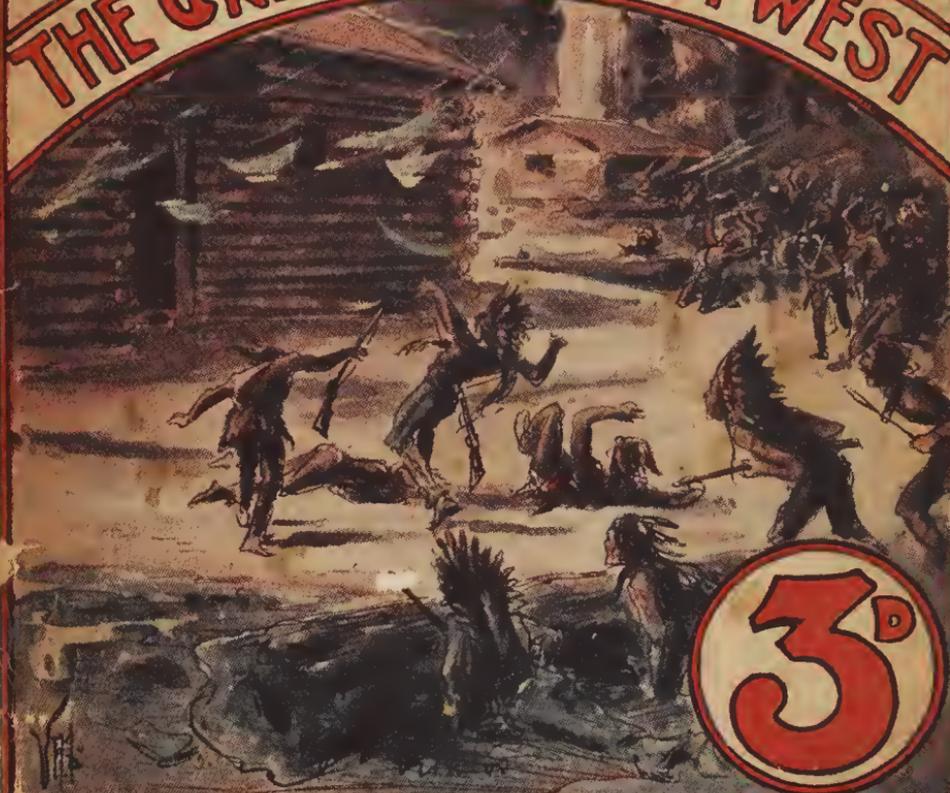




THE GREAT NORTH-WEST



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THE GREAT NORTH-WEST.

A Tale of British Grit in Canada.

By DAVID GOODWIN.

CHAPTER 1.

The Owner of McLeod's.

"HEAD 'em to the right, Ben! Look out they don't stampede at the creek. Ride round the flank!"

Vivian Charters shouted at the top of his voice to make himself heard above the thunder of hoofs. His ehun, Ben Wainwright, set spurs to his mount, and galloped round the far side of the herd of long-horned steers that were rushing across the Calgary plain.

A glance at the two boys was enough to show they were British, and not Canadian, born, yet they looked as much at home in the cowboy stock-saddles as if they had been all their lives on the prairies.

Bred to the saddle in the Old Country, and always living the life of the open, they were the two most popular youngsters on McLeod's Ranch, which lay a mile in front across the rolling grass country, with the dun blue line of the Rockies far beyond. Vivian had a job there as boy horse-wrangler, and Ben turned his hand to everything he was wanted for. They had been sent out that morning to round up a score of neat cattle on the outer grazing-grounds, and were now bringing them in in style, and doing it as simply and easily as if they had been in the West five years instead of a few months only. But they had been put through a hard time of it first, and more than once had come near starving.

Vivian was the grandson of Mr. Weldon Charters, a wealthy squire, and owner of racehorses in Wiltshire. Vivian had spent all his days among bloodstock, riding tricky two-year-olds and jumpers. He had yet to meet the horse he could not master. Ben Wainwright was a farmer's son on the estate of Charters Grange, and Vivian's life-long friend. He had thrown in his lot with the squire's grandson and came with him when Vivian left the life of riches and luxuries behind for the hardships and adventures of the Great North-West.

"We haven't been long roundin' up this lot, Vivian," said Ben, as the two pulled their horses side by side again. "Fletcher'll be pleased all to pieces. Things are busy at the ranch. I say," he added, with a glance at the rolling white-rimmed eyeballs of Vivian's horse, "old Red Fiend looks out of temper this morning."

"He's all right," said Vivian, laughing.

"He behaves mighty well with you. But I'd be sorry to throw lee over him, even now you've got him in hand."

"You'd better not try it: We understand each other, and I'm afraid he'd chew the head off anyone but me."

Vivian was riding a great, raking, long-striding, yellow plug, a magnificent horse to look at and to go, and famous all over the plains. He was known as the Red Fiend, and had killed several men in his time, and crippled more. An enemy had given Vivian the task of riding him, hoping

to see the boy killed. And Vivian very nearly was killed too, but by luck and pluck, and an amazing inborn genius he had for understanding and mastering a horse, Vivian had got the better of him.

Since that day Red Fiend had become strangely devoted to the boy, and allowed Vivian to ride him, though it was as much as any other rider's life was worth to try. Ben himself was mounted on a stocky grey broncho. He was a good rider, too, but not in the same grade as his chum. Ben's great ambition was to be a "roper," and throw the lariat. He had a very good knack at it for a beginner, and had been practising hard for months, on the quiet. He was already a fair hand at the game, to the envy of Vivian, who could not come near him in skill, practise as he would.

"Hallo! Here's Jack Innes and Slim Jim comin' out to meet us," said Ben, as they neared the ranch. A couple of cowboys on wiry cayuses came galloping and whooping over the plain, and, separating, closed in again at the back of the herd of steers.

"Turn this lot over to me an' Jack, boys!" cried Slim Jim, the tallest of the two. "We'll corral 'em. You've got to go right in an' see the boss. Old McLeod's there."

"Moset along, young 'uns!" said Jack Innes. "Guess there's trouble."

The cowboys took over the herd, and the two chums galloped on to the collection of log-huts and shacks by the great corral, wondering what they were wanted for. By the chief house stood Hank Fletcher, the "boss" of the ranch, a long, tough-looking man in a slouch hat; a bad enemy, but a good friend, and the latter the boys had found him. Talking to him was an elderly, grey-haired man, well dressed, on a splendid horse that had evidently never done any cowboy's work.

"Come on, kids!" cried Hank. "This is Mr. McLeod, the owner, an' he wants to see you. McLeod, these are the two. I don't mind sayin' I've never had a slicker pair, though Britishers from way back, an' they're worth their salt, both of 'em."

"Is your name Vivian Charters?" said the grey-haired stranger, turning a pair of keen grey eyes on Vivian rather sternly.

"Yes, sir."

"I have to speak to you seriously, Charters. I like your looks, and I have a good report of you from Fletcher. But there is something that must be cleared up. I am not absurdly particular, and this is a free country, where men who have fallen may make a start, as well as those who have never done wrong. But there are some things I would never forgive, nor keep in my employ anyone guilty of them. You have had an ugly charge made against you."

Vivian's lips tightened. He guessed what was coming.

"Them two kids is white clear through, McLeod. I'll swear to it!" broke in Fletcher. "There's nothin' in the yarn——"

"Enough, Fletcher; the boy must speak for himself!" He turned to Vivian. "It has reached me, Charters, that you left England in disgrace. You were accused of drugging a famous racehorse, Hotspur, in order to win a sum of money over a race, and this horse belonged to your own grandfather, Mr. Weldon Charters! A low-down bookmaker was mixed up in it with you, and though you were not prosecuted because you were a rich man's son, you were disowned and had to leave the country! If that is true, you could never work for me, nor on any ranch I control. What have you to say?"

Vivian had reddened to the eyes, but he lifted his head proudly and looked the ranch-owner in the face.

"It is true I was sent out of England, sir, and that I was accused of drugging the horse Hotspur. I do not deny that the evidence was black

against me. But the story—that I drugged the horse is a lie! I had no hand in it. I know now that it was done by a scoundrel named Jake Stride, a stableman of my grandfather's. And, though I hate to say it, my cousin Boyle Charters was in league with him, and they conspired to throw the blame on me. My grandfather believed them, and disowned me."

"Why should your cousin do this?" said Mr. McLeod, watching him.

"Because he wishes to get me disinherited, and to get my grandfather's property for himself when Mr. Weldon Charters dies," said Vivian bitterly. "This confederate of his, Jake Stride, has since followed me out here to Canada, and done his best to have me still further disgraced, for fear my grandfather might some day forgive me. It is only a fortnight since Ben and I were in the foothills with an Indian guide, Flying Cloud by name. Stride, for some reason of his own, stalked us and came into our shelter in the night, when we were sleeping. I do not know what he intended to do. But we caught him, and made him prisoner.

"The coward was so afraid of us, and especially of the Indian, that he confessed all the villainy that he had done against me, for he was afraid of his life. He owned up!"

"And that's true to the last word," put in Ben Wainwright, "for I was there!"

McLeod paused.

"You tell your story well," he said. "Strange as it is, it sounds to me like truth. But I am a man who takes nothing for granted. I suppose you have no proof of it?"

"I have the best of proof," said Vivian curtly; and slipping off the back of Red Fiend he turned into a corral enclosure by himself, and went into the little log cabin in which the boys lived. In a minute he came out with a small tarpaulin wrapper, from which he drew a strip of birch-bark, scrawled with writing.

"Here is Stride's confession, which we made him write and sign, when he was our prisoner."

McLeod took the strip of bark. The writing was an ill-spelt, scratchy scrawl. He read it over:

"i, Jake Stride, of Wilshire, England doe hereby confes that i drugged the oss Hotspur belongin to mister Weldon Charters, of charters granje, an put the blame on vivian charters, who was outed for it an sent to canada. an i have siuse done it down on vivian charters wenever i ad the charnse, that bein wot i'm paid for. i make this confeshun be-4 witnuses, this 10th day of jewly, 1907.

" 'signed; J. STRIDE.' "

McLeod's brow knitted as he read this rascally document through. He began to breathe hard.

"We made him write two copies of that and sign them," said Vivian. "He had hardly done it when a corporal of the North-West Mounted Police came on the scene, and took Stride in charge. He was glad enough to go. He didn't like our company, nor the Indian's, though, of course, we shouldn't have hurt the scoundrel. The corporal also took one copy of the confession for evidence, and has forwarded a duplicate of it to my grandfather in England. Stride is now in custody, and Mr. Weldon Charters now knows the truth!"

McLeod handed him back the confession, and held out his hand.

"Shake, my lad!" he said, with a sigh of relief. "You are a white man, as Fletcher said. You have been abominably treated, and thank goodness these villains will now get their deserts! You can leave the rest in the

hands of the police. Forgive me for having questioned you. I suppose you will now be leaving us, and going home to enter into your rights?"

"No, sir," answered Vivian, taking the hand held out to him. "Ben and I settled that long ago. We like the life out here better, and I seem to have rather lost my taste for England, after what has happened. I would rather have Red Fiend between my knees and the plains in front of me. I've good friends here."

"I am glad to hear it! You are the sort we want in the West, and I am delighted that you should remain on my ranch. I shall interest myself in you, and you will never regret taking your place on our ranch. We shall meet again, but I can stay no longer now, for I have to get to the rail and go east to Montreal at once. To our better acquaintance, lads!"

He shook hands with Ben as well, and, taking leave of Fletcher, left the ranch and rode off on the Calgary trail.

"Thank goodness that's all right!" said Ben fervently, looking after him.

"Blamed old fool!" growled Hank Fletcher under his breath. "It warn't no wish of mine, kid, for that old yarn to be raked up agin you. The boys all know you're straight goods. I run this ranch, an' I don't want no stone-the-sinners business on it from anybody about the fellers I hire."

"Well, I must say I think he might have left it alone," said Vivian, "even if I'd done what I'm charged with, so long as I'd worked well and kept straight here. This is a country where a man counts for what he is, not for what he was years ago. He's a stern hand, McLeod is; but I suppose he's right. You're a brick all the way, anyhow, Hank."

The two boys went to their quarters, and Ben shut the door.

"Are you sure you've got that confession in a dead safe place, Vivian?" he asked.

"This is good enough, isn't it?" said Vivian. He lifted up a loose flap of bark on one of the logs of the wall in the farther corner, where it was darkest. The bark was rounded, and sprang back into its place, a perfect fit, when released, for the hut was not built of spruce logs. "I found that by accident the other day, and it's the sort of place no one would suspect, let alone find. It holds the strip all right."

He put Stride's confession behind the bark, and let the latter spring back into place.

"Yes, that's all right," said Ben "especially as Jake is in quod now. I expect we'll get word in a day or two that we've got to go into Calgary and give evidence against him at the Court."

"Yes, there's no fear of anyone interfering with it. It's rather rum we haven't heard from the police before. They've had him a fortnight. I suppose they're getting up their case," said Vivian, and the two chums left the hut together. They were hardly outside when they saw a strange figure approaching them—a redskin, riding on a wiry Indian pony, with a rifle slung across his back. He was a fine-looking, hawk-faced young brave of the Cree tribe, though strangely pale and washed-out in appearance at that moment, and he held himself very stiffly in the saddle. His face lighted up and he gave a guttural grunt when he saw the boys.

"How!" he said, riding up and holding out his left hand.

"Why, it's Flying Cloud!" cried Vivian in delight, shaking the Indian's hand, and Ben greeted him warmly.

The stranger was a Cree brave, who, a fortnight before, had been with them on a hunting expedition in the foot-hills; indeed, Flying Cloud was the very man who had helped the boys to capture Jake Stride, and get

the confession out of him, which Vivian had shown to McLeod. They had sworn friendship when they parted, for the boys had found the young Indian to be one of the best of fellows.

"Where have you blown in from, Flying Cloud?" exclaimed Ben.

"I come ask you," said the Cree, "if you know that heap bad paleface we catch in the wood—how you call him?"

"Stride?"

"Yes, that his name. Do you know if he still in prison?"

"Why?" said Vivian quickly.

"Because someone tell me he been seen on the plains. Perhaps got away. I would gone to see if could. But no could go."

"Stride out of prison!" exclaimed Ben. "No fear! They've got him in Calgary. He could never escape from the Mounted Police. No fear!"

"You sure?"

"We haven't heard anything since he was arrested an' taken away," said Vivian; "but it's a sure thing he's safe in quod."

"That all right, then. I not think it could be true. But I thought best come to tell you. He plenty bad mau."

Flying Cloud broke off suddenly, and swayed in his saddle. The next moment his eyes closed, and he lurched right out of it, and would have fallen if the boys had not caught him.

CHAPTER 2.

Ben Tries His Skill.

"HE'S hurt!" exclaimed Vivian, as they laid him gently on the grass. "There's something wrong with him—I thought he looked jolly bad! Poor old chap! Here, let's see——"

"Hallo, sonnies, what have ye got there?" said Ohio, the tall American horse-wrangler, who was one of the best hands on the ranch, coming forward and stooping over the Indian. "Is this Cree galoot a friend o' yours? I take no Injuns in mine." He examined the fallen man. "Why, he's been shot!"

The clothes around Flying Cloud's shoulder were caked with dried blood. He was evidently badly hurt.

"Bullet-wound clean through the shoulder," said Ohio, slitting the cloth with his knife. "Two or three days old, too! He's in a tidy fever. These Injuns are mighty tough—a white man'd ha' keeled over sooner."

"Poor chap! I wonder how he got it?" said Ben pityingly.

"In some scrap with the Bloods, I reckon. They an' the Crees are pi'son to each other. They're always havin' turn-ups among 'emselves, an' not all the Mounted Police can keep 'em in order."

"He'll not be able to get away till that's healed up," said Vivian. "Lift him an' bring him in, Ben. We'll make up a bed for him, and look after him till he's better."

"What, in your shack there?" said Ohio.

"Rather. He's a friend of ours, and he did us a good turn once. We owe him a lot."

"You're a couple of derved young fools!" said Ohio. "It's more than I'd do—I'd as soon have a mountain cat in my hut. Injuns is pi'son. You'll be sorry for it."

He helped the boys to carry Flying Cloud in, however, and they made him comfortable. Ohio said he would very likely remain in a trance for a long time, and it was the best thing for his wound.

"Good job if ho never comes round at all," he added. "Cress is safest when they're underground." He went out with the boys, and they were met by Hank Fletcher.

"Who have you got in there, kids?" said the boss.

Vivian explained, and Fletcher went in and had a look at the wounded Cree.

"D'ye know who he is, or anything about him?" he said, when he came out again.

"His name is Flying Cloud."

"Flying Cloud? Why, a Blood brave that was up at the corral, the other day, told us that a Cree named Flying Cloud had murdered a medicine-man of theirs—a chap called Frog-Foot—an' they were layin' for him!"

"Murdered!" cried Vivian.

"That's what the Injun said. I guess I take no interest in redskins' scrapes."

"How is it the Mounted Police ain't after him, then?" said Ben.

"Dunno. Don't seem as if they are. I don't think they've heard of it. There's a sight more Injuns wiped out in private fights than ever they know of, slick though they are. An' a good thing, too—the more the better."

"I don't believe he did it!" said Vivian hotly. "Flying Cloud is too good a chap to be a murderer!"

Fletcher laughed sourly.

"O' course, it may ha' been a square fight. But Injuns don't fight square, as a rule."

"I'm going to look after him, anyhow, and when he's better he'll tell me," said Vivian, looking troubled. "You don't mind his being there, Hank?"

"I guess not," said Fletcher carelessly. "It's nothin' to me if you like to take the chance. Say, get your grub, kids, and then go out after them calves on the Creek Bottom."

The boys were kept busy all the afternoon and well into the evening. When they turned in, they found Flying Cloud still lying quiet and unconscious in the hut.

"I'm blessed sorry to see him like this," said Ben; "we can't do anything till he comes round. The wound won't kill him, but it's an ugly one."

"I'm hanged if I believe he's a murderer, unless I hear it from his own lips," said Vivian, with a sigh. "Ohio says all Indians are liars; but I don't believe the Cloud will lie to me. It would be a ghastly business giving him up to the police. I—I'm blessed if I could do it."

"Don't worry about it till you know how the land lies," was the sensible advice of Ben; and they both went to their truckle-beds and slept like the dead till morning.

When they turned out, the Cree was still asleep, and would not waken, but he looked a trifle better and less feverish. There was nothing to be done but wait, and the boys set about their morning tasks of roping the horses in the corral, and getting wood from the creek-side.

After breakfast, which was a merry meal in which all the rauchers joined, the boys went about their business. The only cowboy who was late for the meal was Jack Innes.

They saw him riding in from the flat plain to the eastward just after dinner. Innes had charge of the beef herd, and he was then driving in a couple of steers and a well-grown bull calf, bound for the cattle corral. The McLeod outfit usually killed and ate its own beef.

Ben had gone over to tend his horse, which was hitched to the fence some little way along, while most of the men were still at dinner in the

shed. He heard a burst of laughter, and some chaff, and, turning his head, saw that Jack Innes was having trouble with the "bceef."

As a cowboy, Jack Innes needed no teaching from any man under the sun, but the two steers and the bull calf were giving him all he could do to corral them single-handed. They were in a skittish mood, and as wild as hawks, and just as he was managing the other two satisfactorily, the bull calf gave him the slip, and galloped away across the open ground as fast as it could tear, making for the prairie again.

"Durn the brute!" cried Jack. "Say, head him off again, oue o' you! My hoss is about done!"

Most of the ranchers were laughing too much to give any help, and Ben was the only oue near his horse. He sprang into the saddle, and galloped away after the calf, amid roars of laughter from the onlookers.

Ben came across the calf's path about twenty feet or more behind it, but though he spurred along hard he found that his cayuse, spent by the morning's work, could only keep up at the same pace. He could not overhaul the calf half an inch, for the latter was flying along at a surprising pace, tail in the air. There was thus no chance of heading the calf off, at any rate.

The shouts of laughter behind made Ben determine grimly that he would have that calf somehow. He unslung the lariat that hung at his saddlehorn.

Dare he use it, with the whole ranch looking on? He had never made any attempt to take down his rope in public before.

All his practising on horseback had been done out of sight down the river bottom, and he alone knew what good practice he had made with the rope during those weeks. But to rope that flying calf was no joke for a comparative novice. It would be awful to bungle it in front of the entire McCod outfit. The very thought made Ben blush hotly.

But the storm of ironical cheers and chaff as Ben seized his lariat determined him to do or die. The loug coils went whirling round his head, and away went the rope, whizzing out like a snake.

Ben was flustered and worried when he made the throw, and for that reason it failed, though not badly. The noose fell across the calf's back, and in a moment had slipped off him, and the beast went careering away without a check, kicking up his heels as if in derision.

The boy swerved, and gathered up the rope skilfully as he galloped on. Not another thought did he give to what was happening behind him. This time there was no mistake.

