

The Black Panther of the Navaho

The Black Panther of the Navaho

Warren H. Miller

(1921)

Chapter I

The Wonderland of the Southwest

Colonel Colvin sat in a great roomy armchair in the Colvin Trophy Den, puffing reminiscently at a short black pipe and gazing abstractedly into the flickering flames of glowing logs in the rugged stone fireplace that was the heart of the Den. Sid, his son, and Sid's chum, Scotty, were patching their cruiser moccasins with hand sewing-awls, the former now and then glancing over at his father anxiously.

The Colonel looked peaked and worn,—a thin, gray ghost of his former robust self,—for his duty during the War had been onerous in the extreme, as head of the Army Detail Office at Washington. Sid feared a total collapse of the old Indian fighter, for nothing is harder on the system of a man raised to years of violent outdoor life than a long period of desk work. Sid knew the only road back to health. His father knew it too, but, so far, he had not made the first move toward hitting the trail again. However, a certain expectant look in the Colonel's eyes, certain mysterious telegrams which the boy had been detailed to send, addressed to an old Army friend out in Arkansas, had distilled the air of big events to come which hovered persistently in the atmosphere of the Den.

Sid himself was heavier and even more bronzed than when we saw him last, on his hunt for the Ring-Necked Grizzly out in Montana. The War, he realized, had been but an episode,—a tremendous episode, it is true—but still only an episode in his life. For some mysterious reason both he and Scotty had been transferred to the artillery, where he had risen to sergeant and had been the little king over two six-inch howitzers. His memories of the War had been of miles and miles of muddy roads and ceaseless rain; of tractors and tanks that had hauled his howitzers always forward behind the Front; of dog-tired days and weeks when they had crept toward the Vesle, ditched for passing staff cars and corduroyed out of mud sinks around shell holes. And then there had been glorious, stunning, vivid moments when he had stood between his two guns, telephone receivers

over ears, shaken off his feet by the blinding yellow flashes all around him, watching the timing, correcting the ranges and deflections coming in from his spotter, or rushing to the gun shields when a Boche H. E. seemed about to register a direct hit. It was a man's job, while it lasted; almost unnoticed, Nature had put on his upper lip a fine black fuzz that told the world that Sid was no longer a boy.

To Scotty the War had been more than an episode. It had introduced a great change in the red-haired boy's life, for he now wore a black bandage on his arm, and the Henderson service flag bore a gold star. Of them all, the good old Doctor had not returned. A Fokker 'plane bomb had found out the first-aid dressing station where the grizzled old physician had stood, bathed to his shoulders in gore, working without rest or sleep for the thirty-six hours of a major engagement. That was all; there was nothing left of the dugout after that shell had crashed through its roof and exploded. But there were aching hearts in the Henderson home because of it, and Scotty looked older and sadder. The worry of measuring his earning power against this new and hectic America that had emerged from the War had cast a settled sternness on his youthful face. Days in the open would now be a matter of precarious vacations for him!

As the boys mended camp gear the rumble of a big automobile express sounded out in the street, its brake shrieking as it stopped before the house. Colonel Colvin moved in his chair and listened expectantly. They heard the grunt of men struggling under some heavy load, and then the stamp of their feet as they came around the yard path and stopped before the outside door of the Den. A thunderous knock brought all inside to their feet.

"Come in!" shouted the Colonel, springing up to open the door. Two expressmen stood grinning out in the snow, holding between them a long, heavy crate. The leader proffered a thumb and dog-eared book for the Colonel to sign.

"Bring 'em right in and set her down, men," ordered the Colonel, after paying out a bill and some change. The expressmen crowded into the Den, setting down the crate with a big sigh of relief.

"I think you'll find 'em all right, sir," grinned the man of the official cap. "Nice pups, eh?"

Sid jumped for the crate, and a tingle of joy thrilled through him. *Pups*, eh! Why,

then—

“Beauties!” chortled the Colonel, replying to the man, “Three Redbone pups, by Ruler out of Music, sir. Reg’lar old-fashioned Southern cold-trailers from Arkansas.”

The expressman evidently owned some rabbit beagles himself, for he looked over the dogs with renewed interest. “What breed of houn’ dogs might these be, Colonel, if I might ask?”

“Coon hounds, man! The old pioneer’s hound—best bear and lion dogs in the world,” explained the Colonel enthusiastically, while Sid winked blissfully over at Scotty.

The very smell of their lithe, active bodies seemed to bring the tang of mighty mountain ranges into the Den again. Watching the dogs, the Colonel’s age fell away from him as a mantle; his eyes sparkled, he moved about the crate, eying the pups like a boy, and then sent Sid into the main house for tools. The log-walled Den, hung with game heads, rifles and saddles, was a replica of the Colonel’s western log cabin of his younger days.

Built as a wing on to their great town house, there was an entrance direct into the house from it. The expressmen departed, with many a comradely grin, while the Colonel and Scotty waited impatiently for Sid to return with his hammer and cold chisel. Then two upper slats of the crate were lifted, and out jumped the pups, one after another, to range about the room on long, skinny legs. Never were such long-eared, rat-tailed smell-dogs, it seemed to Sid and Scotty, as they watched them delightedly, while the Colonel dug up a set of new collars and chains out of a drawer in his desk. Evidently he had known all about those dogs in advance, reasoned Sid, as he watched this proceeding. And, as they could not possibly be used anywhere in the eastern states, there was more to this than appeared on the surface!

They took them out into the snow for a brief airing. Once back in the Den again, Sid nailed the Colonel imperatively.

“You’ve got something up your sleeve, Father,—don’t tell me!” he laughed, “Where are we going, and when is it coming off?”

The Colonel grinned indulgently. “I tried my level best to buy Ruler, the father

of these pups; but Judge Hawkes would rather part with his own right hand than with Ruler!" he remarked, irrelevantly.

"Answer me, sir—please!" begged Sid. "When—oh, when, Father?—and where?"

"The big problem is how to give them a bit of training," grinned the Colonel, imperturbably. "None of the states around here allow deer running with hounds - ---"

"Scats cats! —That means the West, anyhow!" whooped Sid, triumphantly. "How about it, Scotty, eh?"

"Fraid it lets *me* out," remarked the sandy-haired boy, quietly. "I've got to be looking for a job these days."

Sid looked his sympathy and put his arm about Scotty's shoulders. "We'll manage it, somehow, old bunkie—never fear!" he said, consolingly. "It may be your last,—but we just *got* to have this one together!"

The Colonel smiled enigmatically. "Sure you're going, Lester—job and all!" he assured him. "And how about training these pups, boys?"

Scotty couldn't see it, but at least he would be glad to help train the dogs, anyhow, he reflected.

It would give him some precious days in the mountains under tent cloth. How such vacations were to be treasured—now!

The Colonel took three pedigree certificates out of his desk drawer. "Pepper, Bourbon and Lee," he read, naming the pups, "the markings will tell which is which." Then he looked toward the house door of the Den like a guilty boy. "Boys—how will we—how *dare* we lead 'em in?" he whispered. "Your mother, Sid, knows nothing of this—and you know how she hates dogs!"

The boy chuckled. The Colonel was in a worse fix than he ever had been facing Apache Geronimo! "Looks like they would have to live right here, sir!" laughed Sid, looking up from making friends with the first puppy. "Couldn't wish for better den mates I'll say!"

The Colonel knew more than either of the boys about the trouble he was getting into. That haunting, houndy look in the pups' eyes, as their long, silken ears drooped from high, pointed crowns, told him of a diabolical persistence and a wild, ineradicable thievishness that would play havoc with Mrs. Colvin's domestic arrangements! You could feed them with a shovel and still there would be room for more. And, as to the neighbors' cats and chickens—he shuddered at the thought.

“Well—we might as well have it out *now*!” he remarked, grimly, seizing the chains and pushing open the house door.

A feminine shriek greeted him. “*Where* did you get those horrid dogs?—Send them away at once—I won't *have* them!” came Mrs. Colvin's indignant protest. Pepper, the biggest of the trio, jumped and broke away at that moment, darting for the pantry door with the boys in hot pursuit. A wild African yell came from the kitchen where Aunt Sally was preparing supper. Then there was a crash of broken china, another war whoop, and Pepper came yelping, booted through the door to dash under the dining-table legs.

Aunt Sally charged wheezily after him. “He done broke de Dresden china bowl!—Dat ornery houn' dawg he done broke de Missus' china oyster dish!” she yelled.—“Whar he at!—Let me beat him black an' blue!”

A wail of anguish went up from Mrs. Colvin. The Colonel stood, thunderstruck and unhappy, yanking back on the chains of his other two leaping pups. Just then Pepper darted kiyi-ing from under the table and raced for the upstairs stairway. Aunt Sally couldn't reach him with her broom, but she whipped off a huge boot and hurled it after him, just missing a Vernis-Martin glass cabinet by inches as Pep bolted up the stairs to hide under a bed, where the boys followed, howling with glee, to recapture him.

Aunt Sally stopped and glared at the Colonel reprovingly.

“Marse Colvin, you done got *three* of them thievin', potlicker smell-dawgs?” she accused,—“I'se shore 'shamed of you-all!—There, there, honey, don't cry!” she soothed, taking Mrs. Colvin in her arms while the boys came back with Pepper, yelling with ungodly joy.

“He's gwine take them right out'n yeah, Missus,—or I don't cook him another waffle—so there, Kuhnnel, 'deed I isn't!” she flared at him.

Colonel Colvin's jaw dropped as he stood irresolutely, with the pups winding their chains about and about his legs. Aunt Sally was an ancient institution in the Colvin household. She had raised Sid from a baby, and had grown up with the Colvins since they had settled east. A power in the household, he could not conceive how they were to get along without her, for no one else could cook any such waffles!

Then he beat a masterly and strategic retreat. "I guess it's outdoors for them!" he surrendered, at discretion. "We'll build a kennel for them, right away—look out, Scotty!—there goes Bourbon!—Catch him, boys!"

Scotty had volunteered to hold Bourbon, the second pup, but somehow his fingers had become relaxed and Bourbon was off like a flash, darting for the pantry door where his nose told him there were eats. The boys followed on the run. They found the kitchen empty, save for an atmosphere of appetizing odors. No sign of the pup anywhere!

They stood still and listened. Then a cold draft from somewhere led them to the back door of the kitchen. It stood partly ajar, and from outside came a swift lapping as of a dog's tongue. Dashing out, there was Bourbon, standing in the snow, his nose deep in a huge tureen of chicken gumbo for the whole family, put out there to cool off! It was red hot, but Bourbon was transferring it, as fast as he could make his tongue go.

"Yeow!" whooped Sid, leaning up against Scotty, who leaned against him, weak from laughter.

"Come on—bring 'em out, Father—they might as well all finish it up, now!"

"Coming—what's the matter now?" called the Colonel's voice as they heard him striding through the kitchen, accompanied by the hard click of horny hound nails. He opened the door, Pepper and Lee nearly yanking him off his feet as they both leaped for the tureen. The Colonel roared with Gargantuan laughter—the wild and woolly Outdoors had surely come again to Colvin House! There were feminine sniffs behind him, and another uproar from Aunt Sally, but the mischief was done. No question about Ruler's pups getting theirs first, that night!

Be that as it may, they could get nothing further out of the Colonel but quizzical grins concerning the proposed hunting trip. Spring came and ripened into

summer, finding him still sphinxlike. But every evening he kept them at mending tents and duffel and hunting clothes, while Pepper, Bourbon and Lee put weight on their black and tan bodies until they were great hulking things of over fifty pounds, lacking only hardening to make them full-grown dogs. Occasionally, when Scotty could get off from the job that he had taken in the bank, they went up into the mountains for a brief camp and a run for the dogs. Pepper saw his first deer. After that hunt the pups had to be chased, rounded up and chained in camp until it got to be a plaguy nuisance, no less!

Then came a letter from Big John that gave the Colonel's secret away. The boys found it lying open on the cedar log table in the Den, probably forgotten during some call into the house.

"Got your letter telling how Jedge Hawkes is sending out Ruler and am sharpening up the camp axe," began the letter, as the boys giggled over this cryptic sentence. "Will be in Santa Fe Oct. 1, and go on to Hinchman's Ranch to see about hosses," they read on with joyful eyes. Then they skipped away from the table, for the Colonel was coming back through the house door. He eyed them suspiciously as his glance fell on the open letter. Then Sid burst into a whoop and threw his arms around him boyishly.

"Oh, Dad!—is it the Southwest? Are we really and truly going to the Southwest?" he caroled.

"Who said anything about the Southwest?" growled the Colonel, trying to twist down his lips under his white mustache. "You been reading my letters?"

"Couldn't help it, Dad! Gee, I can see those big hen-tracks of John's 'way from here! And he's going to meet us in Santa Fe, too—with Ruler!"

"Who's 'us,' young man?" queried the Colonel. "Well! I might as well tell you, now; and I'll begin with Scotty. You wanted to go into mining, didn't you, Scotty?" inquired the Colonel.

"Yes, sir—but I can't afford a technical college course, now," said the boy, sadly. "Mother has nothing but her pension----"

"Yes; but that will take care of her alone, son," said Colonel Colvin kindly. "I don't know but the best way to learn mining is the same as the way you learned soldiering, from the ranks up. I'm taking you to the best mining state in the

Union, where you can handle the stuff right on the ground, find your own lodes, study mineralogy with the minerals in your own hands,—so you will know carbonate ore when you see it. That's half the battle; the technology of process work you can pick up right at the mines and mills. There's lots of room for the young mineralogist who can go right along with his own saddle horse and outfit, take care of himself in a dry country, and know real lodes when he sees them. We're going up through the eastern part of the Navaho reservation, where there's pine forests. Big John used to punch cows down in that country; it's an old story to him. We'll explore some ancient cliff dwellings up in the Canyon Cheyo and then cross over to the Colorado and get up on the north rim of the Grand Canyon. That's the best cougar, bear and deer country in the Southwest. How'd you like to camp in a rainless land, boys? Where there's no snow, no dreary northeasters, lots of queer new plants and trees that you never saw before, and where a man can ride like thunder on a hot cougar trail under great western pines! Where a brush sunshade is all the camp you need for weeks on end, and where you can loaf or explore or shoot or weave blankets or do anything you darn please, anyhow, any time! Something new,—eh?"

"You said it, Dad! Gee, I've just longed to camp out in that country, for once!" sighed Sid. "How about you, Les?"

"'Fraid I can't," returned his chum. "Gorry, but I'd love to, though!" he added, wistfully.

"But you *shall*, my boy!" came back the Colonel, positively. "Your mother and I have talked it over. She has enough to live on with you away, and it will be a practical opening in mining for you. I know some big people down there in Prescott, and I know what I am talking about!" he insisted.

Scotty leaped at Sid with glad enthusiasm. "Whee—_yow_!" he yelled. "Am I *really* going?—Thanks, Colonel, ever so much!" he gasped out, wringing his hand. "What do we take for outfit, sir?"

"The little five-by-six-foot paraffined muslin wall tent for you two. Just a light tarp and my Army bedroll for me"—grinned the Colonel. "Otherwise your Montana outfits will do, just as they stand —"

"What—in that hot country, Dad?" inquired Sid, incredulously.

"She's cold enough, at night, son," laughed the Colonel. "Those stag shirts and

the canvas fleece-lined coats will come in mighty handy. Sid, you'll take the .30 Government carbine, and Scotty the Doctor's .405, while I'll pack the old meat gun, the .35 Model '95. Big John's attending to the horse outfit."

"Cracky!—Won't it be some pickles to hunt with the old iron-man again, though! They say he did wonders in France," cried Sid, all happy excitement over the prospects of going West again.

"Sure did!" chuckled the Colonel. "There was a good story going around his regiment that they tell on Big John, boys. It seems they were in the middle of a charge, when someone yelled out—'Hey—Big John!—shake off your bayonet—there's three Boches dangling on it!'"

"Reminds me of a dare-devil I had in my battery," grinned Sid. "That fellow, a big, red-haired Maine man, was afraid of nothing! During our Argonne advance we had a battery assignment with one gun to go right under a tree. The Boches had left a bomb there dangling from a branch by a rope, so that if you took it down it would surely go off. Up comes Mike, as we all stood looking at it, figuring out how to get rid of the thing. 'Lave me at ut!' says he, brushing the rest aside, and before I could yell out a word he had ripped it loose—every one scattering right and left—and then he hurled it,—and the thing went off in mid-air and liked to have blown down our tree!"

"Great times you boys must have had!" sighed the Colonel, "but fighting was not so damn devilish in my day. Glad it's all over, and we can get back to the clean joys of hunting again! We'll get our hats in Albuquerque—wait till you see 'em! A big Mex sombrero, with a sugar-loaf crown and a brim a yard wide—unless things have changed from my old Apache days. And they don't change, much, down there. New Mexico's still half Spanish."

The boys realized that when, two weeks later, their transcontinental bade good-bye to Colorado at Spanish Peaks and dropped down the old Santa Fe trail into New Mexico. Mesas, Indian pueblos still inhabited, and little Mexican 'dobe villages greeted them on every hand, keeping the boys continually crossing to opposite windows of their Pullman to stare out. This was not the old U. S. at all! It just couldn't be! As the train climbed the grade toward Arizona, the country grew wilder and more desolate. Navaho and Zuni Indians came down to the stations to trade baskets and pottery; the pueblo of Laguna rose close at hand; the high rock of Acoma, whose pueblo has defied the conqueror for centuries, was

to be seen, dim and misty, down a bare valley. They saw a great natural bridge carved by water out of the solid cliff, and then, high above, the train passed those remarkable carved and pinnacled buttes called Navaho Church, as the tracks dipped down-grade again, to follow the winding valley of the Puercos into Arizona. Bare and desolate and empty and dry was that stream bed, with frightful bad lands rising across the river to the rim of a high plateau, fringed with scraggy timber.

Shortly after dinner of that last day, the train slowed down to stop at a little water tank station. Hinchman's Ranch could be reached, forty-five miles north from here. The boys searched avidly the little flat, back of the station, with eager eyes. It seemed a mile or so wide and was backed by rock-ribbed bad lands that ascended to the plateau. Whirling clouds of red dust, each the storm center of a cowboy on a cayuse, smoked through the sparse greasewood that dotted the plain, banging out a welcome with fanning revolvers. Alongside the track they spied Big John, mounted on a restive white wild mustang that had evidently only recently been "gentled," for he seemed inclined to hop right over their locomotive. With him were two saddled ponies, evidently for *them*, and a big roan horse for the Colonel. Barking at the train was the largest and boniest hound the boys had ever seen.

"That must be Ruler, Les—and there's Big John with the horses—Gee-roo! I want to yell!—_Can't_ we get this window open?" cried Sid excitedly.

"C'mon, boys, grab your rifles and let's vamoose," called the Colonel, hustling out of the smoking compartment with the stump of a black cigar smoldering under his white mustache. "Here, Sambo, fall on this duffel, boy."

They tumbled out of the vestibule and the Colonel, after a hearty handshake with Big John, hurried forward to see about their crate of dogs in the baggage car.

"Hi, Sergeant Sid!—Gosh-all, but you do look nattral!" yelled Big John from the white horse, as Sid rushed across the cinder platform of the station. "Down, Ruler, down!—you ol' pisen houn' dawg!" he roared.—"An' dam'f thar ain't that ornery little shavetail Looie, Scotty! Put 'er here, you li'l rooster!—Put 'er here!" chortled Big John, leaning far out of his saddle as the white horse braced against his weight on the stirrup.

The boys fell all over one another shaking Big John's huge paw. Except for a

frightful shrapnel scar that seamed his face, he had not changed much since Montana days. The same big hawk nose, the same piercing black eyes and long, twirling mustache, the same intense black hair, under—yes,—the same old Stetson that he had worn in the Rockies! Evidently the giant Montanan scorned the “greaser” hat of the Southwest.

“Them black eyes and black hair of yourn, Sid, make you look like a reg’lar greaser under that dome;—an’, gosh, ef he ain’t raisin’ a _mus_tache,” guffawed Big John. “Scotty, you look like a red candle what’s hed a extinguisher set on to it,” observed the irrepressible cowman. “Otherwise the Colonel ain’t made no mistakes,” he added, sizing up their outfit critically.

Just then that gentleman himself came down the platform, followed by two of the ranch teamsters carrying a huge dog crate.

“Here, John, take a look at these pups!” called the Colonel, as the crate was set down and he fumbled for his keys. Unlocking its door, Pepper, Bourbon and Lee climbed out and shook themselves all over. At sight of them Ruler bared fangs and flew at them. He didn’t know his own of offspring! A furious dog fight ensued. They booted the dogs apart, and a growly peace was enforced;—in the midst of which there was a rapid clatter of hoofs and the two cowboys the boys had seen from the car window came loping in, to be introduced by Big John.

“This here’s Red Jake, an’ t’other’s Mesa Joe, Colonel,” explained Big John, introducing them.

“Up at Hinchman’s they just natchelly lives hearty on fried t’rantulas an’ centipedes, reg’lar; but they ain’t nohow averse to eatin’ a baked Apache if they kin ketch one. The Colonel here, fellows, is one of the old original Geronimo hunters,—an’ these is his cubs,” concluded Big John, introducing the boys with a final wave of his hand.

Red Jake and Joe grinned, but said nothing, as they shook hands all around.

“Wait till we gets you out behind the bunk house, John!” muttered the red-haired one behind his hand, as they looked the Colonel over respectfully, glad to meet an old Indian fighter. Both were typical Arizonans, leathery and lean and sunburned, with hard, gray eyes all puckered from the constant desert glare.

“Well, Sid, climb this here twister and we’ll get up the bad lands to the rim,” said

Big John, as the ranch teamsters finished piling their duffel into the wagon. “All ready, sir?”—this to the Colonel—“we gotta make Navaho Wells by sundown.”

Sid found that his pony was trained to start as soon as his foot touched the stirrup. His pinto bolted off with him, with the rest of the outfit strung after in hot pursuit. Presently the two Arizonans passed him like the wind, their horses thundering by in a cloud of dust. All Sid had ever dreamed about riding was nothing to this! He yelled and waved his hat, whereat the “twister” rose and bucked and sunfished, requiring an iron knee grip and a yank on his Mexican curb to bring him to earth again.

With Ruler and the pups leaping around the horses’ heads, it was a furious race for a while, but then came the steep ascent through bare and hideous clayey ravines. Arrived at the top, the party stopped to rest the horses and there was a chance to look around. This was a mighty red and purple land, thought Sid, as his eyes rested, now on the snowy cones of the San Francisco peaks, a hundred miles to the west, now on the endless jumble of flat mesas to the north of him. It was a land of great horizontal ridges, yellow and red and blue and black; sloping up, sloping down, always in immensely long, gentle slants. And between them there were rocky talus beds strewn with pebbles and boulders. Of vegetation there was almost none.

Later the sage and greasewood became more abundant, and then, forty miles to the north, a ridge of pink layer-cake buttes jutted up into the clear air, with a faint tinge of green at their bases, along what was evidently a river bed. Here would be Hinchman’s Ranch. Sid reached for the cavalry canteen on his saddle hook, and turning, saw Scotty doing the same thing.

“Here’s how, Pal!” he said; “this is sure going to be one thirsty country, Les!”



Chapter II

Across the Painted Desert

“See them blue an’ white striped buttes yander, Sid?” asked John, pointing across the stony desert with his quirt. “That’s limestone, in these parts, an’ it ginerally means a tank ef thar’s any water at all. Navaho Wells is in there, and we’ll camp for the night.”

“Just what I wanted—to have my first night in the desert out under the stars!” exclaimed Colonel Colvin, happily. “We stop here for the night, eh, John?”

“Shore; no more water for twenty miles, sir. Them boys ain’t growed their saddle corns yet, neither, an’ they’ll be plumb glad to get down. I know how ‘tis! Thar’s a nice flat up on the buttes, Colonel. Dust off the t’rantulas and horned toads an’ rattlers off it, an’ a man’ll sleep thar peaceful as a new borned babe.”

Sid nodded approvingly. He was glad they were sleeping out, too. There couldn’t be too much of it for him! He said nothing about his aching knees, but his gait told the older men for him. He heeded no bodily aches, now, however, for a new and delicious happiness was filling his breast and a load of worry was vanishing fast. His father, he could see, was fast picking up health and strength; had been ever since they had started on this trip. Thirty years ago he had ridden these same hills, with hostile Apaches ambushed in these very buttes. Sid could imagine those blue-clad, yellow-scarfed cavalymen with their friendly Indian scouts and the plainsmen rangers, all just like a Remington picture, painted with this place for a stage. In those days his father was one of the young lieutenants of the command. Now he could see the life-giving power of memory at work, for the strength of those rugged days seemed to be reentering the Colonel’s body and spirit. In two more weeks he would be heavy and lean and iron-hard.

They headed the horses up a slope of the buttes. Its little flat commanded a magnificent prospect. Away to the west stretched line on line of stratified ridges, with the flat top of the Hopi mesa far on the horizon. To the east lay a silver-green flat of sage brush, bounded by jagged red peaks. Great woolly clouds rolled in rose and lavender masses over the bare rock saw-tooth ridges that filled in under the horizon. Water was there none, but of arid plant life there was abundance.

“Here!” said the Colonel, looking silently across the desert, while memories of old Indian days crowded his mind, “it was right over there beyond those buttes to the east, that we of the Fifth Cavalry came down from Fort Defiance on our southward trail after Chief Chuntz and his Apaches, boys. A bad business; but it had to be done, I suppose. I’ll tell you of that cave fight, some day. This place is good enough for us, John.”

Mesa Joe and Red Jake turned out the horses while Big John loped out into the sage to wait for the ranch wagon and get provisions and the sleeping gear from

it. The boys set about cutting a quantity of sage bushes, from which they stripped a huge pile of fragrant browse. Colonel Colvin untied his cante roll, and out of it took a six-by-nine foot light tarp, which was all the shelter he ever used. Setting it up with two stakes and its rear corners guyed to the rocky ledge back of the camp site, they had a sun shelter under which browse was spread out. The canteens were hung in a row in the shade, and out of the saddle bags of his McClellan army saddle the Colonel produced emergency rations that had been packed there in the Den, back home, before shipping the saddle out. There was bacon and corn meal, sugar and coffee, and a can of condensed cream.

Then the cowman came in and started a small fire of greasewood while Colonel Colvin produced an aluminum army mess tin with cover and folding handle, about nine by seven inches and perhaps an inch and a half deep.

“Best little desert baker you ever saw, boys,” he laughed. “Many a corn cake I’ve shaken up in her!” He made a thick batter of flour, corn meal and baking powder, and poured the pan about half full. Balancing it on two stones over a bed of coals, he heaped a pile of live coals on the cover. In about fifteen minutes he brushed them off and peered inside.

“Brown as your hand! She’d go better with an egg beaten into the batter. Here’s for another one.”

The boys were too tired and sore to do much beside watch the cake-making. When six of them were done, Big John came riding back from the ranch wagon that had gone into camp out on the flat. He had a bag of oats, a ham, and a sweating canvas bag of water hung to his saddle.

“Shore, fill up the crowd with hog an’ hominy,” Colonel,” he grinned. “Ain’t nothing better’n ham and corn cakes been invented since Pharaoh missed the ford, I’m settin’ here to tell ye!”

He got after the ham with his bowie knife, and soon a huge slice was sizzling in the Colonel’s mess kit. The boys went up on the rocks and watched the sunset, unwilling to miss a single moment of their first evening in the desert. A wild and beautiful land was this; color,—red and rose and purple and yellow,—with gleaming glories of the sunset tinting the cloud edges. Deep blue shadows crept out under the flanks of the mesas. All was still and silent; a peace passing understanding brooded over the whole world.

“Gosh, but that’s wonderful!” exclaimed Scotty, fervently, as the sun plunged over the western rim of the world, striking turret and pinnacle and bastion alike brick-red in scarlet edgings of fire. “I tell you, Sid, these moments are what we live for in the open! Will we ever forget this scene?”

“Makes me feel calm, and serene, and—happy!” replied Sid, softly. “Happiness is what everybody is striving after—oh, so hard!—and few or none ever have any. This is the secret of it, to me. A simple, healthful life in the open, and plenty of the big, beautiful outdoors to look at and wonder over,” concluded the youth, surprised at his own eloquence.

“You said it, Sid!” came the Colonel’s deep voice behind them. “My happiest hours have all been out here, where a man can see a big enough chunk of the earth to realize his own insignificant place in the scheme of things. Back east we tend too much to magnify our own importance, and I always feel cramped and worried, and get pestered by trifles. No chance for that out here—in the presence of *this!*”

He waved his arm to the west. Under a roseate afterglow the grand distances of the desert were bathed in a flood of purples and lavenders, with tints of deep orange on the mesa flanks to the west, while soft, tender shadows of misty blue filled the rugged valleys. They sat in silence, drinking it in, for such wine was good for the soul. The light of a distant watch fire on Walpi shone through the dusk, a tiny point of light fifty miles away. The Hopi Indians, at this time, were performing their mystic rites of the sunset, and a subtle comradeship with them reached out across the desert in the flicker of those rays ----

“Chuck pile!—Come and get it!” rang out the mighty horn of Big John’s voice, breaking in on their reverie. The Colonel arose with a sigh of blissful content. “Seems like old times again, Sid! Let’s eat hearty!”

They climbed down to the little flat, where a thin wisp of gray-blue smoke rose straight up in the still air from the remnants of the cook fire. The boys fell on the ham and corn cakes and coffee ravenously, batting off the four dogs, who were most oppressively sociable, trying to gobble morsels of food right out of their masters’ mouths. The stars came out while they were eating. Then Big John and the Arizonans fell over on their backs and lit indolent cigarettes; the Colonel and the boys sought their lookout rocks, to feed on the desert, shrouded in its impenetrable gloom under a glory of western stars.

After a time the sharp night chill drove them under the shelter. Huddled forms out in the sage told of the cowmen fast asleep where they lay. Rolling in their blankets, the boys voted to call it a day. Sid lay awake, listening to the rustlings of a pack rat which had come foraging into camp, and enjoying the wild howl of the coyotes barking in shrill chorus from the mesas all about them. It was all wild, lonely and beautiful—too beautiful for anyone but outers and very honest men, he decided, as he dozed off to sleep, with the sweet tang of sage in his nostrils.

Next morning before dawn the whole party was awake, the boys shivering and glad enough to warm their hands before the fire. Bacon, flapjacks and coffee were in progress, and, downing them, the horses were unpicketed and fed and the whole cavalcade started for Hinchman's. The sharp, bracing air was good for horses and men alike. They were full of oats and bacon and high spirits. Sid raced along with Scotty beside him, giving their ponies full rein to run off the first enthusiasm of a new day. Big John brought up the rear, singing a cow song at the top of his lungs, the meter chiming in with the jolt of his horse.

