."

"You can!"

Roy raised himself up in bed despite the pain.

"I think so. But we must hurry."

"Sis, do you mean you are going to try it?"

"Of course. We must."

"Then go in and win," cried the boy; "you can follow the tracks by the lights and once you overtake the train the rest will be easy."

The amazed doctor fairly dropped his case of instruments at this whirlwind dialogue.

"But--what--why--bless my soul," he gasped, but only the first part of his remarks was heard by Peggy. Followed by Wandering William she dashed from the room and into the street. In front of the hotel Cash was having a hard time keeping souvenir hunters from the aeroplane. But a pair of blue revolvers, like miniature Gatling guns, acted as powerful dissuaders of curiosity.

CHAPTER XXV

A RACE THROUGH THE NIGHT

"All right. Stand clear, please!"

The aeroplane had been tuned up, and now, panting like an impatient horse, it was ready to be off on its dash for Monument Rocks. But the crowd stupidly clustered about it like bees round a rose bush. The delay was maddening, but Peggy dared not start for fear of injuring someone.

"Won't you please stand aside?" she begged for the twentieth time, but the crowd just as obstinately lingered.

Suddenly an idea came to her. She cut out the mufflers and instantly a deafening series of reports, like a battery of Gatling guns going into action, filled the air. Tense as the situation was,

neither Peggy nor Wandering William on the rear seat could keep from laughing as they saw the effect the bombardment of noise had.

The inhabitants of Blue Creek literally tumbled all over each other in their haste to get out of the way. Five seconds after the deafening uproar commenced a clear path was presented, and, before the crowd could get used to the sound and come surging around again, Peggy started the aeroplane up. Amid a mighty shout it took the air and vanished like a flash in the gathering dusk. The race against time was on.

Fortunately the telegraph poles along the right of way acted as guides, for, in the gathering darkness, the tracks were hardly visible. Peggy did not dare to fly too low, however, for it was only in the upper air currents that the monoplane could develop its best speed.

But even with all her care she pressed the machine too hard, for half an hour after their departure from Blue Creek they had to alight to allow the cylinders to cool. Bud's makeshift stop for the leak, however, was acting splendidly, and Peggy mentally stored it away as a good idea for future use.

The delay was annoying to the point of being maddening, but there was no help for it. To have taken the air with heated cylinders would have been to court disaster. While they waited out in the lonely Nevada hills beside the single-track railroad, Peggy's mind held a lively vision of the train speeding toward Monument Rocks and the Assay Office, bearing with it the stolen papers carried by Red Bill's agent.

At last, after what seemed an eternity, they were ready to start once more. Peggy lost no time in taking to the air. With her every cylinder developing its full horse power, the aeroplane sky-rocketed upward at a rate that made Wandering William hold on for dear life.

"W-w-w-what speed are we making?"

The question was jolted out of the passenger.

"About sixty," Peggy flung back at him.

"Then we ought to overtake the train. I understand it only makes forty-five even on the most favorable bits of road, and the tracks are pretty rough out in this part of the country."

On through the night they roared. It was quite dark now, and Peggy had switched on the search light with which the aeroplane was provided. It cast a white pencil of light downward, showing the parallel bands of steel. Somewhere ahead of them, on those tracks, was the train. But how far ahead? As yet no gleam of its tail lights had come through the darkness.

All at once Peggy gave a triumphant cry.

"Look!" she cried. "It's the train!"

Far ahead gleamed two tiny red lights. They glowed through the darkness like the eyes of some wild animal. But the occupants of the aeroplane knew they were the tail lights of the train that was carrying the stolen papers to Monument Rocks.

Peggy tried to put on still more speed, but the aeroplane was doing its best. But fast as it was going, it seemed to crawl up on the train at a snail pace. The tail lights still kept far ahead.

But although the gain was slow, it was, steady. Before another dozen miles had been passed Peggy was flying above the train.

In the glare of the furnaces as the fireman jerked the doors open, Peggy could see the engineer and his mate gazing up at them with something of awe in their expressions. Aeroplanes were not as common in the far West as in the East.

Suddenly the girl noticed a figure emerge from the forward door of the front coach and clamber over the tender and drop lightly into the cab. A sudden gleam from the fire door served to light his features. Peggy recognized him instantly as the tall "romantic bandit," the one with the red sash.

The girl saw him lean toward the engineer and thrust something into his hand. It looked like a roll of bills. The next instant the train's speed perceptibly increased. It was all the aeroplane could do to keep up with it.

"He's given the engineer money, to go faster," exclaimed Wandering William.

The tall figure now crawled back on the tender and gazed upward. His hand glided back to his hip. The next moment there was a flash, and a bullet zipped wickedly through the air past Peggy's ear.

"The coyote, he's firing at us!" cried Wandering William.

Z-i-n-g!

Another bullet sang by the speeding aeroplane. Apparently the fireman and the engineer could not hear the shooting above the noise of the flying engine, for they did not turn their heads. Presently the fireman began shoveling on coal at a terrific rate. Sparks and flame shot from the smokestack of the locomotive. They streaked the night with fire.