The noose spun swiftly over the calf's head and neck, the cayuse turned and braced himself with all four feet together. There was a surge, a heave, and a tremendous shock as the calf went rolling over with the noose drawn tight.

"Gee!" yelled Jack Innes, galloping up at full speed on a borrowed horse. "Kid, you did that like a rancher! Keep him short. I'm on to him!"

Jack quickly relieved Ben of the calf, and brought it back to the corral, and Ben rode in feeling as if it was the moment of his life. The ranchers rose to their feet and whooped their approval till the very bluffs rang to it.

"Great snakes," said Ohio, "but you've learned that game quicker'n any cuss I've seen for a year or two! Kid, you did that mighty well! I don't care who hears me say it! Gee, but you'll be no slouch at a rope in six months' time! You've got the straight eye!"

"Uncommonly well done, Waiuwright!" said Slim Jim. "A pretty bit of

roping and riding, and for a beginner I've uever seen anything more creditable!"

Jack Innes, as soon as he had corralled the calf, came over to the shed with a glowing face.

"Wasn't I right, fellers?" he exclaimed. "Didn't I say the kid'd learn to heave a lariat quicker'n any young 'un on this yer continent? Ben, I'm proud o' yer! Shake on it, pard! You've done me credit!"

Jack Innes was as absurdly proud of his pupil's prowess as any hen with a single chicken. He was getting on his hind legs to make another speech about the superiority of the subjects of the Union Jack over all others, when one of the horse-wranglers out of the shanty gave the boys a hail.

"Say, kids, here's your pet Injun comin' to life! Guess he wants you."

Vivian made a bolt for the log cabin at once, with Ben close at his heels. The boys were brimming over with eagerness to see how their patient was doing, and besought the ranchers not to come till they saw how things were going.

Vivian stepped quickly and quietly into the hut, his eyes seeking the bed. The Indian was still lying motionless, but his face was lit now by a pair of wide-open, piercing black eyes, which made him look handsomer than ever. They rested on the boys, and a single keen glance took them both in from head to foot.

"I'm thundering glad to see you in your senses again!" said Vivian earnestly, bending over him. "We were beginning to fear you wouldn't wake up again. How do you feel? Can you talk?"

The Indian nodded, his eyes fixed intently on Vivian, but he did not seem able to speak.

"Scoot off and get some broth, Ben," said Vivian; "he must be weak as a crow, poor chap!" Ben was already speeding away to the shed, and soon came back with some good thick broth that the beef had been stewed in for dinner. Ben put it to the Indian's lips, and he drank it down to the last drop, and gave a sigh of content.

"You bring me here?" he said, in a low, quiet voice, and in very fair English.

"Yes: that's all right, old man," said Vivian. "Don't you worry. You've been mauled a bit, but you're coming along like steam. We'll look after you. An' you're quite safe here."

The Cree, without a word, stretched out a thin, muscular hand from beneath the blanket, and both the boys shook it solemnly.

"You heap good men," said the Indian. "I remember you save my life once before. Now you help me when I wounded. Where uow—here?"

"You're in our log cabin at McLeod's ranch," said Ben, "an' you'll stay here till you're fit an' well."

The Cree turned to the up-ended packing-case that served as a table beside the trestle-bed, and he took in his fingers a branch of sumach willow with the leaves on that Vivian had brought in to brush away the flies from his patient. Flying Clond broke off a tiny twig, and snapped it in two halves.

"See," he said, with grave courtesy, "this is sumach-wood—sacred tree of my tribe. Heap good tree. Watch now."

He picked up Vivian's penknife, which lay open on the packing-case, and with it made a quick incision in his bare, supple arm. He dipped the twig into the blood and made a sign on his flesh which the boys could not mistake. It was an admission that he was a murderer!

CHAPTER 3.

Flying Cloud's Story.

VIVIAN was staggered. He had absolutely refused to believe that the red-skinned hunter was guilty of the murder they charged him with. Flying Cloud was still under the care of the boys, and to hear him calmly confess to the crime was horrifying.

"You did it!" exclaimed Vivian helplessly. "You own up to it!"

"Surely Flying Cloud did it," said the Cree, almost proudly. "Yet it no very good thing," he added; "a Cree brave should not boast of killing carrion. He was a Blood, and I spit upon their name—all of them!"

He suited the action to the word, with bitter disgust.

"We were told you murdered the chap," growled Beu, "and we wouldn't believe it. But now——"

"It is nothing," said the wounded Indian, with a wave of his thin hand. "He was only dirt—no more. You did not believe it? Yes, I kill Frog-Foot, the medicine-man. He was brother to the trapper they call Beaver-With-One-Eye."

"Great guns!" said Ben to his chum. "That's the beggar who stalked us once, when we were sleeping, up in the woods! He was a Blood, you know. The one who tried to knife you, Vivian."

The boys had once had an encounter with a Blood Indian, up-country, and remembered it only too well.

"Look here," said Vivian to the Indian, "we want to hear more about this. We've got you in our charge right here, you see, and I think we've a right to know. I don't harbour mur——" He stopped short. "We want the truth out of you, Flying Cloud."

"You wish I tell you the story?" said the Cree simply. "Ver' good, then, you shall hear. I loug try to forget it—but I tell you."

He paused for a moment, and then turned his dark eyes on Vivian.

"One year ago," he said, "Flying Cloud was a great hunter, and have much honour in Cree tribe. Shoot, wrestle, or ride better than the chief. He live in the saddle or among the woods, and very happy all time. Fear no man or beast.

"Then he take a wife—young squaw, prettiest in all the tribe. The Marmot, we called her. I gave old chief plenty skins for her, and two good ponies. She love Flying Cloud, and we plenty happy. No care for anybody else. We lived in fine tepee of our own up head of Running Fox River, and Flying Cloud hunt and fish and go into camp to wrestle with the young braves for prizes, and we do plenty well.

"One day when I out hunting this dog Frog-Foot come to my tepee"—the Cree's eyes flashed fiercely—"and speak fair to the Marmot. He always wait her before I marry her. She not like him—no care for dog of a Blood, who enemies of our tribe—and tell him to go. He would not go, but when I come back he see me and run.

"Many days after he come more times, and Flying Cloud set out to catch and punish him. He went away to his own country. But one day, when I was in the hills shooting elk, he come back and he steal my little squaw, the Marmot. He take her by force, lifting her on his horse, and he ride away down the ranges."

The Indian's eyes seemed to be like glowing coals as he told his story.

"I come back from hunting, and find the Marmot gone. I see the tracks of Frog-Foot and of his horse, and I know well what happen. So I swear that it shall be his life or mine, and I ride out upon his trail. Day and night I ride, never stopping.

"Frog-Foot find that I come after him, and, leaving his first halt, he ride

and ride, with the Marmot bound before his saddle. He dare not face Flying Cloud. So hard he ride that his horse die, and he go forward on foot. He try to make the Marmot run with him, but she would not go—she hate him. So, knowing I was not far behind on his trail, he kill her and escape to the mountains. He kill her with his knife, and hasten on alone, for fear she help me find him. The coward knew I never rest till I catch him. He kill the Marmot, and run for his life.”

Flying Cloud passed his hand over his eyes for a moment.

“I find her—and then I go on. There not land or water enough in all this country to hide Frog-Foot from me! I leave my horse, and follow him on foot among the mountains.

“On the third day I find him—asleep beneath a bush, for he could go no farther. It was the end of Frog-Foot, the Blood medicine-man! He pay with his life the wrong he had done me! You no think that just, white men?”

“You mean you shot him where he lay!” said Ben.

“Wah! A Cree does not kill his enemy sleeping!” said Flying Cloud, with scornful pride. “He does not need. I struck him with my rifle, and woke him. I held him covered. He had his gun, too, but he no reach it. Then I tell him we both put our rifles away, and fight the fight standing up with our hunting-knives.

“Frog-Foot agree. He stand up and face me, both with our knives, and we fight. But Frog-Foot was a Blood, and a coward. He jump back, out of my reach and draw a pistol. I had no pistol, but he fire at me, thinking to kill me. He shoot me through the shoulder—you see here the scar bullet made, both sides. Then I run in upon the coward, and we fight breast to breast—and I killed him!”

Vivian drew a long breath. The boys looked at each other, and then back at Flying Cloud.

“I go then away,” said the Indian. “My wound very bad, and three days I lie in cave. The Shermogonish come—the white policemen-riders from Calgary—but they say nothing. They not know. That is my tale, and I speak the truth.”

The boys stood by him silently for some time. Vivian was the first to move, and he signed to Ben to come outside the hut.

“Ben,” said Vivian, when they were alone, “that—was no murder. It was a fair fight, at the worst.”

“Not even fair,” broke out Ben; “for the other fellow tried to shoot him! Can you blame Flying Cloud for what he did? Remember, he’s a savage, and——”

“Would a white man have done any less?” exclaimed Vivian. “Think of the awful wrong that cowardly Blood did him!”

“Murdered the poor chap’s wife!” said Ben. “Is a Red Indian the sort of man to go and complain to the police about a thing like that? He hunted the scoundrel down, of course, and made him fight, and the right man won. I can’t see that it’s our affair, Vivian. Who are we that we should judge him? But still——”

Vivian strode back into the hut.

“Flying Cloud,” he said, “we believe what you’ve told us——”

“I am a Cree brave, and speak truth,” said the Indian proudly. “I am not a Blood, who lies.”

“And I don’t know how we could blame you for what you did,” continued Vivian; “even if we’d a right to judge.”

“I don’t see that a man like Frog-Foot is any loss,” growled Ben; “and if his brother the Beaver had had his way, you’d be underground yourself

now, Vivian. They're both murderers. Flying Cloud isn't one—he's a warrior. We aren't living in Wiltshire now, remember."

"But see here," said Vivian to the Indian, "you killed Frog-Foot, and you were justified. So why not give yourself up to the police and stand your trial? You'd be a free man then, with no shadow over you. There isn't a jury in all Canada that would find you guilty for what you did. It's justifiable homicide. You understand, don't you?"

"Give myself up!" said the brave scornfully. "What for? Why should I answer to the white police. If they want me I am here; let them take me!"

"They don't seem to want him, you know," said Ben, aside, to Vivian.

"It is not for Flying Cloud to go and eringe to the white men," said the Cree, raising himself on his elbow. "See! Once all this country belonged to us—the hunting and warrior tribes! My people were chiefs of it. Now I give fealty to the Great White King beyond the seas, and him I honour. But I claim still the right to take a stroug man's vengeance, and to kill in fair fight the man who comes like a thief and murders my wife, and robs me of all I have! If the white man's law could not stop Frog-Foot from doing me that wrong, then it is my right to deal with Frog-Foot without the law's leave."

The boys felt almost awed. There was something majestic about the savage brave as he told them his creed—the old, wild law of the forest and the prairie. It was impossible to think of Flying Cloud in the prisouer's dock with a lawyer to speak for him.

"Flying Cloud," said Vivian, "you must have it your own way. "And if I'd been in your place, I think I'd have done what you did. You're a man—and I liked you from the first."

"Wah!" said the Indian simply. "That is well, for I owe you my life. But I no murderer. You take my hand to show you trust Flying Cloud, or I leave your hut, though I have to erawl away."

"There's my fist on it!" said Vivian heartily; and they both shook hands with the young Cree.

"We friends to the death," said Flying Cloud, sinking back. "My life is yours. And see, I show you many things. I shall be to you as another pair of eyes."

"Good, old chap!" said Ben. "And I reckon we're very likely to want all the help you can give us. We've enuemies who'd like well enough to see us stretched out."

"Your enemies are mine," said the Indian; "all the Cree tribe your friends. Flying Cloud need only say the word. Even the beasts of the forest shall be on your side. I show you what I mean when I can go on my feet again."

"We'll be jolly glad of you," said Vivian. "And, by the way, the brother of Frog-Foot—"

"Beaver-With-One-Eye?"

"Yes. He's not exactly a pal of ours. He tried to knife me once."

"Is it so?" said Flying Cloud fiercely. "Wait a little, and you shall see."

"But look here, no more killing!" said Vivian hastily. "I'm not going to have you going after What's-his-name's scalp on our account. You drop that, Flying Cloud, if you're to be a friend of ours."

"Wah!" said the Indian simply. "As you wish. But let him beware how he comes across my path—or yours. Now tell me about your enemies—who is the other?"

"Not now, old man," said Ben; "you're weak, and you've talked too much already. Mop up this bowl of broth, an' then go to sleep. You've

had a narrow shave of pegging out, and we don't want you going into a fever."

The chums went out, closing the door quietly, for the wounded man, exhausted, had sunk to sleep again.

"That's fixed!" said Vivian. "We stand by Flying Cloud, first, last, and all the way. And he stands by us, too."

"I agree," returned Ben. "He'll be as staunch a pal as any chap out here could want. I hope he won't get out of hand, though; you never know what those fellows will do if they get an idea into their heads."

"I'll back him against any Blood that ever wore feathers, anyhow," answered Vivian. "And now let's get to horse; they want us for the second round-up."

"Hi, kids!" cried Hank Fletcher, riding up to them. "I'll have to send you both out to Copper Flat, forty miles up the river. There's a batch of dry cows up there been on the high grazin' grounds, an' your job is to round 'em up, an' bring 'em into the Copper Flat Corral, an' then bring 'em along down here next day. You'll find Sam Stephens in charge there. He'll help you cut 'em out. Take three days' grub an' your blankets, an' git!"

"Right!" said Vivian, and he set about making preparations at once. One was expected to hustle at McLeod's Rance. "I say, what about Flying Cloud?" he exclaimed in dismay. "He's fit for nothing yet. Who'll look after him while we're gone?"

"Oh, pile him on to me!" said Ohio. "I'll see to the cuss. Don't you worry about him, kids!"

It was just like Ohio. Though he affected to scorn "Injuns," Britishers, and Canadians, and used the most lurid language about them, the tough-looking rancher had a heart of gold, and the boys knew Flying Cloud would be well tended by him. They thanked him gleefully, and an hour afterwards bade au revoir to the patient, and set out on their journey to the North.

CHAPTER 4.

The Watchers on the Prairie.

"**T**HAR 'e goes—the young swab! He'd be only a fair rifle-shot from 'ere!"

The speaker was Jake Stride, ex-stableman from Wiltshire, a lean, shift-eyed man of thirty-six, with a scar on his temple. Beside him lay a thick-set native-born, whose face was tanned the colour of oak bark. The pair of them were lying behind a juniper-bush that capped the edge of a bluff, overlooking the rocky plains beyond Copper Flat.

Their eyes were following a solitary horseman nearly a mile away, loping gently along over the scrub. The horseman was Vivian Charters. He had made the journey out to Copper Flat with his chum, and to his sorrow had had to leave Red Fiend behind, for the famous yellow plug for once was out of sorts. Vivian was riding a sorrel broncho—a good horse, but nowhere near the class of Red Fiend.

Jake Stride's face was not a pleasant sight as he watched the boy in the distance. His companion, whose name was Clem Watson, peered through the bush and spat.

"Guess you're right. A bullet'd fetch him from here. Wonder you ain't given him one long before this! That'd be a quicker way o' settlin' with him."

"Them ain't my orders," growled Stride. "I'm takin' enough risks

without puttin' my 'ead in a noose! All the same, you're right. An' so I've told the chap that sent me out 'ere. I'd do it if I got my price! An' I reckon it'll come to that soon!"

"I guess you'd see yourself gettin' even with him for catchin' yon the way he did up the foot-hills—him an' that cub Ben Wainwright an' the Injuu," said Clem. "Mighty slick the way they got that confessiou out o' you!" he added grinning.

Stride cursed under his breath.

"An' talkin' o' risks, I guess I took enough myself that trip," continued Watson, "passin' myself off for a Mounted Police corporal, an' marchin' you off under arrest!" he chuckled to himself.

"You was paid for it!" growled Stride. "It's wot we agreed you was to do if I got into a mess!"

"You got into the mess all right, pard! When I see you through my glasses, caught by them three and tied to a tree, I knew I'd got to do my part," grinned Clem. "Lucky I'd got that corporal's uniform on the pack pony! I've had it ever since I deserted from the corps up Winnipeg way two year back. I slipped into it quick, and came an' arrested you—an' lucky it was they didn't spot me for a sham! Ho, ho! Led you off a blamed prisoner, an' got the confession you'd written out into the bargain for evidence. It waru't a bad bit of buncoing! An' they think you're in Calgary Gaol now!"

"They've got the other copy o' the confession, though!" snarled Jake. "An' there's no safety for me while that's in their 'ands!" He shook his fist in the direction of Vivian, now disappearing over the skyline. "They may find out any time that I'm not in quod at all! What about McLeod's Rauch? Ain't you found out nothin' about wot they've been doin' there?"

"Yes, I have," said Clem quietly. "Guess I know where that bit o' birch bark you want is hid, too."

"You do?" cried Jake, with an oath. "You never told me!"

"I'm goin' to tell you now. Ain't there somethin' movin' in that bush over the creek?" He suddenly turned, and stared hard across the wide gully.

"It's nothin' but a prairie-dog!" interrupted Stride impatiently. "There's nobody within a mile of us! Where's that copy o' the confession? Where is it? Did you see it?"

"Not me! I was smellin' round there while the kids was away in my uniform, though careful the ranchers didn't see me. But a half-breed there who helps the cook told me where it is in the kids' log-hut. An' nobody'd find it, unless they knew the spot. I didn't get a chance to go after it. I tried to sound the half-breed about gettin' it for me, but he wouldn't. He's scared o' them boys, an' they're popular in the rauch, too. A feller who did 'em down would get lynched if he was caught. Would you like to have a try for the thing yourself?"

"No, I wouldn't! I'm supposed to be in jail, an' if I was seen it'd be all up! But I must have that confession, Clem!" Stride's eyes gleamed excitedly. "You'll get it for me?"

"Dunno as I care for the job! I'm goin' to hop over the border soon as I can. Nice thing for me if I was caught by the Mounted Police—an' me a deserter from them, too! Showin' up in uniform, an' pretendin' to be one of 'em! It'd be my finish!"

"I've got to have that confession back at any cost! Clem, I'll give you £30 to get it!"

"Say £50, an' I'll have a try—nothin' less! Two hundred and fifty dollars cold!"

"It's all the money I've got till my bloke sends me some more from England. But you shall have it, Clem. Only get me that strip o' bark! We'd best see about it quick!"

"Let's go, then! Are you comin' down, too?"

"I'm not goin' nearer than two or three miles from the ranch. I'll stop at Bitter Creek, an' wait there till you come back. Now's the very time—while them two young swabs are up here on the Flat. We'll have that confession now, or break!"

The two rascals left the gully, for Vivian Charters was now out of sight, and hurried away southwards at their best pace.

A boy's face peered over the bushes on the far side of the gully. It was the square, dogged countenance of Ben Wainwright. His eyes followed the two men as they departed, and he looked the picture of amazement and consternation.

"Great gloriaua!" he muttered. "Here's a precious mess!"

He watched the pair till they vanished, and then set out at a streaking run for the head of the gully. In a hollow by the edge of the stream, Ben's broncho was standing, fast by the bridle to a small cottonwood-tree. He unhitched the horse, jumped on its back, and spurred away over the lower plain as hard as he could go, on the trail of Vivian.

It took him half an hour's hard riding to catch up with his chum, from whom he had parted some time before. His shouts and gesticulations brought Vivian up short.

"Pull up!" cried Ben, hauling his broncho back on its haunches. "I've got rotten news, Vivian! Flying Cloud was right. Jake Stride is loose, an' I've just seen him!"

"What!" exclaimed Vivian, starting.

"I thought I spotted him out on the upper prairie, after you left me. I know the beggar too well. I hitched my horse, and stalked him. He was lying up, watching you. And what's more, there was a fellow with him—and it was that Mounted Police corporal that turned up and took Jake away after we caught him!"

"Are you dreaming, Ben?"

"I'm hanged if I didn't think I was at first! But there's no doubt of it. It was the same chap, only he was dressed in a red shirt an' shap trousers. He's no policeman at all—he's a sham! It was a put-up job, an' he must have been Jake's partner. He fooled us pretty badly!"

"Good heavens!" muttered Vivian. "How did he get that uniform? He must be a deserter or something! Then Jake was never taken to quod at all! I say, Ben, that copy of the confession we gave him? It's never been sent to England! My grandfather hasn't had it! Of course, they've destroyed it!"

"You've still got the other copy, though."

"Yes, and, by George, we must get back an' make use of it at once! I wish we were back at the ranch, I can tell you! Let's get there with the stock as quick as we can."

"What'll you do when you get there?"

"I don't know," Vivian said, between his teeth. "We must decide on that as we go. It's a bad look-out."

"Oughtn't we to find the Mounted Police, an' let them know?"

"I don't see that's going to do us much good!" Vivian frowned. He had been in trouble with the Mounted Police once, and, though it was no fault of his, he jibbed at the idea of having anything more to do with them than

he could help. "We'd better get our evidence again first, an' that's in the hut. I wonder what those two brutes are after? Did you hear what they said?"

"No—worse luck! I was too far off."