“Whoo—pee,—de—I--yaho! Git along lit—tle dogie,

For ‘tis your misfortune an’ none of—my own!

Whoo—pee,—de—I--yaho! Git along lit—tle dogie,

For I know that Wy—O--ming will be your new home,”

he sang, in a monstrous shout, bawling out the I's and O's in a blare like a foghorn. The boys giggled with joy as verse after verse of the cowman's riding song roared out.

“They sing that song to soothe the cattle when riding around the herd at night,” laughed Sid. “It sure carries well! The cows are perfectly contented so long as they hear a human voice. Otherwise they are apt to get nervous about wolves, and stampede.”

“What's a ‘dogie,’ Sid?” asked Scotty, posting as his pony changed gait to a trot.

“Oh, that's a lean little yearling that they used to drive north to Wyoming, for Government rations for the poor Indians. Listen ----”

“Oh, you’ll be beef for Un-cle Sam’s Injuns,

It’s ‘Beef,—heap Beef!’ we he-ar them cry,

Git along, git along, git along lit-tle dogies,

For you’ll be beef steers by and by,”

sang Big John’s concluding verse, Red Jake chiming in on the chorus,—

“Whoop-ee, de—I--yaho!” etc.

Sunrise over the desert! A magnificent spectacle, a stunning spectacle, a gorgeous, overwhelming, awe-inspiring spectacle! The boys fell head over heels in love with the whole thing, and then as if to give it a touch of adventure, Pepper let out a squeak, with a funny break in it like a boy’s voice changing, and streaked across the sage. After him tore Lee and Bourbon, belly down, legs flying like long broom handles.

“Hi! Hi! *Yip—yip!*—Coyote!” yelled Red Jake, wheeling his broncho to flash off after the dogs. “Git him, boys!”

Ruler brayed a musical volley of hound notes, taking after the pups in long bounds that closed up on them fast. A gray wolfish streak was doing some fancy steps, twisting and turning through the greasewood bushes. Sid galloped, Scotty galloped; after them thundered Big John and the Colonel. The wind whistled around Sid’s ears as his pinto let out speed.

“Run him down, fellers—watch out for prairie dog holes!” snorted Big John, swerving the wild, white horse to the left to cut across the coyote’s trail. The two Arizonans had fanned out in a wide bend; Sid and Scotty jounced along together, pawing at their revolvers which were tightly jammed in the saddle holsters; the horses streaked along with a rapid clatter of hoof beats on the vast level floor of the desert, which was the stage setting for their coyote run.

Sid yelled with glee. What a lot of room there was in this country! Bare mountains and mesas ringed the horizon, but for miles the flat, gray sage and green greasewood dotted the red sand. The dogs looked like little black specks, leaping and twisting through the low bushes. The whole plain was flat as a floor, and the horses under them reached out with flying hoofs in the unrestrained joy

of racing. Then a jack rabbit jumped from behind a sage bush, and the three pups dropped their hot coyote trail and started after him.

“Wa—_hoo_! Stop them, boys!” roared the Colonel from his huge roan. “Break ‘em of that!”

He kept on after the coyote and Ruler. Sid tugged out his revolver and fanned the air ahead of the jack rabbit. His bullets threw up spats of white dust, and Pepper and Bourbon, who were yipping and squealing in hot pursuit, nearly turned somersaults as a bullet threw a splash of sand right before their faces. The dogs leaped back, falling all over each other, and then the swift ponies wheeled around in front of them. Scotty leaned far out of his saddle with swinging quirt.

“Back, Pep! Out of that, Bourbon! Nix on rabbit!—_Skip!_—VAMOOSE!” he barked, lashing at them with his quirt. Sid thundered up on Pinto and they headed the pups and drove them back, whimpering and cringing, to where they had left the coyote track. The men were now at least a mile away across the level basin, stringing along with Big John’s white horse in the lead and Ruler far ahead of them all. The coyote was evidently headed for some craggy red sawteeth where he could make his escape from the horses uphill.

The boys called off the pups and headed across the flat, hoping that the men would succeed in turning the coyote. Then little puffs of white smoke came from the Arizonans. They could not hear the rifle shots, but they saw the coyote turn, bewildered, heading down their way in what looked like an easy lope. He saw them start their ponies into a gallop and again turned like a flash, evidently intending to cross the sage between the two parties. Pepper rose on his hind legs, got a sight of the coyote, and started in long bounds over the sage, with Lee and Bourbon at his heels.

“Now!” gritted Sid. “Head him off, Scotty!” They raced across the coyote’s line. He was coming like the wind. Sid hauled Pinto up abruptly on his haunches and aimed his long-barreled Officer’s Model carefully. A spurt of dust sprang up just in front of the coyote Sid held the round white bead, well down in its notch, just ahead of the flying, twisting animal, swung two yards ahead and fired. The coyote slid to his haunches, snapping savagely at a wound in his side, and then Pepper, Lee and Bourbon fell on him in a riot of howls and barks.

Sid whooped with joy as they rode down. This was fine medicine for those

houn'-dawg pups! It was impossible to shoot; the whirling mass of black, tan and gray was too swift and intricate to risk a shot into it. Came a rapid clatter of paws and a great, deep-voiced bray, as Ruler charged down the slope and pitched headlong into the fray. Out of it rose the coyote, borne aloft by the great bony jaws of Ruler about his throat. There was a savage shake, a worrying and growling from the pups, and then Red Jake clattered up, leaped off his pony, booted the dogs aside and finished the gasping coyote with a single revolver shot as it lay on its side.

"That's the stuff!" yelled Colonel Colvin, galloping up on the roan. "Mind the dogs—they'll be at each other next—they're wild with fight!" He had scarcely spoken before Pepper flew jealously at Ruler with bared fangs, while Bourbon turned and pitched into Lee where he was worrying gleefully at the carcass. The boys dismounted with howls of laughter and grabbed the belligerents by their collars.

"Some pups, Dad! Hang on to him, Scotty!" laughed Sid, slinging Bourbon into the sage and aiming a kick at Lee. "First trophy of the desert, fellers!"

"Nice li'l pasear," remarked Red Jake, wiping the sweat from under his sombrero. "You-all want the hide off this-yere?" he asked, looking to the Colonel for orders.

"You bet! How far is it yet to the ranch, Jake?"

The Arizonan puckered up his eyes as he scanned the far horizon where the colored buttes back of Hinchman's loomed up. "Oh, 'bout eleven miles, I reckon," he decided.

Sid and Scotty stared unbelievably. Why, those red mountains *couldn't* be over five miles off! Their knees ached from the unaccustomed saddle strains, but distances were deceiving in the desert and there was an hour more of riding yet.

As they drew near the mountains, the long 'dobe walls of Hinchman's suddenly developed out of its misty background of mountain, mesquite and cottonwood. It looked more like a fort than any ranch the boys had ever seen before. Built during Apache times, its long outer walls were bare save for a few small black windows up near the eaves of the red tile roof. All around it was a bare, level space of desert, with not a single grease bush for cover. Even now the Navahos or the Apaches *might* tear loose again over some real or imaginary grievance,

and Hinchman's was an outpost in their country.

The sharp clip-clop of their ponies' hoofs rang on the stone flagging as they rode under the 'dobe arch into the big patio within the walls of Hinchman's. A couple of Indians took their horses as the boys dismounted and looked curiously around them. Here was a sort of square court, with a well surrounded by peach trees forming the center of the stone driving space. An inner wall, with Spanish tiled roof sloping inward all around, so as to turn the rainfall into the court drain cistern and also be protected from rifle fire, formed a side to the living rooms and stables that surrounded the patio. The windows in these were larger, but also more than man high, and each room had a door, mostly open, showing glimpses of the dark, cool depths within. In one of them stood a huge, white-haired giant waving his arms joyfully.

"Howdy, Colvin □ Get right down! Sho' is glad to see y'u!" roared the giant, running out to take the roan's bridle reins.

"How!—Hinchy,—you old war-in-eye! Gad, but you look good to me!" chortled the Colonel, wringing Hinchman's hand. He leaped from his horse, and the two old Army comrades hugged each other in a ponderous bear dance about the patio. After an exchange of soul-satisfying punches the boys were introduced. They decided they were going to like this man. Black-eyed and long-nosed, he was all of six feet four in his boots; his smile was constant and kindly, and there was a merry twinkle in his eye that matched the Colonel's own.

"Shore you look peaked, old-timer!" exclaimed Hinchman, searching the Colonel over with solicitous eyes. "Look like you'd been dragged through a knot-hole,—Jeementley-ding if you don't!" he cried, aggrieved sympathy in his tones. "Big John told me they'd worked you to death down in Washington, but I never 'spected you'd look like this."

"Oh, I'll be all right, pronto," grinned Colonel Colvin. "There wasn't any end to it, while it lasted, but it's all over now,—thank God! Enough of me—how's everything with you, old settler? Still patriarch of all the Indians of this section?" he quizzed.

"Still am!" rumbled Hinchman, emphatically. "I'm old 'White Father Hinch' to all the Navaho north of us. They come to me with all their troubles or send in runners about it. One got in last night with a tough one for me to straighten out.

It's a medicine panther, Colvin, that's been stealing old Neyani's sheep. The Indians are all plumb scared of him; heap big medicine! They swear he's black—can you beat that?"

"Black!" echoed Colonel Colvin, incredulously, while the boys listened in with flapping ears. "Freak coloration, eh? The Far East has black leopards, you know, occurring clear down into Sumatra. It's possible, Hinchy. Where did the cougar get the black on his ugly face? No one knows—nor why there are both black and spotted leopards, either. But I don't see where you should worry any, Hinchy—just say the word and we'll go up there and shoot him for you. We've got dogs, you know."

"Precisely just what you can't do, Colvin!" exclaimed Hinchman, energetically. "It would be the worst kind of a sacrilege in the Navaho's eyes. You see, Dsilyi, the Navaho demigod, *he* had four panthers, a white one to the north, a tawny one to the west, a blue one to the south, and a black one to the east. The Indians just know that this is Dsilyi's black panther—there's no use arguing with them! Therefore, either old Neyani or his son, Niltci, has been up to some deviltry and the panther is being sent as a punishment. Not a redskin of the lot will shoot him on a bet, nor even dare track him. You don't know how superstitious they are, Colvin! Sooner than build a fire with a single stick from a hogan in which someone has died, a Navaho would freeze to death. Sooner than touch a hair of Dsilyi's medicine panther, old Neyani and his whole family would let him take all their sheep and starve to death. Right nice mix-up fo' me to unravel, eh?"

"You're dead right!" agreed the Colonel emphatically. "Say, the worst uprising the Army ever had to deal with came from just such a freak animal as this. You remember the Arapaho row in '79, Hinchy?"

"You bet! I sure hope this isn't goin' to be any thing like that! a white buffalo, wasn't it? And now, I've got a black cougar and a mess of Indian superstitions on my hands!"



Previous chapter

Chapter III

The Valley of the Cliff Dwellers

The older men went inside to Major Hinchman's big living room where, over some Mexican stogies, they discussed Neyani and his Black Panther and gossiped over old Army days. Sid and Scotty went out to help Big John with the horses and hounds and then explored the ranch patio. It was all as Spanish as old Mexico. Heavy and age-worn oak furniture—the real Mission—stone *metates* for grinding corn, great red *ollas* or porous jars for cooling water by evaporation, striped serapes and Navaho blankets, Apache and Pima baskets; saddles, raitas and ornamental embossed Mexican leather gear—the horse was King here! The place reeked of those old strenuous border days of the Southwest, and the ranch seemed to have imbibed equally of the customs and usages of the early Spanish and Indian possessors of the country. In turn, the boys peeped in the various doorways; the farriery with a smoking forge and laboring bellows; the bunk house with an interminable game of greasy cards going on; the saddlery, where a weazened old sinner of a Sonoran bent over his leather work; and the great kitchen, where dried beef and hams hung from the smoky rafters, and long braids of corn, peppers, desert onions and dried berries festooned the walls. There were bins of pinyon nuts, flour, *metate*-ground Indian meal, sugar, coffee and red beans—the ranch could stand a year's siege if you asked Lum Looke, the Chinese cook who presided!

After a time Major Hinchman sought them out at the stables in the patio, where Ruler and his progeny had been made comfortable in an empty stall.

“Say, boys,” he grinned at them with a quizzically apologetic smile, “I’m mighty sorry—but thar ain’t a derved thing to eat in the ranch! Nope, not a doggone thing!” he insisted whimsically. “You’ll have to rustle your own grub. Now, Jake, thar, he was tellin’ me of a couple of deer over the river in those cottonwoods,” he confided, in an elaborate stage whisper. “Suppose you boys get you’ rifles an’ rustle us a little venison? You!—_Jake_!” he roared, seeing the delighted smiles on Sid’s and Scotty’s faces.

Jake came straddling out of the bunk house, the sunlight sheening on his glossy black fur chaps as he crossed the patio.

“Jake, you take these boys across the river and fetch us a deer,” he roared, turning to go back to the Colonel to continue their plans for the trip to come.

A high-riding sun bathed the desert in floods of light and color as they rode out of the patio. The pink layer-cake mountains across the river rose high and near,

now. Streaks of yellow and blue, in horizontal lines, crossed the uniform red of their bare and jagged conformation. From a bluff near Hinchman's they could survey a wide bend of the river (which was little more than a wide, fordable brook) and here was green grass land, with cattle dotted over it. Back of it was the corresponding bluff of the opposite bank, fringed with mesquite, oaks, cottonwoods, juniper and pinyons.

"Over the river!" whooped Jake, settling back on his horse to let it slide down the clay bluff. A thundering clatter of hoofs came up behind them as the boys prepared to follow. It was Big John, racing along on the white horse.

"Ain't goin' to leave *me* out, Jake, when it comes to the Colonel's cubs!" he snorted, easing his mount down the slope. "You don't know these pesky boys, Red. When I hed em, up Montana way, the minute they was out of my sight the dern pinheads would start somethin'! Now you take Scotty, here—he's another red-head like you, Jake,—an' I'll sort of ooze along with Sid. Thataway we'll keep the both of them out of trouble,—savvy?"

"Shore!—We'll pass a family of Apache Injuns, boys, on our way up to the notch in them buttes," said Jake as the ponies splashed into the ford. "I'm not denyin' Major Hinchman's got the right idee about the Injuns, at that. He lets a few families of them stay on his ranch all the time, livin' the way they is used ter, tendin' a small herd of cow-critters in return for a beef steer now an' then. Up yander is an ole San Carlos Apache chief, his squaw, an' their two childer,—a young buck which same rides fer us, and a gal. 'Snakes-in-his-leggins,' we calls the ole Injun; but he's a pow'rful dignified ole cuss at that."

They rode up the opposite bluff and along its brink for perhaps a mile, the boys agog with curiosity to see Apache Indians in their native state, so to speak. The thick growth of saw grass, clumps of yucca, agave, and sage increased as they rode along, while nearly every glade held a sparse growth of green deciduous trees. And then, on a point of the bluff jutting out toward the river, they came upon the Apache home. It was a mere sun shelter of poles and juniper, but the squaw and her daughter were at work on a grass hut near by, made of tall looped poles forming a system of arches and tied with yucca fiber at all crossings. The girl was binding on a thatch of bear grass in bundles. By the time the rains came it would be fairly waterproof.

Under the juniper shelter was the simplest of furniture. A few red and black

blankets hung up on the leafy walls to be out of the dirt; a red pottery jar slicked over with pinyon gum varnish held fresh water; there were woven baskets in geometrical black and white figures holding pinyon nuts; strings of red peppers and onions, and braided spikes of blue and red corn ears hung from the rafters. Dried meat and fish swung under the eaves, while the old buck himself sat in the shade, straightening cane arrows with a grooved stone which he had heated in his fire. He grunted with imperturbable dignity as they rode up.

“Nothing to do till to-morrow, eh, Sid?” grinned Scotty as they reined in.

“It looks ideal to me!” responded Sid, enthusiastically, the wild blood surging up in him sympathetically at the fine simplicity of the old Indian’s life. “He’s making those arrows because they are far cheaper than cartridges, and just as effective for him. I suppose they sell those baskets—look at that one like a tall vase; isn’t it a beauty?”

The old squaw looked up from her work and smiled at Sid’s eager, pointing finger. Back of her, down on the river flat, the young buck had just ridden up, bare-backed on a pied pony. He had nothing on him but a breech clout, buckskin beaded moccasins of brilliant blue and white, and a red bandanna about his forehead. He grinned silently at the boys as his pony stopped.

“Gee, I’m goin’ to be an Indian!” laughed Sid. “I’ll build a whicki-up of my own and live here forever! I’m an adopted Blackfoot, anyhow.”

“Why *don’t* you be an ethnologist, Sid?” urged Scotty, inspired by his chum’s enthusiasm.

“Gee-roo, I’d be more than that!” came back Sid. “Instead of just studying their songs and customs, I’d want to do something practical toward letting the Indian live in his own way. It’s the only thing that will preserve the race contented and happy.”

“How, Snakes!—You happy?” chuckled Jake, calling out to the old buck at Sid’s words.

The Apache lifted his great head, and a coppery grin broke on his eagle features. “Plenty happy!” his deep bass voice replied. “Major Hinchm’n heap good to red man!”

“Yet this ole redskin and yore pappy and Major Hinchman, Sid, was on the war path after each other, red hot, only forty years ago! Waal; times hev changed! We must be oozin’ along, now, or there won’t be no deer on the saddle, boys.”

“You see how ‘tis,” said Jake with obvious pride in his master’s system as they rode off, “them Injuns is happy, clean through. ‘Cause why? They’ve got their freedom, an’ can live as they likes. Ef every ranch in Arizona would adopt a few, we’d have no need for reservations, whar they’re always discontented. It don’t take much to feed an Injun an’ keep him happy. That young buck’s as good a herdsman as we’ve got. The squaw makes baskits, an’ the ole feller does a bit of huntin’, mostly sage hens and jacks. They’re wuth their keep; yit we kin sorter look after ‘em if they gits into any trouble. That’s what Hinchman’s preachin’, everywhar he goes.—Whoa, boys! We pickets the horses here, fellers, an’ gits up this coul^de afoot after them deer,” he broke off, throwing a leg over his mount.

They picketed the ponies out in a bit of grass swale, and separated, going in pairs up different flanks of the red butte. The sparse mesquite and bear oak grew stunted and thick, up here, and it was all cut up with little ravines of dense clay soil and friable rock. Moisture and dew from the river, condensed at night, evidently kept it going, for even cottonwood grew in the depths of the gullies.

“Good deer country, son,—for these parts. They lies low up here and comes down at night to drink. Watch out for a track in the clay,” cautioned Big John as he and Sid climbed along, rifles at ready.

A blue-tailed, green lizard darted across their path. Sid was watching it disappear under some loose stones, when the sudden “*Whew! Whew!*” of a startled deer made him jump with rifle half to shoulder.

“Arter him!—up thet draw!” barked Big John, jumping for the ravine as the patter of quick hoofs died away over the ridge. Sid swarmed up the rocky talus while Big John leaped in giant strides along the flanks of the ravine. It seemed to Sid that a quick climb to a jutting shoulder above him would give him a shot, especially if the deer stopped to look back after his first fright was over. The loose soil rolled and slid under his feet; high above him towered the red wall of the butte, vertical and unscalable. When he at length turned to look around, he was high on the roof of the desert, its tumbled ridges stretching away to the south for limitless miles. Down below was the curving bend of the river and across it the low, square, ‘dobe fort of Hinchman’s. Then he turned his back to it

all and began to reconnoiter cautiously over the ridge. As he raised his head, the wag of a white flag told him that the deer had seen him, too. He was a large buck, an eight-pointer at least, and he was galloping up a vast arroyo that cleft into the heart of the mountains. Sid raised his rifle and opened fire at long range.

“Spang! Spang! Spang!” whipped out the sharp reports, as fast as he could work the lever.

“Whoop-ee! Burn ‘im! Set fire to ‘im!” roared Big John’s voice in the ravine, and then he burst out of the head of it, looking for the buck.

Sid saw his bullets strike rock in red spurts of dust. The ringing reports of Big John’s rifle now added their clamor to the din. Far off up the canyon the buck stumbled and fell; got up and went on again, and then leaped high in the air with all four feet and came down on his side.

“That got him!” yelled Big John. *“I don’t know which one of us ‘twas. Come on down, son,—‘twon’t be no pyjama party gittin’ him out of thar, old settler!”*

While Big John was paunching the buck, Sid climbed up to the head of the canyon, led on by an irresistible desire to see what might be on the other side of the top of the world. The ledges of broken and wind-scoured rock gradually gave place to shelves with vertical faces, up which he could find crevices or breaks which could be climbed. The blue margin of the sky was not far above him, now. Scaling the last bastions of the ridge, he found himself perched up on a sharp knife-edge, seemingly only a little below the white clouds overhead. The dry desert winds sang in the peaks around him and caressed him with soft, invisible fingers. He felt somehow brother to it all, as his eyes roved around the horizon. To the north stretched the flat plain of the desert, broken with sheer walled mesas and ragged outcroppings of rock ridges. To the east rose a high-walled plateau, covered with the dark green of arid-country evergreens,—cedar, pinyon and juniper. It ran for miles and miles northward, and in between him and it a purple void told of the chasm of some valley flowing north.

It was through that plateau of pine timber that their route north to the Canyon Cheyo would lie, and somewhere, cut deep in the plateau, would be that valley of the ancient cliff dwellers that they all wished to see. As Sid studied the huge panorama an overwhelming desire for solitude came over him. He wanted to be alone, to take for himself the Indian boy’s three days of trial and to face life and

his future for a time with wide open eyes, alone and uncounseled. Like them, he wanted to ask questions of life and learn what it all was going to mean for him. Here, in this empty land, he could face Mother Earth, Mother Nature, the raw essentials of life, and let his own soul choose his destiny.

The Indians, he knew, encouraged this impulse in boys of his age. Then it was that they went alone into the mountains, to fast and pray to the Great Mystery, and to come back to the tribe with the beginnings of wisdom deep planted in them. The whites stifled this desire for solitude, attempted to guide their boy's every step, and more than often hopelessly muddled his whole life in advance for him. Sid would have none of that! Never once had the old Colonel so much as hinted to him what he was to be and do, in this his life that stretched before him. His boy was free to face it in the only way it *could* be faced, alone. Sid wanted to think it out by himself, to be away from the very sight of people, to have these great solitudes for his counselors for at least a few days. He climbed back down the canyon and rejoined Big John, turning over the desire in his mind. He did not realize that the Desert had taken hold of his soul with its grip of the infinite,—as it has done to the mind of man since countless ages,—but, true to instinct, he was following its silent beckoning.

“John, I’m thinking of doing a little pasear up into the mountains for a day or so, —by myself,” he announced, as the cowman looked up from cleaning his gory hands with a few drops from his canteen.

Big John looked him over quizzically.

“How ‘bout me, old-timer? Colonel Colvin’ll skin me like a mule team ef I comes back without ye!”

“Dad’ll understand—and I know *you* do. This country’s got me, John! I’m just crazy to do a lone hike in it, for a while. Suppose you fellows pick me up in the Canyon on your way north? I’ll be there, and ready for you ‘bout that time.”

Big John grinned, as he scratched the black locks under his sombrero. “You ain’t, nohow, regular intimate with that region, is yer, Sid?” he inquired, blandly.

“No, but it’s a canyon, like all the rest of them, with sheer walls and a lot of prehistoric cliff dwellers’ places in it, isn’t it?” said Sid, confidently.

It is to be presumed that some of the Arizona sense of humor was infecting that

stanch Montanan, Big John, for all he *said* was, “All right, old-timer! Make it the mouth of the Monument Canyon, though, so we can find ye when we want ye. . . I’ve hed that lonesome itch myself, son. You hev your blanket and tarp on the pinto’s cante, and here’s a haunch of venison. Ef you only hed a bag of pinole, now, I’d be plumb willing to turn ye loose.”

“I have,” remarked Sid, turning around to show a buckskin bag at his belt. “Parched and ground corn. You eat a tablespoonful of it and wash down with a drink,—and you’re fed for at least six hours to come. Scotty and I made a lot of it back east.”

“Smart ez lightnin’, you two!” chuckled Big John, shaking his head. “After them Montana days, though, I’d trust ye anywhar, Sid. Sho’—they ain’t nawthin’ to harm you, from here to the Canyon. Git along, son—don’t I know jest what’s eatin’ ye! The Colonel kin take it out on me—I’ll fix it with him! You help me down with this yere critter, and I’ll start ye on the trail.”

Between them they got the buck down the slope, and then led the horses up through the ravine to where the buck could be easily slung. Big John then shook Sid’s canteen, looked over his saddle trappings, and cut off a haunch of the venison and they slung it to Sid’s saddle bow opposite the canteen.

“See thet notch, up thar in them buttes to the east, Sid?” asked Big John, pointing with a horny finger. “This here trail goes up thar, over the divide. Folly it down ‘til you comes into Red Valley. This time o’ year thar ain’t much water, but thar’s plenty of tanks,—pools, like,—whar the water lays in rocky holes. Stick to the valley till you comes to the Canyon. We’ll be along thar in about two days. So long, kid! Hev it out with yourself, son—‘twill do ye good!”

He mounted his horse, with the buck tied across the saddle, and waved a farewell as Sid rode off up the steep trail from the river.

Up through a country of bear grass, sage and mesquite he rode, following a well-worn trail. Once over the divide, the way led all down hill. The junipers and pinyons thinned out; yuccas and century plants sprang up among the bear grass, and then, riding out from the last fringe of trees, a mighty red valley lay before him, stretching endlessly northward in yellow and blue and black parapets, with sage-strewn slopes of gravel slanting downwards from their walls. Sid let out a wild whoop of joy as his pony cantered down the winding trail. Free! He was as

free as that eagle that soared high above him in the blue—so high as to be a mere wheeling speck in the sky! He was alone with himself and Nature.

The pony slowed down as he reached the hot depths of the valley. A dry scoured-out bed of a brook wandered below, here a scummy, shallow pool, yonder the glimpse of shining water where a deep hole in the rocks still held some. None of the thirst terrors of the desert would be his, reflected Sid, as he rode by them; nothing but this inspiring high horizon of a changeless land. Here was the seat of the Infinite, thought the boy, the same last year, the same last century,—the same since the great waters had left this basin bare back in geological time. Of what other place in our country could that be said? The forests and the Indians of the East were gone forever; the prairies and the buffalo of the West were gone. Millions of white men were toiling and struggling to make a living crowded in cities which dotted that land where once was the bounteous plenty of Nature. All the men he knew were fighting a grim battle with Life, just to keep fed and clothed and have a roof over their heads. All the boys he knew were training for that same battle. All of them were tired and weary, and none really enjoyed their lives. All of them would go to their graves with the bitter sense of not having lived at all. None of that for him!

And why? puzzled Sid. Well, their lives were all too complex, for one thing. A thousand distractions pressed in on everybody's time. There was no margin to their lives; no time for ease, for reflection, for communing through books with the great spirits of the past. None at all for those revitalizing periods when man returns to Nature and is born anew. These people spent so much of their time *trying* to live that they did not live at all! Only worked.

What, then, was happiness? The happiest man Sid knew was a young fellow he had met out in Montana, who worked among the homesteaders out in the new red wheat lands, where there was not a school or a church in forty thousand square miles. Among those brave and cheerful folk he was giving his life with a rich enthusiasm, that their sons might have something of an education. And his idealism was so infectious, too, that he had persuaded a young medical student to go out there with him, so, that there might be at least one doctor in all that territory.

Another fellow that he knew, quite as happy, was an outdoor artist who sought out and painted the wild beauty of this beautiful world in which we live. This fellow lived up in a log cabin on a Wisconsin reservation, painting the life of the

forest. He knew animals, fish, game, birds, canoes, Indians, woodsmen; and he knew how to paint them so that one looked and was transported to his scene in the very spirit of it. In the fall he would shoot game and cure it, collect wild rice and Indian potato, and stay right there, painting the forest in winter when it was more beautiful than ever. One exhibition of his pictures a year was all he needed to provide for his simple wants. Thoreau loved to study; he was happiest when he had the leisure to read the Scriptures of the ancients in their original tongues, to search for great truths and sound philosophies and pass them on to his fellow men. To get the freedom to do this he had lived alone in the forest and raised from the soil what he needed to eat.

These men were not complex. They did not want a million things that people think are necessary to happiness. So long as they were free to keep on, they had all that they asked of life. It struck Sid that the master key of all this was for a man to find the work that he loved and then be free to do it. If the work itself was such that it set a high ideal before him, then that man would be happy. Nothing else mattered. Nothing else *should* matter. It was essential to bar out the distractions, the meaningless nothings that frittered away one's time, money and energy. The men of the desert came out here to get away from all that, to devote their lives to some large, simple business, like raising cattle or making the desert bloom by systems of irrigation. And they found the grand peace of the desert good for the soul. Good enough to stay here forever—in what looked to a city man a hideous, iron-bound land—and never have a wish to go back where men spoiled everything in their mad scramble to stay alive.

Sid decided three things for himself during the miles that Pinto laid behind them with that tireless gait of the plains mustang. Happiness, for him, lay close to Nature. She was by far the grandest thing in the world, the one thing of which he never tired and of whose wonders there was no end. Others might prefer the intellectual life of cities, where the body was forever weary, forever crying for good, healthy, sweating exercise, even if the mind was kept occupied. To satisfy them both and be a whole man, happy all over with the thrill of good health of mind and body, a life in the open was the only surety. That other life would be surely a misery for his body, caged like a setter dog in a city flat—there would be absolutely no escaping it. For his mind it would mean simply an exchange of interests working with live things as the raw material instead of with machinery or in spending his days dictating letters, which was the bulk of the “work” done by most of the men he knew. He shrank from such a life as from a plague. Far better to be just reasonably well off, or even poor, than exchange for a heaping

measure of dollars everything that gave one joy in living. Life in the open, for him, could be agriculture or mining or ethnology. The human interest of the latter inclined him strongly toward it. It combined idealism with practical, useful work. To make others happy, to help the misunderstood and protect the unjustly treated—that would be a life that could appeal to Sid’s generous, open-handed nature!

He had arrived at that point in his reflections and his pony had rounded perhaps the fiftieth of the great red parapets and promontories that crisscrossed ahead of him in the winding valley, when two enormous red walls, flat as masonry and hundreds of feet high came to view across the dry bed of the stream.