"Is he trying to kill us?" exclaimed Peggy as another shot winged past.

"I hardly think he'd risk that," rejoined Wandering William, "but what he's up to is almost as bad. He's trying to disable the aeroplane."

But before another could be fired the train began to slacken speed. Ahead and below the aeroplane could be seen a cluster of lights.

"Monument Rocks!" exclaimed Wandering William; "here's where we play the hand out."

Peggy, keeping a bright lookout for a good landing place, presently espied a sort of plaza in the center of the town. It was brilliantly illuminated by a number of arc lights and offered a fine spot for landing. She decided to risk a quick drop and swung the aeroplane downward at a rapid gait.

As the whirring of the propeller--like the drone of a giant locust--resounded over the town, people came pouring out from houses and shops to witness the descent. The crowd gathered so quickly that Peggy had difficulty to avoid hitting some of them. However, she managed to bring the aeroplane to a standstill without an accident.

A local policeman came up as they stopped, and to him Peggy entrusted the machine. Followed by Wandering William she darted off across the plaza and made for a cab stand immediately across it and just outside the depot. As she rushed up to the solitary rickety hack that was standing there and was about to step in a tall figure came rushing out of the station. The train had just pulled in, and long before its wheels had stopped revolving he had leaped from it.

"Get to one side," he shouted, grabbing Peggy's arm roughly and swinging her aside. "I guess I'm first on this deal."

"What do you mean," demanded Peggy angrily; "I had this cab first."

"But now I dispossess you of it this way!"

The ruffian had his hand raised to strike when something happened. A lithe, muscular form glided under the upraised fist, and the next moment there was a sharp crack as the newcomer's fist collided with the other's chin.

He went staggering backward and fell in a heap on the sidewalk.

A tall man with a broad brimmed hat came bustling up, followed by a small crowd attracted from the aeroplane by the disorder.

"Here, here, what's all this?" demanded the tall man in an authoritative tone. "What does this mean?"

"That this man I've just knocked down is under arrest for participation in the Laredo stage robbery and for numerous other crimes, including the larceny of some location papers he was about

to file."

The words came from an athletic young man who had felled Peggy's assailant. The girl looked up at him. In the electric light there was something familiar and yet strangely unfamiliar about his features, and his keen, kindly eyes.

"Why," exclaimed Peggy wonderingly, "it's--it's--"

"Wandering William, minus his wig and goatee, otherwise Sam Kelly, of the United States Secret Service," rejoined the other with a merry laugh. "I guess I'll go out of the doctor business now, since I've nabbed one of the men I was after. Now then, you rascal," addressing the "romantic bandit," who had scrambled to his feet, "where are the rest of Red Bill's precious gang?"

"I don't know," sullenly rejoined the prisoner.

"Oh, yes you do; but first of all give me those papers."

"What papers?"

"The ones you brought here to file in the Assay Office."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Yes you do. Come now, or I'll ask the sheriff to search you."

With a very bad grace the outlaw dove into his pocket and handed over a bundle of papers. Wandering Will--we mean Detective Sam Kelly--took them and handed them to Peggy.

"Those are more yours than mine," he said; "we'll file them in the morning or at any time there's no hurry now."

"Now then," he resumed, turning to the tall outlaw whose arms were held by two of the sheriff's deputies, "are you going to answer my question, where is Red Bill and the rest of them now?"

"Where you can't reach 'em in time to queer their game," came in a voice of sullen triumph; "they're at Jim Bell's mine picking up gold and silver."

CHAPTER XXVI

BESIEGED--CONCLUSION

The sun rose redly and shone down into the arroyo on a group of

sleepless, anxious persons. As the tall bandit had triumphantly announced, Jim Bell's mine was besieged. Since the evening before armed horsemen had surrounded it, but so far the little garrison had held out.

If Red Bill had had any idea that he was going to find Mr. Bell an easy prey he must have revised his opinion. But he knew that it was only a question of time till he could starve him out and take possession of the mine. He was unaware of the departure of the aeroplane for Blue Creek, otherwise he might have kept a better look out.

"I wonder if they got through?"

It was Mr. Bell who spoke, making a brave attempt at indifference to the danger that hedged them in.

Before anyone could reply a figure on horse-back appeared at the head of the arroyo. It was Red Bill himself. On his ankle was a bandage, but his amazing vitality had left no other traces of the bite of the rattlesnake.

"Wa-al, Jim Bell," he demanded, "for the third an' last time, air you goin' ter give in peaceable? Ain't no sense in holding out. We've got your stock. We'll tap your water hole if we can strike the vein and it won't take us long. We've got you whar we want you, an' if you've got ther brains uv a yearling calf you'll throw up the sponge and give us the mine."

"Not while I can raise a hand to fight you," rejoined Jim Bell boldly. "Ah! I might have expected some such trick!"

A bullet had whizzed past his ear and flattened itself on the rock behind the mining man. If he had not caught the quick movement of Red Bill's arm just in time the moment might have been his last.