"Well, let's get these bothering cows together—they must be up here somewhere—and then light out for home."

As ill fortune would have it, it took the boys all the rest of the day to find and round up the stock they had been sent for, and horses and cattle were tired out when they reached the Copper Flat Corral. They had to turn in there for the night.

Sam Stephens, an elderly, slow, and silent stockman, was in charge at the corral, and he would have kept the boys there another day if he could. But they set out at dawn, driving the cattle before them; and perhaps they made rather more haste than even dry cows ought to have been put to. They hustled the herd along pretty briskly. But it was impossible to do the journey in less than two days, and it was noon on the second day when, with fresh horses but tired cattle, they rode into McLeod's, and handed the herd over.

"Hallo, kids!" said Ohio. "Your derved Iujan's all right! At least, he's better—worse luck! I was just thiukin' of poisoning him an' plauting him out!"

"You're a brick, Ohio!" said Vivian; and, thaukiug the rancher heartily, they put up their horses and hurried to the hut.

They found Flying Cloud there on the shake-down, weak and pale, still unfit to be moved, but with the fever gone out of him. He looked up, delighted to see the boys again; but Ben thought there was an uneasy gleam in his eyes, as if he were troubled about something.

"How, partners?" he said. "You ride long way, eh? Your friend, he beeu here to-day."

"Friend? Who?" said Vivian, wondering, for all the ranchers but a couple of half-breeds and the cook had beeu away in camp for two days.

"You get your paper all right, eh?" said the Indian.

"Paper! What paper?" said Ben. "Who's been here, Flying Cloud?"

"The Shermogonish—the corporal of the Mounted Police," said the Indian drowsily. "Same what arrest the bad man, Stride, after we catch him in the foot-hills."

"What!" cried Ben. "Has he been here?"

"Sure! He come in uniform, same as before. He say you send him. He come for paper—bit of birch-bark with writing that you take from Stride. He find it in log over there. I not know it was there. He take it, and say to me: 'You have to come to Calgary soon, and swear to it before the big white judge!' Then he nod to me, and say 'How?' and go away again."

Vivian gave a cry of dismay, and, springing to the hiding-place where he had put the package containing Jake's confession, lifted the loose flap of bark. The package was gone!

"We've been done!" cried Beu. "Some spy must have seen you put it there, Vivian, and told Stride! And he's sent that scoundrelly sham policeman down here while we were away to bluff us out, and get hold of it!"

"Great guns!" said Vivian, between his teeth. "I've lost the only proof I had against Stride and Boyle! The only proof of their villainy and my innocence!"

"Why didn't you stop the man?" cried Ben to the Indian.

"How could he?" said Vivian. "He can't move from his bed. And he thought the man was a Mounted Policeman, and had the right to do what he did. When was this, Flying Cloud?"

"Last night—at twilight," said the Cree. "Was the mau an enemy, then?"

"Yes. He is in league with Stride! We have found he is no Shermogonish, but only a rogue in the uniform of one."

The Indian made a guttural noise in his throat.

"Flying Cloud is a fool!" he said bitterly. "If I had known he was stealing it, he should not have left the hut alive!"

"That confession is in Stride's hands again by now," said Ben savagely, "or will be before long!"

"And you have lost by it?" said Flying Cloud despondently. "I am disgraced to be such a heap fool. I was thinking you sent him. You take pistol and kill me. I deserve it. No more use, Flying Cloud!"

"Oh, don't worry about it, old chap," said Vivian kindly. "How were you to know? I don't care so very much, anyhow."

"But I do!" said Ben. "I'm not blaming the Indian, but I'd have lost a finger rather than Stride should get that letter back!"

"You value piece of paper very much?" the Cree asked.

"Yes, we do, and that's a fact! It's everything to Vivian," returned Ben. "Now that ruffian has pinched it, we shall never get it back. Stride will destroy it when he gets it. Perhaps the other will first. Anyhow, we're done!"

The Indian relapsed into silence, and the boys went out to get their meal, but not with much appetite.

"I'd sooner never have got it at all than lose it like this," said Vivian.

"But it's no use crying over spilt milk!"

"It's a wretched business!" growled Ben. "We're never likely to have such a chance again. It beats me how Stride could have known about it. He's a cleverer beast than we gave him credit for."

"Naturally he's clever enough. If he wasn't, I should never have been in this mess at all."

"You don't——" Ben began.

"What?" said Vivian, seeing him hesitate. "Out with it!"

"You don't think this Indian of ours could have anything to do with it? Whether he might have been in with Stride?"

Vivian was about to deny it hotly, but he pulled up short. It was a queer thing, surely, that the theft should have occurred while Flying Cloud was there, and also that no alarm should have been raised. Anybody must have seen that Stride was stealing the letter, and had no right there.

Everything that the ranchman had told him of the treachery and ingratitude of all Indians came up in Vivian's mind, and for some time his thoughts were rather black.

"Stride knew the Indian was here, that's certain," put in Ben. "It's a funny thing his partner should come and steal the letter in front of somebody else, unless he was in league with the man. Stride don't take risks, as a rule."

"It's no use guessing," said Vivian. "We oughtn't to believe Flying Cloud is such a scoundrel as to do a thing like that, when we've no proof to go on."

"He's wanted by the police, anyhow," muttered Ben, whose loyalty to Vivian came first at all times, "and we've only got his word for it that he oughtn't to be hung."

Vivian said no more, but he could not get the suspicion out of his mind. He said very little to Flying Cloud that night. The Indian himself was always strangely silent, but both the boys noticed that he looked far better and healthier than he had for the past two days, and could move freely on his bed.

"If the fellow's done me—and it looks precious like it," thought Vivian, as he rolled himself up in his blankets on the floor, for Flying Cloud still had his bed, "I've made a pretty thorough fool of myself. If he's really in with Stride—how do I know Stride hasn't made a compact with him this very day to put a knife into me while I sleep? What better chance?"

"Well, let him do it, if he wants to," said the boy to himself bitterly; and he almost meant it as he lay down. But in his heart he still cherished a lingering belief in Flying Cloud's honesty. "I'm about sick of him, and the whole lot of them."

It was some little time before he went to sleep, an unusual thing for Vivian. Presently, however, both the boys were slumbering, and the even breathing of the wounded redskin seemed to show that he was asleep, too. The dark hours wore on slowly, and only an occasional ueigh from the horse-corral broke the stillness.

Not till the clanging of the bell in the "grub-shed" announced the birth of a new day did either of the boys stir. Vivian was not surprised to wake and find himself alive, after all. The suspicions of the night before had passed out of his mind.

"Tumble out!" said Ben, struggling into his boots. "It's a long ride to-day. Hallo! Where on earth is the redskin?"

He lit a candle to dress by, for it was still dark in the cabin. To the astonishment of the boys, Flying Cloud's bed was empty. Vivian started to the door and looked out into the grey light of the dawn, his eyes scanning the ranch and the plain beyond.

"He's gone!" said Ben.

"By George, and my revolver's gone, too!" exclaimed Vivian, glancing at the peg where he had hung his pistol-belt with its leather holster.

"And my quirt," cried Ben, "and the cartridge-pouch, and the rifle! No; I left that with Jack Iunes yesterday. But the other things are all pinched!"

The weapons had been taken, without a doubt. They were the only portable things of any value in the hut. Ben's most cherished possession, a heavy double-thonged quirt, or whip of fine, plaited raw-hide, with a gold ring round the handle—given him by Ohio after winning a shooting bet with a Yankee—had vanished, too; also Vivian's hunting-knife. The Cree, they remembered, had no knife of his own; it had been left behind after the fight with the grizzly.

"You were right, Ben!" said Vivian, with a gulp. The treachery of it made him feel sick.

"The thieving, ungrateful seonudrel!" cried Ben fiercely. "The sneaking thief! I wish——"

"Thief! What thief?" said Ohio's voice; and the big stockman suddenly appeared in the doorway. "Ain't you kids coming to breakfast? Hallo, where's the Injnn?"

Neither of the boys could find a word to say to him.

"Gone, has he?" said Ohio, looking round the cabin. "Cured him already—eh? How many o' your traps has he taken with him?"

"All he could lay hands on!" cried Ben hotly. "Vivian's revolver and knife, and my quirt that you gave me, and——"

The big ranchman broke in with a hearty laugh. Louder and louder he laughed, till the chnms were almost as furious with him as they were with Flying Cloud. The bull-like bellows of laughter soon brought the other ranchers to the spot.

"Come on round, boys!" said Ohio to them. "Come an' take an early laff for an appetiser! The Injnn's cured. He's walked off with everything

he could carry, an' here's the two kids lookin' surprised! Act'ally lookin' surprised!"

The two boys thought they never heard a feebler joke in their lives. The confounded ranchers, however, seemed to think it funny. They woke the dawn with their laughter, and even the cook left his flesh-pots to come and join in.

"You seem to think yourselves beastly comie, don't you?" said Ben fiercely.

"Well, it's no good gettin' up on your car, kid," said Ohio, with a last, lingering chuckle. "You needed the lesson rubbed into you, an' the boys won't let you forget it, neither."

"I warned you that is jest what'd happen," said Jack Innes. "Maybe next time you'll believe what you're told, British. Next time you want a pet in the cabin get a rattlesnake, but leave Injuns alone."

"Come along to breakfast, an' then git to work," said Ohio, laying his hand on Vivian's shoulder, for the boy looked so dowcast that the rancher stopped laughing. "Guess that's the best 'cure for a broken heart, sonny. You'll learn in time. I can tell you, you're blamed lucky the son of a gun didn't take your boots as well!"

Without a word, the boys went to breakfast, and they ate that meal in dead sileuee; then they went off by themselves to rope and saddle their horses, Vivian taking the Red Fiend.

"I suppose," said Ben gloomily, as they rode out together to join the others, "he took the things because——"

"Look here," said Vivian savagely, "I don't want to hear another word about it! I won't hear the blackguard's name mentioned, and I never want to see an Indian again as long as I live! Now shut up about it, or we shall fall out!"

Ben nodded, for he quite understood how his chum felt. Nothing more was said about Flying Cloud, and the day passed in strong, heavy toil under the hot sun, cutting-out refractory three-year-old horses that were enough to try the patience of Job.

There was not much time to think about any grievances, but the memory of the Cree's ingratitude rankled all day in the boys' minds, and was still ranking when they rode home in the evening.

The boys got their meal at the grub-shed, after tending their horses and washing the dust off themselves, and then went to the hut. They did not feel in the mood to join in an evening sing-song with the rest of the ranchers, but were more inclined to turn in, and neither of them said much.

"You'll have your bed to-night, anyhow, old chap," said Ben, for they had been taking it in turns to sleep on the floor for the past week.

Vivian did not answer. He was staring out through the doorway into the fast-gathering twilight, when an exclamation of blank amazement passed his lips. He looked as if he had seen a ghost.

Ben followed his gaze, and he, too, was struck dumb. For, advancing towards the hut, dragging one foot behind the other, and looking quite dead beat, came Flying Cloud.

He staggered into the hut, pale and dust-covered, and sank down on an upturned packing-case.

"How?" he said huskily.

Neither of the boys could find their voices. They stared at him in amazement. He carried Ben's raw-hide quirt in one hand, and in his belt were stuck Vivian's revolver and knife. He searched in the pouches of his deerskin upper garment, and drew out an envelope which he laid on the bed before Vivian. It was the package containing Stride's confession.

"That what you lost?" said Flying Cloud simply.

CHAPTER 5.

Stride Resorts to Desperate Measures.

VIVIAN picked up the package mechanically, and let it drop again. Then he turned suddenly to the Indian, and held out his hand.

"Will you shake hands, Flying Cloud?" he said. "I feel such an utter skunk—"

"Why for?" said the Cree, in surprise, as he took Vivian's hand.

"Well, never mind. I simply haven't the face to tell you, old chap," said Vivian earnestly. "But you're the biggest brick going, and I'm a beast, and that's a fact!"

"And so am I," said Ben. "I own to it."

They both shook hands heartily with Flying Cloud, and looked ashamed of themselves. The Cree looked rather astonished, but they could not tell him they had thought him a thief.

"It all right now—eh?" he said.

"You've got us the package back!" exclaimed Vivian, seizing the missive and looking over the confession, which was intact. "Nothing could beat this! You're a wonder! I'd have given all I've got—which isn't much—for it! How in the world did you find it?"

"On the man who come to steal it," said Flying Cloud calmly. "I let him get paper from you, like a fool. Only right I get it back, you see? I leave last night while you sleep, and I go on trail of the thief."

"In the dark!" exclaimed Ben.

"Flying Cloud follow any trail, light or dark. All day I track him, and when the sun past noon I come up with him," said the brave calmly. "I find the man who came here. From him I take again the paper he steal."

Flying Cloud quietly took the knife and revolver from his belt, and laid them before Vivian.

"These I want no more now. I took them because perhaps I need them," said the brave.

"Good heavens!" said Vivian, changing colour. "You—you haven't killed him?"

"No," said Flying Cloud simply. "It would have been better. But you say not want me to kill while I live in your cabin. I take him in my bare hands—so, and I find on him the paper."

"My word!" said Ben. "Didn't he struggle?"

"Heap struggle," said the Cree calmly, "but no good. Hold him all same puppy dog. Take papers from his pocket. Throw away his weapons."

"Well done!" said Vivian. "He isn't—er—he isn't wounded, then? Not that I—"

"No," said Flying Cloud, handing Ben back his whip. "I give him this. You not want him killed—though I think he deserve to die. So I whack him till my arm can whack no more, and he run away in forest, howling. He get plenty, I tell you. I think he has left for the States. Had enough of Canada—yes!"

Vivian grinned.

"Glory!" shouted Ben. "If only I'd been there to see it! That brute Stride! And you jolly well larruped the hide off him, did you? Shake again, old cock! You win it, all the way!"

"You didn't see anything of Stride?" asked Vivian eagerly.

"No."

"My aunt! What a good thing the man hadn't reached him, nor even destroyed the confession. What a fool, too!"

Ohio stuck his head in at the door, and gaped helplessly as he saw Flying Cloud.

"Hallo, Ohio!" cried Vivian. "You're done! You made fools of yourselves all the lot of you! Look here!

"Our Injun just went off to bring us back the most valuable thing we owued, which we'd lost!" said Ben. "You can go and tell all the chaps to stick their heads in bags! Sec?"

"Well, I'm durned!" said Ohio, in astonished tones, and took himself off forthwith.

"Flying Cloud," said Vivian, "haug me if you're not white clean through—except your skin, and I'll bet you like that best the way it is. I don't know how to thank you!"

"No need," said the brave. "I gave you sign of the brotherhood in blood, and my life is yours, I told you."

"Well, you've paid it off twice over by this! I say, have some food. I'll get you a pot of broth and some meat at once. You look awfully done up. I hope you haven't damaged yourself."

"I all right," said Flying Cloud, though his face was the colour of dark ashes. "Was sorry to take so long coming back, but my wound open when I fight with the thief-man, and——"

"Good heavens!" said Ben anxiously. "Let's see! You ought never to have got up at all, Flying Cloud! And you did this for us, and your wound— Here, give us those bandages, Vivian! Go an' tell Jack Innes to come here at once!"

The Cree had suffered severely for the exertion he had taken, and he had borne it like a hero. His wound, nearly healed, had now to be redressed, and he was soon in a state of collapse. Jack Innes tended him carefully, but some broth and bread was all he was able to manage. He dropped into a sleep of utter exhaustion directly afterwards.

"This is a blame good Injun o' yours, British," said Jack Innes, "an' we're all sorry we said anything against him. A chap that would go on errands for you with a wound like his half-healed, has got sand in him. He'll have to lie a few more days now, but I guess he'll be a lot better in the morning."

"I hope he will be," said Ben seriously; "but he's not likely to come to any harm now. I say, Vivian, what about keeping that letter? It don't seem to be safe to hide it."

"No," said Vivian, stowing the package carefully in his inner breast-pocket. "I'm going to keep it on me, and never part from it day or night till I can take it into Calgary myself. I'll get leave and go to-morrow."

Flying Cloud was better in the morning, sure enough, and he seemed to have as much vitality as an eel. The day after he wanted to get up, but the boys made him swear on the blood-stained willow-twig that he would not move for two more days at least.

"You're much too good a pal for us to risk losing you," said Ben. "As soon as you're fit, we'll go on a regular expedition together, and we'll make things hum. Vivian, do you feel like riding down to the Divide with me? I want to practise a bit more roping on the steers—they're wild enough."

"I'll come," said Vivian. "It's no earthly good my trying to rope. I've practised hard enough, but I can't ever get the knack. I'll do a bathe in the river while you're roping."

It was a slack afternoon at the ranch, and the boys rode out with a couple of free hours before them. Red Fiend had been worked very hard the day before, so Vivian was on a sorrel broncho, while Ben rode his favourite cayuse.

They loped away, a couple of miles down from the ranch, making for the

Divide, where a thick belt of trees shut off a large, open bottom of land where several half-wild steers grazed. It was there that Ben practised his roping, a game he could never get enough of. Vivian, who felt very hot and dusty, left him to go ahead, tethered his own horse in the grove, and walked across the plain to the river, a few hundred yards distant.

"Blow it all!" said Vivian, as he scrambled down the bluff, and came in sight of the river. "No bathe to-day!"

The river was in flood. Heavy rains in the hills had sent down a great torrent, and the big pool where the boys usually bathed was now a raging cauldron, the water roaring breast-high over rocks and boulders that were dry at ordinary times.

It was disappointing; but to attempt to bathe in such a flood would have been idiotic, and Vivian retraced his steps, meaning to get his horse and join Ben. But as he approached the place he saw, to his annoyance, that the sorrel broncho was loose, and galloping far away over the plain, and just disappearing over a rise of ground.

Vivian shouted and gesticulated to Ben, who was in sight, but Ben could not see the horse, and was much too far off to hear or understand what was wanted of him.

"Confound it, I shall have to go all the way back on foot!" said Vivian. "How on earth could the beast have got loose? I tethered him safely enough. And that great thick-headed—Hallo!"

Like a flash a horseman came dashing out of the grove of trees. It was Stride, mounted on a swift black horse, and his eyes were fixed fiercely on the boy as he galloped straight down towards him.

Vivian had scarcely time to move or turn. In a moment the rider was upon him. His hand flew to his belt, and grasped his revolver, but before he could level it or fire, or even spring aside, the horse's knee struck him and dashed him to the ground.

The revolver was knocked flying out of Vivian's hand as he fell, half-stunned and helpless. Stride reined his horse back on its haunches, leaped from the saddle, and threw himself on Vivian before the boy could recover.

"Yer thought you'd won, did yer, you cub?" he snarled savagely, and with his knees on Vivian's chest he pinned the boy down, tore open his jacket, and plucked out of the inner pocket the cherished package.

Then, springing to his horse again, and vaulting into the saddle, Stride spurred away over the plain like a streak of light, leaving the boy prostrate on the ground.

CHAPTER 6.

Ben to the Rescue.

VIVIAN lay dazed with the pain and shock, wondering what had happened to him. When the horse's knee struck him he felt as though his ribs had burst, and a hundred lights danced before his eyes.

He was dimly conscious, as if in a dream, of Stride's evil face bending over him with an ugly look of triumph, and he felt a deft pair of hands searching in his jacket and vest.

What it all meant he hardly realised. A harsh voice said something in his ear, and then Stride departed, and the boy heard the muffled hoof-beats of a horse going away at full gallop.

Gasping like a fish, Vivian slowly got his wind back, and sat up. He felt as if he had been thrown down three flights of stairs, but he saw Stride riding away over the plain as fast as his horse could go, and in a moment

understanding came back to him. He clapped his hand to the breast of his jacket.

"He's got the package!" gasped Vivian, trying to struggle to his feet. "The confession! It's gone!"

The boy managed to get on his legs, though very bruised and sore, and far away to the left, beyond the grove of trees, he saw Ben riding out on the sorrel cayuse a long way beyond Stride.

"Ben, Ben," cried Vivian eagerly, though his voice was too faint to be heard a dozen yards away, "stop him! The package!"

He limped forward as fast as he could, his breath coming quick and short, his eyes fixed on the fugitive.

The much-prized trophy was vanishing rapidly with its captor.

But Ben Wainwright, though far out of range of Vivian's voice, was already riding as if his neck depended on it. He had seen the whole occurrence as he came out of the grove, and settled in a moment what he had best do. He did not make for Vivian, but galloped with all his might to cut off Stride's escape.

"The brute! He must have killed Vivian, or near it!" cried Ben. "Get on, horse—get on!"

With spur and quirt he forced the cayuse to its utmost speed, and, lazy animal though it was as a rule, Ben was soon flying across the plain as if he were riding a Derby finish. He was riding at right angles to Stride's path, and had a good chance of cutting him off.

The moment Stride saw Ben he swerved sharply away to the right, and rode harder than ever. The boy had already decreased the distance between them greatly, and by a clever piece of riding he brought himself within fifty yards of Stride's horse's tail when they both galloped away in the straight.