Sid reined up his pony, looking up at them in wonder, and then at the dim distances beyond with a feeling of utter bewilderment. Surely this was a grim joke that Big John had played on him,—the merciless Arizona humor as practiced on the abysmal tenderfoot!

“This must be the Canyon Cheyo, and those huge walls are ‘Los Capitanos del Canyon,’ as the Spanish named them—but where is the entrance?” he asked himself, perplexedly. Then the truth burst upon him. That line of dim gray cliffs, apparently five miles down the valley was the *other wall* of the Canyon! The whole thing was its mighty gate!

“Gee-roo! Things are done on a big scale out here!” exclaimed Sid as he surveyed it, dismayed. “You could drop a whole eastern state in the mouth of this canyon and it would never be missed! No wonder there are whole ruined cities on the floor as well as the walls of Cheyo!” he cried, ruefully, as he began to wonder how his party would ever find *him* in all this vast expanse of cliff and valley.

But it would narrow further up, he reassured himself. If he could find the mouth of Monument Canyon and hang around there they would surely pick him up. For miles he rode up a flat level floor, green and watered with a brook, while on both sides frowned parapets like the Palisades of the Hudson, about the same height, yet narrowed in closer, so that their grandeur and majesty hemmed him in. Up under the sheer cliffs he could see great hollowed-out caves, with stone ruins peeping out under them, walls shattered and torn, square stone watch towers with their upper stories thrown down, and a detritus of destroyed masonry scattered down the steep, tree-grown slopes.

Then a narrow side canyon attracted him. It would be fun to ride up to it and camp there for the night, thought Sid, besides being out of the main canyon and away from possible visits of passing Navahos who might take into their heads to rob a lonely boy camping out. He turned up it, winding his pony through great spruces and firs that rose out of its moist bottom, watered by a little runnel. The stratified stone ledges of the cliffs were moss-covered at their bases. High up through the cleft he could see the blue sky, with yellow sunlight striking the spires of western yellow pines that seemed like pygmy Japanese trees up there from where he was. It was already dim down in here.

Swiftly the twilight grew, while the pony slowed to a walk, his feet not making a sound in the soft duff. It was growing eerie and mysterious in here, thought Sid, as a slight shiver ran through him, and he now wished he had stayed out in the open valley. But he fought back that wish as cowardly and foolish. Men did not turn back from what they had once set their hand to!

Then a stick cracked, somewhere behind him. Sid reined up and listened. All was still as death; even the birds had gone to roost in the dim twilight of the chasm. But Pinto's actions told him that that noise was not imagination. His pony's ears lay flat back and he was shivering all over with fear!

Sid watched, intently, down the chasm. He thought he saw a bush move. A second's concentration on it told him it *had* moved, for the tips of its lower branches still vibrated. He reached down and drew his army carbine out of its scabbard. For some minutes Sid watched the bush, his heart beating with excitement. A more experienced man than he would have hummed a shot into it to smoke out whatever might be lurking there.

But after a time he turned away and urged the pony slowly ahead. The horse jumped as the spurs touched him, and Sid had a wrangle to quiet him at all. They paced on, slowly, both listening behind them, for Pinto's ears had not pricked forward at all. An uncanny sense that they were being followed,—by something—in the chasm, persisted. Several times Sid looked back, rifle at ready, urged by some half-heard noise.

A likely camping spot, a little dent in the chasm walls showed up ahead, and, as it was getting dark, Sid decided to stop here and make camp for the night, still keeping a wary eye out for whatever beast it was that was stalking them.

He dismounted and picketed Pinto in a little grass swale. Then he cleared away a space for his fire in the needles that lay under the clump of silver spruces in the dent. He was gathering sticks for it when Pinto gave a snort of terror and tugged frantically at his halter. Sid yelled at him, for his eyeballs showed white with fright. He snatched up his rifle to peer down the chasm. Then a shock of alarm went through him, as his eye fastened on a motionless head—looking at them from over a ledge that jutted out from the canyon walls high up. Big, round, and coal-black it was! No ears showed—they must have been laid back flat—but a green and phosphorescent flash came from the two eyes in it that glared at them.

Sid's rifle sprang to shoulder and the red spurt of flame from its muzzle split the semidarkness.



Previous chapter

Chapter IV

Lost Canyon

For the next few seconds after that rifle shot, Sid was fully occupied. The black head, whatever it was, disappeared in the cloud of smoke from the rifle muzzle, and Sid heard a hoarse, ropy, animal snarl and a scramble in the bushes up on the cliff ledges. But Pinto had reared high in the air at the shot, and, with a whinny of terror and a frantic tug of his head, had broken the picket lariat. He dashed snorting across the ravine. Sid dropped his rifle and fell on the dangling lariat weaving like a snake through the grass. It whipped out from under him as he made a last snatch for it and a half hitch of it caught around his wrist.

Sid was yanked to his feet, hauling against the plunging horse, and was dragged across the chasm. Only its sheer wall stopped Pinto in his mad frenzy of backing. Sid snubbed the lariat around a stump and let Pinto buck. Gradually the horse grew quiet as Sid talked to him, and he finally was able to come up on the rope and soothe him. The pony shivered with terror, but slowly became more easy, pricking his ears and looking with alarmed eyes down the chasm every time the thought of that creature that had peered out at them recurred to his equine brain. Sid led him over to the grass swale, where he fell to grazing again. After a time the pony seemed to know that their visitor had gone, for, save for an occasional stoppage to look long and intently, he went on feeding.

But that was no guarantee that the prowler might not come back again, sometime during the night, reasoned Sid

“Bear or cougar, what he wanted was horse flesh!” muttered the boy to himself as he started his fire. “Let’s see; the Navaho hogans are not so far from here, up near the head of the Canyon to the east That’s about eight miles. Suppose this brute was that freak panther that we heard about at Hinchman’s? Of course, it was dark and I *might* have been fooled, but he *was* black, whatever the thing might have been. It couldn’t have been black bear, or I’d have noted his ears. This thing *had* no ears,—and it looked catty! By George—suppose it *is* the Black Panther! The black leopards of the East are always larger and heavier than the spotted and clouded kinds, so this fellow must be an old Tom cougar, a lover of horse, deer and sheep. What’s to prevent him coming back and getting Pinto before I can wake up to shoot him?”

Sid puzzled a long while over what to do, as he squatted before his fire broiling a slab of venison from the haunch. He munched at it and then washed down a liberal help of pinole with brook water, still undecided. There did not seem to be any solution for this particular difficulty.

“Well, there’s one thing about it—Pinto’s as good as a watch dog,” said Sid to himself. “He’ll stay up all night, munching grass, if I know horses,” he laughed, “and he’d sense that cougar around long before I could.... I’ve got it!” he cried, slapping at his knee delightedly.

He pulled up the picket pin and drove it in again under the spruces beside the bed of dry needles among some rock hummocks that he had selected for a sleeping place for himself. Then he retied the lariat, so that there was a short length left over, and this he fastened to his bed roll.

“There!” he exclaimed. “If Sir Black Panther comes, Pinto’ll plunge and rear and pull out his pin, all in about one jump. Then the lariat will yank the bed out from under me—enough to wake up a dead man—and I ought to be up and shooting mighty sudden!” With that he leaned the rifle handy against a spruce and rolled up in his blankets on the needle bed. The last sound that drifted to his ears was the steady munching of Pinto, as unending as the murmur of the rill in the ravine.

Next morning Sid awoke with a sense of having missed something. Wasn’t there

to have been a row with a cougar that was to come and take his horse? But there stood Pinto, grazing peacefully. Birds chirruped in the firs and spruces growing in the chasm; the sunlight streamed down through its silent cathedral walls; a water ousel was bathing himself in a pool of the brook and thanking God for the gift of another sunny day. All was peace in the glory of the morning. The uncanny visitor had not come, then! Sid lay lazily awake for some time, enjoying it all. The only sounds, save the soft soughing of the wind in the evergreens, were the ceaseless runnel of the brook, the liquid notes of the birds, and the champing of Pinto's teeth on the grass beside camp, clearly audible in this vast stillness. It recalled Sid's thoughts to desire for breakfast. He was not *quite* ready for the frontiersman's fare of straight venison and pinole! Coffee and bacon with it loomed up in his mind as much more savory and palatable. And that brought him to remembrance of his emergency ration. The boys never went abroad without it. It ought to be in a canvas pouch on the back of his belt, reflected Sid. Reaching around, he was surprised to find it still there, utterly forgotten and no doubt slept upon in the excitement and fatigues of the day before.

Sid unbuckled his belt and slipped it off. It was a home-made affair, merely an empty cocoa tin with two holes punched in its upper rim and a small bale wire packed inside with the grub. It held a half pint of water when filled. Out of it Sid took a package of coffee, lumps of sugar, a paraffin paper package of bacon slices, a small tin box of salt, and a cube of dried soup powder. The cover of the tin had a tack hole in one end, so that it would make a small frying pan by tacking the tin to the end of a stick. With a small fire going he soon had coffee brewing in the can and four slices of bacon were crisped in the cover. Then washing down a spoonful of pinole, he was ready for further adventures. He was packing up the emergency kit and drowning the remnants of his fire with water carried from the brook, when to his surprise the soft duff under his feet gave way with a crackling of rotten twigs, and, before he could right himself, his boot was jammed down in a cleft of mossy boulders whose humpy forms showed irregularly under the needle floor of the cove. Sid had spent considerable effort the night before in trying to find a level place to sleep on between those hummocks, wondering in a vague way how they came to be there. Laughing gayly at his own clumsiness, he now tugged his foot loose from the cleft and then peered down to see what might be in the hole, for nothing is insignificant to the woodsman. Down in the rubble of needles was—water! Quite a little pool of it. Evidently all the interstices between the hummocks were filled with it.

Sid watched the glistening surface for some time, for all the day was his, and he had no appointment with anything or anybody. Gradually a loose needle detached itself from the ring of them about the hole and floated slowly *toward* the brook! Sid's interest at once arose mightily. He had assumed that this water was merely a backup from the brook, but that needle said, No! More of them detached and followed the pioneer across the water hole in the cleft.

Out of such small beginnings do great things grow, in the woods! There was evidently a current between the hummocks, flowing toward the brook. If so, where did it come from? Sid asked himself. A spring, back in the depths of the cove, most likely. He explored the little dent in which he had camped, carefully. The broken and jagged strata of the walls had met here, jammed together by some prehistoric movement of the earth's crust. It was not the real plateau wall. The trees had taken advantage of the jumble of interlocking slabs, for a giant fir had effected a lodgment in the fissure, filled as it was with pockets of soil that had accumulated there.

Sid eyed it with thrills of adventure and discovery running through him like wine. There was no spring! The water came from farther back—somewhere! He raced back and crossed the brook, climbing the stratified walls of the canyon as high as he could. Squatting on a ledge, he peered upward to where the walls of the canyon towered into the cloudless blue far overhead. His eye followed the symmetrical column of the giant fir. The edges of the cove met and interlocked behind it, and for a considerable distance above its topmost spire. Then appeared a narrow cleft, a sort of fat man's misery, extending to the top, and through it showed a thin seam of sky blue. The cove was a mere wall then, and something lay behind it—a blocked canyon perhaps.

On fire with adventure, Sid eyed it speculatively, seeking a way to climb up to that cleft. Every ruin in the main canyon was known, and had been explored and rifled of its relics by ethnologists and tourists. Two or three centuries ago they had been inhabited by tribes of pueblo Indians, but when the Navaho, the Dene (deer hunters), as they called themselves, came down from the Far North they had attacked these villages and driven out all the pueblos in their neighborhood. How the Navaho *got* down, from the neighborhood of Great Slave Lake where their kinsmen, the Dene, still live,—through the Blackfeet, the Shoshones, the Cheyennes and the Utes,—was a whole mystery in itself, but here they were, and had been since the times of the Spaniard. It accounted for the deserted state of all the cliff dwellings in the San Juan and Chaco Valley and Canyon Cheyo regions.

Suppose, then, there should be a box canyon in back of that cleft that no white man had ever yet explored! thought Sid, as he searched the ledgy walls of the cove before him. “Lost Canyon!—and *I* discovered it, What a start in ethnology for me!—Gee-roo!” he crowed to himself happily, “there’s water coming from in behind there, *_some_where!*”

He climbed down and cached his saddle and rifle, on general principles. Pinto would not likely be molested, for the Black Panther would not hunt in the daytime. The pony would be perfectly content with the grass and water, which he had not ceased to sample since getting over his scare of the night before. Picketing him out with the full length of lariat, Sid swarmed up the fir, for he had noted where a ledge could be reached by climbing out on one of its higher branches. Once on the ledge he looked down, and some idea of his undertaking began to dawn on him. It was a fearsome climb, up above! He was already seventy feet above the floor of the canyon and the beginning of the cleft was still at least a hundred feet above him. Luckily no slippery moss grew on the ledges up here!

It became more and more awful as he ascended from ledge to ledge. There were some that jutted out so that he climbed over them like a house eave, with his body hanging out in space and a frightful fall yawning below him if he failed to make it. And, all the time, the sense of vertical rise grew more and more uncomfortable. If only you could get *some* slope inward,—something less like a stone ladder of huge slabs!

After a time he grew used to the sense of height. The thing resolved itself into the immediate problem of getting over the next ledge above. They *all* shelved back—just a little—that was some comfort! But above him they came out again, in an enormous pediment, one of Nature’s own cornices, big as a whole Parthenon. Sid looked up, despairingly. If the cleft did not begin before that thing started out from the cliff wall, he was beaten! And he had no idea how he was ever coming down those ledges again, either!

But his route, planned out from below, turned out to be feasible. The narrow cleft started from the flat floor of a ledge twenty feet above him. He made it, with the help of some young spruces growing out of crevices in the rock. He had learned to depend on these, as they were firmly anchored by their twinelike roots. Sid at last stood on the ledge, looked down into the void below with a sigh of relief, and then looked up through the cleft with renewed hope.

“Fat Man’s Misery,” as he named the cleft, began with a steep slope of loose, dry earth. You could climb it with your elbows jammed into the rock on either side. Squirming and twisting, Sid wormed up through it, hanging on most of the time by the rocks, where a slip would have dropped him down like an avalanche, to land on Pinto’s pried back far below. Then the opposite downward slope began, just as steep. That ledged cliff was a mere wall—and he had climbed through it!

When he got down out of the cleft he found himself looking into a small valley choked full of tall spruces. Their tops rose out of the green below him. It was a small box canyon, sure enough, not over a mile to the head of it. Sid started down, his feet slipping and sliding in loose shale rock that refused to halt anywhere. Grabbing a sapling, he hung fast and listened to the shower of small stones dropping down into the valley over some ledge below him.

No way down there! He grimaced to himself, shrugging his shoulders. All right!—down the flanks of the canyon, then! He started off, sloping down wherever possible, and little by little worked below. A last plunge through firs and thick needles, and he stood on the floor of the valley. It was filled with mossy boulders, just like those under his camp, and down in between them were cool, clear wells of running water.

Sid drank, and then started up the valley, searching the cliff walls for some of the swallow-nest houses of the cliff dwellers. Then, in a widening of the valley floor, something attracted him. Thick-grown with weeds were clumps of bladed grasses that looked somehow familiar.

“Indian corn!—Wild maize,—I do believe!” he exclaimed, examining one of the stalks curiously. A small ear with a black tassel on it arrested his hand as it slipped up a stalk. Ripping open the husk, a tiny knot of blue and white kernels came to view. There were not over thirty of them all told.

“Corn!” cried Sid. “Relapsed back to Nature! This is what it looks like in its wild state—and this little flat must have been an Indian planting ground!”

A wild vine that ran thickly through the growth like a ground nut next confirmed it. It was a true bean, gone wild, all right! It did not need the stringy pod, filled with small red beans. to reassure him. And rambling profusely over the rocks in the sunlight was a large-leaved plant that he knew to be squash or gourd, he was not sure which. Looking further he discovered a rocky and ruined trail leading

upward from the vegetable patch. Overgrown with briars and weeds, still it had that look of going somewhere that marks the human trail no matter how old. Sid ran out into the valley and peered upward, but could see nothing but ledges above, half hidden behind thick evergreens that were sprouting out of every crack and crevice in the walls. He climbed up the trail, often leaping to a spruce trunk and back again to avoid places where the rock was weathered and shelving. High up on the cliff he came at last to a great out-jutting wall of rock that stood out like a bare chimney from the cliff face. Rude stone steps led up through it, and over the cleft hung balanced a great boulder, held up on its inner side by a stout, bare tree trunk. All the former cliff dwellers had to do was to knock away that trunk to let the rock fall and seal up the entrance to their village forever.

Sid labored up the steps under it gingerly. Something *great* was coming off! He was surely discovering a new ruin!

If so, it must have been abandoned within the memory of men now living, reasoned Sid, for a weatherworn pole ladder next came to view, leading up to the top of the first pueblo. As the boy mounted it, he examined the rock walls closely. They were not of 'dobe clay, but of stone, closely fitted, without mortar in the joints. This placed it as having been built by some one of the San Juan tribes, for they invariably used the flat stratified rock of the region to make their fine walls. Arrived at the top of the ladder, Sid looked about him with wonder. Overhead hung the immense smooth roof of a cave scoured by water action long ago. In it was a small pueblo, only four rooms, but they were cunningly built back from the edge of the ledge, so that it could not be seen from below nor, indeed, from anywhere but the opposite wall of the canyon. And it was a little gem, in a fine state of preservation, for the characteristic blue and red porous pottery water jars still stood cemented on the corners of its roofs. The pueblo had manifestly never been attacked by hostile Navahos.

"Gorry, what a find!" ejaculated Sid to himself as he walked over the roof of the nearest trap door, out of which stuck the poles of a ladder. He looked down it, letting his eyes become adjusted to the semi-darkness within. A faint, musty odor pervaded the place; somehow the very air seemed full of whispering ghosts, for the wind scoured through the vast cave and moaned in the empty windows of the houses. Gradually objects developed out of the gloom. Two large, gayly decorated granary baskets, filled with musty corn, sagged in the corners. Then he made out pottery jars, covered with black and white symbolical Indian designs.

Festoons of dusty red and blue corn ears hung from the rafters, and rows of what looked like shriveled and dried red peppers. Over in one corner Sid finally made out the pottery oven, its sooty door still filled with the fragments of charcoal and sticks.

Then he drew back, with a quick start of surprise, for, huddled against the walls of the furnace he saw two figures, with ornamentally woven blankets fallen shapelessly around them. Sid whistled to himself, softly, as he glanced around with a shiver of superstitious fear. Then he got a new grip on his courage and looked down again. Yes, they were there;—two human figures squatting in the gloom, hugging the heat of their pottery fire that had long since gone out. Sid looked, and then slowly descended. They were an old man and his squaw, shriveled and dry as mummies, their clothing tattered and fallen into decay.

Their whole story was here; pathetic, gripping the heart with its human appeal. Sid added a new item to his philosophy,—the sacredness of the word HOME. These old people had stuck to their home until the last, huddling up to their life-giving fire with the ultimate feebleness of old age. Their young folk had doubtless migrated to one of the populous pueblos now flourishing; these two had stayed by the homes their fathers had built, the squaw tending her few vegetables, the old buck killing rabbits or an occasional deer, the pair making pottery and blankets as their forefathers had done since time immemorial—the last, last survivors of a communal home, where once a happy people had lived and loved!

And the flower of their lives was here, the imperishable immortality of art; for these jars and baskets were beautiful, as beautiful in form and decoration as any Greek or Etruscan vase. The story of their gods was there, just as on the Greek vases of two thousand years ago. One or both of these old folk had produced these, and left Beauty as their memorial.

Sid stood looking at them, reverently, and then stooped to examine the oven door, for the dull white of pottery decoration within had caught his eye. Raking out the sticks and charcoal, a great vase standing bottom upright within the oven came to view. Carefully he lifted it out and stood looking at it in wonder. It was tall and beautifully formed, with a swelling base and wide columnar neck that flared like a trumpet flower at the top. It was covered with black and white symbolic decorations,—rainbows, rain, clouds, lightnings, mountains, mesas all in conventional figures that thrilled him with their mystic significance.

Now, *why* should these two have spent the last hours of life left to them in producing—this? ruminated Sid. Why, but the love of art, the worship of beauty that would not die within them so long as a spark of life remained! It was their monument, that immortal flowering of art,—the desire to make something beautiful that is bedded in the soul of man, is in truth the wine of life to those who have it, rich and fertile, in their beings.

Sid at length climbed up the ladder, thoughtfully, and went along the roofs of the three other pueblos. They were deserted and empty, but outside in the sun against the Old People's room was the empty wooden frame of their blanket loom.

“Thus we lived, and thus we died; mark and learn who will!” sighed the boy, philosophically, clapping his hands together abstractedly. “And now,—how am I going to get back to Pinto and the Canyon?” he asked himself briskly. The climb back down those frightful ledges to the fir tree was only to be considered as a last resort. As he had passed no way out of the box canyon in getting to the pueblo, Sid reasoned that the entrance the former dwellers used must be somewhere up near its head, where there would be a slope of some sort. He went forward along the roofs of the four houses, hoping to find a trail that would lead to this route.

As he approached the last end wall, a faint but noisome odor smote his nostrils. The boy hesitated and laid hand on his small .32-20 belt pistol, for this smell was of tainted meat, and it warned him that an animal lair of some kind was near him. Cautiously he advanced and peered over the wall. Below him the ledge ended abruptly—the cliff men had built right to the end of it, so as to make it inaccessible from below at that end. Spruces grew out of the cliff wall and concealed it, but through their roots Sid thought he could detect worn spots where some creature had been in the habit of passing.

Then he turned his attention to the back of the high cave roof overhead whence came the odor. It shelved down behind the pueblo, and as he walked over to the inner walls, Sid could make out a black and dusty area in behind them, where the cave came down to the ledge floor. Here the shelf slabs were not three feet above the ledge floor, a slit of dense gloom, where water had once scoured out a soft stratum of rock. His eye gradually made out bones strewed on the soil under here, ribs, skulls, leg bones, all of sheep or deer; he could not say which.

“Phew!” he muttered, drawing back to the fresh air. “It’s either a cougar or a

bear den—it can't be the latter, unless it's some small black bear, for nothing but a fly could come through those spruces on the cliff. It *is* a cat! Cougar—perhaps the Black Panther himself!—Why not?" he declared, with growing conviction. "I'll just bet it was him, last night! He hunts around here, or did, until he found that stealing the Indians' sheep was free, to him! Gosh, the beggar might be paying rent and taxes!" sniffed Sid. "Of all the nerve! He's got a pretty soft thing—I'll say!—until some one of us gets a shot at him, out here. And that'll be me, I hope."

But then he remembered that he had not his rifle with him. Nothing but the little inadequate .32-20. The quicker he got back and came up here with that rifle, the better, for the Black Panther would be quite likely to revisit his lair, perhaps this very day.

Sid climbed down by the pueblo trail he had first discovered and worked up through the spruces up the valley, confident that he would soon find a way out and speculating on how to get down from the plateau above into the chasm where his camp was. But the rim walls of the box canyon offered him little encouragement. Three hundred feet above him they towered, with bare, stratified and perpendicular walls after the lower slopes of talus ended. The large spruces in the valley contented themselves with a root hold in the wet soil in its ravine. Nowhere did they come near enough to the cliffs to be of any use in climbing out.

Sid pushed through them, looking for the place where the cliff dwellers had come into and left the canyon, for, of course, a community of people could not have lived shut up in here. But, when he burst through the tree growth at the canyon head, already the high walls of a cliff, partly seen through the trees ahead, had given him a warning of his fate. This canyon had no head slope! Instead, a giant wall of granite stretched before his troubled gaze, and in the center of it was the smooth, scoured trace of an ancient waterfall. A terrific granite slope filled up one corner, between it and the side walls, and there were cracks in it and what looked like the shallow cuttings of stone steps, but the lowest edge of this was utterly inaccessible from below. The cliff dwellers probably reached it by systems of long, notched tree trunks, which the vicissitudes of ice, snow, rain and weather had long since rotted and crumbled to dust.

For him there was no way out—save by the cleft, the ledges, and the fir tree up

which he had come! Sid stood there, staring blankly, sickened by the thought of that awful climb down. He knew well that it was impossible.



Previous chapter

Chapter V

The Claws Of The Black Panther

Red Jake and Scotty rode slowly to the left under the brow of the red butte, after Sid and Big John had started up the ravine for their deer. Scotty drew his .405 out of its saddle scabbard and rested it across his pommel as they approached a belt of scrub oak timber.

Red Jake eyed it quizzically. “I ain’t aimin’, no ways, to be introosive,” he drawled, “an’ I’ve kep’ my health by remainin’ strictly out of other folks’ business—but thar’s limits!” he grinned. “Which I’m burnin’ to find out, is thet thar cannon for shootin’ deer or elephants?”

Scotty flushed. “It’s all the gun I have,” he replied quietly. “She’s a bit heavy for deer, perhaps, but she was father’s old meat gun out in Montana. He left it to me.... A Hun shell killed him, in the Argonne,” added Scotty, his voice dropping over the remembrance.

“Shore, I’m sorry, kid!” came back Jake, extending a lean brown hand, all contrition. “We Arizonans has a pecooliar brand of humor with tenderfeet—but we means well! Put her thar, Pal.”

He gripped Scotty’s hand warmly, and the beginning of a friendship established itself between them.

“Now you put them spurs to that rampin’ steed of yours, kid, an’ we’ll ride up this gulch. She’s acefull on wil’ turks, an’ ye’ll hev a chance to run one up an’ do some fancy shootin’.”

His own mount began to run as he spoke. Scotty’s pony snorted, threw back his head and started into a gallop. The low branches whipped across his face; there was the constant swish and slap of flying leaves, a constant warding off of

branch after branch as the horses thundered through the draw. It was grown thick with scrub oaks and scraggly pines and junipers, with here and there a locust-leaved mesquite, its pods strewing the soil. Then ahead came a roar and the flap of big wings as some large bird rose out of the thicket.

“Thar goes one—watch sharp, now!” yelled Jake, hauling up his horse on its haunches. Scotty jerked on his curb and dropped the reins as he raised the .405, peering eagerly under the low trees. Rapid footfalls sounded in the leaves all about them and the *Pee! Pee!* of wild turkey chicks slipping through the underbrush. Their hurtling charge had scared the flock out of their natural silent caution. Suddenly a long bronze bird, running like the wind, his red legs and shining feathers flashing in the sun, darted across an opening. Scotty drew the bead on him, swung well ahead and pressed trigger. The bellow of his heavy weapon split the air under the trees, and out of the smoke they saw the gobbler struggling on the sand, his huge wings fluttering wildly.

“Some shootin’, son:—seventy paces or I’m a hoss thief!” roared Jake. “Thar goes another!—Atter him!—Ride like a buster!” The ponies leaped into gallop as a large bird twisted and dodged through the underbrush, for all the world like a scared hen. They wheeled and spun about, following his erratic dives, now and then catching sight of him.

“Tricky as a Mex. gambler’s deck, kid!” gasped Red Jake, picking his horse up like a cat to wheel him halfway around. “Thar he goes! Ride him up ☐ Hi! Hi!_”

Their combined onset was too much for that particular turk, who took to wing forthwith. Scotty raised his rifle but hesitated. The bird was big as a barrel, but still mighty easy to miss on the wing, with a rifle! Red Jake spurred after him at top speed, whipped out his revolver and fanned shot after shot up into the air at him. At the third report the turkey collapsed and came down into the brush with a sounding thump.

“That’s Arizona shootin’ for ye, son!” grinned Jake, reining up his pony to punch out empty shells with the rammer of his frontier Colt. “Down in this free an’ enlightened commoonity we learns to cut our teeth on a six-gun, son. For A B C’s we has the short an’ easy road to the right hip; and when we gits so’s we kin hit ‘em in the air from a gallopin’ cayuse we’s outer high school,” he grinned, stopping to roll a cigarette with thumb and forefinger and lighting it deftly by snapping the match on his finger nail.

They rode over to where the turkey had fallen, and Jake swung him up on the saddle. He would go all of eleven pounds. Except for his red legs and the absence of a broad white band across his tail feathers, there was nothing to distinguish him from the domesticated turkey of the farm. They tied this one and Scotty's together and hung them in a tree, and then rode out up the draw for further adventures. The gully rose and widened out into a swale, filled with thick brown bear grass; beyond it began the sage and greasewood bushes, as moisture became scantier in the soil. To the right reared the immense escarpments of the red buttes; ahead a long, level sky line proclaimed some sort of divide.

"Waal, son, if you're ready to jingle a spur, it's jest likely we may see a couple of prong-horns over that divide. They lays out back here in the desert, for thar's no drivin' 'em away from water. I suppose you'd like to git one, hey?" inquired Jake.

"I'd love to see an antelope, but to shoot one—not on a bet!" returned Scotty, shaking his head stoutly.

A look of pleased surprise crossed Red Jake's face. "Waal now!" he grinned, all interest. "Ef you ain't the first sport that's come down here that wasn't all-fired crazy to snake out one of our antelopes! Th' Major, he don't shoot none, because they'se mighty scarce—but a guest,—of course, he don't say nothin', but —" Jake's pantomime was expressive. "Say, them sports'll put in all their chips the first round to git a prong-horn!"

"Just let me see one, wild, that's all," said Scotty, feeling that his stock was rising in the Arizonan's estimation. "None of us may ever look upon another, soon, you know."

They spurred up and rode out into the desert back of the red buttes. It was hot and bare and dotted with sage. It shimmered with heat waves, and glared like iron slag under the pitiless sun. The desert was in a far different mood, now, than when the glories of sunset and dawn made it splendid; it was now a scene of endless desolation, with sunbaked gray mesas standing sentinel across it, stretched to the north.

"Look! Thar they go! See 'em!" cried Jake, pointing suddenly across the distant plains with his finger. Scotty puckered up his eyes and searched the shimmering heat as best he could. _Some_ thing was moving, far to the north. Like twin gray

ghosts were they, bounding with incredible speed and tirelessness. Then one stopped and looked back toward them. A white flash appeared from his rump. Immediately he melted into the same gray invisibility as before.

“That’s their signal, that rump flash!” exclaimed Jake. “The ha’rs move, jest like you’d turn plush. They signals a warning, that way, to try out anything so far off they cayn’t see it well. If we could make a white flash like that in answer they’d think we was another herd. Look your fill, sonny, this is about as near as we’ll git to them.”

The antelope disappeared behind a ledge of rocks, as Scotty sat silently, resting one leg over his pony’s saddle, scanning the torrid, iron-bound scene.