"That's just a taste of what you'll git if you try to stick it out," bellowed Red Bill, and wheeling his horse he rode off.

Two or three times that morning Jimsy tried the experiment of raising a hat on a rifle barrel above the top of the little canyon. Each time a bullet pierced it, showing that the place was well watched.

Miss Sally lay on her cot in her tent. The venerable New England lady was literally half-dead from fright. Alverado, sullen eyed and apathetic, strode up and down the canyon all day muttering threats he was powerless to carry out. Jess, wide-eyed and white-faced, but brave, did her share of the work and kept Jimsy and Mr. Bell cheered up as well as she could.

But the suspense of awaiting the return of Peggy and Roy was the hardest to bear. If they had gotten through safely and the papers

were filed, then, even if Red Bill captured the mine he could not work it. A few nuggets would be his reward. But if the aeroplane had been disabled or had reached Blue Creek too late, why then Red Bill held all the cards. Mr. Bell had reasoned this out with himself over and over again, while his brother sat, staring and disconsolate, playing endless games of solitaire.

It was past noon when Jimsy, who had taken an observation between two rocks, which acted as a bullet-proof sentry box, announced that the forces of the outlaws seemed to be massing.

"Looks as if they were going to make an attack," he said.

Mr. Bell clambered up and speedily confirmed the correctness of Jimsy's opinion.

"Get everything ready," he ordered; "there's just a chance we can stand them off. If not, we'll have to trust to their mercy."

A clatter of hoofs sounded above the arroyo and the next instant several horsemen appeared. Without knowing just what he was doing Jimsy, who had a rifle in his hands, pulled the trigger. He was amazed to see the giant form of Red Bill totter and reel in the saddle, and fall with a crash to the ground. The next instant horror at the idea that he had killed the man seized on him. His hands shook so that he almost dropped the rifle.

But there was little time for reflection. The sight of their leader's downfall seemed to drive the other outlaws to frenzy. They poured a leaden hail into the arroyo that must have exterminated every living thing in it if they had not sought shelter behind a mighty mass of boulders.

Hardly had they crouched there in temporary safety, before, far above them, came a familiar sound. The giant droning of an enormous beetle was what it seemed to resemble most. But Jess and Jimsy recognized it instantly.

"An aeroplane!" shouted Jess.

"It's Peggy and Roy!" cried Jimsy the next instant. Looking upward against the blue was outlined the scarab-like form of the monoplane.

At the same moment a terrific trampling of horses' hoofs sounded above. Shots and shouts rang out in wild confusion.

"What can be happening?" gasped Jess. Even Aunt Sally, cowering in her tent, summoned courage to peek forth. The sight they saw was an inspiring one. Bud and his horse hunters were riding down the outlaws in every direction.

While this was going on, the aeroplane swung lower. From it there stepped as it alighted, not Roy and Peggy, but Peggy and a strange

young man whom nobody recollected having seen before. Without a word he bounced from the chassis as the aeroplane struck the ground, and, revolver in hand, set off in hot pursuit of Bud and his men, who, from horse hunters, had become man hunters.

The outlaws, outnumbered and outridden, were fain to cry for quarter. With the exception of three who escaped, the whole band was rounded up and made prisoners. Red Bill, who proved to be only slightly wounded, was captured by Sam Kelly himself.

The presence of the horse hunters on the scene at the opportune moment was soon explained by Peggy, who spent a busy hour relating all that had occurred since they left the camp. Roy, she explained, was still at the hotel in Blue Creek, but mending rapidly. She and the detective had encountered the horse hunters as the aeroplane was on its return journey, and, guessing from the tall bandit's story that the camp in the arroyo must be besieged, they enlisted the services of Bud and his followers.

There seems to be little more to tell of this portion of the Girl Aviators' adventures. The mine, in the developing of which they had played such striking parts, proved to be rich beyond even Mr. Bell's dreams, and when additional claims were taken up each of the young airship enthusiasts found that he or she had substantial shares in them.

The aeroplane line from the mine to the railroad, which had been Mr. Bell's original idea, proved to be a great success. Under Roy's tuition three young aviators, who were brought from the East, were instructed in managing their lines. Alverado, it will be recalled, recognized Sam Kelly as an old acquaintance during lawless times in Mexico--he has been appointed to a position in the government service, where he has done good work in aiding to rid the Big Alkali of the rascals that formerly infested it.

As for our young friends, when the aeroplane line was well established, they returned to the East, as Aunt Sally firmly refused to remain any longer in the far West, which she always scripturally refers to as a land of "the wicked and stiff-necked."

But their adventures were by no means over, as perhaps might be expected in the case of those who dare the air in fast flying machines. Their experience on the great Nevada desert was not destined to be the only time that the Girl Aviators and their chums proved their worth in seasons of danger and necessity.

Stirring aerial adventures lay ahead of them, still more exciting than the ones they had encountered while "On Golden Wings." What these were, and how our girls and boys acquitted themselves in facing and surmounting fresh difficulties and dangers--as well as their lighter moments--will be related in full in the next volume of this series:

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