"You ruffian, I'll have you, though you ride to the deuce!" cried Ben, leaning forward over his horse's withers. Stride made no reply, but cast a look of defiance back at the big youth, and rode for all he was worth.

The ex-stableman had expected to outdistance Ben easily, but to his disgust he found the sorrel cayuse was gaining on him. He plied whip and spur mercilessly, but still the pursuer gained.

Stride suddenly swerved again, and made straight for the river, where the ground was rougher, and he expected to tire Ben's horse the quicker. But it made no difference, except to bring the pair of them back within a few hundred yards of Vivian, and Stride altered his course afresh, and spurred away eastwards over the open prairie. Still the cayuse gained on him, and barely thirty yards divided the two now.

"Curse you!" shouted Stride furiously. "Lemme alone, will yer?"

He pulled a long-barrelled six-shooter suddenly from the holster at his belt, and, twisting in the saddle, fired point-blank at Ben.

Once he fired, and twice, but the balls flew wide. Ben did not slacken speed in the least, but bent low over his horse's neck as two more balls came whistling past him. He had little fear of being hit at anything over fifteen yards from a man on a galloping horse firing behind him. Ben knew by this time what a revolver could or could not do, and Stride was not a shot of Ohio's class, or anything like it.

"Pop away, you skunk!" said Ben. "Cartridges are cheap!"

The cayuse drew up, till the distance was barely twenty-five yards, but the stamina of the horse was failing, as Ben could feel. With a rapid movement he unslung the lariat from the saddle-horn, and the long coils of rope went sweeping gracefully round his head.

Away back over the plain Vivian gave a shout of excitement as he saw

the rope. Could Ben do it? Was he skilful enough to make sure in such a case?

Ben himself put his whole heart into the throw, and as the coils went swinging round his head he judged the distance with his eye, and called on his horse for one last effort.

Stride, catching sight of the lariat, gave a frightened curse, and fired his last two shots with anxious care. The second bullet grazed Ben's neck, raising a spurt of blood, and the next moment the snaking coils of the rope shot out like an arrow, true as a die.

Right over Stride's head and shoulders whizzed the noose, though he ducked desperately. The cayuse turned sharp to the left, and braced its feet in answer to Ben's rein; there was a jerk and plunge, and Stride was plucked out of his saddle with the noose tight round his chest and arms.

He struck the ground in a cloud of dust, and his horse careered away over the prairie, riderless. Ben had all he could do to pull the maddened cayuse up again, for it started off directly after the jerk, and Stride, yelling, was towed along several yards in a dusty halo. Ben reined in as soon as he could, and jumped down, leading his horse by the bridle towards Stride.

"There's a good many would ha' towed you home all the way; an' you deserve it, you skunk!" exclaimed Ben.

Stride was not injured, except for having most of the wind knocked out of him, for he was a light-weight, and had fallen fairly soft in the dusty grass and sand.

The empty revolver was still gripped in his fist, and Ben plucked it from him and threw it away. The ex-stableman made a feeble attempt to free his arms, but the boy jerked the noose tight, and knotted it securely to prevent it slipping, giving the bight a turn round his prisoner's ankles.

"Yer've killed me!" gasped Stride.

"Not I!" growled Ben, putting an extra turn in the lariat. "You'll die in a rope when your turn comes, I reckon, but it ain't this journey, more's the pity. I'm going to—Hallo, old chap!"

He broke off as he saw Vivian, a few hundred yards away, limping towards them as fast as he could. Ben waited till he came up.

"You ain't hurt, old chap?" cried Ben anxiously.

"Nothing serious, I think," said Vivian, who looked very white. "By gum, you did it splendidly, Ben! It was worth while even to see you. Yanked him slap out of it first throw. He rode me down—"

"I saw him. I thought you was killed, an' if you had been there'd be a different sort o' noose to the one this skunk's got on him now—round his neck, an' a good strong tree-branch to carry him!" said Ben grimly. "Did he rob you?"

"He's got the letter—Boyle's. Thank goodness we haven't let it go!" said Vivian, hurrying to the captive, who scowled at him blackly. They both searched the man, Stride cursing feebly as they did so, and Ben pulled out of his jacket-pocket the packet, and an envelope that bore the English stamp and postmark.

"This is all right," said Ben, "and I'll bet it never gets into the enemy's hands again after this! Here's a letter, Vivian, addressed to Stride, an' it's in your cousin's regular writin', or I'm a Dutchman!"

Stride burst into a torrent of threats, mixed with bad language; but Vivian, paying no heed to him, opened the letter, and saw Boyle's signature at its foot.

"You're right, Ben. It concerns me, an' so I'll stick to it—an' it's still better worth having than the other," he said. "I guess it's justifiable to take it, too, considering what these sweeps are trying to do to me."

"I shouldn't worry myself about justifyin'," growled Ben, "since it's due

to him you're out here at all, an' he was doin' his best to make cold meat of me five minutes back! Let's see if there's any more on him."

No further letters were found on Stride. Vivian pocketed the one he had, that had cost so much trouble, and they looked down at their captive.

"Now, what's to be done with this animal?" said Ben.

Stride, having recovered his breath, made use of it to hurl such a storm of abuse at the two boys as nearly exhausted it again. He was frantic with rage and apprehension as he saw Vivian stow the two captured letters away.

"You'll pay for this!" he spluttered. "You wait! Yer've made things worse for yerselves, an' so I tell yer, yer young devils!"

"That'll do, Stride!" said Vivian grimly. "You don't know what's going to happen to you yet!"

"You talk as if yer owned the prairie!" exploded Stride. "D'yer think you're goin' to judge me? D'yer think—"

"There's one thing occurs to me as the best thing to do," said Vivian drily, "and that's to take you back to the ranch and let the boys deal with you. They'd enjoy doing it when they'd heard our story."

Stride turned deadly pale, and the bluster died out of him. He guessed what sort of a reception he would get at McLeod's from the ranchers and cowboys. He stopped threatening and began to whine.

"Ain't you hurt me enough?" he cried. "You've broken 'alf the bones in my body, chuekin' me out o' the saddle like that! What 'arm 'ave I done? You took a letter o' mine away from me—that red-skinned beast was your pal, an' he nearly killed me—an' I took it back agen, that's all. You don't bear no malice, do yer? I'll never give yer no more trouble!"

He whined dismally, his tongue going faster than ever; and Ben, picking up the empty revolver, smashed the lock and hammer against a piece of rock. Then he glanced at Vivian.

"What shall we do with him now?"

"Oh, let the beast go! It's no use our bothering with him. I've got what I want!"

"Let him go! Nonsense! Give him over to the police!"

"I tell you, turn him loose. We don't want the brute. I've got all I need."

Ben was used to obey Vivian without question. He freed the prisoner's legs, and pulled him on to his feet. Then he cut off the lariat just behind the knot he had made on it, leaving Stride's arms bound.

"He can think himself lucky to get off like that," said Ben. "He nearly killed you, Vivian, and no fault of his that he didu't quite. Let him alone. He can walk it to his nearest friend's, and in the meantime anybody can cut his arms loose that wants to."

And, without another word, leaving the ungrateful Stride complaining loudly out on the prairie, the boys set off home.

CHAPTER 7.

Boyle Shows His Hand.

"YOU'RE sure you aren't damaged, old chap?" said Ben, as they turned towards the ranch, for his chum still looked very white.

"No bones broken, but I feel as if I were oue large bruise from head to foot."

"Up you get on my nag, then. Don't jaw, but get up, else I shall lift you on!"

Vivian protested that he could walk, but Ben insisted on his riding the cayuse, and walked beside it himself. Stride was already making for the woods in the opposite direction as fast as he could, evidently scared lest any of the ranchers should come out after him, and the boys took no further notice of him.

"A jolly good afternoon's work!" said Ben. "We must—— Ha!lo, here's Ohio coming out, lookin' quite excited. What the——"

"Don't say anything about what's happened," said Vivian quickly. And the big ranchman gave them a hail as he galloped up. They were then within half a mile of home.

"Hi, kid, anything wrong?" shouted Ohio. "Your horse came back without anyone astride him ten minutes ago, an' I lit out in a hurry, thinkin' you'd come to grief somewheres."

"All right, Ohio, thank-ee," said Vivian, "everything's serene."

"Durn you, for givin' me a fright like that! You don't mean to tell me that ar' broncho got rid o' you?"

"No; I tied him up, and he got loose. I'd a bit of a tumble down by the river, but there's nothing wrong bar a bruise or two."

"You never go out 'thout suffin' happenin' to you, seems to me. Say, that Injun of yours is off the sick-list. He's got up on his hind legs."

The boys hurried to the cabin on hearing this, and found Flying Cloud just returning to it after a stroll round the ranch.

"I say, you oughtn't to have got up yet!" said Vivian. "You aren't fit to walk, old cock. Get back to bed."

"Flying Cloud heap fit again, plenty thanks to you," said the Indian, who had got over his wound with a rapidity that showed his toughness. "Cree brave no stay in tepee when he can walk. Hate bed soon as wound cured. It is you who get hurt," he added quickly, looking at Vivian's face. "What's been matter?"

"Shall we tell him?" asked Ben.

"Yes. No secrets between pardners," said Vivian. "Flying Cloud's one of the firm. You see, old chap, we've just had a turn-up with the gentleman you tackled for us the other day."

He told Flying Cloud what had happened. The Cree listened in surprise. Then his face hardened, and he seized Ben's rifle and started for the door.

"Flying Cloud go on his trail!" he said quickly. "I come back to you before morning."

"No, you don't!" said Vivian, stopping him. "Leave him alone. None of your games, Flying Cloud. We've taken what we want; let it go at that."

"You make heap mistake to let him go so," said the Cree brave earnestly. "I tell you, you get no peace till that man's scalp taken!"

"I know," said Vivian; "but I don't collect 'em. You mean well, old chap, but you must really keep these little habits of yours under, and don't go scalping on our account. Stride's no more trouble now we've got our own back."

"Let's see what's in that other letter," said Ben, as Flying Cloud reluctantly sat down on the bed. "You said it was about you."

Vivian produced the letter. It was not addressed in Stride's name at all, but to the "Post Office, Calgary." The handwriting Vivian recognised as his cousin's, not in the least disguised.

"It's a wonder he writes so openly as that," remarked Ben, with some surprise. "What does he say?"

"Charters, Grange, Wiltshire.

"Dear James," began the letter,—“If you are able to get me two or three wild three-year-old bronchos from blooded sires, I'll give up to a hundred dollars apiece for them. Send them by rail and steamer, at my charges. I want to try them at the stud farm here, and shall break one as a hack. I will send you instructions about the other horses later. Yours truly,

"B. CHARTERS."

That was all. Vivian turned the letter over and over, and read it through again. It was as innocent a missive as any letter could be.

"What's it mean?" said Ben, puzzled. "Boyle didn't send Stride out here to buy mustangs for Wiltshire?"

Vivian shook his head. The note puzzled him. He noticed that the sheet of notepaper was a large one, and that the writing covered only a small portion of one leaf of it. All the rest was blank.

"Is there nothing else on it at all?" asked Ben. "If not, it's a sell."

Vivian examined the letter for a long time, and was considerably disappointed. He felt rather ashamed of having taken it, for meddling with other people's letters, unless it were a matter of life and death, struck him as being rather underhand. There seemed to be no treachery in this one, at any rate.

Vivian put it in his pocket, deciding he had drawn a blank, and that it was no use to bother any more about it. He busied himself with other affairs, but somehow the letter seemed to burrow a hole in his pocket. He felt that there was something in it that he had not discovered. It made him quite fidgety.

Presently he took it out and perused it again. He could not let it alone. He carried it out into the evening sunlight, and had a still more careful look. It struck him as queer that there should be so much white paper, and so little writing.

Following up this idea, which dawned on him suddenly, he held the paper sideways so that the rays of the sun gleamed across it. There were marks on the blank part of the paper—so faint and ghostly as to be almost invisible except in a very strong light, nor could he make out what they were. But marks there certainly were.

"By gum," he said to Ben, "I've got it! Light a bit of a fire, and we'll see what this means."

There was a little stone fireplace at one end of the cabin, and with a bunch of dry grass and a lump of resinous pine-wood a good blaze was soon obtained, with plenty of heat. Vivian held the letter carefully to this, so that the heat fell on it, much to Ben's mystification.

"Do you expect to find out anything by cooking it?" he asked sarcastically.

"Yes," replied Vivian. "Look for yourself."

Slowly, as it felt the warmth of the fire, line after line of close handwriting began to show itself on the white surface of the paper in a rusty brown tint.

"What d'you think of it now?" exclaimed Vivian triumphantly. "I told you Boyle was a deep 'un!"

"What is it? How's it done?" said Ben wonderingly.

"Secret ink, that's all—probably only a little milk or some turnip-juice, used with a clean pen. You can't see it when it's dry. But warm it up, and it shows at once. Good way of making sure nobody else will read it till the one who's in the know holds it to a fire. I thought there must be something."

Ben watched excitedly, while Vivian, with a perfectly cool hand—except for the fire—slowly brought out the whole of the hidden writing. When he had done so, it read as follows:

“You must push the business ahead faster, no matter what it costs. You say you are doing your best, but the kid has slipped out of your traps both times. It seems to me he is too many for you. I am keeping the old fool up to the mark here, and taking care that nothing favourable about V. comes to his ears. I am first in his favour, and likely to stay so. But it’s difficult work keeping him primed, and sometimes I think he misses the kid.

“You must manage either to land V. fairly in the soup soon, or else put him right out of the way. You know what I mean. Don’t risk either of our necks, of course; but if you can’t do it yourself, try and get this Indian ruffian of yours to do the job for you, and make sure of it.

“If you could get that big lout B. W. separated from him, it would become easier. I can’t understand how you can fail to do the business in a country like that. If you don’t bring it off soon, I shall come out myself and attend to it, for the thing must be done at any cost. You understand? I double the price we agreed on at first. Earn it!”

The message stopped abruptly. There was no signature, but the boys did not need to look twice to recognise the handwriting. Indeed, it was the same as in the first part of the letter.

They were silent for some time, during which Ben, with a set jaw, slowly planted his huge fist on various imaginary portions of Mr. Boyle Charters’ anatomy, choosing them with great care. His emotions were too deep for words.

“This wins it!” he muttered at last. “Vivian, did you ever hear the like? You’ve got Boyle now!”

“Look here,” exclaimed Vivian, “we’re the first to read this, of course! Stride must have had it brought up to him from Calgary by someone, and it’s fallen into our hands before he’d even time to make a fire to bring the secret ink out.”

“You’re right. It’s a sure thing he’s had other ones, though, before.”

“It don’t matter about those. This one is enough for us. He’d deny all knowledge of it, of course, and so would Stride. But we shouldn’t want very much more proof to add to it, and show him up.”

“Are you going to use it at once?” said Ben eagerly.

“No. Even now I’ve not quite evidence enough. You laugh. But I want more. I’ll risk no failure with my grandfather.”

“You mean you’re too proud,” growled Ben.

“Too proud to have any argument with a man who doesn’t trust me,” said Vivian bitterly. “Oh, I’m a fool, if you like to put it that way! But don’t make any mistake, I shall right myself and get my own back when the time comes—or else go under.”

Ben shrugged his shoulders.

“Well, I’ll always allow you know best, Vivian,” he said.

“I’m not going scuttling home all in a hurry, waving this bit of paper an’ crying for my inheritance!” said Vivian obstinately. “I like the life better out here, and the rest can come in its own good time. Why, it’s been more sport getting hold of that letter even than ever I had at home. Give me plenty of spice with my day’s work. I don’t fancy things slow. Who’s Stride, that we should be afraid of him?”

“I didn’t know we were,” said Ben, taking up the letter and studying it. “It’s a pleasant sort o’ love-letter, this, isn’t it? The ‘old fool’! That’s your grandfather. I suppose.”

"And 'that big lout B. W.' is Mr. Benjamin Wainwright," added Vivian, grinning.

"Stride is to separate us—if he can," chuckled Ben; "and, by George, don't I wish Boyle would come out here himself, as he threatens to!"

"There'd be some sport then!" said Vivian, rubbing his hands gleefully. "I'd give a trifle to come across Boyle at Red Dog, or out on the prairie, or anywhere else!"

"It's only brag, of course. He's too big a coward to risk his own dirty hide," said Ben.

"I'm not so surc. You don't know Boyle as well as I do. It wouldn't surprise me," returned Vivian.

"Well, remember one thing, our trump card—besides our own wits—is that letter. That and the other one. We've learnt that it's not safe either to hide 'em or carry 'em about," said Ben. "Stride's gettin' desperate, and he'd stick at nothing to get them back. We must give him no chance at all."

"There's only one thing to do," said Vivian—"deposit the letter and the confession in a sealed package at a bank. Then even the Governor-General himself couldn't get hold of them. And it's got to be done at once. We can neither sleep nor slacken our guard till they're safe. We—Halo, Ohio! What d'you want?"

"Kids, the boss wants you at once," said the big ranchman, looking in at the door. "Hurry an' get to him, for he's in a tearing temper!"

CHAPTER 8.

Held Up!

THE two boys knew better than to keep Hank Fletcher waiting, and they went at once. They found the captain of the ranch in his verandah, cursing two of the half-breed stockmen pretty freely.

"Here, you two," he called to the boys, "you've got to get mounted at once! Ben, light out for Abe Bonnet's house six miles north, an' tell him to send a horse-wrangler down here. Vivian, you've got to go into Red Dog, blazes for leather, an' rouse out some kind of a thing that can take horses down the trail. They mus' both be here before daybreak."

Jack Innes, who was near enough to hear, chipped in:

"Say, Hank," he said, "I know Old Man Abe ain't got no wrangler on the place. Both his are away in the ranges. An' there ain't ne'er a man to be got at Red Dog, that's sure, for I was there last night. Guess you won't get one either o' those places."

Fletcher burst into such a torrent of picturesque language that the sparks seemed to fly round him.

"Durn it all, I can't spare a single man from the big round-up to-morrow!" he cried. "An' there's those eight bronchos got to be delivered at Calgary Thursday for certain. How the blessed three stars am I to get men to take 'em down, in this blazin' desert?"

Vivian took the chance, and made an offer that surprised himself.

"Boss," he said, "can't Ben and I take them? You can spare us two from the round-up, can't you?"

"You!" said Hank, staring at him. The idea had not struck the ranch-captain before. "Well, you two are handy kids enough, an' spy on a horse, but you don't suppose you kin herd a bunch o' ha'f-wild bronchos a hundred miles through the forest?"

"Mighty tough proposition for kids," murmured Innes.

"I think we can do it, if you'll let us try, sir!" said Vivian eagerly, for the chance of getting to Calgary was tempting enough just then to make him face any difficulties.

"Think? There ain't no thinkin' about it. If you lost those horses it might take a month to get 'em back."

He seemed so decided that the boys were silent. Fletcher scratched his head with a harassed air, and looked out across the prairie.

"Guess there's no help for it," he said suddenly. "You'll have to take them horses. If you lose 'em, you'll get blazes! If you git 'em all through, I'll make it a bonus of ten dollars each to you. Be ready to start in the mornin'."

Ben and Vivian made off in huge delight, thinking nothing of the difficulties ahead, provided they were allowed to go.

"It's the one chance we needed!" said Vivian. "We can get right to Calgary, an' shove those letters of Boyle's into a bank for safe keeping."

"An' till that's done there's no sleep fer both of us at once, nor much chance o' takin' our fists off our weapons," said Ben.

They made for the hut, to complete their arrangements and put stores together. They told Flying Cloud about the expedition.

"Wah!" he said. "Heap good; come with you. Flying Cloud must go to his people, and I come with you most of way to Calgary. That all on my way. Then I strike away west to my tribe."

"This is rippin'!" said Ben. "I tell you, it's no end of a relief, for those letters'll weigh on my mind all down the trail till Vivian's got rid of them."

"I like to see the thief could get them from you while I am near," said Flying Cloud proudly.

"I jolly well agree with you, old cock," said Ben. "Only don't go collecting scalps on the way, will you? They always put me off my food. You're goin' to look up your pals, the Crees, then? I suppose we sha'n't see you any more?"

"What! You think I desert you?" said the Indian, looking proud and hurt. "I go but to my own people because there are things there I got to attend. Only four days I am away—four." He held up four fingers.

"But if you prefer I not go, then I stay with you all time. I not mind."

"No, no!" said Vivian. "Not a bit of it. And don't think we don't believe in you, Flying Cloud; for, after what we've scen, I'd trust you to the last ounce. Go and see your folks by all means. And we don't want you to think you're tied to us, just because we once did you a turn. We'll always be glad to see you back."

"Good!" said the Cree impassively. "For I like you more better than any white man living, and Flying Cloud always your friend. I help you with those horses. You find them plenty trouble."

Ohio expressed the same opinion when he heard what the boys were going to do.

"It's a blamed good job the Injuu's going with you," he said. "You've bitten off a tough chunk, kids. Drivin' those brouchos south is a bigger job than any you've tackled yet."