“We’ll git back to the ranch, now, son,” remarked Jake as they rode back to the turkeys. “Hyar’s meat enough, even if Montana John an’ th’ other kid don’t hang up no buck. Put away your hardware. We won’t see nothin’ on the way back.”

They rode down the draw, and then along the river bank, crossing to the ranch. Major Hinchman and the Colonel rose to greet them and exclaim delightedly over the turkeys, while a roared order from Hinchman brought the Chinese cook running out into the patio.

“You, Lum Looke!—catch’m turkey, roast topside all over, savvy?” directed the Major, handing the birds to the grinning Celestial.

About an hour later Big John rode into the patio with the buck across his saddle.

“Where’s Sid, John—coming along?” inquired Colonel Colvin, surprisedly, as Big John dismounted and pulled at the saddle thongs that held his buck in place.

“Nope!” he grinned. “Sid’s gone locoed, Colonel. Got a lonesome fit. Shore, nawthin’d do but he must steal a haunch of my buck an’ take a bag of pinole that he’s got hitched to his belt, and off he goes for a couple of days, all by his lonesome! He says fer us to pick him up in the Canyon.”

Red Jake wagged his head approvingly. “Which the same is the right layout,” he put in. “I’m admirin’ that kid’s sperrit! Ain’t nawthin’ to hurt him, ‘scusin’ p’rhaps a cinnamon b’ar that’d run away as quick as he would, in these parts.”

“I ain’t worryin’ none, either, Jake,” grinned Big John. “It’s been for a long time

my the'ry that thet boy's borned to be hung,—an' the good Lord ain't goin' to let nothin' happen to him to cheat the halter, you bet!"

"But how will we find him?" asked the Colonel uneasily. "If it's the Canyon, we've got a mighty lot of room to pick him up in. At Monument Canyon, you say, John? Well, I'm going out to-morrow. I can't feel as easy as you do about him, John. Major Hinchman can't get away for the trip, I'm sorry to say, so it'll be just you and Scotty and myself,—and Sid when we find him. Get together all the horses and dog gear you need, and this afternoon we'll go over the grub."

It was early next morning when their little cavalcade, preceded by the four dogs, trotted out from the hospitable gates of Hinchman's ranch and followed the left bank of the river. Colonel Colvin led the line on his big roan, with the bulging pockets of his cavalry saddle secured by their leather yoke over the cantle hook, and above that hung his bed roll and tarp in a long, low bundle. After him came four pack animals, with the water cans in their panniers, now filled with oats, to be used later on the desert, crossing to Grand Canyon. The grub and duffel bags were piled across the saddle trees under tarps, with the diamond hitch thrown over them. Big John brought up the rear, with Scotty as outrider. The way led up some of the roughest bad lands Scotty had ever seen until it reached the rim of a high plateau to the east. The horses labored and grunted; even the dogs stopped now and then with panting tongues, and once or twice the pack animals tried to roll over in protest. But once on the plateau they found themselves in a typical open stand of western yellow pine, the tall, well-formed trees standing far apart from each other, gigantic and imposing spires of dark green. The floor of the plateau was flat and covered with sparse bayeta grass.

Presently the horses broke into a run of their own accord, even the pack animals bobbing along in an enthusiastic burst of speed. Far under the distant tree trunks Ruler and his three pups galloped tirelessly, noses down, snuffing old scents, heels flying, ears flapping, the pups now and then giving tongue as they struck recent jack rabbit or deer sign.

Scotty and Colonel Colvin galloped hard after them, heading off the pups from all trails with slashing quirt and bellowed command, for it was essential to get them rabbit and deer proof before going over to the lion country of the Grand Canyon. Mile after mile of this exhilarating open forest riding kept up. Twice during the morning deeper and thicker banks of trees showed up ahead, where small canyons intervened, with dense growths of spruce rising out of them. Or,

there would be a hazy void ahead and they would find themselves on the brink of a vast chasm, where some tributary to Red Valley would cut its gigantic ravine through the belted forest of the plateau. Then Big John would lead the train in detours of miles to the eastward around the head of it. This way was much longer and more circuitous than Sid's route down Red Valley, but it served the double purpose of striking Canyon Cheyo far up near its head and reaching at the same time Neyani's hogan, which lay to the eastward of it, for Colonel Colvin had agreed to look up Neyani and see what could be done about the Medicine Panther for Major Hinchman.

It was four in the afternoon when Big John at length turned west and the pack train began to descend the head slope of a ravine which led down in steep declivities into the Canyon Cheyo floor hundreds of feet below.

"We ought to name this ravine 'Yellow Canyon,' all right, sir!" said Scotty to the Colonel as they dismounted and led their horses down the almost perpendicular slopes. "Look at those buttes—all of yellow clay, and worn as smooth as cakes of soap! See how the trees manage to grow, out of every crack and cranny and all their trunks turn up the cliff faces!"

"It'll get down to solid rock soon enough!" replied the Colonel, quietly. "Clay, sandstone, limestone, tertiary, jurassic, triassic—a man can't help but become something of a geologist, in this country!" he laughed. "You can read a big story of the earth in the walls of these canyons. But wait till you see the Grand Canyon, though! There you'll see strata enough to write the whole vast epic of the world's creation! . . . Mark!—Up on the cliffs!"

He pointed upward to where a huge brown bird was just launching into flight from a dead juniper growing down on the face of the yellow cliffs.

"Golden eagle!" cried Scotty. "That's my first! Wonder what in the nation he's doing, in this gameless land!"

"It's not gameless, for him—and, besides, there's young lamb! The Navaho flocks are not far from here. They are within easy flight, for that old marauder!" retorted Colonel Colvin.

They had now reached the dry, rocky bed of the ravine. It sloped downward in a vast series of ledges, as different strata of rock were cut through. By mid-afternoon they were in the main canyon itself, and searching eagerly its sheer

walls for ruins, calling and yodeling, hoping to come upon Sid in one of them. Up under the cliffs at the tops of steep slopes were these prehistoric pueblos, some of them to be reached by easy climbing, others perched on steep, smooth walls that could only have been scaled by a system of pole ladders.

“I think we’d better begin shooting signals for Sid, now, boys,” remarked the Colonel with a tinge of anxiety in his voice. “I’ve had my eye open for signs of him for some time, now, but so far we haven’t found a trace. Scotty, suppose you try the .405? It’s the most powerful rifle we have.”

Scotty raised the heavy weapon and fired their old private signal. *Bang! Bang! Bang!—Bang!* it roared out, and the valley of cliffs reechoed it solemnly down the length of the canyon. They all listened with pent breaths, but no answering shot came.

“Wall, I’ll be derved!” ejaculated Big John. “A man’ll hear that big rifle five mile, in this yere canyon! An’ Sid’s .30’s got a right smart whip to it, too, fer answerin’. Shore is funny!”

“And it’s mighty queer Ruler and the pups haven’t picked up any scent of him, too. Who’s got something of Sid’s on him?” asked the Colonel anxiously.

Something that was Sid’s! It was with a sense of foreboding that Scotty searched his pockets, in vain, for some trinket, however slight, of his old chum’s, that might serve the hound’s nose.

“Shore, fellers, we’s way off the trail in this-yere!” spoke up Big John, suddenly. “Ef Sid’s come through here, he’d be ridin’ the pinto. What we wants is somethin’ off thet hoss!—I’ve got the idee!” he exclaimed, his eyes brightening. “He rode off an’ forgot his hobbles,—like a kid will, allers forgettin’ somethin’. I’ve got ‘em in the horse gear pack, right now.”

He loosened the diamond hitch on one of the pack ponies, while the others were rounding up Ruler and the pups. Presently he yanked a pair of leather hobbles out from under the tarp.

“Here, Ruler,—you ol’ pisen critter,—smell ‘em!” he commanded, shoving the hobbles into Ruler’s eager nose. “They’re sure whiffy of hoss-flesh! Go fetch, Ruler! *Fetch!* Sssuey, dawg!”

Ruler rose on his hind legs and pawed the air with an understanding bellow. It did not take much further encouragement to get him to circling about, snuffing along the canyon trail with busy nose. The party sat watching him on horseback, half skeptical over the experiment, the Colonel inclined to ride down the Canyon to the west, first, for that was the direction from which Sid would have to come. But Ruler was famed for his sagacity. Many a story had drifted back from Arkansas of the incredible feats he had performed,—such as finding lost children in the mountains, and once of having gone back three miles into the forest to retrieve an axe forgotten in the woods.

A bellow from him decided it. Ruler braced back on his haunches, pointed his great black muzzle to the skies, and let out a rolling barking-treed call that was his signal of having found a trail. Then he set off hotfoot to the east, his three pups yipping after him excitedly. The men spurred their ponies to a gallop, for Ruler took a hot pace to keep up with him.

He talked excitedly in hound language as he loped along. “It’s all right!—Here’s more!—I’ve got him coming fine!” his reassuring tones seemed to say, as he ate up the narrow horse trail ahead of him. The walls of the canyon seemed to fly by as the ponies strung out in pursuit. There was no time to so much as glance up at ruins, now. They had lost interest in ruins, somehow! Here was Sid’s trail, leading out of the canyon; though why or when he had gone they could not conjecture.

Gradually the trail sloped upward, and the surrounding walls became less high and further apart. At the top of the last gulch a vast sterile plain spread before them. Low junipers and mesquite dotted it,—semidesert again! Big John turned in his saddle to shout back at them.

“Watch out for Navaho hogans, fellers!” he yelled. “There’s quite a lot of them settled hereabouts.”

Scotty looked around from his jouncing pony, but could spy out absolutely nothing. He knew that the hogans, or Navaho houses, appeared from the outside as mere dirt mounds, and were usually built near mesas or rocky ridges where it would take a sharp eye to pick them out. They were never built near water, the Navahos preferring to carry it from some distant source. It was all a part of their stealthy raiding and marauding tendencies; a warlike folk that had invaded the pueblo country several centuries ago,—whose very villages were a sort of

ambush for the unwary.

But Ruler still kept on, streaking across the desert in an unhesitating run. His occasional bay showed that the pony's trail was quite recent, enough so that the heat of the desert day had not evaporated all scent from it. Then far to the east showed up a broken ridge of rock with quite a thicket around it, rising like a green hummock out of the ocean of gray sage. In the midst of it Scotty's young eyes made out a tiny patch of color.

"Mark!" he called. "Indians! Navaho!—See it, sir?" he asked, turning to point out the patch to the Colonel. "Looks like a blanket or something, over yonder in that grove of mesquite."

Ruler redoubled his bays, and the gray sand spurted from his heels. He headed straight for the grove. A tiny wisp of smoke rose from one side of it, curling lazily away in the desert breeze. The patch of color had now developed into a square shape, striped and crisscrossed with a pattern of some sort, and under the shade of a mesquite the forked uprights and cross poles of the blanket loom gradually developed and became distinct to the eye.

Then, with the suddenness of realization, they all became aware of the dirt mound of the hogan, looming up before them. A gray blanket hanging in its door had been pushed aside, and a young Indian girl had stepped out with a spindle of wool yarn in one hand and a pottery jar in the other. The black square that she opened up immediately gave the hogan shape around it. It was large and conical in shape, and cunningly planted with aloes, yucca and even sage, so that it looked about the same as the desert soil around it.

The girl peered at them, and then ran around to one side, where the smoke came from under the shade of a juniper. A young buck appeared, the red bandanna around his forehead the most conspicuous thing about him at that distance. Big John shouted to the dogs and reined up his pony, for a hound on a hot scent is quite likely to attack any human that gets in his way. Ruler turned and circled back inquiringly, for he was well trained to voice, while a pistol shot across the sand halted the pups, and they came around to follow in his lead. Scotty and the Colonel closed up, and the party of whites halted, while Big John dismounted and slipped a leash on Ruler.

The young buck came running out to greet them with a smile of welcome on his

bronzed face. “How, white Father Hinch,” he called out, evidently taking the Colonel for Hinchman. He slowed up and walked diffidently toward them, his white cotton shirt, open at the neck, decorated with silver jewelry and his blue cloth leggings gaudy with beadwork.

“How, Injun,—where white boy?” demanded Big John, sternly.

The youth looked mystified, and then his mobile face took on a lugubrious expression as he broke out into lamentations in unintelligible Navaho. Then, in broken English, reversing his sentences in direct translation from the Navaho —“Oh, White Father—the Dene much, much trouble have!” he cried, addressing the Colonel. “The Black Panther of Dsilyi, he come! Many sheep, he kill! My father that me have done big wrong, he say.” He almost wept, seizing Colonel Colvin’s hand and begging him with pleading eyes to dismount and come at once to their hogan.

“This must be that son of old Neyani’s that we heard about at Hinchman’s, boys,” said the Colonel. “We’ll have to get this trouble of the black panther off his chest before we can get anything more out of him concerning Sid. Funny he doesn’t say anything of his being here, though!”

“There, boy,—me come from Father Hinchman—me make all right!” he soothed, smiling at the young Navaho. “You Neyani’s son?”

“Neyani’s son I was,” said the young Navaho, sadly. “That I did wrong he say, and so Dsilyi his panther send. Now I no more son of his, he say!”

The Colonel whistled.

“There’s superstition for you, Scotty! I’ve heard that the Navaho are the most superstitious of all Indian tribes. We’ll have to handle this with the utmost tact, or there’ll likely be a big row over it. This boy is doomed, unless we can manage to interfere somehow, though. I know Indians! Somehow this freak panther must be explained, and so they have to make someone the scapegoat over it! We’ll ride in and see Neyani. Perhaps we can find out something from him about Sid. It looks to me, though, as if Ruler had followed a Navaho pony here, and fooled us.”

They rode to the hogan, slowly. An old squaw was sitting before the partly finished blanket, pulling alternately at the warp sticks and passing little balls of

colored yarn through various sheds of its warp strings. The young girl had seated herself on the sand before the hogan and was dipping wool yarns in her dye bowls of red, black and yellow dyes.

As they approached she looked at them shyly and then picked up a hank of dry wool and caught the end around the staple on her spindle. Rolling it across her thigh, she drew out the lengths of spun yarn, allowing it to coil itself loose around the spindle as each length was twisted to the proper thickness.

“Where Neyani, son?” asked the Colonel after bowing to the squaw and the maiden, who returned his salutations with frightened smiles.

The Navaho youth waved his hand toward a corner of a pole sheep corral which jutted out of the brush back of the hogan. Evidently he was not welcome in his father’s presence, for he immediately dropped back and went over to where his silver forge lay smoking under the shade of the thick desert juniper.

The party dismounted and tied their horses, while Big John put leashes on the remaining dogs, for there would surely be half-wild shepherd dogs out in the corral, and they had no wish to open up the proceedings with a dog fight.

The Colonel led the way around the hogan. Their appearance was greeted by a chorus of barks from two shaggy shepherd dogs, half coyote, that guarded Neyani’s sheep. The old fellow was kneeling over a struggling animal under the shade of a low bush, putting some sort of healing vegetable compound on deep, bloody gashes in its side.

Seamed and wrinkled with age, with silver locks hanging in thick mats over his ears, Neyani’s eyes were, nevertheless, bright with the unconquerable spirit of a wild and free desert people. Just now there was deep trouble in them, and he looked up at Colonel Colvin with something like relief, for he evidently connected his coming in some way with Major Hinchman, the White Father of all the Navahos.

“How, Neyani! What’s the trouble, bear?” asked Colonel Colvin, pointing down at the wounded sheep and endeavoring to draw the old fellow out by a leading question.

Neyani shook his head gloomily. “No, cougar. Dsilyi send him. Plenty sheep, he kill.”

The whites knew vaguely of Dsilyi. He was the Elder Brother of the Navaho, a heroic demigod who had visited in the abodes of the high gods, and who stood in the same relation to the Navaho as Achilles did to the ancient Greeks.

“Why don’t you shoot the varmint, Injun?” broke in Big John. “You won’t have no wool for to make blankets of if you don’t get rid of that critter.”

Neyani shrank back, alarmed at the very idea, and an expression of superstitious fear crossed his face. “Ugh! No,—_no!_ Navaho no kill! Him medicine panther! Him *black*! Dsilyi send him.”

“Well, I want to know!” guffawed Big John, incredulously. Neyani shot him a dark look, and then turned to the Colonel, whose face showed more sympathy for the Indian’s beliefs and superstitions.

“Oh, White Father,—black he is! Great, and black as the night! I, Neyani, seen him have! Dsilyi send him!” he insisted, coming back to his original declaration again.

“How do you know that he is Dsilyi’s panther, Neyani?” asked the Colonel, sympathetically, suppressing patiently his own ardent wish to inquire about his son.

“Know, then, the legend of the Navaho, my White Father. How that Dsilyi crossed the rainbow arch and so to the Sacred Mountain came. And in the mountain was a cave. In the cave was a fire. The fire without wood burned. Around the fire were four panthers. A white one to the north. A blue one to the south. A yellow one to the west. A black one to the east.” Neyani paused to let the significance of this—to him—sink in. “The four panthers asked for tobacco,” he went on. “Then Dsilyi of the medicine tobacco took that he had stolen from the Ute. He to the four panthers gave. The four panthers smoked the medicine pipe. Still they lay, dead. Then took Dsilyi the ashes from the pipe, and on the four panthers rubbed. The four panthers came alive again. Then drew the four panthers a sheet of cloud from the four corners of the cave. And on the cloud were painted the ways of the cultivated plants by which the Dene (Navaho) now live. Thus Dsilyi for his Younger Brothers the secrets of the plants learned. And now Dsilyi afflicts the hogan of Neyani with the Black Panther,” grunted Neyani, despondently. “From the Valley of the Departed to the west he comes! Great and black as the night he is!” shuddered Neyani. He relapsed into silence

and looked to the Colonel for some help in this his trouble.

“But why has Dsilyi sent him, Neyani? Has anyone in your hogan done any wrong?” asked the Colonel, sympathetically.

Neyani’s face took on a look of stony immobility.

Whatever his private family griefs were, he chose not to air them before strangers.

“Well, *I* know why!” suddenly roared Big John. “Injun, you projoooces that white boy, mighty sudden pronto!” he shouted, angrily. “Or by jings, you’ll find more’n forty black panthers atter ye!— Look yonder, Colonel!”

They all followed his pointing finger, to where the long poles of a horse corral up on the ridge back of the hogan showed. Nickered at them over the gate was Sid’s pinto! Ruler was right!



Previous chapter

Chapter VI

Ruler Takes a Hand

When the first realization burst upon Sid that he was a prisoner in Lost Canyon, his first reaction was a rebellious No! The thing was preposterous—there *must* be a way out! The cougar’s route, for one thing. With that idea in mind, Sid decided on a return to his cave lair on the pueblo ledge. He had a shivery repugnance for the haunted cliff dwelling, now, since he knew that he would very likely have to spend the night in the same valley with this abode of departed spirits. But Sid tossed aside such thoughts, for the present, and worked his way resolutely up to the cliff dwellers’ village again. The cougar’s trail leading out of his cave was well marked—as far as the edge of the ledge. From there his immense strength and activity, and his sharp, hooked claws made possible for him any number of different routes along the cliff wall. There were claw marks, here and there, plainly to be seen, places that the boy couldn’t think of reaching. No creature without hooked claws could remain there for a minute!

Sid marked a number of these spots and worked out a more or less nebulous route by them along the cliff walls. Going below, he could pick these up, he thought, and follow them up the canyon so as to locate the spot where the cougar came down the cliff. With this idea he descended again and stumbled hurriedly down the rock valley, searching the ledges above with his eyes. He could just discern the faint spoor marks, where certain small shrubs had been bent over, or certain patches of loose, rocky soil dislodged. They all trended north, toward the head of the canyon.

And there lay his fate! That vast, smooth slope, of utterly bare rock slanted up from the upper ledges to the top, here. It was smooth, of weathered gray granite, and it was so steep that no man without a rope to hang on to could attempt to climb it. A thin fissure, with tufts of weeds growing invitingly out of it, crossed it diagonally. A man *might* ascend, with that precarious foothold,—but it was utterly inaccessible from below.

The great cat had negotiated it with ease, however, his steel-hook claws gripping the granite without probably giving it so much as a thought. Over it, up and down, he had come, carrying his prey in his teeth, as patches of hair and dried blood on the granite showed. The route was as easy to him as to a cat going up a tree; to a man it was quite as impossible.

It was growing late when Sid finally came to the conclusion that impossible was the answer, so far as he was concerned. He spent an hour more in walking up and down the ravine, studying the cliff rim for some possible crevice or chimney up which he could climb by the aid of a manufactured rope. This, too, was hopeless, without at least a hundred feet of lariat—things were done on too huge a scale, here, to be at all complaisant with puny man and his inventions! To return to the high cleft in the wall that blocked Lost Canyon suggested itself. Sid could see nothing in that to allure! At the best he could only reach the ledge at the bottom of “Fat Man’s Misery,” there to sit and look below. His own people were not due in the Canyon until to-morrow; even then it would be a mere chance that could decide them to come up this side canyon which he had explored. He recollected some talk about their striking the canyon from its upper end,—seven miles away from him! With his small .32-20 revolver there was hardly a chance that they would hear him, even if he sat on the ledge all next day and fired signals.

Sid decided that his present duty was to make himself comfortable for the night. Usually this was a most delectable occupation. Never in his life had Sid known

fear of the forest. One thing which had always brought a disrespectful grin to his face on being urged to read the great poets had been their very evident distaste for a forest—at night. Even in the daytime they peopled it with fairies, dryads, monsters, witches—at the very least with wild beasts and all the terrors of the unknown and unseen. Not one of them, Sid felt, could have been left out all night in the forest without a feeling of uneasiness, without at least a stoppage of the Muse and an ardent desire for a return to the comforts and security of civilization! But to Sid the trees, the rocks, the birds, the forest animals all formed one vast brotherhood with him; it was always with a feeling of utter peace and security that he allowed himself to sink into the unconsciousness of sleep, confident of a joyous reawakening when dawn should steal through the forest aisles again and all its wild brotherhood burst into life and song.

But this evening, with the grisly proximity of the deserted pueblo and its unburied dead, with the certainty that his valley was shared by a night-prowling wild beast, he found that his usual serenity had left him and instead there was a nervousness and a disinclination for sleep—a tendency, even, to stop in the midst of some trivial action and watch and listen. And, that evening, Sid discovered also the presence of an Elder Brother within him,—that cowardly, brutish, superstitious and terror-ridden cave man that psychologists tell us occupies the left lobe of the brain. This part of ourselves is only held in subjection by the superior soul of man,—the result of ages of intellectual training and advancement,—that controls the right lobe of his brain and dominates the whole man. But this pre-Adamite self, this abject creature,—whose mildest manifestation is that peculiar fit of shyness known as “stage fright”—lurks always within each one of us, ready to drive into blind, unreasoning terror, the mad fury of murder, or the brutish outbursts of passion, the best of men, once he gains the ascendancy. He whispered now to Sid, counseling he knew not what madness, ghost-terrors, fetishes, superstitious fear of the dead.

For a time Sid held him in check, occupied with the practical business of making a bivouac,—a sort of bear’s den of spruce browse slanting over a horizontal pole beside his fire. After that came the preparation of a meal of bacon, coffee and pinole. But as night fell and it grew pitch black within the canyon, the whimpers of the terrified cave man within him grew louder and more insistent, urging him to fly, he knew not where,—to yell aloud for succor,—to build a huge fire for its imaginary protection—all the promptings of the arrant coward. Sid fought him off, partly amused over the childish suggestions that swirled through his brain, partly sympathetic over the lives of real terror that the actual cave man must

have lived, and whose indelible recollections they have transmitted down to us, deep buried in the very core of our beings.

But still there were things that helped the cave man. A wind was stirring, and it mourned and moaned through the empty windows in the deserted pueblo above him, shrieked and gibbered through the faggots on its rafters. It was disquieting to listen to—so low as to be almost inaudible, yet always there! Then there was an owl, not your lusty great barred owl, with his rousing *Hoo-hoo!—Wahoo-hoo!—Hoo-hoo-wah!*—Sid had always loved that bird—but another one, a ghost of an owl, whose call, floating through the forest like the wail of a lost soul, can only be approximated by the ghastly voice-tones of a lunatic. This cry was hair-raising to listen to, as Sid squatted beside his flickering camp fire. He got to jumping every time that grisly bird uttered his call,—and, as for the cave man within him, he was more than ready to take Sid shrieking out with him into the night!

Sid withstood this combination of insane promptings within and weird noises without until the higher man in him at length rose up determined to have it out with this cave fellow, once for all. Perhaps all this was part of the vigil of the Indian boy, during his three-days' fast, he reasoned. If so, it would be good to down him and have done with him forever, as doubtless the Indian youths had had to do!

“You darned, ignorant, cowardly fool!” his higher self belabored the quaking ass within him. “Just to show you what *I* think of all these perfectly explainable night noises, *I'm* going to turn in and dig out a good night's sleep! Gorry,—I even wish that cougar'd show up, so I could start something real in all this!” he snorted, contemptuously. Ruggedly indifferent, he forthwith dismissed the night and its noises from his mind, poked up his fire, explored out into the ravine for some dead night wood that would keep burning, and then lay down beside the blaze under his lean-to, pulling the browse under him and backing up a pile of it against that spot between his shoulder blades which is always the first to feel the cold. The browse was warm from the fire heat. Sid had routed his troubles with one mighty effort. Now, with the utmost indifference, he felt a comfortable drowsiness stealing over him. Victory!

He awoke with the impression that dawn had come. A gray light filled the canyon; he could see distinctly. The fire had gone out, and his first move was to stumble out among the trees and collect some more dead wood. Somehow, he

still felt sleepy and had not that fresh, invigorated feeling with which he usually greeted the dawn. Stupidly he fumbled over his emergency kit, wondering in a vague way how long the remnants of it would last him. The cold of night was biting in through his back, and he was right glad to lie down beside the flickering flames again and feel the warmth of the pile of browse against his shoulder blades.

As he lay, with his head resting on one hand, the early light mystery solved itself. A narrow red rim appeared over the brink of the canyon,—an enormous curved line, threaded through the tree trunks. It rose and shortened as he watched, gradually taking round form. Then the moon rose, splendid and silvery, through the tree tops. It was still early night; he had not slept over two hours!

Sid gave a grimace of dismay as he watched the moon sailing steadily upward high over the canyon rim. It meant hours more of this waking and dozing before he could wear the night through. Tomorrow his father and their party would come into the main canyon; then or never would be the time to get in contact with them. He was puzzling over practical ways to do this—when out of the dead silence of the night a sudden scream, like a woman in agony, rent the stillness. Sid fumbled hastily in the browse for his revolver and then leaped to his feet.

He knew that cry! It was the hunting call of the cougar, during his night prowlings. Evidently the four-footed sharer of his canyon was coming, returning to his lair!

As Sid watched the rim, a movement in the dark bushes caught his eye. They parted; and out on a tall pinnacle butte stepped the form of a great cat. Great, and black as night was he, as Sid watched him, his heart pounding so that he could hear its beats through his open mouth. He was—he *must* be—black! That couldn't be a trick of the moonlight, for the moon was on the opposite side of the canyon, to the east, and it played full on the sleek body of the cougar.

“The Black Panther of the Navaho!—and he's come!” whispered Sid to himself, hardly breathing. “Well, what am I going to do about it—let him come down here?” he asked himself, after an indecisive period of shivering with excitement and cold.

Like some bronze Fremiet statue, the Black Panther stood silent in the

moonlight, his long lithe body sloping away behind in graceful curves. Only the tip of his black tail twitched slightly. Then his superb head moved, and there was a flash of green from his eyes as the moonlight caught some gleam of the fire burning in their fuming depths. He uttered a low, hoarse mew, and his fangs bared as his nose caught some taint unfamiliar to him wafted up from the canyon below.

“Gee—I can’t let him come down here!” gasped Sid. “What shall I do?—Attack’s *always* the best defense!” He raised the revolver and caught the panther through his sights. To what a midget creature had he shrunk, high up there on the cliffs! The front sight nearly covered him; all the rest of him was included between the horns of the U on his rear bar.

“Gorry!—I can’t hit him, much less hurt him—but I can at least start something!” thought Sid, as he held steady and pulled the trigger. The sharp spiteful report of the little .32-20 rang out. It was followed by as tremendous an exhibition of strength and agility as Sid had ever hoped to witness. The fright of his own cave man within was as nothing compared to the wildly ungovernable scare that his sudden shot had given the Black Panther. In one mighty leap he jumped to the top of a gaunt bare cedar that jutted out behind the pinnacle; in the next he had flashed down the tree, striking right and left with flail-like blows of his paws, jumped a chasm twenty feet across, and sprang up another tree, leaped down again and spun around in circles—simply demented with terror!

Sid laughed grimly. Not a sound did the great cat make. It was all done in less than three seconds, out under the placid beams of the moonlight, and then with a last bound the panther disappeared, and Sid could hear the underbrush up on the plateau cracking and snapping in his wild dash for safety.

Sid turned and looked down at his browse bed, mechanically. A grim sense of mastery, of himself and all things around him pervaded him as he took a few steps fearlessly up the ravine. He owned that whole canyon and everything in it, in his present mood!

“I must have hit him some where, to make him carry on like that,” he muttered, breaking the revolver open to slip in a fresh shell. All desire for further sleep had now gone from him. He was wide-awake, now, full of a conquering desire to take hold of this situation and master it, so that he would have some plan of action ready by dawn. Spying a dead fir lying in the underbrush, he dragged it

out and hauled it to the fire, where the flames soon reached up to envelop it in a cheerful blaze.

He sat down to think things out clearly. His mind was keen and active, now, untroubled by any more nervous and superstitious fears. Realities were plenty enough for him! reflected Sid, joyously. And he had faced one of them,—the worst—and had come off easily victor!

As he set his mind to work marshaling the events of the last two days, a sudden startling thought smote him—suppose his party had started a day *early*! It was quite possible; it was probable, even! Big John had left him about noon, two days before. He had then gone back to the ranch with the buck and told them how he, Sid, had gone off on a lone hike to the Canyon Cheyo. Suppose then, his father, knowing the immense size of the canyon, had become worried over losing him and had started after him the very next day; Even if they went by the wooded plateau route they would have arrived at the head of the canyon by *yesterday afternoon* at latest! That, then, was the very time he should have been signaling with all his might, raising a smoke, firing his pistol from the ledge, doing everything to attract them, instead of fooling around trying to get out of the Lost Canyon by himself.

Well,—it was too late, now! Perhaps they were still in Cheyo—of course they were,—and looking for him. The dogs would trace his pony, eventually; they would probably come up his side canyon early next morning. If so, it behooved him to get up on the ledge and be on watch with keenest of eyes and ears.