The boys did not believe it, but when the time came they found Ohio was right. He gave them all the tips he could. They listened for a long time while he laid down the law on herding bronchos along a forest trail, and they found his advice invaluable.

Hank Fletcher, though he did not believe much in "Injuns," made no objection to Flying Cloud's accompanying the herd, and he was allowed his pick of the horses to ride. The Cree chose a wild-looking black, which was certainly the best, and had been ridden a little.

Ben took his sorrel easy, and Vivian a good, useful horse from the corral, for Hank would not let him take the Red Fiend into Calgary.

"Guess it's a bit too rough on Calgary," Hank said. "An' besides, I don't want the herd eaten up. The Fiend wants plenty o' room round him."

"I tell you what," said Vivian to his chum. "We'll take the grizzly's skin with us and sell it. It's no good to us here, and it'll fetch a good price in Calgary. We want the money more than the skin. What d'you say?"

The boys had shot a grizzly in the foothills a month before, and had got a good pelt from it.

Ben was more than willing. They made a pack of the grizzly's hide, and proposed to strap it on the back of the tamest of the bronchos. The animal became like a mad horse, however, as soon as he smelt the skin, and would have nothing to do with it at all. He knocked Ben down and dragged Vivian all round the the corral, by way of showing them that he objected to carrying bearskins. Ohio came to the rescue, and showed them how to pack the hide up in a tarpaulin, so that its smell should not scare the horse, and finally all was arranged to the boys' satisfaction.

The first dim streaks of dawn were showing over the prairie when the three voyagers, with a good meal apiece under their belts, rode out on the Calgary trail. They crossed the river and struck out on the track through the woods, herding the eight bronchos between them, their ropes, halters, and quirts ready for use, and Vivian's pack-animal looking sulky at having to carry the bundle.

"Off at last!" said Ben. "I tell you what, Vivian. No sleep for the party till we're safe in Calgary. We don't want any more monkeying with Stride."

"You sleep all you want," said Flying Cloud, lighting his little copper pipe. "I look out for you. I am your eyes and ears."

How true that was the boys very soon learned. Flying Cloud was a perfect godsend to them. When daylight came, and the bronchos grew skittish, it was he who headed them off each time. He seemed to be able to talk and think with the horses as one of themselves, and they were quieter to his voice than to that of either of the boys.

He took them to the best springs, he made short cuts off the trail and saved miles of travelling, where the boys would have lost the herd and themselves too if they had tried it alone. He showed them a dozen tricks of woodcraft that even Ohio and Jack Innes were not up to, and beyond it all he proved himself a most cheering and entertaining companion.

There is no need to detail the whole journey, for the Calgary trail was not new ground, and, though the boys had a hard time of it with the bronchos, they met with no out-of-the-way incidents, nor did any enemy trouble them in the least. Flying Cloud said the way was clear of foes, and so it proved.

At night the horses were fenced in a corral of rope wound round four or five tree-trunks. It was on the third day that Flying Cloud dismounted from his horse and bade them farewell.

"You within two hours of Calgary now," he said. "Trail all clear and good, and nobody worry you. I leave you, to go west to my own people. In four days—not sooner—I come back to Red Dog."

They bade Flying Cloud a warm ad revoir. The Cree, saluting them gravely, struck out to the westward on foot, and disappeared.

As he had forecasted, the boys arrived in Calgary without much more trouble, for most of the wickedness had been worked out of the bronchos by their journey, and they were now on the broad Edmonton trail. They

reached the place to which the horses were destined, just on the outskirts of the town, and got rid of them at once.

Hank Fletcher had bidden them take the purchase money for the horses themselves, and not to take anything but "greenback" notes and gold. Cheques were barred. The money was then to be paid into McLeod's account at the bank over the counter.

The money was paid, Vivian gave the receipt, and with nearly four hundred dollars about them, the boys were glad to get to the bank at once and get rid of it. Vivian took with him a canvas envelope, and sealed the two letters from Boyle into it with wax. He put his own name and address on.

They paid the money into the McLeod ranch account, and Vivian produced his letter.

"Can I get this kept here," he said, "in the bank strong-room?"

"You can if you become a customer here and open an account with us," said the bank cashier. "You can start one with fifty dollars."

"Can you swear on that ledger of yours that this package will be dead safe if I leave it with you, and that nobody but me can get it out?" said Vivian.

"There's nobody in Canada or anywhere else could get it out except yourself," said the clerk, smiling.

"I guess that's good enough," said Vivian. The boys had not fifty dollars of their own or anything like it. They had with them all their worldly wealth, which amounted to about twenty dollars between them.

They went out, however, and sold the grizzly's skin at a fur-dealer's, and it brought them in forty dollars. Such a skin was likely to fetch five times the price in the Eastern States, but the boys considered they had done well for Calgary.

They were not particularly pleased at the prospect of banking their money, for they wanted to keep some of it round Calgary and keep the rest handy. But Ben insisted that the account must be opened and the letters got rid of. So they went back to the bank, opened a joint-account in both their names, passed in the money, and Boyle's letters went to the great strong-room vaults of the bank.

"That's off my mind!" said Ben, with a huge sigh of relief. "And now for a little recreation. Eh—what?"

Next morning early the boys were in the saddle again, glad to feel their horses between their knees and the plains and forests stretching out before them. They rode out along the Edmonton trail half the day, forcing the pace, for they wanted to get back, and left it to strike north-west for Calgary in the afternoon.

"It's been a jolly little jaunt," said Vivian. "Wish we had Flying Cloud with us; but it'll be three days before we see him. Hank ought to be pleased, anyhow. We never lost a horse for him."

"He made a nailing good price of those bronchos, considerin' what they were," said Ben. "Four hundred dollars is more than I'd have reckoned on, and the chap we sold 'em to—Hallo! What the deuce—"

He reined in his horse with a jerk as two mounted men suddenly spurred across the trail, appearing from nowhere, and barring the boys' path. One was a big mulatto, and the other a bronzed, clean-shaven white "tough" in leather hat and "shaps." In an instant both the strangers whipped out a revolver, and levelled them at the boys.

"Han'supp!" said the man in the shaps sharply. "Up with your paws, kids, or you're cold meat!"

CHAPTER 9.

The Road-Agents.

THE boys stood dumbfounded before the two gaping pistols. Vivian stared at the men, wondering who they were and what they meant when the order was repeated harshly.

"Up wi' them hands!" snarled the mulatto. "Quick, unless yo' want the daylight let through you!"

For the first time Ben and Vivian understood what "the drop" meant. These men were not playing, nor threatening—they would be as good as their word. There was no help for it, and the boys raised their empty hands above their heads at once.

"Keep 'em like that, or you'll be plugged quicker'n winking!" said the white man, in a drawling voice.

"What on earth is this about?" muttered Vivian, his palms stretched as high as they would go. "Is it some of Stride's work?"

"Robbers! That's all they are, I reckon," said Ben, under his breath.

The mulatto, who was a most villainous-looking animal, pitched his revolver to his companiou, who levelled both of them, and the coloured man rode round to the back of the boys.

Bidding them harshly to remain still, he skilfully ran his hands through Vivian's pockets, and searched the wallet at his belt.

Vivian, at the touch of those insolent, snuff-coloured fingers, felt as much disgust as if a snake were crawling over him. He had an almost irresistible impulse to turn on the creature, and grapple with him. But he knew that the first sign of resistance meant a bullet for Ben, and a knife slipped into his own ribs; and to reach for a weapon was hopeless. The white man in the sombrero hat kept the two revolvers levelled accurately.

"What do you think you're doing? Who are you?" said Vivian, as soon as he could find his voice.

"Shut your head!" was the white man's reply. "Don't ye know when you're held up, you derved Canuke? Look sharp, now, Jose!"

But the mulatto, who found nothing ou Vivian but an odd dollar or two and some small change, swore comprehensively, and turned his attention to Ben.

Ben's pockets, however, produced only a few cents more than Vivian's had.

The mulatto searched them both most thoroughly. The saddle-flaps, blankets, and packs containing provisions and pannikin all were examined in such a way that, if the things sought were there, they must certainly have been found.

The mulatto suddenly shook his fist in Vivian's face.

"Whar's the stuff?" he exclaimed, in a fury. "Whar is it? Hand it out, you eub, or I'll put a foot of steel in yo'!"

"Stuff! What stuff?" retorted Vivian. "What are you blithering about? Here, take your beastly hands off me, or I'll go for you! I'd rather be shot, thau touched by you again!"

"Ain't they got it on 'em, Jose?" cried the man in the sombrero.

"Not a red cent of it!" the mulatto replied, with an oath. He turned to the boys again; "What ha' yo' done with it?" he cried savagely. "The money for them hosses you brought from Red Dog! They were sold in Calgary! Hand it out, 'less yo' want to be made cold meat of!"

Vivian understood now, and catching a glance from Ben, despite the awkward fix they were in, he burst into a laugh.

"It's where you won't get it!" said Vivian. "You've drawn a blank, you beauty! The money was banked half an hour after we got it!"

The jaws of the two men dropped, and the mulatto, clenching his fist, shrieked out such a torrent of abuse and threats as the boy had never heard.

"If you like to look inside the cover of my watch," said Vivian quite coolly, "you'll see the bank's stamped voucher. You can take it to the bank, and ask 'em to give you the money, if you want to," he added sarcastically.

The coloured man snatched the watch, and opened it, pulling out the detached part of the paying-in slip which Vivian had brought from the bank, giving evidence that the money had been paid in. There was another referring to the cash the boys had deposited in their own account.

"By gosh, it's true!" gasped the mulatto. "The money's banked!"

The man in the sombrero burst out laughing.

"The kids have done us brown!" he said. "Haw, haw!"

He seemed to think it rather a good joke.

But the negro did not agree with him. In a paroxysm of rage the man seized Vivian, and whipped out a long, ugly-looking knife.

"Yo' whelp!" he cried. "I've a mind to——"

"There now, let 'em be, Jose!" called the man in the sombrero. "The cubs have sold us, an' the laugh's on you, I guess! There's nothin' to be got, so let 'em go!"

"Not me! I'm for takin' it out o' them!" swore the nigger.

"See here, you black hog! If you tech 'em I'll slip some lead into you! Guess I don't want my neck shoved in a noose for nothin' at all! Let 'em go!"

The mulatto put up his knife, protesting sulkily.

"We can't make nothin' o' their horses, an' don't want to be bothered with 'em! Them odds an' ends ain't worth takin'. We was out after a big plum, an' we've missed it! Git back there, Jose!"

The mulatto, who seemed to be under the orders of the white man, obeyed with a growl.

"Here, you kids," said the ruffian in the sombrero, "come forward here, an' git past me. That's it! Now ride right ahead, an' keep your noses in front o' you. Stick right to the trail for the next two miles. Don't look round neither, or you'll get a dose of lead through the baek before you knows what's happened. Git!"

Ben and Vivian were glad enough to follow the advice.

Their baeks turned to the two men, they touched their horses with the spur, and cantered away without another word. Not till they were well round the bend of the trail did they lower their hands, and take the reins.

CHAPTER 10.

The Bullet That Came From Nowhere.

"**P**HEW!" said Ben. "I'm glad to be out of that, old chap! We're in luck to get off so cheap! Are they outlaws, or what?"

"I reckon they're what they call road-ageuts," said Vivian.

"Just plain robbers—that's what they are. Must have seen us driving those horses into Calgary, and reckoned we'd be coming back up the trail with the money; so they laid wait for us."

"Thought they'd got a soft thing on—eh?" said Ben gleefully. "By George! What a bit of luck we banked that money—and our own as well! Absolutely did them in the eye! They'd have got a rare fat haul if we hadn't done it."

"All our hard-earned savings," said Vivian, grinning. "Grizzly, and all; besides the eash for the horses."

"What a beast that saddle-coloured nigger was!" said Ben.

"Ugh!" rejoined Vivian. "The other ehap wasn't a bad sort, though, even if he looked an awful tough. Well, they didn't get anything out of us. Rather amusing, I call it!"

"Glad you enjoyed it!" grunted Ben.

"Well, I can tell you, I was jolly glad they were only road-agents out after this money, and not some plant or other of that scoundrel Stride's. That's what I thought when they first stopped us. Quite a relief—eh? I look upon a mere robber as a gentleman compared to Stride."

"Or Boyle, either!" said Ben grimly.

"Yes; or Boyle!" agreed Vivian. "He's the worse of the two. It seems that when a Charters does go wrong he's about as thorough a black-guard as you'll find anywhere. We've had a black sheep in the family before."

"An' when he goes right, there's nobody to beat him!" said Ben, whose loyalty stood the test of all weathers. "Well, we're out of range of those two deadbeats now behind us, and they're out of sight. What are you going to do about it?"

"What can we do?"

"Ride back to a Mounted Police post, and get them chased down."

"I'd rather push ou to Red Dog. Why should we bother about them? We've wasted enough time, and I don't see that we want to squeal out every time we get hurt. Of course, if we come across a trooper of the police, we'll give him the hint."

"I don't want to bother about them myself," said Ben. "Do as you please, old chap."

"They were both Americans—the nigger and the white man too. You could tell that by the way they talked; and they weren't like Canadias. The ruffians'll either get nabbed on their own account, or else they'll slide away south, and be over the border very soon and in their own country."

"I'll back the Mounted Police to drop on them, if they give any trouble. Wonder what Fletcher'll think about it?"

"Won't think anything, except that the money for the horses is safe. If old Flying Cloud had been with us I believe he'd have smelt out that couple, and they wouldn't have been able to surprise us at all."

"We sha'n't see him for three days. Thank goodness that package is safe in the bank! I'm more concerned about that than the money," Ben replied. "I say! The night's drawing in fast. We'd better pitch on a good place to camp in while it's light."

They rode out towards the river, and being good hands at picking a spot for a bivouac by now, they selected a likely place beside a creek, hobbled the horses and turned them loose to graze, and cooked their evening meal of fried pork and flap-jacks.

"I wonder if Stride knows what we've done with those letters?" remarked Vivian, as they lay back and looked at the sky after the meal.

"Quick work, if he does! How could he?"

"That's just it! He seems to get hold of everything that happens in a mighty queer way. Perhaps he didn't dare tackle us when Flying Cloud was with us."

"If he thinks you've still got 'em about you, he's pretty safe to have another try to get hold of them, I should say, now we're alone."

"Think so?"

"Yes! Anyway, we've got to keep watch—and watch all night. No taking chances for me!" said Ben. "We've been bitten twice already."

"You're right! I'll toss you who keeps the first watch."

It fell to Vivian, and he sat up with the rifle across his knees for the first four hours, while Ben rolled himself up in his blanket, and snored gently.

The horses were tethered within easy reach, and save for the usual noises of the night, nothing was heard.

Vivian found it hard to keep awake towards the end, for they had been up late in Calgary the night before.

When the four hours were up, Vivian woke his chum, and immediately went to sleep.

It was just before the dawn, during Vivian's third hour, that he felt Ben's hand on his shoulder, and was on the alert at once.

"Don't make any row," whispered Ben, "but put your hand on the bank, and listen! I heard a rustle, and a twig snapped just now in the brushwood up the hillside; and I'm pretty near ready to swear I caught sight of that copper-coloured brute's head against the starlight over yonder."

"Beaver-With-One-Eye, do you mean?" said Vivian, under his breath, looking cautiously along the slope. "How could you tell?"

"It was just about the shape of that wicked nut of his. He shall have both barrels of the shot-gun slap in the face if I get a fair chance at him."

The boys listened, and watched for a while in silence.

"It isn't likely to be the Beaver," whispered Vivian, "if you heard him. He wouldn't tread on dry twigs or rustle the bushes. He's as silent as a snake."

"He might have scared some animal that made the noise."

"That's more like it. Hallo! Look out!"

A night-bird suddenly flapped out from the trees up the slope, and there was a scurry, as some small beast—a jack-rabbit possibly—ran out of the brushwood and scuttled off towards the river.

"There is somebody there. You were right," murmured Vivian. "Keep your gun handy!"

Whoever the intruder was, beast or human, he was neither seen nor heard any more of. The sky began to lighten, and in half an hour it was day.

"The light's scared him away, if there was anybody," said Vivian, rising.

"Or else he saw we were awake, and chucked it. Let's go and search the brushwood. We can see well enough now."

They made a pretty thorough search, but found no traces of any intruder, for the ground was hard, and there were no tracks that the boys could make anything of.

Flying Cloud, had he been there, might have read a different story from what they saw, but there was nothing to go by.

"I don't believe it was anybody," said Vivian. "If it was, they weren't after us. Let's get our grub, and go ahead."

They cooked a satisfying meal, after a wash in the creek, and half an hour later were both in the saddle again, reeling off the miles as they journeyed northward along the trail. The horses were fresh, and went well.

"If there was anybody after us, he's got to be well mounted to keep up!" said Vivian, laughing.

"I should think he'd be equal to that," was all Ben replied, and the talk turned to other subjects.

The boys discussed their chances of making a good thing out of the great country they were in, and particularly out of McLeod's ranch.

Nothing whatever unusual happened during the long day's ride, and they knew the trail by this time well enough to keep it without any fear of going astray.

They pushed on fast, and late in the afternoon found themselves within

two or three miles of Red Dog, but still in the wilds, and far out of sight of any human habitation.

"You see," said Vivian, "we're having a good time on the whole at McLeod's, and they're a decent lot of chaps; but I'm wondering whether there's much money in it. I don't see how we're going to make our fortunes there."

"I was thinking we work pretty hard from dawn till dark, and don't draw overmuch cash," said Ben; "but it's a ripping fine life, though. I'll stick to it as long as you do."

"The oldest hands on the ranch, with twice our age and experience, are only making a living at it," Vivian replied. "There are lots of other things in this country that men are getting rich at. If we could start a ranch for ourselves, for instance, and make it pay—I say, Ben, it's no fancy, this beast of mine is going lame!"

Vivian pulled up, and jumped down from the saddle. The broncho he rode, though he had used it carefully and the trail was good, certainly was going rather tenderly on its near foreleg.

The boy felt the fetlock, and raised the hoof. It took him some time to make the examination, for no outward injury could be seen, nor did there seem any strain to the sinews.

"I'll have to walk him home," said Vivian, straightening up.

"Let's see what the matter is," said Ben, jumping down. "I think it's only something in the frog."

Vivian stood back, for, fine rider as he was, he knew his chum to be the better horse-doctor of the two. Ben lifted the hoof, and was about to examine it.

Suddenly from the edge of the forest away across the open rang the vicious crack of a rifle, a spurt of white smoke jetted from the trees, and, with a stifled groan, Vivian fell forward on his face and lay still.

CHAPTER 11.

Flying Cloud Takes the Field.

A CRY broke from Ben's lips as he darted to Vivian's side, and bent over him anxiously. His hand flew to his weapon, but a second shot from the invisible foe hummed past his ear, and Ben, snatching Vivian up in his powerful arms, leaped with him into a gully a yard or two away.

"The murdering demons!" muttered Ben wildly. "I knew they were following us—I knew it!"

The moment he had got Vivian out of the line of fire and laid him in the gully, Ben unslung his gun, and waited, with his teeth clenched and his eyes fixed on the rim of the forest.

He would have given anything to have dashed right ahead at any risk, and gone in pursuit of the cowardly sniper, but he dared not leave Vivian alone. A second groan came from the boy's lips, and then he lapsed into unconsciousness.

Not a sign of the skulking foe was to be seen. Ben dropped his weapon, and turned hurriedly to Vivian, bending over him, with a terrible fear at his heart.

"Are you much hurt, old boy?" cried Ben. "Where's the wound?"

But Vivian made no answer. His face was dead-white, and his senses had left him. The left side of his coat was wet with blood, and Ben hastily opened the cloth the whole way down with his knife.

The wound was in the boy's shoulder, and ugly though it was, Ben saw with joy that it did not look likely to be fatal.

He ripped up his own shirt for bandages, and dealt with it as well as he could.

"I think he'll do, if only there's no artery cut," said Ben, binding the strips as hard as he could. "Poor chap! The shock of it has knocked the senses clean out of him."

With great anxiety Ben found that it was anything but easy to stop the flow of blood, and he tore up some wet moss from a spring near by, and used it to the best of his ability.

"If I had hold of that scoundrel who did it, I'd be willing to lynch him with my own hands!" muttered Ben.

Between the times of tending Vivian and trying to bring him to, Ben kept a watch all round, the gun standing at full-cock beside him, ready for instant use.

At first he had expected to be attacked at any moment, now that one of the two was down; but it soon became evident that the would-be murderer had fled, and that the boys were alone.

"What am I to do?" groaned Ben. "He may die if I don't get help for him. I can't leave him, and he can't be slung on to a horse either."

Poor Ben was at his wits' ends, and for fully half an hour he tended Vivian with the greatest anxiety, applying the wet compresses of moss above the bandages.

He was making up his mind that the only thing to do was to carry Vivian on his back as well as he could towards home.

"It may make him worse," thought Ben hopelessly, "and we shall be an easy mark for the rifle of the blackguard that shot him, whoever it was, besides. But if we stay here all night, that'll be just as bad both ways."