And, if they *didn't* come? Well, he had a half-formed plan for that, too. A big spruce grew up near the head of the canyon, in such a position that by building a fire around its roots he could throw it to fall where he could reach the lowest point of that fissure up the cougar's ledge. Taking a quantity of stout pegs up with him, he could drive them in and so build himself a way out.

An hour of such plannings and reflections had put Sid in a sleepy mood again, and, as the moon was now setting in the west, he used up the last of his light in gathering firewood and then turned in, to fall into a sound sleep. By dawn he was up and hungry. The last of his bacon and coffee seemed a mighty sparse meal. By now he loathed the taste of pinole. It would be another day before he could become accustomed to it as a steady diet. It was full daylight before he had cleaned up everything and was ready for the climb up the flanks of Lost Canyon

to the high fissure in its closing wall. Coming down now seemed to Sid even worse than going up, for to his eyes he appeared literally suspended, by hand and elbow grip alone, over a yawning blue depth, misty with the vapors rising from the main chasm below.

He finally reached the narrow ledge at the foot of Fat Man's Misery, and peered cautiously over it, straight down below. The top of the green spire of the fir rose up to meet him. Nearly a hundred feet down, it looked mighty inviting, for that way led to freedom and a reunion with his party. But a very brief climb down the ledges served to show the utter futility of any descent that way, for soon he came to a ledge where in going up he had swung out into space as if clambering over a house cornice. Without eyes in his feet, no man could find a safe spot to plant them *under* that ledge!

But it gave him one advantage, for lying on the ledge he could look over and see the whole floor of the canyon below. The first thing his eyes fixed on was the top of his picket peg. The glint of iron came up from its ring,—but there was nothing attached to it, save a short piece of frayed lariat. Pinto was gone!

Sid stared for some time, disbelieving his eyes and craning his neck so that he nearly lost his balance trying to spy out the horse somewhere up or down the canyon. But all was silent and serene, down there; not a sound but the eternal swish of the wind through the trees and the occasional chirrup of small birds.

“Gee-_roo_!” he cried at length. “The darned pinhead! I suppose he got frightened and broke his halter, once he realized he was alone in the canyon. I’ve seen a horse drag an iron disk plow clear across a field in the unreasoning terror of being alone.—Gorry—but this is developing into a *regular* adventure!”

Plenty of the dangerous part of it was all around him, now, he realized, as he turned to climb up to the cleft again. More than once he cursed his temerity for exposing himself to fresh risks, just to have a closer look down into the canyon where lay his longed-for freedom,—and more than once he had to beat back the whimpering cave man in him who persisted in trying to break out with slobberings and tears! But he negotiated the cleft again, and was soon back in the walled confines of Lost Canyon.

“Now for the spruce!” he ejaculated to himself, cheerily. “It’s up to this *hombre* to make good all by his lonesome—just as he started this, all by his lonesome!”

But his heart sank as he began clearing away the underbrush around it and gathered the wood for a fire. That spruce was all of two feet thick! It towered a hundred feet up into the canyon, yet its topmost spire was not half the distance to the upper rim. Sighting it from across the canyon, Sid judged that it would fall with its top some distance below the beginnings of that huge granite slab over which was the Black Panther’s route, but still, it *could* be reached from ledges up there and he was ready to dare anything to get out. But then that frightful climb up that crack in its surface would begin!

He lit the fire. It had to be a small one, to prevent the tree itself from taking fire, when the whole valley would go up in cinders—with him in it! At the end of an hour the trunk was merely blackened, and a thin skin of charred bark covered its face toward the fire. Sid added logs and fought off discouragement, but it *would* not down! The whole thing seemed so hopeless—a labor of weeks, years, centuries! It would take the patience of an Indian to get that tree down. He gulped a mouthful of pinole and ranged up and down the valley—seeking fresh game with his revolver, for a meat hunger raged within him. He had plenty of time—all the time in the world! A log, now and then, was all the fire needed; any more would be dangerous. He could hunt, loaf, do anything he pleased—but get out. The little valley, however, was absolutely gameless. Nothing came down here; nothing *could* get down here, except an occasional bird and the ubiquitous pack rat, one of which had come snuffing into his lean-to the night before.

Sid was more than weary of the whole thing—but he was learning, from life itself, the meanings of the words patience and fortitude. To take things as they came; never to give up, never to be discouraged; always look for the bright outcome somehow, somewhere—it took a strong soul to do that! His own soul was growing, under the exercise of the Indian's virtues—courage, honor, fortitude, faith. He knew it; he felt it within him, as his soul rose struggling out of its sea of troubles.

And then, as if Mother Nature had teased him long enough, down to Sid's ears floated the sweetest music he had ever heard—the baying of a hound!

Sid pranced with joy, hand cupped to ear, listening, locating, his heart bubbling within him.

Ow-ow-ow! it sang, the distant chiming bellow of a hound on a hot scent. Surely that was Ruler's voice! Then a squeaking, ripping bray, seemingly farther off, whispered through the forest—Pepper, by all the red gods!—Sid was sure of them, now!

Sid whipped out his revolver and was about to fire their private signal, when a warning thought bade him hesitate. Those dogs were far ahead of the horses. They were undoubtedly on the trail of the Black Panther, who would head here for his lair where he could be rid of them. If he fired, the panther would turn off and seek some other of his haunts, taking the dogs off with him and Sid would never be found. Far wiser to hold his fire and let him come! Besides, there would be doings!

Sid leaped up on a boulder where he could command the whole canyon and listened with all his ears.

_Ow-ow-ow! Ow-oooow! _A whole chorus of doggy music resounded through the forest up over the canyon rim. Pepper, Lee, Bourbon,—he recognized them all, and above the din rose Ruler's mighty horn of a voice, deep, ringing, menacing. They were coming nearer, much nearer! And the cat would be on ahead of them, some distance ahead, most surely. It was time to be on the lookout for him. What should he do? Sid was still undecided whether to get into this with the little pop-gun .32-20 for grouse shooting, when the Black Panther himself appeared, galloping along the rim of the canyon,—his tail erect and bushy as any household cat's as he leaped surefootedly from crag to crag. That

tail was laughable! Sid whooped and jeered. *Medicine* panther, indeed! If the Navaho could only see him now!

The great cat did not so much as glance at him. He was making for the granite slab, hotfoot. Sid raised his revolver as the panther sprang down it. He ran like a fly over the smooth surface, and began bounding along the perpendicular face of the ledge. If he fired and hit, the cat would fall and there would be a knife-and-claw encounter—in a box canyon, with no escape for him and no adequate weapon to defend himself. That cat could strike with a blow that would tear every rib out of his body, and he would come with the quickness of lightning. Elementary caution told Sid to wait until the men came up with their rifles. They had the Black Panther at bay, now.

Meanwhile the Black Panther, with a single hissing snarl at Sid below, had reached the pueblo ledge and darted into his cave of refuge. Once inside, he sent forth a ferocious growl of defiance, warning all the world that he had reached his last stand and was going to be ugly if pursued further. Sid laughed, and watched the canyon rim.

Then,—“Ruler! *Ruler!*” he screamed in a frenzy of delight as the great hound appeared on the cliff face, checking himself, puzzled, as he came to the last cougar track on the very brim of the canyon. Ruler paid Sid no more attention than a flea; his mind was completely occupied in studying out this hot cat trail. He lifted his muzzle and gave forth a mighty bellow. A squealing and yelping back in the timber answered him, and presently Pepper and Bourbon joined him on the brink, their tails waving like flags as the dogs all conferred over the scent and then decided to circle.

“Hi! Ruler! Pep! Bourbon! This way!” yelled up Sid, waving his arm to them in the direction the cougar had gone. The dogs belled together in unison, then, and started weaving along the brink. Ruler ran out on another pinnacle and struck hot scent, where the Black Panther had only recently landed from his jump. He rolled off a barking-treed call and the pups squeaked and rushed over to smell it, too.

“*Hi! Hi!—This way, Scotty! Hyar they are—over by the canyon! Wahoo!*” resounded Big John’s voice far off through the timber. Sid yelled, and then heard the shout of Scotty answering Big John and the crash of his horse breaking through the timber. Then came a thundering of hoofs, and Big John rode up to

the brim on the white mustang.

“Hyar’s the dawgs, Scotty!” he turned around to yell back into the forest—then he caught sight of Sid, down below!

“Well, I’ll be plumb teetotally hornswoggled!” he roared. “What in my-gosh-amen are you doin’ down there, Sid? Hey—Scotty!—Here’s Sid! An’ I’ll bet my boots he’s got the varmint down thar with him, too!”



Previous chapter

Chapter VII

The Fire Dance of the Navaho

“Hi, old-timer, this-all’s too many for me—I’m a fool and proud of it!” roared Big John down at Sid, as Scotty came galloping up to the brink of Lost Canyon and yelled delighted greetings. “What in thunder are ye doin’ down thar? How’d ye git there, an’ how’d ye lose yore pony? Speak up, *hombre*! We lost a varmint, hyarabouts,—y’ ain’t got him, none, in yore pockets, has yer?”

Sid waved a hand up at the cliff dwellings as he laughed back gayly, “There’s your bird, John—up in a cave yonder. Gorry, but I’m glad to see you all! I’ve been shut up here for two days. That’s the Black Panther you’re after and he’s got a lair in a cave back of those pueblos----”

“Yeah? I jest knowed it war old Neyani’s identical black sheep-stealer! Eh! Seems like a Navaho god or devil named Dsilyi owns him,—but Ruler, here, he runs across his trail, ‘smornin’, an’, very impolite, lights out after the sacred critter! Me, I hops the cayuse an’ oozes along, with Scotty scratchin’ gravel behind me, an’ hyar we is. We found yore pony in Neyani’s corral, Sid,—Say! all h—l pops loose then, you bet! Yore dad’s back thar now, settin’ on the lid and holdin’ the Injuns quiet. You want to show up thar, pretty sudden, or some pore Injun’s goin’ to git lynched.”

“But how in the nation are we ever going to get you *out*, Sid?” called Scotty, who had been surveying the canyon intently while Big John was speaking. “It’s all walls and cliffs, as far as I can see.”

“Search me!” grinned Sid, shrugging his shoulders. “And how are you two going to get down to help me smoke out the cougar----Mind the dogs, boys!” he broke off suddenly. “They’ll be tumbling into the canyon, next, if you don’t get leashes on them, pronto.”

Ruler and the pups had now worked around to the brink of the granite slide. The big hound was even intrepidly venturing down it, with Pepper at his heels. Big John roared; Scotty yelled; Sid aimed his revolver and spanged a bullet on the rock in front of them, for a sheer fall down into the canyon threatened them if they tried to go any further.

“Back up out of thar, Ruler—you ole fool critter!” shouted Big John, shying a stone over with deft aim. The dogs yelped and started back, but a challenging snarl, ringing out from the cave, brought them all back again, barking madly. Ruler ran to the edge of the vertical ledges and put his paws on the nearest, bellowing his disgust at being unable to follow further.

“So there’s where he is, eh?” cried Scotty, reaching down to his scabbard for his .405. “If I could only get a shot from here!”

He peered across at the cliff dwellings, but the Black Panther’s lair was, of course, invisible from Scotty’s position.

“Don’t shoot, kid!” warned Big John. “We ain’t ready yet. Whar’s yore rifle, Sid?” he called down.

Sid waved the little .32-20. “This is all I’ve got. Can’t you see?—I’m locked up in here,” he yelled. “I climbed up by yonder wall, and now I can’t get out of this box canyon or I’d have met you fellows long ago.”

“Yaas?—it works like an eel trap, eh? Ketches ‘em comin’ and goin’!” hee-hawed Big John. “Cat in one end; kid in t’other!—waal, how are we goin’ to git you out? I ain’t fixin’ to bombard no varmint, with you down thar, right plumb intimate with him, nohow!” he declared vigorously.

“Say!—chuck me down a lariat and I’ll get out, all right—both your lariats,” called up Sid, suddenly, as a scheme for escape came to him.

“All right, son, anything that’s ourn is yourn,” grinned Big John as he lifted his lariat coil from its saddle hook. After a few moments of untying, the ropes

soared out from the cliff walls, to drop down into the underbrush.

“Scotty, you watch the trick panther’s hang-out while I climbs down an’ ties up them pisen-mean houn’ dawgs,” said Big John, as Sid started retrieving the lariats and coiling them up. The cowman dismounted and tied his mustang back in the timber. After a time his long form began sliding down the steep shale slopes above the granite slab, where, at the top of it, he drove in his heels and regained his feet.

“You’ll obleege me, Sid, by rockin’ them dawgs from whar you are,” he called to Sid, who was waiting to see the outcome before putting off on his own perilous climb.

Sid “obleeged,” sending the pups yelping up the slope. Ruler was harder to manage. By no persuasion could he be coaxed to leave his position, sniffing and whining with the implacable persistence of a hound over the last foot of cougar trail that he could possibly follow. Big John had at length to climb down the crevice and haul him up by main strength. Sid breathed freely when man and dog once more reached the comparative safety of the upper slopes.

“Well,—so long, fellows!” he called out. “I can let myself down to a fir tree beyond that wall,” he explained, pointing out the blocked end of the canyon. “It lands me in a side chasm of Cheyo Canyon, where I’ve cached my saddle and rifle. I’ll whoopee, when I’m through the cleft. Then burn out the cat, if you can, and ride down to join me.”

“All right, old-timer,—good luck to ye!” called Big John. “We’ll git him, somehow.”

Sid made the climb up to the cleft in the end of the wall for the last time. Once down through it, he secured the two lariats together and let down their combined length. To his delight they reached well into the top of the fir tree. Then he tied the upper end to a stout sapling growing near the ledge and tested it for strength. Taking the rope in his hands, he raised his voice in a loud *Whoopee!* and began the descent.

Distant shouts answered him, and then the bellow of rifles. They were making it hot for the Black Panther, Sid hoped, as he picked his way down from ledge to ledge. With the confidence born of the lariat in his grip, it was now easy climbing. A scramble down from one huge slab to the next below, often lowering

himself vertically by the rope, brought him at last to where he could grasp the swaying top of the fir tree. Then, abandoning the friendly lariat, he climbed down rapidly, and with a mighty whoop of joy stood on firm soil once more—free!

Then came the reaction—from all the strain and fatigue of the past three days. A delicious sense of ease, of victory and repose, crept over him as he retrieved his rifle and saddle and then rested indolently against the latter, waiting for Scotty and Big to come down into the canyon. He had had his three-days' trial, just like any Indian boy. There had been no starvation, no vision; but there had been plenty to test his nerve and courage and resourcefulness. He decided that he was more in love with the great wild outdoors than ever. His life would be here, that was sure, for to him it was happiness. Just what he would do was still somewhat indistinct, but there were lots of purposeful, worth-while activities to be carried on, wholly in the wilderness. Something practical, something with an object for those benighted children of the forest, the Indians, was as far as he could see for the present.

It was perhaps an hour later when Ruler came in sight around a jutting cliff down the canyon, with the three pups trotting along just behind him. After them appeared the tossing heads of the ponies, the flash of sunlight on Big John's silver-mounted chaps and the white glare of Scotty's tall sombrero. As they caught sight of him, they burst into a gallop and waved their hats.

"Well, how's the Black Panther—did you get him?" laughed Sid indolently from his saddle as they rode up.

"Naw," growled Big John. "I climbs round whar I can sort of carrom him, like, with the thutty-thutty, an' for every whang we hears him spit back,—growl fer whang, even-Sтивен—but it don't interest him none. Then Scotty, here, he tears loose with that old Four-O-Five persuader, like it hed a half stick of dynamite into it, an' that's jest a leetle too much fer kitty! He crep' back into a hole in his cave an' pulls the hole in atter him, like a tyrantula; an' so we guv him up."

Sid glanced up the cliff wall to where the lariats hung in a long black streak down from the cleft ledge.

"I was weeping real tears over leaving these good lariats behind, boys," he smiled, cherubically, "but now I see we've got a use for them. Scotty and I'll

climb up there, some day, into Lost Canyon, while you and father run the panther with the dogs. Then we'll have a nice roof party on top of those cliff houses—eh, Les?”

“Sure thing!” agreed Scotty. “But, Sid, the thing to do now is to get back to Neyani’s hogan as fast as we can. You see, Ruler picked up your pony’s tracks in the canyon yesterday, and led us out to Neyani’s place. They’re in lots of trouble out there. This medicine panther, as they insist he is, has been taking one of Neyani’s sheep every few nights—a regular scourge. So what do they do but think that Dsilyi, their demigod, is angry with the house of Neyani and, therefore, it must be because someone has committed a crime and the panther is being sent as a punishment. The suspicion rests on young Niltci, Neyani’s son, a harmless, industrious Indian boy, so far as I can see, and a peach of a silversmith. Well, Neyani was telling us all about it, when John, I think it was, spied your pony up in Neyani’s corral!—Cracky, but thunder broke loose then, you can bet! John, here, was for wringing Neyani’s neck,” laughed Scotty, “and only your father saved it for him. Of course, they all protested their ignorance of you, and swore that the pony had come trotting to their hogan of his own accord. First habitation he saw of any human beings, I suppose. Well, anyway, Neyani turns and blames the whole thing on Niltci and accuses him of murdering *you*! Of course Colonel Colvin interfered, then, but I’m afraid the poor boy’s doomed, for the Navaho are holding their great fire dance to-night to see who’s guilty, and the least unfavorable omen will settle it for him. We all drew off and camped near by, to try to save Niltci if it comes to the worst. Colonel Colvin told us that the situation had to be handled with the utmost delicacy. We couldn’t kill the sacred medicine cougar without starting an Indian uprising; we couldn’t prove Niltci innocent with you unaccounted for—the whole thing was a mess! Well, early, before dawn this morning the Black Panther came again ----”

“Funny, that war!” broke in Big John. “Shore tickled this *hombre*’s sense of the reedic’lous! Thar we was, afraid to make a move fer fear of offending them pore Injuns’ feelin’s, with their medicine panther an’ all that. But Ruler, here, he don’t know nothin’ about no sacred panther! All he smells is cat, red hot, an’—most impolite,—takes out after the heap big medicine trick panther! I pilgrims out of me blankets and heaves a saddle on wild Bill, an’ Scotty an’ I rolls our tails after thet b’ilin’ of dawgs, leavin’ the Colonel to fix up some lie that’ll pacify the Injuns. Now we shore is wanted back to home, boys! I’ll tote that saddle of yours, Sid, somehow, an’ Scotty, you carry the extra rifle while Sid takes yore stirrup and runs with us. Let’s get movin’—we’ve got all of ten miles to lope.”

Sid got to his feet and passed up the saddle to Big John. Then Scotty took his rifle and, with Sid getting a grip on the stirrup, the ponies started cantering down the side chasm. In a mile more they were out in the main canyon and riding steadily up its huge amphitheater of cliffs.

Sid was dog-tired with the alternate walking and trotting of the horses when, shortly before sunset, the wide plain of the Navaho settlement came to view. Running with a stirrup-hold was far easier than he had anticipated; walking was another story, for a horse's stride is so long as to take a very rapid pace to keep up with it. As they looked about over the semidesert plain it was hard to realize that there must be at least fifty hogans in plain sight at that very moment. But, so carefully concealed were they that if this party of theirs had been hostile invaders they would be walking right in to a first-class ambush.

But, as they drew near Neyani's, the entire vicinity seemed dotted with busy Indians, all preparing for the great Fire Dance. From every direction they were dragging in wood, small dead mesquites, greasewood bushes, anything that would burn. A huge pile of it twenty feet high was being assembled near the hogan, with an inclosure of brush formed in a ring about it. Indians passed them, gayly decorated with barbaric jewelry, in white cotton shirts and colored leggings, the older ones wearing broad, striped "chief" blankets. All were noisy, and busy on one errand or another, and behind brushwood screens they could see the young men and warriors of the various clans and secret societies decking themselves in ceremonial costumes.

Then Colonel Colvin came galloping out, his face one huge smile of glad relief and astonishment.

"Sid, my boy!—where *have* you been? What in the devil has happened to you, son?" he cried, as he reined up his horse to lean over and wring Sid's hand. "You have come just in the nick of time. It will at least relieve young Niltci of any suspicion of having harmed a white man. But the Fire Dance ceremony must go ahead, I fear. Any news of that infernal panther, John?"

"Yaas; the dawgs run him into a leetle box canyon back thar in Cheyo—an' you can steal my hoss if thar ain't Sid, ez ornery and ez nat'ral ez ever! I told ye not to worry, Colonel," he wagged his head. "Thet rope's still waitin' for him! He clumb up thar, an' then he couldn't git out again. The varmint's got a lair in that canyon, too, in a cave behind some of them cliff houses."

“So you didn’t get him, eh? That’s bad!” said Colonel Colvin, disappointedly. “He’ll come back for some more lamb in a day or so. I’ve sent for Major Hinchman, but he’ll get here too late to do any good, for the Indians are so wrought up that they’re like to throw Niltci into the big fire if anything goes wrong during the ceremonies. He and Neyani are to be leaders in it, so they’ll be right in the limelight.

“I tell you what we’ll do!” exclaimed the Colonel suddenly, as they walked the horses toward the hogan, “we’ll break camp right now, and get everything ready for the ride across the desert to the Grand Canyon. Then if things go wrong at the dance we’ll watch our chance and get Niltci away and take him with us across the desert, until this business blows over. You, Sid and Scotty, keep near him. Watch where they put him if they tie him up; get him free and join us out on the plain, as it will be pitch dark. We’ll start right out and put fifty miles between us and this hogan during the night. I’ll strike for Lee’s Ferry on the Big Colorado.”

Sid and Scotty winked at each other gleefully. A cutting-out party of this nature was right in their line! Big John and the Colonel rode on to their camp, while the boys dismounted at the hogan and went inside. Neither Neyani nor Niltci were anywhere in sight, for they were off in the brush somewhere, dressing for their parts. But a group of old medicine men were making sand paintings on the floor of the hogan, pouring various colored sands deftly through their fingers. The boys looked around curiously, at the huge beams of the hogan slanting up overhead and the square smoke hole over a small fire in the center which gave light for the sand-painting ceremonies. Around the walls ran a log-and-clay shelf which served as both bench and sleeping bunks. Pottery water jars stood in the corners, with granary baskets of corn and pinyon nuts and bowls of corn meal. The young girl knelt beside the fire, making *pik* bread by pouring a thin batter deftly through a crack in her fingers on a smooth, hot stone. As fast as a layer cooked she rolled it around itself and spread a fresh batch. Paper-thin pancakes of corn meal were they! Her mother crouched in a corner, grinding meal in a stone trough with a long stone pestle.

Then they turned to watch the sand paintings. Brilliantly hued, they told the legends of the Navaho brought down from the Far North—Dsilyi in the house of the Snakes, who taught him the prayer stick mysteries; Dsilyi in the Rainbow Hogan of the Butterfly Woman, who gave him command of the Rain Lightnings; Dsilyi in the cave of the Sacred Mountain, where the Four Panthers taught him

the secrets of the cultivated plants. It all became intelligible to Sid as he studied out the symbolical figures, while one of the medicine men explained him the legends.

Later came the young men of the tribe, to look in and study the paintings. It was as good as the Iliad was to the Greeks, thought Sid,—an easily read symbolism of Navaho heroes and gods that was being passed down to the younger generation in this way.

Then every one trooped out to the inclosure around the brush pile. Just at dusk the qcali (medicine chanter) stationed himself to one side and began the chant of the legend of Dsilyi. Immediately torches were set to the wood, and great roaring flames forty feet high swept up into the night. The heat was so intense that the boys had to shield their faces with their buckskin gloves, but into the narrow ring between them and the fire dashed a band of twenty young men headed by Niltci. They were daubed all over with white clay, but it seemed beyond the power of human endurance for any one to remain there a moment. Each youth bore in his hand a wand tipped with eagle down, representing snowflakes. Writhing and twisting, they advanced to the flames, their object being to burn the down to balls of red cinders, while the qcali chanted the story of how the gods changed the snowflakes to mud balls and pelted the Utes with them when Dsilyi was surrounded and nearly overpowered by his enemies. The performers lashed their way toward the fire, their long hair singed and smoking, their eyelids scorched and their faces streaming sweat. Niltci wriggled along the ground like a lizard, his prayer stick advanced toward the fire, his back tortured by the blistering heat. So eager was he to do his part well that he overdid it, for, when the others arose, whirling their wands with red-hot cinders at the ends, his was burned off and showed only a tiny point of fire.

At this a grunt of disapproval ran around the spectators and accusing fingers pointed at him. Then, at a certain measure in the chant all the wands blossomed into snowballs again, a clever trick done by a string through a hole near the end and a second ball of down concealed in the hand. All but Niltci's! His wand end was burned off, string and all. A shout of rage greeted him as he stood irresolute, the others dancing about, waving their prayer sticks. Then the performers ran out of the inclosure, and the first of the legend plays was finished.

A muttering and murmuring ran around the circle of Navahos. It looked bad for the poor youth, already. Sid and Scotty whispered together, wondering how they

were going to get in touch with him if matters grew any worse. They had not yet formed a plan, when the qcali started chanting again and two old chiefs of the tribe danced in, dressed in the ceremonial costumes of the Plumed Arrow-Swallowers. The leader was Neyani, and, as they watched him closely, the boys could detect a nervousness in all his movements. The honor of his family was at stake, now, since Niltci had bungled his part, for the omens were going against him and his. The qcali sang the story of how Dsilyi went to the Rainbow Hogan of the Butterfly Woman, where the Plumed Arrow-Swallowers put his feet on the white lightnings and gave him command of the rains. At this climax of the mystery play he suddenly stopped chanting, while Neyani and the other chief halted and raised their arrows up vertically. The spectators held their breath. Slowly, inch by inch, the long arrows disappeared down the throats of the performers. To anyone who did not know that the arrows were made of collapsible reeds, the illusion of swallowing them was complete.

But Neyani, in the eagerness of his grasp, had somehow bent his arrow. By no force of self-torture could he make it go down further! Stubbornly it stuck, while a mighty growl rose from all the Navaho watching him. A babel of voices burst out in accusations; fingers pointed, knives flashed out. Over near the chiefs Sid could see his father shaking his head anxiously, while Big John beside him fumbled at his gun holster.

Dramatically the qcali raised his arm and pointed, while a dead silence struck the throng motionless.

“Neyani—it is thou!” his voice rang out. “Behold the judgment of Dsilyi! Confess! Confess thou before the Navaho!” he declared in guttural Indian speech.

The boys could not understand a word of it, but his tones and actions were unmistakable. Equally significant were Neyani’s. He drew forth the arrow and dashed it on the ground. “Not I!—Not I!” his head shook in negation. “These years have never yet taken blame! This viper in my house, it is!” he yelled, turning to point at Niltci, who stood cowering without the inclosure.

“Ai!—We shall see!” exclaimed the qcali, significantly. He waved his arm for the final ceremony to begin, and then took up the legend of Dsilyi again, telling of his final defeat of the Utes. Once more Niltci’s band came charging in, this time beating each other on the backs with flaming torches, signifying the utter

roust of the Utes by Dsilyi. Round and round the scorching inclosure they raced. The smell of singed hair and scorched flesh told that many a blanket would hide a sore back next morning! In the middle of the third round, Niltci, who was belaboring the youth in front of him with the eagerness of despair, tripped over a root and fell sprawling on the ground. Instantly the whole tribe rose as one man and swarmed over him. That last omen had been more than enough to damn him! Twenty hands grabbed for the poor unfortunate, while the boys shoved their way into the throng, eager to be of some help, yet not knowing what to do in the present fanatical mood of the Indians. Colonel Colvin beckoned vigorously for them to stand aside and keep out of it.

Niltci was dragged to his feet and hustled, amid the yelling of angry voices, to the nearest tree. Big John pranced over with a six-gun in each hand, about to wade into the whole crowd, regardless, but the Colonel grabbed him and forced his guns down. For the present there seemed no immediate danger, for buckskin thongs were being passed around Niltci instead of the rope which the cowman had usually seen produced by a frenzied mob. Then the Indians stood aside, waiting the judgment of the qcali.

The latter stalked forward and began a long harangue. He seemed urging Niltci to confess, but the boy shook his head, his eyes piteous with injured innocence, his face looking at them terrified over the fearful predicament into which the superstition of the Black Panther had brought him.

“What does he say, Neyani?” demanded Colonel Colvin. “The white men do not understand this at all!”

Neyani shrugged his shoulders. He was through with his renegade son, it was quite evident. His interest was merely that for some criminal.

“Perhaps a man in the desert lies dead because of him; perhaps some girl she lives dishonored by him. Who knows? For that Dsilyi his Black Panther sends. But the sun god, he tell,” he remarked, stolidly.

“What do you mean ?” asked the Colonel, quickly.

“To-morrow he must look at the sun god till he tell. No good!” explained Neyani, coolly.

As the qcali finished, a group of young braves stepped forward and bound Niltci

so that he faced to the east. Then a fork was secured about his head, the purpose evidently being for someone to hold it so that the poor youth would have to face the desert sun until its torture forced him to tell something or invent a confession if he had none.

The whites looked at one another significantly. “Well, boys—we must be getting back to camp,” said the Colonel. “Neyani, the white men think that your son is innocent. There is some other reason for the Black Panther. But to-morrow Major Hinchman will come. My advice to you is to wait until the White Father arrives, before doing anything that you yourself may regret for all the rest of your life.”

And with this he turned away, leaving the old Indian shaking his head and staring at him stolidly.

Two hours later all was quiet. The Navahos had departed to their hogans; the desert was as still, under its canopy of stars, as if never the doings of foolish men had disturbed its peace. And, out toward the west moved the Colvin pack train, silent and shrouded in darkness. There was yet an hour before the moon would rise.

About two miles from Neyani’s hogan the horses were reined up and Sid and Scotty dismounted. They were about to vanish into the darkness of the sage, when Big John threw a long leg over the white mustang’s saddle and leaped to the ground.

“Hyar! I’m goin’ to be in on this!” he declared, truculently, handing the Colonel his reins. “Them pesky boys is all right, I’ll admit, to save having it proved on me, but thar’s times when they needs a man around—which same is me!”

Colonel Colvin hesitated a moment. Then—“I guess I can manage the Pack train alone, John. You’d better go,” said he at length. “Use no violence, now, unless you have to. I’ll ride the horses slowly toward the Canyon. Good luck to you, boys.”

He waved them a farewell as the three set out. All of them were busily thinking over some plan to rescue Niltci that would work. To steal upon him, even under cover of darkness was playing the Indian’s own game, they knew, a tremendously difficult one for mere whites to succeed at undetected. To make a big detour and come down by way of the sheep corral would be fatal, for the

dogs there would surely give a warning. Niltci would undoubtedly be guarded. If they overpowered the guards, it would be known who had kidnapped the prisoner. That would never do!

“As I see it, fellows, the only stunt for us is for one of us to entice Niltci’s guards away for a time, while the other two get to him and cut him loose,” said Sid in low tones as they crept through the sage. “Any one got any notion of what might attract a Navaho’s curiosity?” he inquired.

There was a silence as the others shook their heads. Then Big John spoke up. “I got a better layout than that, Sid. These Injuns are superstitious, an’ thar’s one thing they’re scairt of wuss than anythin’ else. You-all got plenty of matches?” he asked suddenly.

The boys stopped and got out their emergency kits. Out of each they produced a bundle of about fifty matches. “Ef these was the good old brimstone sticks they’d go better,” said Big John enigmatically, taking them in his big paw, “but I’ll make out with them, all right. You boys run along, now, an’ git as near Niltci’s tree as ye kin. Then lay low and watch my smoke.”

He disappeared into the sage without a further word. Sid and Scotty looked at each other, puzzled, but they knew Big John had a mighty good head on him, and he would be unlikely to try anything that would not work. As they drew near Neyani’s hogan they redoubled their caution, crawling through the sage and taking advantage of every little ridge of rock. At length they were quite near Niltci’s tree and well concealed in a patch of scrub bear grass. They could make out the Indian boy’s blurred form, now, bound upright to the tree. Beside him on the ground squatted two Navaho guards, silent, motionless. They might be dead, for all the movement either made; but that they were quite awake and on watch the boys could not doubt.

For a long time nothing happened. All the desert was still as death, shrouded in the gloom of a faint mist that hung over the barren ground. Overhead the stars swung in their great courses, but their light penetrated but feebly through the dust and mist and haze of smoke that drifted over from the ashes of the great fire.

Then—“*Hist!*” whispered Scotty, at length, gripping Sid’s arm. “What’s *that?*”

There, quite near,—over by a little nest of boulders—_something moved!_ Dim,

dark, hardly discernible, a round, black head peered out, advancing fearsomely, with two phosphorescent disks of fire glaring at them, balefully!—Then a wild, mortal shriek rent the night! It was the Black Panther, himself!

The boys tugged feverishly at their revolvers, their hair standing on end with fright. As for the two Navahos, one wild leap, one terror-stricken grunt of dismay, and they were off like the wind, bolting out into the sage. It was not until they were some distance away that they raised terrified screams of fright, running like deer as they yelled.

The panther crept nearer, and, just as Sid was about to fire, Big John's low voice called out to them reassuringly.

"Don't shoot!—Up an' git young Niltci, boys!" he gritted.—"How did my fox-fire look?"

Sid went nearly hysterical with the reaction. "Was that you, John? It was great! Simply *great*!" he chuckled, springing forward to wring the cowman's hand. Bubbling with delight, they all dashed for Niltci. Swiftly his thongs were cut, and then, each grabbing an arm, they started for the canyon.

"Run, fellers—I'm a good kitty, all right, but we ain't got no time to lose!" whispered Big John, hoarsely.—"Listen!"

Voices and yells came from hogans all about them. The night was hideous with uproar—then it suddenly ceased and all was silent again.

"Well, I'll be derved!" grunted Big John, as they hustled along, "what d'ye make of that?—I'm wise, boys!" he laughed. "Them brave bucks has told the hogans that their friend, Mister Black Panther, has come and took *Niltci*—an' they're all stickin' close to home, scairt to death! Hep, boys—hep!"



Previous chapter

Chapter VIII

Silent Pines and Yellow Craggs

“Shore I’m shy a good hat!” exclaimed Big John whimsically, as they slackened speed and began to look about through the gloom for some sign of the Colonel and the pack train. He took off his old Montana Stetson and twirled it ruefully in his hands. It was black as the night, where it had been gray, and out of two holes up near the crown he stuck two fingers and wiggled them at the boys. “I shore oughtta go on the stage after that panther stunt, boys,” he drawled, his face breaking into a slow grin, “When I left you, I worked around to whar the Injuns hed their big fire an’ got me some charcoal. Then I crep’ over to them rocks an’ lay thar, waitin’ till you come, and blackin’ up the ole cage all over good. Then I cuts two holes in her, an’ dolls her up with yore matches tied in two round bundles. Arter a while, when I thinks you-all shore must be hyarabouts, I spits on me hands and rubs them matches good. Shore ‘twas funny!” he chuckled. “I looks me ole sombrero over an’ like to hev scairt myself to death with them two fox fire eyes glarin’ at me out’n thet black hat! But ‘twan’t a fleabite to the way them redskins lit out, an’ you two boys allowed to sell yore lives dear when I lets out that yelp intended to represent a panther’s call an’ oozes out into the scenery!”

“I was just frozen stiff with fright,” admitted Scotty frankly. “We thought it was the Old Boy, himself, coming for us!—I’m not sure about it, even now!”

Niltci grunted and stopped, transfixed with astonishment. “You?” he asked, incredulously, pointing his finger at Big John.

“Shore ‘twas me, Injun. Shore!” cackled the latter, facetiously.

“No!”

“Thunder, yes!” came back Big John, raising his voice all he dared.

“NO!—Heap big lie!” squeaked Niltci. “Dsilyi’s panther him come!” he insisted.

“I tell you, it was a stroke of genius, John!” laughed Sid; “the Indians must think it’s all over, or inside, with Niltci, now! That idea came to me, back there when we were freeing him; so I kept his thongs so they wouldn’t find anything. Makes it all the more miraculous, you see. They won’t think of following us.”

Big John’s jaw dropped and he stopped dead. “Sid, you shore has a headpiece on you!” he declared, admiringly. “I never thought of that myself. My idee was jest to heave a gosh-almighty scare into ‘em—but I never thought I’d get you boys,

too!” and he broke into a huge chuckle again.

A tiny point of light winked twice out of the gloom ahead, and then all was impenetrable darkness again.

“Over this way, fellows,” whispered Scotty, who had noticed it, “that’s the Colonel’s flasher. He must have heard us.”

They headed over, and presently the dim outlines of the horses showed up. Colonel Colvin greeted them delightedly and then explained briefly to Niltci his plan. The Indian boy agreed, submissively, and they all set off down into the canyon. A mile further they broke into a trot with Niltci hanging to the Colonel’s stirrup.

“Of course there’s plenty of good hunting, boys, all over this wonderful Arizona,” said the Colonel as they rode along. “All through the canyons of the pine belt south of Flagstaff there is deer and bear, and we could reach it by riding southwest from here. But I want you to see the Grand Canyon,—the big sight that no American should permit himself to miss,—and the way to get it all, and first-class big game hunting besides, is from that vast network of canyons and crags back of the north rim. It’s a desert ride, either way we decide to go, southwest to the pine belt or west to the Ferry. We’ll take the latter. It’s eighty miles from here and just one drink the whole way. Here’s where our oats-and-water scheme scintillates, for we can do it in three days, with good grain feed and water enough to keep the horses full of pep.”

As they debouched from Canyon Cheyo the pack train was halted to make these adjustments. All the pannier water cans were filled from the brook and a full bucket of oats taken out of them was fed to each horse. The rest was put in gunny sacks and the loads redistributed so that there was an extra cayuse for Niltci to ride. They fixed up an improvised saddle made of a tarp, a folded blanket and a cinch strap for him, and then all the spare stuff was cached.

Bidding the running stream a last good-by, the train started climbing up a mighty ravine that led out to the vast desert plateau to the west.

Arrived at the head of it, a high mesa greeted them, stretching for miles to the northwest. Under its flanks the party rode, while the soft, cold desert wind sifted the desert sand in a faintly audible ticking around the horses’ feet. It was a tired and sleepy party that saw the sunrise, five hours later, with thirty miles of travel

behind them. Bare desolation, and color, color, color, everywhere the eye roamed! Blue cliffs, red cliffs, yellow cliffs, black buttes; and, to the west, the enchanted walls of the ghostly White Mesa.

During the heat of the day the train halted under the shade of a rocky nest of boulders as high as a house, and the horses were fed and watered and picketed out to nibble what sparse vegetation they could find. The four men spread out bed rolls, and, with the four dogs insisting on bunking in their midst, slept in an indescribable huddle, too tired to boot them off.

It was black night and cold when Sid awoke again. The others slept around him. A distant coyote raised his piercing cry, soft and plaintive in the vast solitude; the blurred forms of the horses dotted the little swale in front of their camp. Then came the false dawn of the moon, and Big John awoke and nudged Niltci, whom he had elected assistant horse wrangler, and they began silently to pack the animals.

The sight of them at work was too much for Sid; he awoke his father and Scotty, for at least they could attend to the saddle horses and help break camp. They were nearly ready to mount when an enormous red moon rose slowly over the mesas to the east. Higher and higher it soared, becoming smaller, rounder and more silvery as it quitted the haze over the desert. Then, in a splendor of white light, clear as daylight and pricking out the buttes in staring porcelain and inky shadows, the pack train headed west. It was all weirdly beautiful; color was there none, but of sharp contrast, of strangely rugged and distorted rock formations, of vague and ghostly desert distances there was such a play as to place one in imagination in some selenitic valley of the moon.

The afternoon of the third day found the pack train climbing down the frightful escarpments of a high red butte that abutted on the Colorado. There had been no adventure, no sandstorm, no thirst torture, no accident; but all were weary, the men silent, the dogs limping painfully, the horses plodding on persistently. A ringing whoop from Big John and the roar and rumble of waters announced the sighting of the famous Red River. Out of the gray ramparts of Cataract Canyon it swept, to flood past them in boiling riffles, majestic and purposeful in its headlong drive for the sea—the river that has more to show for its labors than any other river in the whole world.

Pistol shots brought ferrymen down to the opposite bank, to man the flatboat

which crosses here by an overhead wire and trolley wheel tackle. Swiftly it came over, driven by the rapid current impinging on its sides. It was big enough to accommodate the whole party, and, paying the toll, the horses were ridden onto its capacious flat floor. The reluctant dogs were booted aboard and then the boat set out for its return trip across the Colorado. As the water boiled and swirled around its gunwales Sid looked downstream at the mighty chasm of black gneiss into which the river plunged with a dull and ceaseless boom like the thunder of a distant Niagara. He could not keep his eyes off it. From there on the canyon would become inconceivably grander and more majestic, one of the seven wonders of the world,—yet what was it, in the infinite program of Nature, but an inconsiderable trickle in an inconspicuous crevice on the enormous round globe which is our world? If this remnant of a stream was so awe-inspiring to man, what must it have been when that whole vast inland sea which reached clear up to Wyoming was flooding out through these same gates to the ocean! The very thought gave Sid a glimpse,—like a rift through the clouds at some mountain top,—of the unapproachable dignity of Nature. Man, at his best, is but a mere insult in her presence, an audacious, unspanked microbe, that has occupied and will occupy but a brief period in her cosmic processes, even when his whole history is told from start to finish.

A day was spent resting up at the ranch and giving the horses unlimited oats and water once more, and then they pushed southwest through a bare and sparse country to where Buckskin Mountain dominated the Kaibab Plateau, huge, gray and imposing in his nine thousand feet of snow-topped height. Once around its flanks they were in a fine country of tall western pine, with every ravine leading to the rocky buttes and parapets and pinnacles that overhung the enormous slopes of the Grand Canyon basin. Back in the pines a short distance from the rim they established camp. The boys' little green five-by-six-foot wall tent was set up, with a pair of shears in front and its ridge rope run back to encircle the trunk of a pine three feet thick. The little tent was a wonder of a forest home, for its five pounds of weight. High enough to stand up in, it had a gauze window in the rear wall, with a flap to it which could be guyed out in fine weather and closed in when it stormed; it had a netting front door over a sill a foot high, and the cover flap of the front door was V-shaped, so that it formed a porch when held out horizontally by two upright poles, making a shady place to sit under and one sheltered from rain for a cooking space when needed.

The boys piled spruce and fir browse on the floor of their tent, sealing up its sod cloth, rolled out their sleeping bags, and hung wall pockets at the head of each

bed to hold all their small camp belongings. Then they went out to inspect the Colonel's bivouac. Near their own tent it was, a classic of comfort and lightness for one lone hiker. A stretcher bed hung on two stout poles, which were lashed to a pair of shears about a foot above the soil, and over the shears ran a ridge rope, with the tarp thrown over it and pegged down behind to form a windbreak. Its front edge was guyed out in a gentle slant, so that the Colonel had a cooking space in front of his bed, in out of the rain; and he could sit on the bed and tend his meal or clean his rifle, or just loaf or lie at ease on it. As the boys approached he was filling the bottom of the stretcher bed with fine fir browse.

"Learned that trick in the Army, long ago, boys. The Service camp cot is the coldest thing to sleep on ever devised by the brain of man,—unless you put a layer of hay or browse in the bottom of it. Then it is good, and comfortable and warm."

He rolled out his canvas bed roll on it and lay down, to dream indolently in the sunny, pine-scented glade, while through a rift in the foliage his eyes drank in the hazy, purple splendor of the Canyon. "This is good enough, for the present, boys," he grunted, stretching his arms in lazy happiness. "I haven't any idea when we'll ever bother to leave here again, but to-morrow we'll hang up a deer and try to get the dogs on a cougar."

Sid and Scotty wandered on to inspect the rest of the camp. The tinkle of horse bells came from a little mountain meadow where their ponies had been turned out. Up near them a gray and black patterned blanket, hanging in a tree, told where Niltci had staked out his claim for sleeping quarters. Under a nest of big pines lay Big John's bed roll on a thick bank of needles. Down near a tiny spring in the ravine, that facetious child of Montana was at work making a stone fireplace, and already he had a saddle and horse gear rack built to keep their leather above the rodent zone.

It was all good; too good to be true; too wild and beautiful and sublime, and filled to the brim with Nature's plenty for any but very honest men to live there at all, thought Sid. A healthy, natural lassitude had come over the boys. Nature gives these periods, when she is in her mild and genial moods, for times of recuperation to her children. They are not wise who waste them, unheeding. Sid and Scotty sauntered down the ravine and then climbed a tall, round pinnacle of yellow rock, invited by the mists of immense distance that lay beyond it. On its brink they lay down, beside a stunted pinyon that had found a lodgment there.

Below and before them stretched the vast gulf of the canyon, clear to its south rim twelve miles away. They had no wish to do anything but lie there and look. There are spectacles of Nature that man never tires of dreaming over, like the ocean and its ever-tumbling surf. This canyon is one of them. For a long time neither youth said a word.

“It’s just the Canyon, yet,” said Sid, at length. “Wait till we get down *into* it—then we’ll begin to appreciate it!”

Early next morning Sid and Scotty turned out refreshed and ready to perform prodigies. The horses were saddled and the dogs unchained. Off through a high table-land of tall pines the horses galloped, with Ruler and the pups all over the timber, running in wide casts around the main course of the cavalcade. Down into the shallow gulches and across wooded promontories leaped and sprang the ponies. These ravines were the gentlest beginnings of that vast shore line which once rimmed the course of the Colorado. Each gulch sloped downward, to fade in long wooded ravines into the blue depths below. Always the great physical fact of the Canyon was there. You couldn’t get away from it, couldn’t forget it for a moment.

Then Ruler gave tongue. It was a musical bellow, a houndy song that told the world he had found something. The pups dashed over at his call. Big John, on the fast, white mustang, clattered over and dismounted in a single leap. Ruler was already unraveling the trail, his long, ropy tail swinging in circles as he snuffed along, yelping at intervals as he ran. The party gathered around the track, while Niltci bent down with his face almost in it. A faint impression was there, in the leaves, large and round, but without any particular formation.

“Cougar. Beeg!” pronounced the Navaho boy after a careful examination.

“I told you they was lion-broke!” exulted Big John. “Them runs we had after the Black Panther spiled ‘em for small stuff,—Ruler’s broke, anyway.”

A ringing, resounding chime of hound voices rang up from the depths of the ravine below. All four of them were in that chorus, even Lee who was proving backward and slow in his development.

“Ride, boys! They’ve started him!” whooped Colonel Colvin, vaulting into his saddle. He thundered off down the ravine, with Sid and Niltci hard after him.

Big John headed his horse up across the slope. "Come on, son!" he called to Scotty. "We'll ooze for a point an' watch which way the varmint goes. He mought turn an' come back up, an' he'd git away if no one was up here."

Immediately they topped the slope, the white mustang began to race off through the dense young timber that covered the promontory. Scotty drove in his spurs and hung low over his saddle, guarding his eyes from the slap of branches. It took some riding to keep up with Big John! After a time the ground pitched down dizzily. Through the trees Scotty got glimpses of the purple void out there, and above him rose the long lines of pinnacles of yellow buttes. Far down below he could hear the constant chiming of the hounds. The chase was crossing their front. Then the trees grew suddenly sparse and short below them, and Big John reined the white mustang sharply up on his haunches where he slid with all four hoofs braced in the crumbly soil.

It was awful, on ahead! The land seemed to end nowhere, with unheard-of voids below. Looking up, Scotty could see the yellow cliffs frowning high above him, now, while the clayey rock they were standing in was reddish.

"Right yere's whar we ties up and takes to shank's mare!" said Big John, dismounting, tethering his mustang to a stout sapling and taking off his lariat coil. Scotty followed suit, wondering how they were ever going to get up again. And then a queer shiver of realization burst upon him. This red rock was only the next below the top of all those long bars of color that line the infinite slopes of the Grand Canyon!

They slid down to the brink of the ledge and looked over. A great slope, acres in area and covered with sparse timber, appeared below. Ruler was streaking down through it, volleying his approval of the trail. Almost vertically below Scotty was Pepper's sturdy back, the hound hesitating over the passage of some shelf below him. Bourbon and Lee were far up the slope, while the small figures of the Colonel, Sid and the Navaho could be seen far above to the left, sliding down a high roof of yellow clay.

A sheer fall of two hundred feet lay directly in front of them. It seemed nothing at all in this abyss of infinite distances. Big John ran along the brink of it, dislodging stones which shot out, to hit the slope below after a tense interval of fall, and then go bounding on down to disappear from sight over the brink of shelves that led on down to yet lower depths. Scotty worked after him,

somewhat more cautiously, but with none of the respect that he would have had for such a precipice as this anywhere else. His sense of proportion was utterly lost here.

A crumbled corner of the shelf gave them a steep slide, down which without a second's hesitation Big John plunged. Whizz! Ankle-deep in red earth, accompanied by a cloud of big and little stones, he shot down the slope. Scotty followed, giving himself no time to let his imagination work. They tore on after the hounds, through thick, bushy pines and spruces that covered the slope. Without any warning at all, save the interminable blue distance ahead, it suddenly ended in another frightful precipice. Scotty brought up on the brink of it, hugging a sapling and glad to see that for once Big John had stopped.

Over to the right the trees trailed down to a point, terminated by a tall red cliff, craggy-faced, indented with great slabs and boulders, which threw huge shadows of themselves on the next cliff beyond. A sort of chasm or chimney led down its side, a mighty cleft full of boulders in which all the skyscrapers in the world could be piled and never be found. Down this impossible, preposterous thing the dogs were climbing, as their voices proclaimed.

Scotty looked up. Already the entire world seemed to have been stood up on end above him. The green pines and yellow pinnacles of the rim above looked like a line of mere dents in it, with a little dark moss covering their tops. It would be days and days of work getting up there again! But Big John had only paused to get the location of the dogs in mind before he set off again along that precipice wall. Scotty followed. He might as well be killed sticking close to Big John as be killed anyhow, by some fall which could only end up in the Colorado itself, perhaps half a mile yet below him in a vertical line!

Ruler had charged out of the bottom of the chimney, barking a regular hullabaloo of a treeing call. If the dogs had slid down this cleft, men could climb down it, the boy reasoned as he began descending an almost perpendicular chimney, hanging to small, stout pines and catching his toes in crevices in the rock. They came upon Lee, whining piteously, afraid of being left behind, afraid to make the jump that would land in a sort of chute already worn with dog and cougar tracks where the others had gone down. Big John picked him up unceremoniously and tossed him into the chute, where he sprawled and slid with lightning speed down to the slope below. Without a word the man climbed on down after him, with Scotty panting and laboring behind.

Once on the slope below a columnar yellow pine loomed up far down the slide. It had survived avalanches, rock slides, ice rifts—was Nature's survival of the fittest, to seed the slopes beneath it and below it. Upon one of its branches the tawny body of the cougar crouched, treed, spitting at the dogs prancing below, twitching his tail angrily, ready to spring on the instant.

“Shoot, you little wart—if you miss I'll pisen yore grub!” barked Big John at Scotty, holding his own rifle at the ready. Scotty braced himself and poised the heavy .405. He had always prided himself on his shooting, but never in any such condition as this. His whole body shook with fatigue; he was covered with a scalding perspiration. Hold as he might, the bead refused to steady. Its square white patch nearly covered the cougar at that range, yet it could not have been over two hundred yards. Scotty finally attempted trigger release on the swing. The rifle went off, driving his shoulder back a foot with its recoil and, as they watched, a huge spall of bark flew out of the tree trunk above the cougar's back. Instantly he sprang down among the yelping dogs. A whirlwind of unbelievably swift action ensued. Yellow and brown were inextricably mixed as the cougar struck this way and that, the dogs darting in from every angle, the cat turning to strike as each grabbed a new hold. Big John raced forward, his rifle at shoulder, ready to put in a shot at the first possible instant.

Then the cougar made a sidewise swipe of his paw, so swift that the eye could not follow it. The steel hooks of his claws caught in Ruler's ear and the cat pulled him towards a snarling open mouth, towards the glistening white fangs that awaited him. But with a furious tug the dog tore himself loose, his ear slitting to ribbons. Big John fired at that tense instant when dog and cougar were braced in the fixed rigidity of their tug of war. The cat leaped in the air, high above the whole mob of dogs, landed running, and darted like a squirrel over the brink of the ledge.

The dogs tore after him. Big John and Scotty raced down the slope in giant strides, that for Scotty kept getting longer and longer as his momentum gained. He finally threw himself sideways to the ground as he felt himself falling downhill rather than running.

“Thar he is!—Mark left!” rasped Big John hoarsely, pointing below. The ledge was a mere escarpment, and along its base the cougar was flying, his tail erect and bushy like a scared household tabby. Pepper clung like a viper to his hock, while Ruler was trying to forge ahead and get a throat hold. Then the cat

disappeared into a rock crevice taking the dogs with him.

Putting in their last burst of speed, Scotty and Big John threw themselves over to it. The huge rocky knife-edge that made the cleft, stuck up like a fan,—one of those little insignificant spalls on the cliff faces, as seen from El Tovar. Here it was enormous, and led down to no one knew where. A hoarse, snarling murmur and the worrying and fighting of dogs came up from inside it.

“Run down to the lower edge, Scotty!” yelled Big John. “I’ll drop a rock in here an’ he’ll come out to you like a bat out of hades.”

Scotty slid down, arriving torn and bruised at the lower edge of the crack where the rock fan sprang up ten feet thick from the cliff. The narrow crack between it and the wall was dark as a pocket; nothing came from there but the maddening roars of Ruler and the snarling of the cat. Then Big John whooped, above, and the crash of a falling rock resounded. Out of the rift, straight at Scotty the cougar exploded in a frightful cat-spit. His rear was covered with dogs, but his chest showed clear and tawny as he sprang. Scotty met him with the heavy .405, himself knocked flat against the cliff with its recoil. A reeking mass of animals shot past him in a fury of flying paws, rolled over and over down the slope, and fetched up in a writhing heap in the midst of a nest of scraggy pinyons.

“Did you git him?” yelled Big John’s voice from above.

“You bet!” crowed Scotty. “Come on down and help me with the dogs.”

There was a rumble of falling stones and Big John dropped down beside him.

“I *knowed* one good poak from thet ole cannon of the Doc’s would fotch him,” he laughed. “Good shootin’, son! Git some clubs, now, an’ we’ll gentle them pesky dawgs.”

They needed to, for a glorious dog-fight was in full swing over the dead body of the cougar.



Previous chapter

Chapter IX

Kaibab Grizzly

“I’ve got to turn back, Sid,” gasped Colonel Colvin, as they halted at the foot of the vast slope that topped the second rim of the canyon like a house roof.

“Climbing up out of here is a job for a young heart; mine would need half-soling before we’d ever make the rim again!”

From safety holds on tough pinyons that overhung the precipice of the second rim, they peered down at the chase far below. This second rim was an ungodly wall, perhaps a thousand feet sheer, and it no doubt cut a noticeable figure as viewed from El Tovar, where tourists at that moment were raving in absurd sentimentalities over the canyon. To the Colonel it meant a terminus, for him, of that particular cougar chase, for to add its weight to the labors already in store on the climb back would be foolhardy to one of his age. They watched the tiny black dots weaving slowly across the lower slope, that must have been the dogs in hot chase of the cougar, and after them came two oval specks that were Scotty and Big John as viewed perpendicularly from their height. Then the whole business disappeared over a ledge and nothing but the baying of invisible hounds came floating up from the far depths.

Colonel Colvin shook his head. “It’s their meat, Sid. But there’s room enough in this country for two or three hunts to be going at the same time. They’ve got the dogs, but we’ve got Niltci, who’s better than a dog at forest hunting, I’ll warrant. We’ll climb back to the rim and start something of our own back in the breaks.”

Sid felt that his place was with his father, anyway, and he did not care much about being a tail-ender in a hunt that had already distanced them.

“Shrewd guess of Big John’s that was, Dad,” he replied. “It cut off at least half a mile for them. If the cat had gone north, along under the first rim wall, they’d have been out of it instead of us. Let’s ride back into the gulches and box canyons of the country behind the rim, and see what we can see.”

They looked up, seeking a place to climb back. A thousand feet above them towered the rim of rock, dented with columnar pinnacles, crowned with dwarfed pines that they knew were themselves at least a hundred feet high. The Colonel was winded and panting before they had climbed for fifteen minutes. The crumbly soil slid down underfoot; even zigzagging was slow and laborious toil, —not at all eased by ledge after ledge of rock outcroppings that called for hands,

knees and feet to scramble up them. Niltci and Sid pulled and pushed the Colonel up, but an hour of dizzy, sweating work had gone by and all were spitting cotton before they stood at the base of the rim rock precipice.

Five hundred feet sheer it rose above them. For comparison Sid imagined that if he were looking up the Woolworth building to its very top and if, at the same time, he were standing on a narrow shelf of yellow and rotten rock with a slope three times as deep below, ending in blue nothingness—he would have some of the sensations that now overcame him as he looked up for some possible chimney up which to climb and wondered how they were ever going to get his father up it if they did find one. If he could only manage to stand off from this thing a little, so as to get some idea of its surface, it would be easy to find the break in the rim where they had come down. Which way did it lie, north or south? They discussed it, finally yielding to Niltci, who was sure that it lay north.

Along under the rim wall they crept. The narrow path was worn deep with cougar tracks. It was a regular runway for them, for they lived down here in the canyon and came over the rim at night to hunt in the deer and wild horse country of the hinterland. At any point they might come upon a cougar cave, here, and the Colonel, who was in advance, never passed around a pinnacle base without stepping warily, with his rifle poised for instant use.

“By George, Niltci, you’re wrong—we should have turned south!” barked out Sid after perhaps half an hour of this gingerly progress. “Look at these young Matterhorns coming up out of the canyon below us! I never noticed them before!”

The party stopped to take bearings. Certainly the lookout was new and unfamiliar. The canyon jutted out here in a great cape, and on its slope Nature had dropped, casually, three or four red and yellow mountains that rose below like pyramids. Anywhere else they would be objects of wonder and bear grandiloquent names.

But Niltci shook his head vigorously and led on without a word. The rim cliff ended abruptly a little further on in a huge tower of stone, and, rounding it, they found themselves in a vast amphitheater, a mile deep, and a mile across a valley of illimitable depths to its opposite point. All around it the cliffs rose sheer. Surely they never came down here! Niltci had to acknowledge that much,

himself, but instead of turning back to retrace their steps he grunted impetuously and led them on, following the rim into that enormous basin.

“Aw, rats!—what’s the use, Niltci, you’re crazy!” exploded Sid, as both he and the Colonel balked at going any further. For answer the Indian boy pointed to a thin fissure that cleft the rim from top nearly to bottom, up near the head of the basin. It was about half a mile away. How Niltci could know that that crevice could be practicable for ascent, Sid could not conjecture, but the red men were wise in the ways of Nature, so he followed on, albeit incredulously. But he had no idea what impassable obstacle might await them to the south if they turned back. This, at least, looked possible!

Arrived at it, they peered up to where the last of it ended in a broken, jagged path, showing where water had come down during the rains. For fifty feet this rose up the cliff,—an absurd trail for anything but a fly to attempt; then began the in-cutting of the fissure.

Niltci started up it, amid a howl of protest from Sid and the Colonel. Like a creeping cat the Indian lad climbed steadily up until he had reached the fissure, where he turned with a whoop of triumph.

“Wow! We can’t let him get away with that, Father!” chuckled Sid. “Shut your eyes and climb! Forget mother, forget your insurance, and all the rest of it—it’s the only way!—I’ll be right behind you.”

The Colonel groaned, whimsically, and started up. Niltci came down again by some incredible feat of legerdemain—as they looked back upon that climb afterwards—and gave him a strong lift over the worst places, and so they all reached the bottom of the fissure. It was dark and gloomy, and it curved around a bend above, so that they had no idea how it was all going to turn out—most likely in some sheer wall, thought Sid. But the only way to get over these things was to go ahead and do them, so they climbed up into it. Part of the time Niltci was straddling both walls of it; part of the climb crawling up vertical ledges higher than his head. The curve mercifully hid from them the frightful depths below, should anyone fall. It grew better, once around it, cutting deeper and deeper into the rim wall and becoming less and less vertical. Masses of pine roots fringed it overhead, and finally their feet found a narrow bottom of yellow, crumbled rocks, which led up in a steep slant to the forest above.

“Great work, Niltci! That’s mountaineering for you!” laughed the Colonel as they dropped panting on the forest duff. “I suppose you could visualize this whole water crack, having once seen the fissure in the rim wall, eh?”