Ben jumped to his feet. Did he hear the sound of horses' hoofs, or was it fancy?

The next moment a shout rose to his lips, for round the bend of the trail came three horsemen, and it needed only a glance to see that they were friends.

Ohio, Jack Innes, and Slim Jim, coming south out of Red Dog, were loping along the trail at an easy pace, talking and smoking as they went.

Ben yelled at the top of his voice, and waved to them. The ranchers caught sight of him, and putting their horses to the gallop, very soon drew rein alongside the gully.

"Great Joseph, what's this?" exclaimed Ohio, jumping down from his horse. "Is the kid hurt? Who's done it?"

"Some blackguard shot him from the woods there!" cried Ben. "It was either that thief of a Blood Indian or else the man Stride! Help me with him quick, or he'll——"

"Gee!" exclaimed Jack Innes, coming quickly to Vivian, and kneeling beside him. "Plugged right through the shoulder! Scatter out, you others, and see if you can't ride down the cuss that did it. I'll look after the kid."

Ohio and Jim, after a hurried question to Ben, galloped off like the wind to the spot whence the shot had come, while Innes attended to Vivian.

He examined the hurt quickly, with his usual skill in treating wounds, and was able to reassure Ben.

"Derned nasty flesh-wound, and he's lost a lot o' blood," said Innes; "but there's no bones touched. Here's the ball, all but through."

So nearly had the piece of lead spierced the boy's shoulder that it lay right under the skin on the opposite side.

A single touch of the knife brought it away. Innes deftly made a compression that was held down by the bandages, and stopped the flow of blood.

He sponged Vivian's forehead with wet moss, and made him as comfortable as he could. Then he held up the rifle-ball.

"Remington bullet," he said. "Some Injun fired that!"

"Ah," said Ben, "the Beaver, then, and not Stride! I didn't think Stride would have even that amount of pluck, anyhow; and he's no shot."

"Who is Stride?"

"I'll explain that to you when we get to the ranch. I'm beginning to think we've held our tongues about it longer than we need."

"I think you're right, old chap," said a faint voice.

They turned to Vivian hastily. He had opened his eyes, but was still very pale.

"Are you feeling it much, young 'un?" asked Innes quickly.

"My shoulder's giving me gyp. The beggar got me, didn't he?"

"Yes, a painful wound, but not a bit dangerous; an' you're healthy an' tough. Ten days will see you quite sound again, only you'll have to lie up."

"It was the Beaver, wasn't it? Did you see him, Ben?"

"Whoever it was," said Jack, his eyes flashing, "we'll string him up quicker'n a snowflake 'ud melt in the hot place when we get our hands on him. The boys are out after him now, and——"

"I doubt if they'll nab him this time," said Ben. "The Beaver's as slippery as a conger, and he's had a long start. Here they come back— Slim Jim, anyhow. Hasn't got him."

The young rancher galloped up to the party, and was jubilant at finding that Vivian's condition was not dangerous.

"The dirty skunk that did it has cleared right out, though," he said.

"It's an Injun, by the tracks, with half his left foot gone."

"Oh, that's the Beaver right enough!" said Jim.

"Yes, that Blood trapper you had the row with at the ranch, the treacherous brute! I'm surprised he should try such a right-down piece of murder as this, though!"

"He had his reasons, I fancy," said Ben grimly.

"If he were paid for it, I could understand it."

"I should say you've just hit the nail on the head there, Slim Jim," said Ben; "but has the chap given you the slip altogether? I was afraid he would."

"It beats me, and that's a fact," said the rancher. "I'm no bad hand at following a trail, and Ohio's a lot better. We thought we'd easily strike it, and ride him down. But though we can see the beggar's tracks near the edge of the wood, and the place where he got on his horse as well, a hundred yards farther the trail gives right out. The ground's very bad for it. We've spent half an hour ringing the whole place to try and strike it again, and Ohio's there yet. I came back when it was lost to see how the kid was, and if you wanted help."

"We can get him to Red Dog all right," said Innes, "if you'll give a band with the horses."

"Right. Ohio's going to stick to it till he finds it, and he's a better trailer than me. I wish we had an Indian here to help. Let's get the kid in as quick as we can; he'll get a fever out here in the dews with a wound."

They made a rough stretcher with poles and a blanket, and Vivian was carried on to Red Dog just as Flying Cloud had been after the mauling from the grizzly, only his bullet-wound was far less serious than the Cree's injuries had been. It was no great distance to Red Dog, and they covered it in an hour.

Vivian bore the journey well, and he elected to go right on to the ranch, preferring to be there rather than in the Backwoods Hotel. McLeod's was reached an hour after dark, and amongst the first to meet the party was Hank Fletcher.

"What in thunder's this?" he cried.

"Kid Vivian shot through the shoulder, Hank," said Innes. "A sou of a skunk has tried to murder him."

Fletcher flushed hotly.

"What!" he exclaimed. "You don't mean to say that hound——"

He checked himself suddenly, but Innes filled in the blank for him.

"It was that rat of a Blood trapper that Ben pitched across the hut. Ohio's out after him."

"Oh, that cuss, was it?" said Fletcher, and he drew a breath of relief.

"The Injun? I hope to goodness Ohio gets him! I'd see every Injun in the country strung up rather than lose Kid Vivian. Not very bad hurt, you say? That's good! But whar's my horses? What ha' you done?"

"The horses have all gone through, boss, and the money's safe in the bank," said Ben. "Vivian ain't very fit to talk to-night, so I'll report to you when I've seen him safe."

Everybody on the ranch was eager to do what they could for Vivian, and he might have had his choice of the best quarters in the place, from the captain's downwards. Vivian preferred to be put in his own hut, however, and, being very exhausted, he fell into a heavy sleep as soon as he was in bed, and had had a bowl of strong broth.

When Ben had seen him made thoroughly comfortable, and sleeping soundly, he got one of the ranchers to sit in the hut and keep watch, for Ben did not mean to leave his chum unguarded for as much as five minutes, and went to join Fletcher.

He told the ranch-captain of their journey south, of the safe arrival of the herd of horses without a single loss, the banking of the money, and the encounter with the road-agents, besides Vivian's mishap.

"Gosh!" said Hank. "You kids absolutely win it! Getting these horses through was a smart enough bit of work in itself, an' I own I reckoned on losin' at least two or three o' them. An' then getting held up by them skunks of road-agents—when you'd banked all the money, too! I'm blamed glad you got out o' their hands safe, you bet! I'll have the Mounted Police out after 'em this very night—I'll send a rider down to the post at Flat Creek, an' they shall rope in that dirty Injun, too! I'd rather lose the best broncho on the ranch than that Kid Vivian should come to grief! I would—you mightn't believe it, but it's a fact!"

"Those two ruffians who held us up were Americans," said Ben.

"Well, I guess I'm an American, too," said Fletcher; "but there's more'n one sort, kid," he added, taking out his pocket-book, and drawing forth several greenbacks. "I'm a man o' my word, an' here's the twenty dollars I promised you if those horses all reached Calgary—ten dollars each."

Ben thanked him, and was glad to have the notes. Fletcher shook hands with him as they bade each other good-night!

"Let young Vivian have every derned thing he wants, no matter what. I'll foot the cost myself. You needn't ride out with the boys till he's all right again—he'll need you to look after him. An' I guess I've lead here in my six-gun fer any cuss that interferes with either o' you. Good-night, young British—you're white, both of you!"

Hank might be "tough," but Ben thanked his stars for having such a decent "boss."

CHAPTER 12.

A Fruitless Search.

THE boy went back past the sheds, and as he did so, Ohio came riding in through the darkness, covered with dust, and his horse was blown.

"Kid," he said, in a disappointed voice, "I'm sorry to say it's no good for the present. The cuss has done me!"

"Beaver?" said Beau. "It's no wonder you haven't caught him, Ohio might as well hunt a ghost; and he had a long start."

"I'd ha' backed myself to drop on him," said Ohio disgustedly; "the way the critter covers his tracks would beat anybody but a Cree. A trace of him or his horse was gone, and I ringed round till dark, tryin' to strike the trail. Then I rode away down to Abe Hook's cabin at The Trees, and he's goin' south in the mornin', so I left him a message for the Mounted Police post. We'll have that skunk of a Blood yet, an' when we do—"

"I reckon there are no trackers in the Mounted Police to beat you, Ohio," said Ben.

"Ah, but there's such a lot of 'em, and so well organised that they don't fail. Don't you make no mistake. When they want an Injun, they get him—at least, it's mighty seldom they fail. When Charcoal, who was a Blood, too, shot Wilson, the agent, the Police hunted him six hundred miles, and stopped every pass in the Rockies, but they got him at last, though he shot two of them, including Wilde, the finest officer the M. P. ever had, and who tried to take him single-handed."

"Beaver's one of the same tribe, then?"

"Yes, an' I guess he's a lot more slippery than Charcoal, though not so plucky. Charcoal would never ha' failed to drop you dead at that range, but the Beaver'll take more catching. Now look here, Ben, how is it that the Injun, an' that white skunk who was up here last week, are down on you to this extent? What's the game?"

"Well," said Ben, "I reckon I may as well tell you. Vivian agrees, and I don't see what we've got to keep it secret for any longer. You see I'm anxious about Vivian. It's him the blackguards are after, and at the rate they'll get him sooner or later."

"It looks blamed like it, kid."

"Beaver didn't do this only out of revenge. It's a pretty sure thing he paid for it by that white skunk, as you call him. The man's a stableman from England, and one of the biggest rascals unhung. He's doin' his utmost to bring Vivian to grief, and he's come mighty near it more than once. I'll tell you why."

As briefly as possible, Ben told Ohio the story of Vivian's dismissal from Charters Grange, and its cause (a part of which the ranchman already knew), and of Stride's subsequent persecution of the boys at Montreal and Calgary, the capture of Boyle's letters, and, in short, the entire history, as Ben knew it. Long before he had finished Ohio's eyes were blazing.

"Kid," he said. "We ain't much on lynching up here; but if this cuss Stride was to fall into the hands o' any of us at Red Dog, I guess we'd make an exception, an' string him up quicker'n blazes! A man like that ain't fit to tread the earth!"

"Well, that's outside my limit, and I don't think you're likely to get hold of him," said Ben; "but I thought I'd tell you, because if anything does go wrong with us, you'll know the reason of it."

"I never heard o' such a low-down plant in my life!" exclaimed Ohio

"This stableman euss au' the feller in England who's backin' him want wipin' out! It beats me!"

"There's a lot of money at stake, you see," said Ben. "Vivian is heir to one of the richest men in England—or was, till Boyle Charters cut him out. If Vivian's out, of the way, the other chap'll be safe. He's afraid of Vivian being taken back into favour."

"I'm glad you told me this," said Ohio grimly. "I guess I'll let a few o' the boys know it. It'll entertain them. You slide along now, sonny, an' look after the kid. When he's on his feet again, we'll take a hand in this game, an' see where the trumps are. I guess Red Dog will mix in. Good-night, young British!"

Ben went back to the cabin, where he found Slim Jim had some broth ready for the wounded boy. Vivian was in such a deep sleep, however, that they did not wake him. Ben learned that Fletcher had given orders that the ranche was not to be left unguarded at night, but that there was always to be one armed man on watch.

Perhaps this was due as much to the fact that a couple of cayuses had been stolen during the night the boys were in Calgary as to Vivian's mishap; but in either case, it suited Ben well, for he was badly in need of sleep himself.

Next morning Vivian woke greatly refreshed, and made a good breakfast. His wound was stiff and painful, and, of course, getting up was out of the question. Ben, having no need to go to the round-ups, was let off duty to attend his chum.

For six whole days things went on smoothly, and Vivian progressed so rapidly that Jack Innes declared he would be sound and fit again by the end of the week. His strong, healthy frame, the life he led, and his unusual vitality, gave the boy a great advantage, and, indeed, on the sixth day he was walking about the ranche, though not as yet quite fit.

It was in the evening, when Ben had insisted on his turning in again, that Vivian received a visitor, at whose absence he had been already wondering. A shadow fitted in through the door, and the boy, looking up, saw the Cree brave standing at the foot of the bed.

Flying Cloud had returned. And as his gaze fell on Vivian's bandaged shoulder, his dark eyes began to glow like live coals, and his hand dropped to the short scalping-knife at his belt.

"Hallo, Flying Cloud!" exclaimed Vivian from the bed. "It's you, is it, old buck? Jolly glad to see you! We were afraid the Mounted Police had pinched you!"

He held out his hand, and the Cree took it in silence. He seemed unable to speak. He looked Vivian over with searching eyes.

"I want to know who done it!" he said fiercely, pointing to the boy's bandaged shoulder. "How you get wound like that? Was it knife—"

"A bullet," said Vivian, "from somebody who wanted to get me out of the way. I didn't see him; but I'm nearly well now—"

"I uever forgive myself!" said the Cree, striking his breast passionately with his fist. "Flying Cloud heap rascal—no trust him! I say I be away three days, and I was six, and so here you are with bullet through you! When I—"

"No, no," said Vivian, breaking in; "it wasn't any fault of yours, old chap. Do you think I want a nurse to look after me? Besides, it happened the day after you left, so your absence didn't make any difference."

"Who did it, I say?" exclaimed the Indian hotly. "Who shoot you?"

"We reckon it was Beaver-With-One-Eye," said Ben.

Flying Cloud's eyes blazed so savagely, and his bronze face showed such hatred when he heard the name, that Vivian was startled.

"I want to hear how it was and when it happen," said the Cree quickly. "Where were you when that dog shoot you?"

"Oh, down by the woods, somewhere along the trail!" said Vivian. "But I'm a bit tired to-night, old chap; I'll tell you about it in the morning. When I'm fit again we'll set to, and bring the beggar to book for it."

Seeing the fatigue in the boy's face, Flying Cloud withdrew quietly, and beckoned Ben outside with him. They walked to the corrals in silence.

"Rotten business, isn't it?" said Ben. "I'd like to hang that murdering thief of a Blood with my own hands! It might have been worse. Vivian only got a flesh wound, and he'll be sound by the day after to-morrow. It's a week ago since we brought him home——"

"Never mind that," said Flying Cloud abruptly. "Sit here, Ben, and tell me just how shot fired, and where you see Beaver last. You not follow the trail? You sure it was Beaver?"

"There wasn't any trail to follow said Ben; "at least, it disappeared and Jim and Ohio couldn't find it."

"Wah!" said the Indian scornfully. "Ohio good fellow, but blind as a bat. Never can follow trail unless in soft mud, Ohio! Now, where you first see Beaver?"

"We didn't see him at all, for certain. After being stopped by some thieves on the trail—they didn't get anything—we camped for the night near Five Forks. There was somebody sneaking about, trying to stalk us, we thought, and I'd have pretty nearly sworn I saw Beaver's head above the bushes once. He didn't do anything, because we were both on the watch, and had our rifles. It was daylight soon after."

Flying Cloud muttered something.

"We rode pretty hard all day, and Vivian believed that if there had been anybody we must have left him behind, but I didn't feel so sure about it. Vivian's horse went lame just at the turn of the trail, five miles down from Red Dog, and he got off to see to it.

"Almost at once there was a shot from the wood on the left, and Vivian went down. I thought he was killed, for sure. I couldn't leave him, and didn't see anybody. I mounted guard over him, and presently three of our fellows rode up, and tried to find the trail. There were tracks at the edge of the wood—with only half a foot one side, like Beaver has."

Flying Cloud nodded grimly.

"They lost the trail soon after, though Ohio searched for it till dark. We brought Vivian home, and the Mounted Police are after Beaver; I hear they're searching the Blood camps for him, and they're stopping all the passes in the hills to the south."

"Wah!" grunted the Cree. "Beaver not go that way, nor to the camps. Now, you answer all I ask you."

He put the most minute questions to Ben, one after another, and many of them seemed to Ben to have nothing whatever to do with the affair at all. He answered as well as he could, however, and Flying Cloud, with deep, slow-twinkling eyes, smoking his copper pipe the while, listened silently. All the rage he showed before had left him now, and he was quiet and unperturbed as a man could be.

CHAPTER 13.

Flying Cloud Takes the Law Into His Own Hands.

BEN went away to attend to several odd jobs that had to be done, and later on he returned to join Vivian in the midday meal. There was nobody at the ranch, and even the cook was away at the Otter Creek round-up, so the boys cooked the meal themselves in the cabin. Vivian was declaring that by all the powers he wouldn't nurse himself any longer, and that another dose of staying in would kill him.

"I'm glad Flying Cloud's back," said Ben, as he forked the tough beefsteaks off the fire. "He'll be able to keep a watch over the cabin till you're all right again——"

"Where is he now, anyway?" said Vivian interrupting. "He isn't generally missing at mealtimes."

"He'll turn up soon, I expect. I was telling him all about your disaster an hour or two ago. He'll soon be here."

Flying Cloud did not arrive, however, and presently Ben went out to look for him. The hoy came back after a while, and announced that the Indian was nowhere to be found.

"I expect he's gone up the creek to get some fish for you," said Ben. "I told him fish was a good thing if one was laid up."

Vivian was silent, and seemed rather thoughtful.

"I wonder where he is?" he said at last. "I'll hct my hat he's not fishing! What's he slipped off like this for, without saying a word?"

"He never does say very much," returned Ben. "He's a silent sort of bird. Why, what does it matter?"

"Tell me what he said to you this morning."

Ben repeated his conversation with the Crec, and presently the two boys went out together, Vivian looking a little nneasy. A ranchman presently came riding in from the southward, out of the woods, and waved to the boys as he passed. It was Joe Merrick, one of the stockmen.

"Hallo, kids!" he said. "How's the shoulder, Vivian? What's that pet Injun o' yours after—is he poaching buck?"

"Where did you see him?" asked Vivian, stopping the horseman.

"Saw him about four miles back, jus' by the foot of Short Gulch, ridin' up into the Alonquin Hills, with his rifle across the saddle. Seemed to me at followin' a trail, by what I could see. Wouldn't say 'howdy' to me at all—pushed right on. Looked mighty business-like."

"Look here, Ben," said Vivian, as the stockman rode on, "he's off; I thought he was."

"Stalkin' buck, or something?"

"Rot! Stalking Stride, or else that Blood trapper, more likely."

"That's what he asked me all those questions for, is it?" said Ben, grinning. "Well, I'll put my money on Flying Cloud. Wouldn't care much to be the chap he's tracking. You should have seen how he looked when I told him about your getting shot."

"I did see him, au' he looked like——"

"Like business. Well, it'll be a score for us if Stride or the Beaver is found and arrested."

"I don't know about a score; I don't quite like it," said Vivian. "You never know what Flying Cloud's after. He's doing this without consulting us, and I vote we follow and see what it means. Get your horse, Ben, and I'll saddle Red Fiend."

"What, now?"

"Of course! It's odds against our overtaking him already."

"But you ain't fit to ride, Vivian."

"I'm fit for anything—anyhow, I'm going," said his chum impatiently. "Go and rope that broncho of yours, and let's be off!"

Vivian went to the small corral and saddled Red Fiend, who was very fresh indeed for want of work, and made believe to eat his master alive. He was ramping like a stag when Vivian mounted him, and overjoyed to get his hoofs upon the prairie again.

"Now, you go steady, old chap," said Vivian. "I've got a puncture in my shoulder, and it isn't properly repaired yet. I don't want any shaking up."

It almost seemed as if the yellow stallion understood, for he quieted down, after one open-mouthed rush at Ben's broncho, for the sake of appearances, and went steadily enough. The chums crossed the river, and cantered swiftly southwards along the narrow trail through the woods.

"He won't go very fast, I should think," said Vivian, referring to Flying Cloud, "if he's following a hard trail. I expect he knows pretty well where to look for his quarry; there isn't much the chap's not up to. Let's go a bit faster."

"I shouldn't be worrying myself, if I were you," said Ben, as they quickened to a fast gallop. "Can't say I care much what happens to Stride, or that copper-skinned thief who's his partner."

"No," agreed Vivian; "but you never can tell what Flying Cloud might be letting us in for. He's a grand fellow, but he's hot stuff, and I shan't be easy till I take a hand in this game."

They covered the distance quickly till they came to the spot where the main trail had to be left, and the four miles did not take them twenty minutes.

"I told Ohio the truth about Stride," said Ben, as they rode.

"Did you? I suppose it's just as well," returned Vivian. "If anything did happen to us through that ruffian, the boys would know why it was, and he'd be rounded up, and made to pay the penalty. But I'm not sure you weren't a bit too early."

"I thought it better, and then he'll find it a lot harder to come sneaking round our cabin."

"He isn't likely to show his nose at the ranch any more after what's happened."

"I'd never care to be what Stride would do or wouldn't do," said Ben. "It wouldn't surprise me a bit. Isn't that the end of Short Gulch yonder?"