Niltci grunted happily. He had no idea what that speech was all about, but evidently his adored Lord Colonel was pleased! Sid rejoined them, a moment later, and all sat and looked ruefully at their clothing. Their bleeding knees peeped through frayed and torn riding breeches, their buckskin gloves were out at the fingers; Sid had a scraped thigh, caked with blood; all the uppers of their cruiser moccasins gapped open in rent seams. Niltci, in his light cottons and buckskin leggings, seemed the least frazzled of the three, but his bare toes poked out from thin moccasins worn through on the rocks. It was half an hour before the Colonel sat up again.

“And now, where are we?” he queried, briskly. “We’ve got all the rest of the day, so we’ll find the horses and go hang up a buck for camp meat.’

They all rose and started off through the forest. A short walk through the high pines that covered the plateau brought the blue haze beyond, of the canyon again, and presently they came out on a rock pinnacle that commanded the whole prospect below. A sheer fall about a thousand feet lay below them. Beyond that smoky, purple depths showed beyond over the second rim.

“The place where we came down must lie to the west of here, boys,” declared the Colonel. “Big John and Scotty are somewhere down in this valley—they’ll be all day getting back! We’ll start west for another look-see.”

A second outlook from another point showed them the steep slope down which they had first come. Up in the ravine at the head of it would be the horses, for there they had first started the cougar. Soon they were in it and had remounted.

“Sore and tattered, but still in the game!” ejaculated the Colonel as he put spurs to the roan and led back up the ravine into the hinterland

Back in here they found the huge flanks of Buckskin all cut up with rocky glades grown up with yellow pines, and gulches which led to high, walled canyons, all leading out to a discharge into the Grand Canyon, somewhere. Great pines grew heavily in the swales. It was a wonderful, rich, plentiful game country! Again and again Niltci grunted, to point down at deer tracks, wolf tracks, and the round hoofprints of wild horses, and there seemed to be a cougar after every deer,

judging from their frequent footprints!

“Hist!” called the Colonel, suddenly, stooping down to whip out his .35 from its scabbard. The bushes shook, up in a densely grown ravine that lost itself somewhere in the upper flanks of the mountain. Gray shapes bounded across it, stiff-legged, flashing into sight occasionally, to disappear as quickly.

The Colonel’s rifle barked, followed by Sid’s. One of the gray shapes plunged, and there was a mad scramble in the timber. They were mule deer, a whole drove of them! Sid fired at another, running bewilderedly up a bush-strewn slope in full flight. Then all was still again.

“I nailed mine,” said the Colonel. “We’ll wait a while. Once he lies down he’ll never get up.—Lord, boys, there must have been thirty in that drove!”

He got out his pipe and lit it, while the horses switched flies patiently. Then Niltci, who had been scouting through the bush, called to them with a low grunt of eagerness. There seemed to be suppressed excitement in it, too, and the tones of his voice thrilled Sid with a nameless feeling as he urged his horse over to where Niltci stood, pointing down at the track.

“Come over here, Father—for the love of Pete, look!” called Sid, tingling with shivery sensations as he looked down from his horse at a deep hollow in the needles, over which Niltci still stood, his wild eyes snapping meaningly.

The Colonel came over and halted his horse. The track looked as if someone had set down a long oval bowl there. It was all of fourteen inches long, and the foot that made it had borne down so heavily that a trilobed palm and the five toeprints, huddled together like a human foot, were distinctly visible. And such toes! Each one was the size of two human thumbs laid down together! Some distance beyond each was a long, pointed gash in the soil at least five inches from base to tip, the claw marks, all heading together.

“Good Lord! That’s more than a grizzly, Sid!” ejaculated the Colonel after studying it awhile. “I tell you what!—in the old days we used to have the giant yellow grizzly of California, a whale of a brute. He’d carry off a whole horse, and many’s the cowman who has been suddenly charged by one from ambush. The old boy wanted the horse, but he didn’t mind fetching its rider a swipe, incidentally, that knocked him into kingdom come. A .45-90,—even the old Sharps .45-105 with the 550-grain bullet—never fazed him. That tribe of

grizzlies has been extinct since the early '90's in California, boys, but I'll miss my guess if here isn't one! First track like this I've seen in thirty years. Here, if anywhere, there'd be a few survivors. He's my meat, Sid! You got old Ring-Neck, up in Montana; this bird is *mine*!" declared the old Indian fighter, his eyes flashing "How old is that track, Niltci?"

The Indian boy knelt down and smelled it for some time. Then he raised his head and held up one finger.

"One day, eh? It's a good thing we got two bucks, Sid. We'll get one of them out of here for camp meat and leave the other for bait."

Niltci pointed silently into the bush ahead of him. Here was another deep footprint, and, sighting along it, a dim line of them led up the ravine flank. They followed slowly on the horses, who were shivering and plunging violently, for even up to their nostrils had come that faint grizzly odor that a horse fears above all other things. Up on the ridge the track crossed bare rock, and on a little sandy spot a huge track lay, a beautiful print, like an enormous, flat, stubby hand with long, sharp, in-pointing nails for fingers. Beyond the ridge lay a hideous gulch, a bad-land, all boulders and scraggly pinyons, twisting and writhing among the rocks in weird contortions. It would invite a broken foreleg to attempt to work the horses in there.

"No use following him any further," said Colonel Colvin as they reined up to look it over. "We'd only leave our own scent around,—though I doubt if *he*'d care any! We'll go get the bucks."

They retraced their way and went up on the hill. The Colonel's buck lay some fifty feet from where he had been hit, his double-Y antlers and black crown proclaiming him a mule deer. Sid's lay further up in the bush and was a mere spikehorn.

"He'll do fine for camp meat, though. Get him up, Sid; we'll paunch him somewhere away from here. The old yellow grizzly may clear out, if there's too much human sign around, but still, mighty few people ever hunt this country and he *may* have that bad temper of the old-timers."

He halted his horse and looked over the scene, planning where to locate his ambush and the probable course of the charge and battle that would surely ensue if the first shot from the .35 did not prove mortal. Sid and Niltci got up the buck

and tied its legs to the saddle thongs. Then they all rode back to camp, silent, subdued, thinking over that twilight vigil of the Colonel's by the bait, to come.

After rustling a meal, all three went out to the rim rock to await the return of Scotty and Big John. It was nearly sunset before they heard voices below, and then Big John's sombrero—what was left of it—appeared over the rim. His face was caked with dirt, bloody, and streaked with sweat lines.

"Shore I ain't got enough clothes left on me to flag a tote-train!" he grinned, spitting the dust out of a grimy mouth as he turned to haul on a bundle below him. "Hyar's yore cat skin—I needs another skin myself, b'gosh! Anyone which same wants a kitty out'n that canyon kin go an' get him, an' keep right on goin'! —_Thar!_"—he gave the rope a final haul and sat down on the brim with a mighty "*Whoosh!*" of relief.

Scotty came up, pushing behind the bundle. He hadn't a word, but an unconquerable grin beamed out of his eyes. He flopped down on the needles, and after him struggled Ruler, to lie down with his long, red tongue hanging out and his sides panting. Pepper crawled over the rim in his wake and curled up in a doggy heap of legs and ears, licking morosely at various red wounds that gashed his sides and thighs. The other two pups were yelping disconsolately at the foot of the slide and Sid and Niltci sprang down to carry them up.

"Whoosh! That was reg'lar Bronx Park huntin', I'll say!" exclaimed Big John, yawning, with a mighty stretch of his arms. "Where in thunder was you-all? Scotty, here, got him."

Sid grinned as he looked over the ragged assembly. Scotty was a sight! He was covered with yellow dirt from head to foot; his breeches were split wide open and a jagged red cut showed on his thigh. Big John's knees were bloody, with the fringes of his home-spuns encircling them like whiskers. Ruler licked steadily at a great red tear on his thigh where the skin hung open like a small hairy tent flap, and shook his ears continually as they dripped blood from long slits in them.

"Father couldn't make it, boys," he explained. "It takes a heart like a hunk of sole leather to attempt the canyon. He was wise to stay out. We turned back at the first rim, when you fellows and the dogs went over the second. We've got a buck hanging up in camp."

“Roast her whole, boys,—I could eat a rhinoc’ros raw!” gaped Big John. “We’ve been climbin’ since ten o’clock ‘smornin’. Lucky I thought to take my rope down with me. We had to haul them dawgs up the chutes, one at a time.”

Sid and Niltci picked up the cougar skin and the whole party started for camp. An hour later a monumental mulligan, compounded of cougar chunks, spuds, onions, peas, tomatoes and macaroni, boiled in an eight-quart pail, was served. Big John and Scotty were still prodding into the bottom of it with their spoons when Sid and Niltci sat back utterly stuffed. The Colonel had long since departed for his lonely vigil near the buck carcass, awaiting the coming of the Yellow Grizzly.

They stretched out the cougar skin and measured it—nine feet two inches, with three feet six of tail—but could get nothing but uninterested grunts from those two, who still scooped in the mulligan pail for more. Then Scotty and Big John rolled over without a further word and fell sound asleep where they lay.

It was broad daylight when Sid awoke again, and the sun must have been ten o’clock high. The Colonel had not returned. Scotty and Big John slept heavily, for Nature had a lot of fixing up to do on them yet. Niltci was gone. Sid hoped that he had tracked his father to the rocky gulch, for he felt mighty uneasy about that great yellow bear of the fourteen-inch track, with only a lone hunter to face him. All he had ever read about the California Silver Tip came to mind. The largest one ever measured weighed 1,150 pounds and was nine feet from nose to tail and over ten feet across the fore paws. That was as large as any Alaska brown bear, yet with the ferociousness and agility of the grizzly to back all that weight and strength. The Black Panther would be a mere kitten compared to this brute! The average Bengal tiger weighed 340 pounds and would go something over eleven feet; the largest cougar was under three hundred pounds. Even the Black Panther would not reach over three hundred, judging from the skin of the cat Scotty had killed. The Yellow Grizzly was three times as big as any of them, and quite as active and ferocious. He doubted whether the .35 was rifle enough to stop him.

Sid had about decided to take Scotty’s .405 and try to ride to the gulch to see what had happened, when he looked up, to see a Navaho Indian standing silently before him. The man’s face looked somehow familiar. Sid thought he recognized him as one of the bucks at the Fire Dance, as the red man held out a grimy envelope and proffered it with a bronzed and friendly smile.

Sid tore it open, although it was addressed to Colonel Colvin.

“Dear Colonel [it read]:

“All halleluiahs has broken loose in wagon loads, here. I hate to send for the Agent, and perhaps get out a troop of soldiers, but I’ll have to do it if it gets much worse. The Indians have spirited old Neyani off somewhere, and I reckon they’ll make a sacrifice of him to appease Dsilyi in spite of all I can do for him. I found a wild story about the Black Panther having taken Niltci, the boy, when I got here. You had left for the Canyon, but the Panther came back only a few nights later and took another sheep from Neyani’s corral. You can understand how the Indians took that! They wanted to wipe out Neyani’s whole family. If I had dogs I’d track that confounded cougar and do away with him, somehow, but I can’t lay for him and shoot him here or my influence over these redskins would be gone forever. If you can break your hunt to come over here with the dogs I would be eternally grateful. Meet me in Canyon Cheyo, near the mouth of Monument Canyon, which is a good landmark. I’ll be there, and we’ll put something over on this superstitious bunch of redskins. I declare, I lose all patience with them sometimes!

“Yours in haste,

J. F. Hinchman, Maj. U. S. A. Ret’d.

Sid made up his mind at once. It was necessary to get rid of the Indian runner, first, so that their movements could be made unwatched by the Navaho. He went to his tent and tore a fly leaf out of a small leather notebook in his tent wall pocket. He wrote a brief message that they were coming, rolled it small, and slipped it into an empty rifle cartridge. Corking it with a bit of pine, he returned to hand it to the runner.

“You take, White Father Hinch,” he ordered. “Pronto! Savvy? You got meat and oats?”

The Indian shook his head, pointing to the small bag of meal at his loin cloth. Sid cut him a flank from the buck, gave him a bag of oats and a handful of cartridges for a present, and sent him on his way. Then he saddled Pinto and rode toward the gulch, leaving Scotty and Big John still snoring in camp.

He rode along the flanks of Buckskin, trying hard to remember the lay of the

ravines, even though he had passed through them twice before. It was not easy. Several times he was sure he was lost, but each time some familiar tree or rock formation reassured him and he rode on. When he finally reached their ravine he was not sure of it, even then. Scraggly pinyons covered its rocky slopes, but there were dozens of others just like it, and there was absolutely nothing living to be seen in it. But, as for men or animals, what are they in Nature's vast landscapes, where half a mile of verdure is tilted up as a mere wrinkle in one of her mountains! Buckskin was twenty miles long, a straight knife-edge as seen from across the canyon, cloud-covered, dim, and distant, as inaccessible to the traveling world as the North Pole, and it had hundreds of ravines like this.

Sid halted his pony, looking down into the ravine with half a mind to push on further. Then a sort of break in the pinyons attracted his eye. That was not natural; something lay there! He rode over to it, and long before he reached it a great brown mass of fur appeared dimly, huddled up in a mass of tough, craggy trees that had been broken off like jackstraws. He dismounted and walked over to it with rifle at ready, for by no urging would Pinto come a step nearer. The brown mass did not move as he climbed through the crags toward it.

A shiver went through Sid. Why, this was the place the Colonel had chosen for his hide! It was a hundred yards from where the buck lay, down hill, there, on the ravine flank! Then he got sight of the animal's head. Big as a brown boulder it was, with incurved snout-bone doubled up on a great beard of furry whiskers. The great round ears were erect, but the eyes were closed and a streak of blood ran from under long, glistening tushes still bared in the snarl of death. It was the Yellow Grizzly, Sid realized—but *where* was his father! He stood looking over the carcass and peering about through the pinyons, fearfully. There were cakes of matted blood all over the long hair on the bear's chest, and great cavities where the bullets had come out on the other side, and there in that side was a knife, still buried to the hilt—Niltci's!

Sid looked around, bewildered. The pines were all torn and mangled about him. There had been a terrific fight, here!

Then a feebly cry electrified him. "Water!" it called, more a moan than an articulate voice.

Sid rushed over. Down in a pit of boulders he saw the brown khaki-clad back of a man, lying face downward doubled up on his side. Those broad shoulders

could be none other than his father's, the boy realized, as he scrambled toward the spot with sobs of anguish welling up in him.

Gently he turned him over, and sat him up in a more comfortable position. Down the Colonel's side, from his shoulder to knee, he saw a frightful row of red marks, as if some set of steel cultivator hooks had gouged its way there. The rocks around were all red, and the Colonel's clothing was soaked and dripping.

But the old warrior's eyes opened and looked at him steadfastly as Sid slipped his arm tenderly behind his head, calling to him softly, the tears raining down his cheeks. He motioned for water. Sid nodded and raced to where he had tied Pinto. Ripping off the canteen from the saddle hook, he dashed back and held its life-giving stream to Colonel Colvin's lips. Then he set about bandaging his claw wounds.

"Better now, Father?" asked Sid, tremulously, as he finished.

The Colonel opened his eyes again. "Niltci!" he gasped, waving his arm feebly. "Don't mind me—now."

Sid rested him back, comfortably, and set out in the direction the Colonel had indicated, searching the boulders under the low pinyons. Fifty feet further on, he made out a white cotton shirt lying under the shade of a scraggy pine. One buckskinned leg was drawn up in the act of creeping; the other lay limp and was red with blood.

"Gosh,—that boy would have crawled all the way to camp for help, if he hadn't fainted!" exclaimed Sid, as he rushed to him with his canteen. "I need all kinds of help, here! It's time I fired our signal."

Niltci came to and grabbed at the canteen, his eyes speaking volumes as he drank. Sid looked around. A glint of blue steel caught his eye. It was the Colonel's .35—with its stock smashed off close behind the lever. Its magazine was empty, and he dared not move the Colonel again to take more cartridges from his belt. He ran over to the bear's carcass, grabbed up his own Army .30, and raised it to the sky.

"*Bang! Bang! Bang!—Bang!*" whipped out its sharp report.



Previous chapter

Chapter X

The Desert's Frown

“Stop him!—Nothing stopped him!” smiled the Colonel wanly from his bandages, as he eyed the huge skin of the Yellow Grizzly stretched between four poles and propped up where he could look at it and gloat over it. “Look at that skin—it’s a regular sieve!”

The boys and Big John sat against trees around the small camp fire in front of the Colonel’s stretcher bed tent. It had been a strenuous two days. First there had been, for Sid, those anxious hours of waiting and signaling until at last Big John and Scotty had poked the noses of their ponies over the ridge. Then the long trail home, with two stretchers to carry, the bulk of which labor had fallen on Sid and Big John, while Scotty led the horses. And then a feverish night in camp, when both patients needed sitting up with and constant attention. This second day had been spent in skinning out the grizzly by Big John and Scotty, and in assiduous doctoring and splint-making by Sid. And now, as sunset came, the huge pelt had been set up for the Colonel to look at, and Sid had decided to let him talk.

“Yes, sir, that was the nearest I ever came to getting my everlasting!” went on the Colonel. “With just two inches more reach he’d have taken out every rib in my body. It was in the dim light before dawn, boys, that I made him out, standing over the body of the deer. He picked that buck up like a mouse and started lumbering off with it. That gave me only a rear quartering shot, which is the very one to make him most angry and do the least immediate damage. But it was that or none, so I drew careful bead and fired.

“That started the fun, men!” said the Colonel, laughing feebly, after a pause to get his breath. “He whirled about and started for me in leaps that were twenty feet to the jump. It was the cursed wind that did it. You know how it whirls and howls around Buckskin! Never the same any two minutes. Some one of those back currents sweeping down the mountain took my scent right to him. He didn’t want any better guide!

“I think I missed my second shot,” went on the Colonel, “for he was bounding up and down so over those boulders, rearing and bellowing like an express train as he came. But my third bullet took him square between the eyes and doubled

him up like the punch of a battering-ram. He went over in a complete somersault, Sid. Did he stay down? Any other creature in the world, even an African lion, would have been scuppered by that shot, but that mountain of beef got up and came right on, like a ton of hate. You know something of the ferocity of that grizzly charge, Sid, and you, too, Scotty!

“The next shot was a heart shot and I was mighty careful of it, for I had only about forty yards left ----”

Big John nodded. “Shore ‘twas a center shot, Colonel. That heart was shot to ribbons when I took her out. I seen whar the bullet went in, an’ got her out to see what ye done to him. Oughtta hev stopped him, right thar.”

“Not for a minute! He squalled like a stuck pig, but hardly slackened. I fired my last bullet at fifteen feet and then jumped back from the cleft in the bowlders where I was hidden. He cleared the distance in one bound and I saw that big right paw of his coming down on me like the trunk of a tree. It smashed the rifle out of my hands. I felt like a hot iron had ripped me from top to bottom as his claws raked down inside my guard. I went over backward and then Niltci jumped in, from God knows where, and his knife flashed up and into the bear’s side. That’s the last thing I know about it, for I saw stars as my head struck the rocks.”

“That blow knocked you about ten feet, Father, over the rock and into a little hollow behind your hide,” said Sid. “As for Niltci, a back-hand swipe from the bear splintered his leg like a straw. There wasn’t a claw mark on him. The old yellow boy must have collapsed where he lay, but he bit off and broke every pinyon tree in reach before he gave up. Some charge! I’ll match him against any dangerous beast the world over. I’d like to see a bunch of Masai tackle him with spears, the way they do an African lion!—There would be mighty few left after he got through.”

The Colonel looked blissfully at the great yellow expanse of fur, tipped with fine white at the end of each hair. “Boys, she’ll about cover the floor of the Den back home!” he exclaimed. “I’ve met a good many bears in my time, but our cavalry troop never got over into southern California, although we heard a good deal about those big demon grizzlies there. Even the modern .35 is not gun enough, I’ll say! The old buckskin pioneers must have had their hands full with them!”

Sid now brought up the matter of Major Hinchman's letter, for it was essential to move quickly about that business.

"The thing to do, as I see it, Father, is for Scotty and Big John and myself to take the dogs over there, right now. We know where the Black Panther hangs out, which the Major doesn't. He and Big John can run him with the hounds, while Scotty and I climb up by the lariat into Lost Canyon and wait there until he comes. There must be a kiva or underground secret society cave somewhere in that pueblo. We'll drop the carcass down there, so it will disappear forever. Then Major Hinchman can fix up some sort of a yarn that will take with the Indians, and the whole affair will blow over if the Black Panther don't come any more. Niltci will be able to creep around and look after you and the camp in a day or so, and there's plenty of meat and provisions. We can get back in about a week."

The Colonel ruminated over it for some time. "Looks good, Sid. The less Niltci and I move around the better. I ought to be fairly well healed in a week, and the splints you put on the Indian boy will let him get about if you make him a pair of crutches. We'll make out! As for the Black Panther skin, it would be a wonderful trophy, but you couldn't ship it out of Arizona without the game warden examining it, and then word of it would get back to the Indians. For Hinchman's sake the only thing to do is to abolish it. Well—you might as well get organized for the trip, Sid."

He closed his eyes as if tired out with the effort. Sid and Scotty went to their tent, where lay Niltci. On being told that they were going to leave for a long trip, the Indian boy insisted on having a browse bed made for him under the Colonel's shelter, where he could attend to him. A shy and childlike adoration for the old army officer seemed to have grown up in the Navaho lad; there was nothing he could do that would repay the debt he felt he owed the Colonel for saving him from the fanaticism of his own kinsfolk. This feeling he managed to convey in expressive sign language, accompanied by what few English words he knew. So, while Big John mended horse gear and got the outfits together, the boys spent the evening in making Niltci a pair of rude crutches and moving him out where he and the Colonel could run their own hospital together.

Next morning the boys turned out, to find the Colonel and Big John talking earnestly in low tones together. Sid knew from their serious faces what they were discussing—water. The boys hovered around to listen, for both men were old desert campaigners and a long experience backed their words.

“You can’t make time and take any of the pack animals, John,” the Colonel was saying. “Yet that water hole may be dry, or all green scum not fit to drink, at this time of the year. Ten gallons a day is the very least the horses can make out on. If you fill up at that tank you can push along and reach Canyon Cheyo by evening of the second day. I have only two water bags. Five gallons each. You’ll have to sling them to Scotty’s saddle bags, for he is the lightest. You can carry two quart canteens each, using all our spare ones. See that they are well-corked, for they will be half rations at the best. No use striking for the San Juan. It is really as far up there as over the desert to Red Valley.”

“You leave it to me, Colonel,” broke in Big John, emphatically. “I don’t want no pack horse totin’ water. I’ll rig them bags, an’ we’ll roll our freight outer here an’ squeeze the dern water out of that desert if we have to!”

The boys made up their own rolls and saddle bags with a sense of the seriousness of their undertaking. To cross that desert without either packing or wagoning an ample supply of water was no joke. If all went well and they kept a good pace, they could make what water they could carry do. If stopped anywhere, any way, by a sandstorm, for instance—it made them thirsty just to think of it!

As they filed out of camp Scotty rode the Colonel’s big roan, for he could easily carry the boy’s weight and the extra eighty pounds of water in the canvas bags. The rest of the party were loaded up with bags of oats in addition to their own outfits.

At the ferry the old-timers shook their heads when the water bags and canteens were filled for their dash. It couldn’t be done—that was certain as death! But there was too much at stake to turn back. They alone could solve Major Hinchman’s Indian troubles, and they weren’t going back on the Colonel’s old army chum, no matter what the risk.

Once across the Colorado the horses cantered off briskly, snorting and whickering with good spirits. They had been filled up with all the water they could hold and it was yet early morning, keen and cool. The steep climb up the red buttes that led over the divide to the flat country north of the mesas began. Then came sand, valleys and valleys of it, with scant vegetation, dry, arid and desolate. That loose sand was particularly hard on the dogs. Lee had been left behind in camp, for he was too long-coupled to have the needful endurance, but

Pepper and Bourbon, they had felt, would be worth taking. Ruler seemed made of iron, as he rambled right along through it. He evidently appreciated his responsibilities, for if either Pepper or Bourbon attempted to lag he was behind them with ready snarl and snapping teeth that drove them flying onward. At noon the party halted and doled out their first water. It worried the boys to see how greedily the horses sucked down their allotments of half a canvas pail each and then whickered and bit for more. The dogs nearly came to a fight over theirs, and each had to be held by his collar to prevent him from flying at the drinking one.

By evening the horses had slowed to an exasperating walk and the dogs limped painfully. Down into a hideous gulch Big John led the party. It was out of the wind, but dry as the Sahara. Here they made their first dry camp. The first water bag had gone flat and the second was already alarmingly lean. Sid shook his canteen. There was but a drop or two in the one on the off hook, and again he felt the cork of the other to make sure that it had not come out. He had gotten through the day on schedule. They were all right, *provided* ----

That night he woke up with the cold. That was unusual, in itself, for that bag was good down to below freezing. Sid uncovered the flap and looked out. The stars were obscured, and a steady stinging sift, sift, sift of sand went on all around him. He could hear that faint, continuous hiss and ticking, and, attempting to move in his bag he was surprised to note it heavy as lead and immovable.

“Sounds like the beginning of a sandstorm to me,” he murmured to himself. “I’d better wake John, so we can all turn out and look after the horses.”

He crawled out of his bag and punched Big John awake. The keen wind blew steady and strong, chilling him to the bone, while blown sand gritted in his teeth. It did not take the big plainsman more than one sniff to bounce out of his mess of blankets, wide awake.

“Shore it’s a reg’lar night-bloomin’ swozzle a-comin’, Sid! Let Scotty lie. We’ll git the hosses in under the shelter of the buttes.”

Out in the cold gloom they found the animals, standing patiently with their sides to the wind. Pulling up their picket pins, they herded them into a sort of shelf where a great rock wall jutted out in a weird, wind-scoured formation, like a vast top on end.

“She’s goin’ to hum fit to blow the shingles off a barn, pronto, an’ we’ll all be buried in sand,” said Big John cheerfully. “You an’ I gotta rig a tarp up here in these rocks, old-timer, before we hits the hay ag’in.”

Sid was shivering like a leaf. He ran for his saddle roll and slipped on the fleeced-lined coat, glad of its shelter. Then they unrolled the tarp, fighting it in the wind and the dark like some wild thing, until it was finally anchored and rose at a steep slant like a sort of bear den. Under it they laid their sleeping rigs and then picked up Scotty, bag and all, and carried him over. Aside from a sleepy grunt or two, he slept right through it! The dogs were glad enough to follow them in and curl up again, backed up against the sleeping bags.

“You remember how we batted the snow off the rag house walls up in Montana, Sid?” queried Big John as he crawled into his bag again. “Waal, same stunt here. Reach up an arm an’ hit her a good poke when she sags too much. There won’t be nawthin’ but sand hyarabouts, come morning.”

They dozed off to sleep. Sid awoke before dawn with a sense of some great body pressing down on him. A howling tempest was raging down the gulch; sand in sheets and clouds swirled by. Overhead the tarp sagged down on them all, and, pushing up on it, he found it immovable. His exertions wakened Big John and incidentally jammed an elbow into Scotty’s face so that that exemplary sleeper arose, spluttering and spitting sand out of his mouth.

“Wh—wha—what’s happenin’?” he mumbled. “I dreamed the Grand Canyon had caved in on me ----”

“Sho’ has! Turn out an’ shove, old settler,” grunted Big John as the three put their shoulders to it. There seemed to be a ton of sand on that roof, and it would not slide off in the docile way that snow did. It lay heavy and inert, to sag back again as soon as a shoulder was withdrawn.

“Say!” grinned Big John, his dusty eyes sparkling at them from where he sat humped up under the immovable tarp, “if that Atlas feller done this fer a job, that will be about all for Atlas!—gimme them rifles, boys, we’ll stick ‘em up for sort of mine props.”

They tugged the weapons, in their leather scabbards, up out of the bedding, and with them propped up the roof. There was a chance now to look about. A fine dust filled the tent; just out in front a smooth hummock of sand like a snowdrift

had accumulated. Beyond roared the wind in a monstrous shout, in a fury awful and unending, and the dim light of dawn showed a yellow and opaque void all around them.

“Waal, we’re alive, an’ that’s a mercy!” drawled Big John as the boys prepared to curl up in their bags again. “No water to-day, boys. We ain’t doin’ nawthin’, and we don’t drink nawthin!—See?”

The stern iron tones of his voice told them that that was an order, peremptory as death! Sid curled up and tried to forget that he was alive. An hour later he looked out. There was no change, except a greater and yellower light, showing that the sun was busy somewhere high above all this. But, off to the left, right near the lean-to, were three large, indistinct objects, all in a row, that he finally perceived were their horses. Sid’s heart smote him. More than any speech was the dumb appeal of those three heads! They were asking their men for water—and not getting it! Unmoved they stood there, patient, but eager. If one whinnied, the sound was lost in the howl of the storm. Sid thought of his own canteen grimly. Not until they moved would man or beast touch water again! It was precious as dear life, now.

About eleven o’clock the storm blew out. Their first intimation of it was a dazzling yellow haze, rapidly thinning the murk of sand dust and as rapidly showing the details of rock and gulch near by in the desert. The dust thinned out, and blue sky began to develop overhead, and then the whole yellow cloud drifted off north and they could dash out of their shelter and begin digging the sand off saddles and equipment.

“Ramble, fellers!—Ramble!” whooped Big John, yanking his saddle up out of the heap of sand that buried all the horse gear. “We’ll roll our freight out of here for Misery Tank, plumb pronto! We jest gotta git thar, come night, for—here goes the last of our water for the hosses!”

Their second water bag collapsed flat, as a scant half pail was drawn from it for each of the three horses. The dogs got a remnant that was left, and then it was rolled up and stowed as of no further use. With eager haste the saddles were cinched, canteen rolls made up, and rifle scabbards slung. Then with a leg over and a chirrup to the dogs, they rode out of “Thirsty Gulch,” as Big John had named it.

Sand, sand, sand; and miles, miles, miles! Black Mesa passed them to the south, and then came a great cliff with wavy stratified lines streaked across its face and flowering plants nearly buried in sand strewing the slopes that led up to it. The horses whinnied and started on the first real run they had made that day. They smelled water, and it did not need Big John's finger pointing to a deep rocky chasm under the cliff to tell where it lay. A rippled slope of white sand led up to it—and then the boys reined up with a cry of dismay. The tank was filled to the brim with white sand drift!



Previous chapter

Chapter XI

White Mesa

“Whoa, thar, pards! The world ain't fell over the moon, jist yet!” guffawed Big John at their blank faces. “She's thar, boys, only you've got to dig fer her. This desert's full of them little tricks on the pore tenderfoot.”