The boys dismounted when they reached the place, and scouted round carefully. They made the most of the lessons Flying Cloud had given them, and their eyes were sharp enough. Indeed, it needed no great skill to pick out their dark-skinned friend's tracks, for the ground was wet from the rain of the night before, and Flying Cloud had dismounted and quartered the ground, leading his horse. The hoofmarks of his cayuse, and the rounded prints of his own moccasins, were plain enough to see.

The boys were able to follow them on horseback at a good pace through the soft earth of the hills, for Flying Cloud had evidently mounted and ridden on slowly. Whether he had been following a trail himself, or whether he knew where to find the quarry he sought, it was hard to say. Vivian thought he had not been tracking, but just riding ahead.

After penetrating into the Alonquins for a mile or more, the forest became thicker, and the trail would have taken more experienced scouts than Ben and Vivian to follow it. They lost it altogether.

"It's no good creeping about for hours with our noses on the ground, trying to find it," said Vivian. "Time's important. We must ride on, and trust to luck, covering as much ground as we can. You take a wide

circle to the right, and I'll go to the left. Meet at that spire of rock you can see half a mile ahead."

The riders separated, and rode in and out through the woods, ringing them, so as to leave as little ground as possible unsearched, but no sign of a human being did Vivian see, nor any tracks.

When they came together at the meeting-place, Ben had had no better luck.

"It's a wildgoose chase," said Vivian despondently. "I'd give a finger to know what the chap's up to; and he may be miles ahead or miles back for all we know."

Vivian was becoming so anxious that Ben grew uneasy too; he hardly knew why. They rode on in silence for some distance, their horses treading noiselessly on the thick carpet of pine-needles.

Suddenly Vivian pulled up, as the Red Fiend, turning his head to the right, cocked his ears forward and spread his nostrils.

Motioning Ben to follow quietly, Vivian let his horse take him that way. They rode through a narrow track among the thickets, and coming suddenly into a wide clearing, the boys were met by a sight that drew from Ben a startled exclamation. They had found Flying Cloud with a vengeance.

CHAPTER 14.

Two Prisoners, and What Became of Them.

It was certainly an astonishing picture that the boys came face to face with, and one for which Ben, at any rate, was not prepared.

Right in the centre of the clearing a rough stake had been driven into the ground, and lashed to it with leathern thongs, tight as they could be drawn, was Beaver-With-One-Eye, the Blood trapper.

His usually copper-skinned face was a leaden-grey colour, and around his feet was a pile of dry brushwood and pine-faggots. A little way beyond his horse lay dead upon the ground, a bullet through its head.

Facing the captivo Blood, half a dozen yards away, and squatting on his haunches, was Flying Cloud. He was quietly smoking his copper-bowled pipe, his gaze fixed steadily on his prisoner's face.

There was no triumph or exultation in the Cree's keen, hawk-like face, only deadly, burning hatred in his eyes.

Immovable as a statue, he sat and watched Beaver's features. Beside him lay an open hunting-knife, newly stropped, and a resin-reeking brand of wood to serve as a torch, with a metal box of sulphur matches next it.

The purpose of Flying Cloud was plain to see, but he said no word. He did not even taunt his prisoner. Beaver seemed incapable of speech, and stared at his captor with glassy eyes and an ashen face.

"My heavens, look at that!" muttered Vivian. "We're just in time!"

Flying Cloud sprang to his feet in the twinkling of an eye, gripping his rifle, and, spinning round, he faced the boys.

The astonishment of the Cree quite equalled that of the boys. They stared at each other for a moment in silence, and the captive's voice was heard suddenly in shrill accents, calling for mercy.

"Look here, Flying Cloud," exclaimed Vivian, "what on earth are you about? We can't have this, you know!"

"You no right to leave the ranch," said the Indian emphatically. "You no fit to ride, Vivian. How you get here?"

"Get here! It's a jolly good thing we did get here, it seems to me!" said Vivian, dismounting and striding forward. "What were you going to do with that man at the stake?"

"Stop!" said the Cree, coolly, holding up his hand. "See now, you or in T
on your horses again, and ride away. No need for you to worry yourself
at all. You leave it to me. Flying Cloud settle it all right."

"Not much!" said Vivian, hitching his bridle to the stump-branch of P
tree. "I'm going to take this job in hand myself. How did you get h
of that fellow you've tied up there?"

"Quite easy," said the Cree brave. "After what Ben tell me, I go at
him; know where to look for him. He fire at me, and try to ride awa
but I shoot his horse, because I want to take him alive."

"And you were going to use some of your beastly Indian tortures
him!" said Vivian sternly, pointing to the knife and the torch.

"No need for you ask questions," said Flying Cloud placidly. "I go
treat him as he deserve because of what he did to you. He is a murder
and a coward! See, his face nearly pale as a white man's!"

"George, I don't wonder!" muttered Ben.

"Only right he pay the penalty which my tribe take from such as he
said the brave. "He would have done worse to me."

Faithful, loyal, and courageous though he was, Flying Cloud was still
savage to the backbone; and Ben saw why his chum had been so anxious.

The Cree took it as a matter of course that his prisoner should suffer
the stake for his treachery, and thought no more of it than Vivian wou
have thought of punching a rival's head.

Moreover, it was Beaver's showing the white feather that most disgust
Flying Cloud, who did not know what fear was.

"You cast him loose from that stake at once!" said Vivian. "You
got to drop this sort of thing, Flying Cloud, for good and all, or I'll dra
you! Do you take us for wild beasts? Unbind him!"

"What for?" said the amazed Indian.

"Because I tell you to! He's a miscreant, I know, and he tried
murder me. But I won't have this sort of thing! He shall be givi
over to the authorities and stand his trial, and the law shall punish h
justly."

"If you give him to the police," said Flying Cloud earnestly, "he qui
as likely to get away from them as not. I say it is folly. We have gr
him here, and his life is forfeit. If you will not have him burnt——"

"I'll shoot you with my own hand if you dare try it!" said Vivian
hotly.

"Then shoot him!" said the Cree briefly, seizing his rifle. "Even a whi
man should not be fool enough to let him go."

Vivian refused to listen, and insisted on the Blood being handed over
the proper authorities.

Flying Cloud protested, but in vain.

"It will end in your death by his hand!" said the brave. "I tell yo
so. I foresee it!"

"It's I who have the right to say what shall be done!" said Vivian
sharply. "It was me he shot—not you. You say your life is ours becau
we saved it, and you took the oath. Obey my orders, then, for I'm going
to have them carried out!"

Flying Cloud gave in at once when his oath of blood-brotherhood w
recalled. It was only his astonishment at Vivian's ideas on the subj
that had made him protest.

"Bind his arms tight, all the same," said Vivian. "I've no notion o
letting the treacherous brute get away. We'll make sure he doesn't troubl
us any more, at least."

Beaver said not a word as they released him from the stake. The colour
came back to his swarthy face, but he showed no gratitude to Vivian

or having saved him from the fate Flying Cloud had intended to put in to.

The Cree brave made the thongs fast round his captive's arms, and called p his own horse, which was grazing not far away.

He lifted Beaver on to it, and tied his ankles under the mustaug's belly. Then, walking beside the horse, he marched him off down the slope of the hill, Ben and Vivian mounting and riding on either side.

"It is foolishness," said Flying Cloud; "but if you will do it, let us and the Shermogonish, who will not be very far away, and let them take charge of him."

"That's what we'll do," returned Vivian. "We're tremendously obliged o you for catching him, Flying Cloud, and jolly smartly you've done it. There's only one thing—you've got to undertake not to play any of these ndian games on prisoners now or at any other time. If you don't agree o that we'll part at once, for I'll not be connected with any such beastliness. s that a bargain?"

"Yes, if you say so," said Flying Cloud simply. "I give my word."

"That's all right, then, old chap," said Vivian, with relief; "and we're riends through thick and thin. I suppose it's no use expecting you to understand how I feel about it, but I'd rather have been shot dead myself han have anybody tortured on my account, even a brute like this. But hat's all settled now."

They said no more about the matter, and the three friends, with their risoner, pushed on as rapidly as they could, Flying Cloud trotting beside he horse, whose bridle he held. An hour's travelling brought them back o Short Guleh, and soon afterwards they came right upon a sergeant of he Mounted Police, on a big black troop-horse, making for the Gulch itself.

"How, Shermogouish?" called Flying Cloud.

The sergeant reined up in astonishment, and stared at the prisoner.

"By gosh, you've got him, then, boys!" he cried. "Say, this is a icker! There's two patrols gone t'other side of the trail, an' I struck out his way because I reckoned he'd gone up the Alonquins; but they wouldn't elieve it."

"You were on the right track, sergeant," said Vivian, "an' the others re away off it. We'll hand him over to you. He's your meat now. Took im about four miles off."

"You're the kid he shot, ain't you?" said the sergeant. "Glad to see ou out again, young British. You're hot stuff, by what I've heard, but his is about the smartest thing you've done. It ain't many can say they ot ahead of the N.W.M.P."

"We didn't do it," said Vivian. "All the credit goes to"—he was about o mention Flying Cloud's name, but checked himself—"to our friend here. e tracked the rascal down, and captured him single-handed."

The sergeant looked at Flying Cloud, who met his gaze with a face that ight have been carved in stone. The policeman's eyes twinkled for a oment.

"How, Flying Cloud?" he said. "This is a bit of work that'll go to our credit. They say you ain't exactly a brother to the Blood tribe."

The brave made no reply, nor did a muscle of his face move. The boys ere relieved to find that no mention was made of the feud with Frogfoot, ho had been Beaver's brother, for they believed Flying Cloud to have been n the right.

"I'll take him right down by the short trail on foot," said the sergeant. "You'll be ueedin' your horse, I guess. Cut his aukles loose, an' I'll put im on a lead."

"Are you goin' to take him to Calgary?" said Ben

"Yes, of course! You'll be sent notice when the trial comes off, and you'll have to come up an' give evidence. There's more against him than this shootin' racket, too. You've nailed one o' the worst rips that ever wore a copper-coloured skin, an' the woods are well rid of him. Sergeant Mackay is my name, by the way. You'll hear from me. Come on, pardner," he said to Beaver. "We must be gettin' along."

Not a word did the Blood say while he was being secured, and a lariat made fast round him was hitched to the sergeant's saddle-horn. The Beaver-With-One-Eye, just before he was marched off, turned upon Vivian an eye more malevolent than that of a rattlesnake that is about to strike.

"This is not the end," he said, in a hissing voice—"this is not the end, white man! I shall come back, and some day, soon or late, but sure, ye shall die a death that shall make birds fall from the trees for terror. Wait a little yet!"

The sergeant jerked roughly at the lariat.

"Get on, you skunk!" he growled. "None o' your lip! It'll be a long day before you have the chance, an' before you leave us we'll cut your claws. Git! So-long, you three! Don't you worry—this euss'll git your lifer!"

The Mounted Policeman disappeared down the trail with his prisoner, and Flying Cloud, mounting his horse, rode back towards Red Dog with the boys. The Indian was strangely silent.

"What's wrong, my noble hunter?" said Ben. "Why so quiet—do we've done a jolly good day's work—or, rather, you have."

Flying Cloud shook his head.

"It is in my mind we have done foolish thing," he said, rather gloomily. "Somehow, I can see it that Beaver-With-One-Eye will keep his word, and do to you what he said."

"Well, I'm not going to lose any sleep over that," said Vivian; "he's bound to get at least ten years for attempted murder, if not a lifer; and nobody can say he doesn't deserve it. So what may happen after all that time doesn't worry me. I shall be a good deal older then."

"More better you had left him to me, as I tell you!" growled Flying Cloud. "But it is done, and there is no help for it. I would like to see all your enemies as safe as I would have made Beaver-With-One-Eye. But let us get back to the ranch. You should not be riding here with wounds on your shoulder, Vivian."

"I'm all right, old chap," said Vivian. "The wound's healed, and the ride's done me good. I never could stand being cooped up indoors. Let me put the pace on; I'm hungry, and want my grub."

They cantered on till Red Dog was reached, and rode straight through it, calling out the news of Beaver's capture to several cowboys in the verandah of the hotel, and hats were waved gleefully in response, for Vivian's mishap was naturally known of for fifty miles around, and there was nobody more popular, unless it was the huge and placid Ben, whom everybody had a good word for.

"Here we are back again," said the latter, as they came out of the woods and crossed the river. "What's up at the ranch? They've got something on!"

They had something on indeed. There was a crowd in front of the horse corrals, gathered round something that the boys could not see. But when they caught their attention, and drew the exclamation from Ben, was the sight of a lariat with a dangling noose thrown over a high crossbar that was generally used for stretching new rawhide from.

"What on earth's the rope for?" cried Vivian, in amazement. "Hav-

they caught a thief? They don't lynch horse-thieves in this country! What the——"

"My great James!" ejaculated Ben, as they rode up and saw that the ranchers had a prisoner in their midst. "It's Stride!

CHAPTER 15.

Tar-Barrel and Bolster.

STRIDE it was beyond all doubt. He was in the midst of a ring of fierce and wrathful ranchmen, and Ohio and Slim Jim had him in their grip.

The ex-stableman was very white in the face, and panting heavily. He showed signs of having been through a severe struggle, and his little ferrety eyes darted this way and that like a cornered rat seeking in vain a way of escape. As the boys rode up, and he caught sight of them, he grew paler yet, and gave an audible gasp.

"Hallo!" cried Vivian. "What ou earth's up? Where did you get him?"

"Here you are, kids!" called Ohio grimly. "You're just in time for the picnic! This is the cuss you've had all the trouble from, ain't it?"

"By George, yes!" said Vivian, springing down from his horse. "That's Jake Stride!"

"Two of 'em in one day!" cried Ben, slapping his thigh. "If this ain't a bit o' luck!"

"He's the one that's been layin' for you, ain't he, kid?" said the ranchmen, almost with one voice.

"You bet he is!" said Vivian, coming forward quickly. "Where did you find him?"

"Jack saw him makin' across for your cabin while you was away, before any o' the rest of us got back, an' collared him."

"Well done!" said Ben. "It's not the first time he's tried that, but I reckon it'll be the last!"

"I reckon so, too," said Ohio grimly. "Guess I spotted who he was quick enough, from what you told me, an' all the boys thinks as I do. We——"

"I ain't done nothin'!" cried Stride earnestly. "I'll take me oath I ain't! Lemme go!"

"Shut your head, you cur!" said Ohio briefly. "Now then, Vivian, this yere is the galoot that's tried to put you out o' the way, ain't it?"

"It's him," said Vivian, "sure enough!"

"The one that helped get you sent out o' England in disgrace? The same that follered you all the way out, au' done his best to pip you half a dozen times? The one that's paid to do it by that low-down cousin o' yours at home?"

"It's a fact," said Ben, breaking in. "It's him, an' no other. Weldon Charters' ex-stableman."

"That's all we want to know. Boys, let's proceed to business. Are you all agreed?"

"Yes!" said the ranchers fiercely; and the boys had never seen them so savagely angry.

"Then bring him under the bar, an' we'll finish the job off."

"No, no, no!" shrieked Stride, flinging himself down in a frenzy of fear. "You can't do it! You ain't goin' to murder me! I tell yer it's all a lie!

Lemme go—oh, please, gents, lemme go!"

"Hold on!" said Vivian. "What are you going to do with him?"

"Why, we're goin' to have a little necktie party," said Ohio grimly, jerking Stride underneath the dangling rope. "A eur like this ain't to tread the earth in a white man's country! We mean to put the fin to him!"

"No, no!" cried Vivian, pressing forward. "You can't hang him! Don't do that, Ohio, for Heaven's sake!"

The rancher stared.

"What! D'you mean to beg him off?" he exclaimed. "No kid, he fair earned it, an' he shall have it!"

Holding Stride in his mighty grip, he passed the noose over the man's head, and Stride collapsed in a pitiable fright.

"I appeal to you all!" cried Vivian. "This is a white man's country. We live under the King's law, and we mustn't hang a man without trial. He's done no murder!"

Ohio looked taken aback. He had lived long in the States, where lynchings are thought no crime, and so had many others in the crowd. So white-hot was their anger against Stride that they had been ready to take the law into their own hands. So vile had his crime seemed to that gang of wild and rough, but honest, men, that they considered he deserved death. In Montana or Texan camp he would certainly have suffered it.

"Fair play, even for a scoundrel!" cried Vivian. "Don't disgrace the Flag! This isn't the States, where they hang men without trial, and burn niggers alive! Take that rope off his neck, and leave it to justice to punish him as he deserves!"

"Wah!" said Flying Cloud gutturally. "It is the same folly again! I do not understand it. You will let him go, same as Beaver! I say they are both guilty, and should die!"

"The kid's right!" said Slim Jim. "No lynchings on British soil!"

"We shall all have ter stand our trial in Calgary, if we do it," said a voice.

"Durned if I care for that," muttered Ohio. "Well, maybe you're right, an' it ain't the thing for Canada." He slipped the noose off Stride's neck, and the man gasped with relief. "What's the move, then?"

"The police," said Innes.

"What are you goin' to charge him with?" said Ben. "Can you even prove theft against him?"

Vivian was taken aback. From first to last, he knew they had no proof against Stride that would satisfy any court of law. He had covered his tracks too cunningly, and, except for the taking of the letter from Vivian after riding him down, and which they had afterwards recovered from him themselves by force, there was nothing they could successfully charge him with. Even his own confession in writing was no evidence in a law-court, for he would say it was wrung from him by force, and deny it.

A few questions showed this.

"Well, by gosh," said Ohio, "if you reckon he can wriggle out of it all at law, we ain't goin' to let him go seat-free—eh, boys?"

"No!" roared the ranchers.

"He's been an' defiled this yere ranch by comin' thievin' round it! He's got to pay for what he's done!"

"Tar-and-feather him!" said a voice.

"That's not a bad idea!" returned Ohio, and there was a shout of approval. "We'll make a job of it. Fetch the tar-barrel, an' loot a bolster from Hank's house, some o' you!"

"Not that!" exclaimed Vivian. "Don't put him through that. It's cruel!"

"Cruel! What d'ye call the things he's done to you? Who put that bullet through your shoulder, kid? You say you can't prove he paid the Injun, but you know he did! Tarrin' an' featherin' ain't a hundredth part o' what he deserves—why, it's child's play!"

"Ay, that's right!" said Jack Innes, trundling out the tar-barrel, "and we'll make a good job of it!"

"You stan' back, kids—keep out of it! We ain't goin' to have any interference!" said Ohio fiercely.

"Let 'em alone," said Ben to his chum. "Dash it, you ain't the Humane Society, are you? He's lucky to get off hanging, if you ask me, and if anything'll cure him, it's this."

Vivian saw it was useless to object, nor did he feel any great desire to. It was only the memory of his own distress when they were within an ace of inflicting the same punishment on him the first night he came to Red Dog, that had made him say a word for Stride.

McLeod's ranch meant to have its way, and no protest would have availed a moment. The tar-barrel was broached, and a big feather-bolster split up with a knife. They were hauling Stride towards it, whining and shouting for mercy, when Jack Innes glanced up.

"Yonder comes the boss," he said, as Hank Fletcher was seen riding up. "Guess he won't stop the picnic, eh?"

"Stop it!" snorted Ohio. "By gosh, we'll tar an' feather him, too, if he as much as tries it, an' that I swear to! Gimme that brush!"

Stride caught sight of the ranch-captain, and a perfect scream came from the prisoner.

"Hank!" he screeched. "Hank! Get me outer this! Make them stop it! If you don't, I'll tell about Red Fiend! You know me, Hank, an' you know what I mean! Make these beggars let me go!" He concluded with a furious oath. "Quick, now, or you'll be in a worse fix than me!"

CHAPTER 16.

Stride Tarred and Feathered.

STRIDE'S frantic screech was a surprise to everybody—the ranchers wondering what he had meant by the words he had used. But Hank Fletcher, without turning a hair, rode right up to the group, though he had heard plainly enough Stride's accusation.

The boys were startled, wondering what Fletcher would do. He was a man who would have his own way if he chose, whatever the odds, and he was quite fearless. But there was no mistaking the temper of the crowd, and they meant to stand no interference.

"What in thunder's this?" asked the ranch captain coolly.

"You hear me, Hank!" screamed the struggling Stride. "Make 'em let me go! Make 'em turn me loose! If you don't, I'll show you up! I'll split on you!"

"See here, boss," broke in Ohio grimly, "we've caught this mean young skunk thievin' round the youngsters' cabin—it's him that robbed them before; an' he's out 'ere a-purpose to get them both enched. It's a sure 'nough thing it's owing to him that Kid Vivian was shot; an' he deserves stringin' up!"

"Guess that's so!" said Fletcher, ejecting a chew of tobacco. He took not the slightest notice of another frenzied outburst from Stride.

"The kids reckon we oughtn't to hang him; an' maybe they're right,

though I don't think it. But we're going to tar an' feather the skunk that's dead sure! It ain't the half o' what he deserves."

"Right," said Hank. "Go ahead! Give him a durned good coat—lay on thick!"

"Rip that 'ere bolster open!" said Ohio. "Gimme hold o' the brush!" "No, no, no!" screamed Stride. "Not me—not me! Do it to 'im! You beast, Hank! Weren't you in it, as well as me? Tar 'im, too! Lay it on him, if you must do it!"