He got out his camp plate from a saddle bag and started digging. Ruler and the dogs were already shoveling industriously with eager paws, for their noses smelled the water. Sid grabbed out his plate and fell to, while Scotty held back the horses to keep them from burying their hoofs to the fetlocks in the sand and packing it too tight to dig.

After a time it came out damp, then moist, then wet mud. Big John hove out the dogs and stood Sid aside, as they all watched the deep hollow they had made, nine pairs of eyes all trained on the one object of most engrossing interest in all the world,—the seepage of an almost invisible puddle of cool, clear water!

“Git me the canvas pail, an' a cup, Sid—the hosses is first. Git outer thar, Ruler, you ole potlicker!” he roared, batting back the persistent hound. Scotty was struggling with the horses, jamming back on their curbs as they plunged and pawed, wild to get down into the sand and drink, drink, drink! Then three equine noses shoved urgently, fiercely at them, as a few cupfuls in a canvas pail were passed up.

“This is nawthin', boys!” grinned Big John, as the impatient animals were being

watered. “Onct I hed to save myself by cuttin’ open a bisanaga cactus and go to poundin’ the inside with a club. Thet pulp is full of sweet water, an’ ye squeezes out the pulp an’ throws it away ontill ye hev maybe a pint of good clear water to drink. No old-timer dies of thirst, the way them writers is allus makin’ ‘em do, down south in the barrel cactus country!”

It was all of two hours later when the last of the water bags was filled and the party set off toward the southeast. If no accident befell they had water enough for the run to Los Capitanos del Canyon, where a blessed brook awaited them. The sandstorm had delayed them one day; the whole party were now worried lest they should be too late, for Neyani’s fate hung in the balance, and, perhaps, also that of Niltci’s mother and his sister.

“That thar letter says the Injuns has took ‘em off, somewhere, don’t it, Sid?” asked Big John as they discussed the matter, urging the horses along. “Waal, it’s a leetle deetour over to White Mesa, but I’m going thar, boys. That’s a sacred spot to them Navaho; they’re scairt to death of it, an’ think it’s full of ghosts, but the hull tribe sometimes comes thar to pull off some reeligious stunt, each brave sorta bolsterin’ up the other’s courage. It’s just whar they mought take ole Neyani—an’, of course, the Major, he couldn’t do nawthin’ but follow an’ try to talk some sense inter them, ef he heard tell that was whar Neyani was.”

“I’ve heard of the Enchanted Mesa,” replied Sid. “The Navaho call it the ‘Judgment Throne of the Ghosts,’ don’t they?”

“I dunno. It’s a skeery place to go by, in the moonlight, even for a white man. It’s as full of howls and roars, and the awfullest sounds a body ever listened to,” said Big John. “But I’ll bet my ol’ lid thet that’s whar Neyani is, right now!”

After an hour’s riding White Mesa itself juttet up, in a long escarpment, shimmering with heat, in the immense distances. As they gradually neared it Sid felt that never had he beheld such a place. The odd chalky formation rose in ramparts and pinnacles, like bastions of huge whitened giant’s bones. By moonlight one could well expect to see whole regiments of bleached skeletons of departed Indians skipping across it. But there were living beings there, now!

“What did I tell you?” chortled Big John. “Them little moving dots along the base is Injuns, on their ponies. Somethin’ doin’, thar, boys!”

As they rode nearer to the blazing white sepulcher the moving dots showed color

and took form. They were the Navaho, a lot of them. Soon some stopped to look at them and there was a commotion among the tiny black figures. Then a lone rider galloped furiously out toward them, mounted on a large black horse.

“That’s no Injun, an’ no pony—it’s Major Hinchman himself!” exclaimed Big John as the rider streaked out toward them.

The man waved his sombrero. “Hi! Hi!—Back!—Halt!” he called excitedly as he thundered toward them.

“Yaas—we’re haltin’, a lot!” muttered Big John as they all reined up and he called back Ruler. “Wonder what’s up?”

“Hi!—Is that you, boys?—Howdy, strangers—get right down!” yelled the white giant on the horse, for it was Hinchman himself. “Jee-mentley-dingit, but it’s a mercy of Providence that you-all happened to come this way!” he exploded as he rode up close. “I couldn’t have met you at Monument Canyon with this coming off. But I see you’ve got the dawgs—Jeementley but they look good to me! Whar’s the Colonel, Sid?”

“Father’s laid up, sir, over in the Grand Canyon,” explained Sid. “Had a mix-up with a whale of a grizzly and got mauled some, but he’ll be all right, soon. It’s an old-time California silver-tip, Major, the biggest bear I ever saw. Got him in back of Buckskin. Niltci’s looking after father, while we came over ”

“*Niltci!* Eh ? Splen—did!” beamed Major Hinchman, his keen face lighting up with joy and relief. “You don’t tell me! Nothing on earth can convince these Injuns but that the Black Panther came and took him that night ”

The boys laughed, and Big John grinned sheepishly. At the Major’s questioning glance he told him just how that affair really was managed. Hinchman howled with delight. “Better and better and better!” he cried, his eyes snapping with pleasure. “You see, boys, since you have been gone the Black Panther has been visiting all the Navaho sheep corrals—I suppose the dogs running him scared him off Neyani’s—but anyhow he’s become a regular plague. The Navaho now think the Dsilyi is angry with the whole tribe, and they got madder and madder at Neyani over it. One day I found Neyani’s hogan broken down and he and the wife and girl were gone. Couldn’t get a word out of the tribe about it, but I suspected White Mesa would be where they would take them. To-day the whole tribe set off for here, and I followed. Ever hear of the Ganhi, boys?”

They all shook their heads.

“Well, they are giant spirits who live in the mesas and mountains, and they sometimes interfere in mortal affairs when things get too complex. This White Mesa’s a regular abode of them. Not a Navaho will come here except by daylight, and a crowd of them at that. They’ve got Neyani here, somewhere, up in the cliffs, waiting for the Ganhi to give some judgment as to what Dsilyi wants. Now, you-all have got Niltci, which they don’t know. Easy! We’ll stage a miracle with him on White Mesa! Niltci will come back from the dead—from the house of Dsilyi, b’gosh ! and he’ll tell them”—he paused a minute while his quick brain plotted something plausible—“I’ve got it!” he shouted joyously. “Why, it’s the chance I’ve been waiting for these five years! For five years I’ve been arguin’ with these fool redskins about their using these cheap traders’ dyes for their blankets. But they’re lazy and indifferent, and can’t see that the mills back east can make Navaho blankets by the thousand and eventually cut them out of their industry with vile imitations. The mills can imitate the patterns, but they can’t get those soft colors of the earth dyes made out here! My stunt is to drive that in by a miracle, and right now! I’ll appear on White Mesa, you’ll see! I’ll be an oracle from Dsilyi, telling them that Niltci will come back to earth on White Mesa, and that the Black Panther will come no more, *if* they will get back to their native dyes again.”

“Sounds good, sir,” said Sid. “How about Neyani?”

“I’ll take care of him, too. We’ll see what we shall see!” smiled the Major enigmatically. “I’m riding along with you, now. You-all turn back, presently, after we get out of sight of the Injuns around the bases of those buttes yonder, and scout around. You’ll soon see where they are keeping Neyani and his family. Then—don’t be scared if you see a Ganhi, yourselves, boys! And keep your wits about you! Better go into camp somewhere in here, and tie up the dogs—they’d only make trouble.”

Once around the chalky bastions of the butte, the Major dismounted and, taking a bundle from his horse, began to climb up a deep cleft that led to the top of the mesa. Big John and the boys unsaddled the ponies and tethered them out, with the dogs leashed on watch under the shade of a huge cliff.

“Better hook on your canteens, fellers,” said Big John as they started out.

“‘Twon’t look well to be askin’ the Injuns for a drink, an’ thar ain’t no water

around hyar.”

Presently they came upon Indians loping in on their ponies from the general direction of Canyon Cheyo. They tethered them in a rude corral, hastily thrown up near the entrance of a huge gap that cleft into the heart of the mesa. Its gorge was filled with Navaho, all silent and scared, and crowding close together for protection. Usually the noisiest of Indian tribes, these bucks were now sullen and silent, greeting the white party with frightened nods, superstitious fear written on every face.

The way led up a steep, narrow ravine, bare of vegetation, a hideous gulch of hot and thirsty rocks. The procession had dwindled down to twos and threes, as Big John and the boys pushed on up it, passing the hesitating and reluctant Navaho. Evidently the tribe feared what they were about to see.

Up near the head and slightly below the top of the mesa jutted a tall white shaft of stone. It was at least fifty feet high, and detached entirely from the cliff wall for some twenty feet down from the top. A stratified shelf of rock jutted out here, and upon it they saw the qcali and three assistant priests, in a ceremonial dress of feathers and plumes that almost disguised them. They were beating on small skin drums and chanting a dreary monotone as they danced in the jerky steps of the Indian.

The boys watched them as they climbed, and then their attention was attracted to a sort of pocket or cave, opening by a cleft from the top of the mesa. in the sheer wall of the cliff opposite. The wind bellowed and sighed in it, making the weird noises that they had heard without being able to explain them, as they had come up the ravine. With every swirl of the wind scouring over the flat mesa top above, this cave answered with a huge sigh. A most uncanny effect—one would not like to be there at night!

“The mouth of a Ganhi, I suppose!” whispered Sid to Scotty as they paused.
“They are supposed to be a sort of giant genii ”

Then he stopped as his eye roved again to the stone pillar. Up on top of that white shaft of stone something moved! What he had thought at first glance were mere hummocks of rock or dusty boulders, proved to be three human figures! How they had been put there, or how long they had been there, he could not imagine. One of them was smaller than the other two, a pathetic little heap of

misery—it was without doubt the girl, and the other two were Neyani and his wife! the boy realized with a sudden shock. They were isolated, starving—and worse than that—oh, much worse—dying of thirst! That lonely rock,—under the pitiless desert sun!

He and Big John and Scotty pushed up rapidly toward the ledge as he passed word of his discovery.

The Navaho were down below them in the ravine, straggling along in a thin line, watching the rock fearsomely, while the priests above chanted. This was the day when Neyani and his family were expected to die, or confess, or tell of some vision from the Ganhi, evidently.

Sid looked up. Neyani and his wife had long since given up hope, for they did not move. They squatted in the stony immovability of Indian pride, huddled on the bare top of the rock, enduring the thirst torture stolidly. But the girl was young, and life to her was yet sweet. She had moved and was now looking down at Sid, and her tongue stuck out at him, black and dry and revolting. At first the boy thought she was making a face at him; then he realized that she could not draw back her tongue! She had reached the last stages of thirst, when the tongue protrudes like a strangling person's, black and cracked and dry. Her dark eyes looked down at him beseechingly.

“Gee, boys, do you see *that*?—Here! I can't stand this!” barked Sid, tugging at his canteen. “That girl's dying of thirst. I've been thirsty, too! I'm going to toss her up my canteen and let the Indians do what they please about it!”

At sight of it the girl stretched down her arms appealingly. Neyani and his wife might scorn to beg water, and their spirits still have stern command over their flesh, but the girl was young, and the all-devouring wants of her body drove out pride and all else in her overpowering desire for water, water, water!

A shout went up from the Navaho as Sid sprang up on the ledge, followed by Scotty and Big John. He motioned to toss up the canteen to the girl's outstretched arms.

The qcali stopped, angrily. “No!” he grunted, in English. “White boy not dare!” A roar went up from the ravine below and knives flashed out, while men stooped to pick up rocks. The three medicine men crouched behind the qcali, their eyes blazing hate and defiance.

“No!” yelled the qcali, stretching out his arm in sign to halt.

“Yes!—Darn you! Have you no pity?” shouted Sid, stooping to toss up the canteen to the girl’s waiting hands.

On the motion the qcali leaped for him, his three assistants at his back—but that was as far as they got! For Big John had leaped in front, and his guns had flashed out like two level bars of light. It was the first time the boy, had ever seen a gun thrown, and the speed and certainty of it was astonishing.

“Back off, thar, Injun!—or I’ll fill you so full of bullets they’ll put ye in the ammunition wagon instead of the ambulance!” gritted Big John’s quiet, iron-hard tones. “You leave the boy alone!”

There was a tense instant. A single shrill war whoop rang out down in the ravine and then all was quiet. For,—out of the stillness, came an insistent rattle, like the whirr of some huge desert rattlesnake. It seemed to come from the cave opposite, and the Indians’ quick ears directed all their faces that way. Sid seized the moment when no eyes were on him to toss up the canteen, where it disappeared over the rim of the rock pillar.

The whirr from the cave continued. Then a thin trickle of smoke came weaving out from the edges of its floor. A kind of gasp came from all the Navaho below, and into the medicine men’s eyes near Sid there crept an expression of superstitious fear. More smoke wafted out, as they all watched. It had a greenish tinge, then bluish.

“*Ganhi! Ganhi!*” rose the indistinct, awe-stricken murmur from the crowd, while the weaker ones turned to flee. It needed but a touch to stampede them all!

Then from the black depths of the cave, towards its mouth, floated the weirdest object the boys had ever looked on! It was immensely tall, filling the whole aperture from top to bottom. It had neither arms nor legs; and what might be a head was a mass of feathers and prayer plumes, such as one would see on Indian momo masks. The rest was a confused drapery of skins and mystic ceremonial objects.

In a hollow voice the Ganhi began to speak, addressing the Navaho in ghostly sentences that for them had all the tones of almighty authority. It paused between each utterance, while the crowd shuddered and all the Navaho raised their arms

in prayer, following the lead of the medicine men on the ledge. After a time the Ganhi ceased, while fumes of smoke filled the cave and rendered it more and more indistinct.

The qcali finally plucked up courage enough to croak out a word or two in reply, and then the Ganhi receded gradually into the cave, finally disappearing in clouds of smoke which puffed out as the vagrant winds listed up above.

For a long time the crowd stood awe-struck, spellbound. Then the qcali shouted out an order. A few responded, but the rest were hastening out of the ravine, flying from the Enchanted Mesa as quickly as they could get to their ponies. Big John and the boys waited until they saw a pole bridge being produced from somewhere and preparations being made to take down Neyani and his family, the qcali and his assistants addressing them with every mark of respect and tenderness.

“Now’s a good time to ooze out of this, boys,” whispered Big John “If that was the Major, he’s sure a shark on Indian ceremonials!”



Previous chapter

Chapter XII

The Last Stand of the Black Panther

It was dark and the Navaho had all gone when Major Hinchman appeared again in camp.

“Went off fine, boys! The Black Panther’s not coming any more—that’ll be up to us, right pronto, for if he visits the Navaho sheep corrals a single time again we lose all we have gained. Niltci—I told them *I* was Niltci, now a Ganhi from the spirit world—Niltci will come back to earth again, soon, in that very cave on White Mesa, and I’ll make a great medicine man out of him without his knowing any too much about it himself! The dye business is already fixed up; Niltci can help me drive that home, too, after I’ve had a talk with him, or the Colonel can make a good missionary out of him, as you say he has a lot of influence over the boy, Sid. The thing for us to do now is to ride for Canyon Cheyo and camp somewhere on the brook to-night, and then run the panther with the dogs early

tomorrow morning. I can only hope and pray that he don't go sheep stealing to-night!"

Around the camp fire that night they went over their plans. Sid and Scotty were to start for Lost Canyon at dawn, while Big John and the Major would ride with the dogs out to the eastern desert and pick up the Black Panther's trail somewhere back in the timber west of the Navaho settlement. If they treed him, they would shoot and bury him 'then and there; if he made for his lair in Lost Canyon it would be up to the boys.

"An' believe me, I'll be right behind his tail, Major!" declared Big John. "Them pesky boys is aimin' to kill me of worry, an' they'll git me yet, with their wild an' woolly doin's! I'm fixin' to be right thar when that ole comatabody goes a-sky-hootin' all over the roof of that pueblo, as he's bound to do as soon as they begins lettin' lead inter him."

It was in the dark before dawn that Sid roused out, to awake Scotty and saddle Pinto. "To-day's the day, old-timer!" he grinned delightedly, as his knuckles bored into Scotty's ribs. "Up an' at 'em, fellah!"

Silently they oiled and cleaned the rifles of desert sand, gulped down some coffee, and saddled their ponies. A rasp of chains where Ruler had arisen from his bed of pinyon straw told that he was awake and eager to be off. Sid went over to him. "Go git 'em, old snoozer!" he whispered affectionately, fondling the big hound's long silky ears. "We're sure depending on you!" Then with a pat for Pepper and Bourbon, he walked over to Pinto to grip the bony ridge of his neck, jammed a foot into his stirrup, and was off, with Scotty galloping hard after him.

By sunup they had reached the little dent in the side chasm that marked the great natural wall which blocked Lost Canyon. High above them, hanging down from the ledge at the foot of the cleft, still dangled the lariat. Picketing the ponies, they strapped on their rifles and climbed the fir tree where, arriving near its top branches, Sid took off his rifle and handed it to Scotty.

"I'll go up first, and then you tie on the rifles and I'll haul them up the ledge. After that you swarm up, and we'll make Fat Man's Misery to-gether."

Scotty sat in the swaying top of the fir tree, trying to get used to the height as Sid climbed up swiftly above him. To him it seemed a hideous business, even with a rope, and he wondered how Sid had ever had the courage to go up there without

it the first time. Scotty's was the kind of courage that needs lashing from a higher source, from the inner soul that rules over the whole man. He argued that his was the highest kind of courage, the kind that forces the cringing body to go ahead, although it is crying out with fear; but, nevertheless, he wished he had some of Sid's kind, whatever it was,—that had no fear at all, that regarded this climb with the same matter-of-fact directness that he would have had it been near the ground and the element of danger eliminated.

“Aw,—what's the use of being afraid!” his mind belabored his craven body as he booted it into action when the time came for him to go up. But he *was* afraid! Horribly so,—as afraid as the tyro aloft in a man-o'-war's rigging for the first time, and his climb up the narrow cleft did not improve it either. By the time they had reached the trail up to the pueblo, Scotty was thoroughly exhausted by his wrestles with his courage and far below the key of his usual manliness. A fearsome idea had obsessed him after that climb and he now gave it words as they reached the roof of the cliff dwellings.

“Sid,—suppose this is a real Asiatic black leopard?” he asked. “Did that ever occur to you, as a possible solution of his coloration?”

“Aw!” grinned Sid, “where'd you get that notion, Les? It's a color phase of our own ordinary cougar, that's all.”

“But it's possible, though,” persisted Scotty. “Seems I remember reading once about a big circus that got strewn all over seven counties by a cyclone down here in Arizona. Now, if they had a black leopard in their menagerie —”

“Even then—y'aren't scared, are you?” interrupted Sid, scornfully, turning to gaze at Scotty with wondering eyes—Scotty who had met the Ring-Necked Grizzly alone up in Montana!

“No, but I'm facing the facts,” retorted Scotty, stoutly. “If he *is* a black leopard, then he'll *stalk* us—that's the leopard's game, every time. He's not afraid of men.”

“Well, what of it?” exclaimed Sid, intolerantly. “C'mon, we'll try his den first.”

Scotty shrugged his shoulders, as Sid led on with his rifle poised for instant action. In Sid's present mood there was no use urging ordinary plain caution. Scotty, however, scanned the cliffs and trees about them warily. He wanted to

make sure that no panther lurked up on some limb, to spring on them unawares as is the habit of the leopard in the East. Sid halted at the edge of the inner wall.

“Woof!” he called, shying a stone into the dark recesses of the cave. “Hi!—Come out and let’s look at you!” he taunted.

But there was not a sound or a movement from those impenetrable depths.

“Good business!” ejaculated Sid. “Nobody home. That means he’s out after his daily sheep, and the dogs’ll get a fresh track.”

Scotty was not so sure. He looked around cautiously, unmindful of Sid’s amused sniffs. The tall boy led him over to show him the pueblo of the Old People, but even then, before its mouth Scotty hesitated, with rifle cocked, before venturing to peer down. He could bear the reproach in Sid’s eyes unblushingly, for to him Sid seemed casehardened, foolhardy almost. His own cave man within him was no such subdued creature as Sid’s, but was alert and tense as a deer, for a subtle sixth sense persisted in warning him that *something* lurked around that pueblo that was a deadly menace. It might be imagination; it might be a finer instinct for danger; or possibly some indistinguishable taint in the air that would have been plain as day to the nostrils of our ancestors.

Disregarding Sid’s taunting protests, Scotty kept his rifle cocked and his body on hair trigger, ready to turn or spring aside or leap into instant action at the first hint of warning. Sid turned away from him in amused disdain and sat down ruggedly on the outer wall, his ear cocked for the first distant bay of the hounds. It was broad daylight, now, with the sun perhaps two hours high, and the chase was due to arrive any minute.

“Gorry! It’s funny we don’t hear them!” exclaimed Sid, impatiently, after perhaps fifteen minutes of waiting, his eyes scanning the opposite rim impatiently.

Scotty nerved himself to speak out what was in his mind. It was the brave thing to do—morally brave and he did it. “Suppose, Sid, the Black Panther heard us coming, and just sneaked out of his lair,—and is prowling about here *now* ----”

An impatient shrug of Sid’s shoulders stopped him. “Scotty, you’re nervous,” he said, solicitously.

“Never let yourself get that way, or you won’t be able to shoot---- By George!—There’s Ruler, now!”

He had interrupted himself to gaze across the canyon. The great brown hound stood on the opposite rim. Silently he had come out of the forest; silent and perplexed, he sniffed the air, testing its scents. As they watched, his body suddenly stiffened and his tail went straight as a poker. His ears laid back and his teeth bared, and then a volleying bark rang out across the canyon. Ruler pawed the ground in his excitement—then he suddenly ceased and ran along the rim, a houndy growl, whimpering with eagerness, coming from him.

“That settles it!” said Scotty, rising energetically. “He *saw* the Black Panther, Sid! His eyes are sharper than ours. That brute’s around here, somewhere, behind us or above us—did you note where Ruler seemed to be looking?”

Both boys were now alert and warned. They stepped slowly along the roof, toward the ladder end of it, rifles poised, eyes scanning every possible lurking place.

“By—_Gosh!_—There he *is*!” yelled Scotty in a sudden scream of fright. “Mark!—_Cliff!_”

He had jumped back as Sid looked up, bewildered. Thirty feet over their heads, on the sheer face of the cliff where grew out the stubby roots of a spruce from a crack, crouched the great cat. His eyes smoldered green fire as he peered down at them over the root, and his pink mouth opened in a hideous, silent snarl. Then his ears flattened back.

“Shoot! He’s going to jump!” barked Sid, his rifle springing to shoulder and crashing out as the bead swung up over a confused mass of black. Down through the smoke that long, lithe shape plunged like a plummet, a brawny forepaw stretched out, with the five talons outspread like steel hooks. Both boys leaped back rapidly across the roof, for when he landed he would rebound like some deadly infernal spring-machine at one of them. It was a diabolical black head,—the nose a snarling mass of wrinkles, the eyes spitting savage ferocity, that turned on Scotty with the quickness of a lightning flash when the Black Panther hit the roof. His attack was bewildering, a series of short springs, each a smash of the muscular forepaw, each a wicked snarl of formidable fangs and a hoarse, hissing catspit that nearly paralyzed Scotty with fright. The youth jumped back,

the cat following, sparring at him as he pranced on three legs. It was impossible to get the gun muzzle up, as the sweep of that paw would have knocked it spinning out of his hands. Yet during the short five seconds of that rush Scotty was aware of the constant baying of a hound and the shouts of Sid to jump clear to one side so he could fire. Then a frightful blow, that ripped his sombrero brim and tore it from his head, sent his rifle up instinctively to ward off, and the next instant it was struck from his hands, bellowing like a cannon as the trigger jarred loose.

For an instant the Black Panther recoiled at the noise, and in that instant Sid's .30 whipped out its sharp report. High in the air leaped the great cat. All that had gone before was nothing to the feats of strength and agility he displayed now. He was hit,—he was enraged,—he was frantic with fury! In one terrific leap he cleared half the distance between himself and Sid; in the next he was pawing and striking around Sid's gun muzzle, stuck into his face as the boy retreated, prodding at him and trying to reload. Scotty had picked up his .405 and was frantically yanking on its lever. Then past him leaped a brown shape, bellowing attack. Ruler it was—in the nick of time to save Sid! He had done the incredible thing, the impossible thing, of climbing along the cougar's cliff route through the spruces! At the hound's raging bark, the Black Panther whirled about from Sid and his back and tail went up until he seemed ten feet tall. Ruler was a third his size, but the instinct to hump up at the sight of a dog seems ineradicable in all the cat tribe.

The next instant he had leaped up on the cliff wall above its hollowed-out arch, so as to get a high place from which to spring. "Shoot, Scotty!— Shoot quick!" yelled Sid, for his own rifle had jammed, with one cartridge in the chamber and another in the carrier, in the excitement of trying to reload with the panther pawing at him. The heavy .405 roared out, filling the whole arch with smoke. Down through it fell the Black Panther, paralyzed for the moment. He struck on his back, and the rafters of the ancient cliff-dwelling roof crackled under him. Toward Sid he floundered, his claws scratching the 'dobe. Blood spurted in a stream from his side and he was dying, but there was murder in his eyes, hate, fury, the yearning desire to kill in the last second of life left to him. Rapidly he crawled toward Sid, purposeful, determined not to die without his jaws clenched in at least one adversary. Ruler bit and worried and dragged back on him from behind, but the Black Panther ignored him completely. He had Sid cornered, in the angle between the side and end wall of the pueblo, and he knew it.

Scotty hesitated, with wabbling rifle, for a tense moment. If he fired he would certainly hit Sid, for the two were in line with him and the heavy bullet would crash clean through the Black Panther from behind. If he moved to another position he would be too late.

And, during that instant of hesitation, shot after shot rang out up in the canyon. Bullets came in a leaden hail—from somewhere—as the cougar flinched and his head was struck from side to side as if lashed with an invisible whip. It seemed impossible that a man could shoot so fast and so true as those bullets came that were crashing into the Black Panther's skull. Then Scotty's .405 went off, close at hand, with a stunning report, and everything was obliterated in a cloud of smoke. The cougar shuddered, in a last terrible convulsion which shook the pueblo walls, and then, with a crack of breaking poles, the roof gave way beneath him and the Black Panther sank from sight.

A thin haze of smoke drifted out from the spruces on the cliff wall, between the pueblo and Fat Man's Misery, as the boys looked around to see where those finishing shots had come from. Then Big John's voice rang out from the green depths.

"Say,—that was the devil's own climb, boys! I ain't so leetle but what I got a number ten foot and a number two haid, an' that lariat looked like a pack cord to me! How d'ye git down out'n hyar?—she's all slide rock!"

Whoopee!—Big John!—The boys howled at each other happily at the sound of his familiar tones. Then Sid shouted him directions, and after a time he himself appeared over the ladder head on the pueblo wall.

"Wa'n't invited to the party but I got hyar, allee-samee pronto!" grinned Big John, as he mounted to the roof. "You boys'll break this ole hoss-wrangler's neck yit! Right sociable time ye was havin, with the trick cougar, eh,—Siddy boy!" he chuckled, winking at Scotty. "*I* seen him, flewin' round, soon's I clumb through the cliff, so I wraps myself around a tree, up thar, an' draws cyards to set in the game, too."

"Came in mighty handy, John—my next would have been a jump over that wall into kingdom come, if you hadn't opened up !" laughed Sid, still fussing with the jammed army cartridge. "Darn a rimless shell, anyhow, I'll say!"

Ruler was having a wonderful time, all by himself, worrying at the carcass

below, so they all dropped down to examine the great, glossy prize.

“Gee, what a trophy!” exclaimed Sid, admiringly. “Cougar or leopard, he’s a scientific curiosity! But we’ve got to bury him, boys. It’s our duty. We couldn’t ship that skin out of Arizona without the warden examining it, and word of it would sure get back to the Indians. We owe it to Major Hinchman, fellows. Look for a kiva in this floor.”

“Dern them Injuns, anyhow!” grunted Big John. “I hate to part with this ole boy, somehow; we shore hev had a fine time with him!”

They scratched around in the dust and after a time unearthed the round stone cover of the kiva, or underground cave, that is built in every pueblo for the mystic rites of the rain priests. Into its dark cavern the body of the Black Panther disappeared, forever, as they replaced the stone and tamped back the earth.

“Shore it’s a derned shame!” snorted Big John.

“Good-by, kitty! You were a good kitty, an’ you give us a nice party while you lasted—only you didn’t onderstand that sheep ain’t public property! C’mon, boys, we’ll have a fat job gittin’ Ruler down them ledges! The Major’s thar, waitin’ fer us with the other two dawgs. We shoved fer your canyon as soon as Ruler didn’t give tongue, fer I knew the Black Panther was hyar and there’d be doin’s.”

“Sure was!” grinned Scotty. “But now that he is properly abolished, the Major ought to be able to smooth the Indians down all right. He can keep his word about the Black Panther coming no more, now.”

Sid was the last to leave the little cliff dwelling. It was with a feeling of sadness that he turned away. The place had become tragic, the tomb of a noble beast that had been a notable character, in his way. Like the Indian, Sid inwardly begged his pardon for their having had to kill him. This cliff dwelling would be his fitting monument. He belonged here, in the silence and mystery of an ancient and changeless land. For countless ages the cougar, the bear, the wolf, and the deer had lived with the red men of this country, generation after generation, century after century. They were part of it all, together with the desert sun and the clouds and winds. Life, as it was lived here, had become a settled, stabilized thing long, long ago. The White Man was an intruder; he could take it or leave it as he chose; but he could not alter it, by one jot or tittle.

Sid did not wish to alter it. The desert, the canyon, and all their inhabitants suited him.

“This is my country!—These are my people!” he whispered to himself.

“Ethnology for mine! Practical ethnology. I’ll begin with Major Hinchman for a guide. Some day, when all this blows over, I’ll come back up here and get those pottery treasures from the Old People’s pueblo.”

Sid turned for a last look as they reached the point near the cleft from which Big John had fired. Silent, mysterious, inscrutable as eternity, the walls of the cliff dwelling nestled under its great overarching cave. Old as the centuries, typical of this country and of the spirit that broods over its changeless canyon and desert, it had acquired a new dignity, it locked a new secret in its walls, for it was now the tomb of the Black Panther of the Navaho, and over it hung the sable majesty of Death.

He turned to the cleft, where all was sweating activity.

“Easy with Ruler, thar, Scotty!” Big John was bellowing from a precarious footing on the lower ledge. “The Colonel will skin me alive ef we drap him. We starts across for the Big Crack, to-night, boys. Let me git that white hoss atween my knees jest onct more—an’ ye don’t git me up no cliffs ag’in, nohow!”