"Shut your head!" said Ohio, hauling him towards the bolster, which was ripped open, and disclosed a regular sea of feathers. "We're going to make a prairie-chicken of you!"

"Hank was in it, I tell yer!" bellowed Stride. "I give him fifty dollars to put the kid on the yeller 'oss! 'E did it! Look at 'im sittin' there on the saddle, an' larfin'! I'll kill yer for this, Hank—I'll kill yer!" The coward became almost hysterical. "The kid's a liar! I never did nuffin' to him! He's a dirty liar——"

Splosh! came the tar-brush against Stride's mouth, stopping a stream of bad language, and making him splutter furiously. Ohio began to wield the tar-brush like an artist.

Hank took no more notice of the affair, but bit the end off a black cigar and rode coolly off to his house.

The boys drew back. They saw it was useless to make any objection to the punishment Stride was undergoing.

"Let 'em alone!" said Ben. "They can't tar him any blacker than he ought to be!"

"Off with his duds!" said one of the cowboys. "Lay the tar on his skin! Give it him properly!"

Vivian protested hotly against this, for it would have been absolutely cruel, and Ben joined him. Two or three of the ranchers also demurred.

"You might as well shoot him at once as do that," said Vivian. "Draw it mild, boys!"

"Slap it on to him as he is!" said Ohio. "We don't want to spend an hour over the skunk. Tar him from head to foot just as he stands!"

It was done! Stride, cursing, bellowing, kicking, was tarred liberal all over. The proceedings were very funny, after all, and the only bare parts of him were his hands and face, which now received a plentiful dose of the stuff. The rest was laid on over his clothes. Then Ohio tipped him into the mass of feathers, and he was rolled over and over vigorously.

There was a roar of laughter as the ruffian got up. He looked three times his proper size. He was one vast, fluttering ball of fluff. It seemed as if three hundred chickens must have been plucked to cover him.

"You beasts!" screamed Stride. "Yer oughter be all shot for this! Ow!"

The crowd of cowboys laughed till the very woods echoed; nor could the two chums help joining in.

Stride looked like nothing so much as a huge squeaking toy—a fluffy silver penny hen that squawked when it was pressed—for his voice came out from the centre of a great ball of feathers that grew round his head.

He staggered to his feet, almost blubbering, and breaking through the ring, plunged blindly into Ohio, and nearly upset him, at which the crowd roared more than ever. Terrific language came from the midst of the feathers.

"Git!" shouted Ohio. "Git, while you've a whole skin, you white-livered

skunk, an' thank your stars you got off so cheap!" He took his double-thonged quirt, and advanced towards Stride. "If this teaches you anything, guess it'll teach you to quit thievin' an' spyin', an' hirin' dead-beat Injuns! I reckon we're wrong, an' we ought to ha' hanged you! But there's the way clear afore you! Take it, an' go!"

Stride desired nothing better. He took to his heels with a yell, and after tripping once or twice, made for the woods at a surprising speed, considering his condition.

The bellows of mirth that went up behind him could have been heard two miles away across the plains.

Leaping, bounding, tripping and swearing, Stride carcered across the open like some sort of a human ostrich, leaving a trail of loose fluff behind him, which shook out of his covering.

"Go it, chicken! Go an' hatch yourself!" roared Ben.

Stride halted at the bridge, and turned round. He shook his fluff-covered paw at the ranchers—it was as big as a football from the feathers that stuck to it—and, shouting out a venomous curse, crossed the bridge, and made for the woods beyond.

There he stopped again, and the mirth-stricken ranchers waited to see what he would do. They heard him giving a shrill, piercing whistle. It was not easy to see how he could whistle at all, just then—but he did; and repeated it over and over again.

"What's he after?" said Vivian. "Is he goin' to whistle till the tar drops off?"

"He's callin' for his horse," answered Ben. "I reckon it's somewhere around, an' knows his whistle; an' he don't feel like walkin' any further."

Ben was right. A saddled horse came trotting through the woods—a useful-looking roan broncho, which Stride always rode—its ears cocked forward as it sought its master. Stride went forward to mount it.

The result was surprising. The horse shied right across the clearing as it caught sight of the huge ball of fluff. It reared right up, and, turning, galloped off through the woods. Stride, with furious shouts, went in pursuit, and the last that was seen of the ex-stableman was a feather-bedizened figure plunging into the dim aisles of the forest in full pursuit of a frightened broncho. Then he vanished, and the assembled jesters of McLeod's lay on the grass of the prairie and wept with sheer delight.

"Boys," said Ohio, sitting up and wiping his eyes, "it's a record for Alberta. It'll live in the blessed annals o' this 'ere glorious country as long as history lasts! Oh, my ribs! But I am sore!"

"Kid Vivian, you're a public benefactor!" said Slim Jim. "It wouldn't have been half the fun if we'd hanged him, as we were going to! You're quit o' that skunk for a while, anyhow!"

"Fellow broncho-busters an' scourers of the wild an' woolly plains!" said Vivian. "I beg to thank you on behalf of self and pardner for the efficient way in which you've handled the cuss that wanted to upset us——"

"Hear, hear!"

"I don't envy the condition he's in just now, but knowing what I do of him, I must say he jolly well deserved it," said Vivian. "Gentlemen," he concluded, taking off his sombrero with a majestic sweep, "once again my most sincere and grateful thanks!"

"Go an' cool your head!" said Ohio, grinning. "Think we got this entertainment up on your account?"

"That's both o' your bloodthirsty foes settled with, anyhow, kids," said Jack Iunes. "Guess I don't think much of either of 'em."

"All the same, a lariat's the best cure!" said Ohio.

The boys and Flying Cloud walked back to the log-cabin together.

It was noticed that the only person in the whole crowd who had laughed was the Indian. He had smiled grimly once or twice while Stride was undergoing the tarring and feathering, but that was all.

"What'll become of the wretched brute, d'you think?" said Vivian.

"Oh, shucks, he'll be all right!" returned Ben. "He'll have to get out of his clothes," said the big youth, grinning. "They won't be no more good; an' I dare say it'll take a gang of his Indian pals two or three days' work to get the tar off his face and hands with turpentine and margarine. We shall have some peace while it's bein done; an' I should be surprised if he retired to Calgary, and took a holiday. I'll bet my hat he never shows himself on McLeod's ranch again! What do you say, Flying Cloud?"

"No, he never come here again," said the Cree: "but, all the same, Ohio was right. I never was see anything like the way you interfere in these things, you two braves."

"We do, rather, don't we?" said Ben.

"If you had left Beaver to me and the white chief of the cowboys, they would have been an end of it. But, now they may still be troublesome again."

"Not Beaver-With-One-Eye, anyhow," returned Vivian. "He's dead for at least twelve years in the penitentiary."

Flying Cloud made no reply. They reached the hut, and on Vivian's table lay a letter bearing the Canadian stamp.

"One of the chaps must have left it here for you," said Ben.

"Not from home," remarked Vivian, opening the letter. "Hallo, from Mrs. Anderson!"

"That plucky little woman who saved you from what Stride's just done at the Calgary Hotel when we first came, eh?" said Ben. "She was a good sort. Member your saving her kid's life when he fell overboard coming across?"

Mrs. Anderson was a kindly Scottish woman, who had come out to Canada on the same liner as Vivian. He had saved her little son from drowning on the voyage, and she had befriended the boys more than once since.

Vivian read the letter out:

"Moose Creek, Upper Fraser, B. C."

"My dear Vivian,—I am going to call you that, because I'm not likely to forget that little Dicky owes his life to you.

"I learn that you are ranching at Red Dog, and shall be glad to hear how you and Ben Wainwright are getting on. I am living with my brother who runs the Moose Creek lumber camp, and we are doing very well in the grand country, though very wild and savage—more so than where you are."

"Don't forget that there's work for you here, and a home, if ever you should want it. We had a young German up here among our logging hands, but between the bears and the Indians he has been frightened away and gone home. We've never had much trouble from either ourselves.

"Good luck to you, anyway, and to Mr. Wainwright. Bear in mind what I've said.—Yours very sincerely,

MARY ANDERSON.

"She's a brick, that little lady," said Vivian, handing the letter to Ben. "Lots of grit. I wonder what a logging-camp is like?"

"Excitin' sort of game, I've heard," said Ben. "You go roaring down mountain-sides and along rivers on the top of great avalanches of ice or something. But we're ranchers, an' besides, we're fixed up here. They ought to give us a rise or screw soon."

"I reckon we're worth something in the way of entertainment to the ranch," said Vivian, "an' if I were a thundering rich man like McLeod, I'd treble the earnings of two deservin' and enterprisin' young immigrants who——"

"Oh, dry up, an' let's get our grub," said Ben, "after which I'm going to turn in, for I'm dead beat. Come on, you chaps; there goes the bell."

CHAPTER 17.

The End of McLeod's Ranch.

THE boys slept that night without troubling to keep watch save that Flying Cloud, in his blanket, and with his rifle to his hand, lay across the doorway. Nobody remained on guard, however, and they were justified, for the night passed away peacefully. Their enemies had had enough of them, possibly for some time to come.

At daybreak they were up at the sound of the bell, and Vivian, declaring himself perfectly fit for work, joined the others at the grub-shed, and went to saddle Red Fiend afterwards.

Flying Cloud went off by himself, and had an interview with Hank Fletcher. He proposed to buy the sorrel broncho, which he had borrowed to go after Beaver the day before, and which he had told the boys was "heap good little horse."

The ranch-captain named a price, and to his surprise the Cree paid it at once in "greenback" bills, taken from a considerable roll of them which he produced from some mysterious part of his upper garments. Hank's respect for the redskin increased at finding him such a capitalist.

"I go out to round-up, too, this morning, if you like," said Flying Cloud. "You find I cut out colts as well as your men."

"Guess you can go, then," said Hank. "Ten of the boys are out in camp, an' I'm short. Usual pay for stray jobs."

"No want pay," said the Cree, with a wave of his hand and a slightly-contemptuous look. "I do it for nix."

"Do you?" said Hank, grinning. "All right, then, if you're proud. You want to keep within hail of those two kids, I see; and I must say they need it."

Ben and Vivian were both surprised to find Flying Cloud was joining them in the ranching-work. Instead of waiting for the rest, he galloped right on ahead, and was soon lost in the gloom over the prairie, for the sun had not yet risen.

"Shouldn't wonder if he showed us all a thing or two," said Ben, "though," he added proudly, "he can't rope."

"He won't stick to it long," opined Vivian. "Flying Cloud's too wild a bird to go in for a daily job like this, which gets pretty monotonous when you've been at it a while."

The Cree brave did not know much about scientific ranching, it is true, and did not even carry a lariat. At most of the work the men of McLeod's were far ahead of him, but when it came to cutting out, and the required horses had to be separated from the excited crowd of them, Flying Cloud went through the herd like a streak of light, and did his part of the work in amazingly quick time. He was the equal of any of them, except, perhaps, Ohio and Jack Innes, and his experience with the wild herds of ponies of the Cree reserves stood him in good stead.

"The Injun's no slouch," opined Ohio, and Hank Fletcher, who came

out for part of the time, and rode back early, silently approved of Fletcher's work.

They had a stiff morning of it, returning to camp soon after midnight, and they had hardly corralled the horses they brought back with them when the ranch-captain came out of his house with some papers in his hand and rage in his face.

"Hallo! What's wrong with Hank?" remarked Ohio. "Something's gone crooked."

Fletcher strode up to the crowd, who had dismounted from their horses and shook a crumpled piece of paper at them.

"Just listen to this, boys!" he cried, hardly able to speak for anger. "McLeod has turned us down! The blamed ranch is sold!"

"Sold!" chorussed five or six of the men, in amazement.

"Sold!" cried Fletcher. "Yes, an' I guess we're sold, too! The boss has burnt his fingers speeklatin', an' he hands over the whole concern—buildings, horses, stock, ranch—lock, stock, an' barrel—to the Querne Company!"

"That set o' rabble?" exclaimed Ohio. "Those blamed mongrel swindlers! Why, Hank, I guess I'll be lookin' out fer another job mighty quick!"

"Sold the ranch!" said Vivian, in surprise. "That's a rum 'un! Will it make much difference?"

"I tell you," raged Hank, "Jim McLeod had no business to spring this on me like this! I've always acted fair by him. It ain't as if we'd had no notice—the ranch is in the new people's hands already. Here's a letter from their boss, sayin' they're sendin' Rene Hudson over to take charge, an' all orders are to be taken from him."

"Rene Hudson, is it?" said Innes, in disgust. "Why, I'd sooner go with a coyote! We know Rene Hudson. Boys, this is rather news."

Ben and Vivian hardly grasped what had happened, but by degrees the news came out. McLeod, the owner of the ranch, an old North-West man, who had made a big fortune, had a good many other interests as well, which he controlled from Winnipeg.

He had been tackling several other kinds of business, and in some speculation or other had lost a large sum. It had not ruined him, but to pay for it he was forced to realise some of his property at once, so the ranch was sold, or handed over, to satisfy the people he had lost money to.

"The whole shebang turned down in half an hour," was Ohio's comment. "There's no fool like an old fool."

Vivian did not feel it as the others did, for he had only seen McLeod once. He knew that his pay came from the ranch-owner, and that was enough.

"Who are Querne Company, or whatever they're called?" he asked.

"Querne & Co.? Ain't you never heard of them?" said Jack Innes. "Well, they're a set of coyotes that ha' made a good bit of money in good many shady ways. They snap up any firm that gets into difficulties, get hold of it, and run it on the cheap, putting their own men in."

"They're vultures—turkey-buzzards," said Fletcher sourly, "with a name for carrion."

"I reckon they've landed old man McLeod in difficulties, an' captured his ranch on the hop," added Ohio. "They're mostly half-breeds an' low-down French mongrels—they ain't the sort a white man can work with."

"An' Rene Hudson is about the rankest of the lot. He's in their pay."

"Say," remarked Innes, staring across the plain to the eastward, "is that some of the gang comin' now?"

Everybody turned to look. A party of eight or nine horsemen, on ratty-looking cayuses, were galloping towards the ranch, and at their head was a big, swarthy, foreign-looking man on a white broncho.

"That's Rene Hudson, sure 'nough," said a ranchman.

The strangers came straight up, till the bulk of them drew rein and halted, and the big man, with a commanding, swaggering air, rode towards Hank Fletcher. The ranchers awaited him in grim silence.

"Where's Hank Fletcher?" said the big man roughly.

"Mr. Fletcher to you," said the ranch-captain briefly. "Don't gimme no 'Hank'!"

Hudson cast a sour look at him.

"Gettin' particular, ain't ye?" he said, in a menacing voice. "Well, I guess you've heard this 'ere-ranch is sold to the Querne Company?"

"Yes, I've got word," said Fletcher briefly.

"Well, I'm in charge," returned Rene Hudson. "I'm ranch-captain here now, an' I'm puttin' in my own men. I guess you know your work, Mr. Fletcher," he added, with a sneer, "so you'll stay on under me as horse-wrangler."

He did not pause to hear Fletcher's reply, for he knew jobs on the ranches were scarce just then, and there were more men than places.

"There's Ohio, an' Innes, an' Black Pete," said Rene, running his eye over the crowd. "They'll stay on, too. The rest of you are fired out, so pack up your traps an' git!"

"I guess we'll take our week's wages ahead, then," said a cowboy.

"You can stick old McLeod for them!" jeered Hudson.

Fletcher was in such a rage that he literally could not speak. It was the giant Ohio who stepped out, with vast politeness, and addressed the usurper.

"Excuse me, Mr. Hudson," he said, "but did I hear you suggestin' that I was to stay on here?"

"Yes!" snapped Hudson.

"With you an' them tan-leather-coloured mongrels o' yours?" pursued Ohio, pointing to the men Hudson had brought with him, and who were sniggering and jeering in the background.

Rene looked at him savagely.

"Because if that's the case," continued the big American, "I've got to point out to you that I'd as soon think o' workin' with skunks, or eatin' with coyotes. An' if you make any more offers like that to me I'll draw my gun and open another new vacancy for ranch-captain right here. I ain't takin' any insults, mind!"

"Same here," said Innes. "If you're firing the other hands, you can leave me out too."

"An' as for me!" shouted Hank Fletcher, stepping so fiercely up to Hudson that the man changed colour and reined back his horse, "I'd see you in blazes before I'd stay within three miles o' you! Keep your hand away from that gun! You gimme half an excuse, an' I'll plug you quicker'n winkin', an' thank you for the chance!"

"All right," said Hudson, with an oath. "Clear off, then! I'd ha' led you the life of a dog if you'd stayed, so maybe you're right!"

He glared at the others again, and his eyes lit on Ben and Vivian, who were standing by, wondering what they had better do.

"You're there, are you?" roared Hudson. "I've heard o' you two! I'll have no durned British brats on this ranch! I give you two minutes to clear out! Git!"

"Don't worry yourself," drawled Vivian. "We'll go when we're ready. We only work for white men."

Rene, choking with rage, raised his quirt, and spurred up to the boy, but Ohio caught the white broncho's bridle, and forced it back on its haunches.

CHAPTER 13.

Rene Gets the "Drop."

"SEE here," said Ohio, in his most dangerous tones, and very quietly, "if you want a funeral to start off the new ownership, just lay a hand on them kids. Send back those mongrels o' yours—keep 'em back, I say! If trouble's what you want, we'll give you a skin-flout of it!"

The big half-breed's rage was frightful, but the cowboys were pressing forward, spoiling for a fight with the intruders, and in the wink of an eyelid there would have been bloodshed. But Rene was no fool, and saw that his gang of "hoboes" would be no match for the tough ranchmen. He swallowed his anger with an effort.

"I've said all I want to say!" he snarled. "There's only one word to it, an' that's git—the hull lot o' you!" He turned to Hank. "McFletcher, I'll trouble you to hand over your accounts, inventory o' the hosses in the corral, an' everything connected with the ranch."

"Jes' walk in front o' me to my house," said Hank quietly. "I'll put them matters in your hands. Remember, the first insult I get from you all the ground you'll need on this ranch is six feet by two."

There was an exchange of looks between them, but the fire that smoldered in the tough Texan's eyes cowed the half-breed, and, muttering to himself, he walked quietly enough to Fletcher's quarters. They both disappeared into the house.

The men Hudson had brought with him seemed to think they could do as they liked, and one of them, dismounting, said, with a few oaths, that he was going to secure the best shanty for himself. He selected Slim Jim's quarters, and marched right into them, only to be knocked down and sent away howling, with a quirt well laid across his shoulders.

"You're in a little too much of a hurry, my good fellow," said the young Oxford man, tucking the quirt under his arm. "You really mustn't disturb me till I've packed up my little belongings. After that you can take possession of these sumptuous chambers and welcome; but in the meantime, as Ohio says, git!"

There was very nearly a conflict over this, but the Querne Company gang could not muster up courage enough to tackle the cowboys, and they drew off, muttering, and looking very foolish, while McLeod's men, taking things very quietly, prepared for their departure.

"Come on," said Vivian to Ben; and the two chums strode away to their own cabin, to enter it for the last time. Not a word did they say to each other as they packed together their few belongings. There was nothing that they could not carry themselves, or, at any rate, on the back of a pack-pony. The blankets, rifles, cooking-outfit, and Vivian's fiddle case were soon made ready for transit. Vivian took one last, regretful glance round the rough but cosy little cabin that had been their home for three months past, and then they went out.

"This is a smash-up, kids, ain't it?" said Ohio, who came up, leading his tall broncho, his own kit slung before the saddle. "Durned if I care much! I like variety. The only thing I hanker after is to kill off a few

o' the Querne Company before I go; but they ain't worth a white man's notice. What are you two reckoning to do?"

"We don't rightly know, Ohio. It's a bit sudden," said Vivian.

"Where's the nearest ranch where they might want some hands?"

"Where are you makin' for yourself?" asked Ben.

"That's where it is," said Ohio, cutting off a chew. "Ranching's on the slump just now. I don't believe there's an output for four hundred miles where they want wranglers or breakers. There are more men—an' good men, too—than there are jobs. The outlook ain't bright, an' that's a fact!"

The boys looked rather downcast, for Ohio seldom croaked unless there was good reason.

"Don't you think we can get jobs, then?"

"I cain't say, sonny. You're a smartish pair, an' folks know you for the right sort hereabouts; but the ranch-bosses don't take people unless they need 'em, an' they're mostly dischargin' 'em now. Money's tight, an' there's no big demand for heeses. It won't last; things will bulk up, an' there'll be plenty doing."

"When?"

"In a couple o' months or so, as I read it, an' I'm an old hand."

"That's a long time to hang around," said Ben ruefully. "What had we better do?"

"Wal, you kids are more than welcome to ride with me, if you like to, an' take your chances. I'd like to have you; you're white right through, an' I've kinder took to you. But I don't say it's any catch. Got any money? I can let you have some, if you're short."

"That's decent of you, Ohio! We've quite a good bit banked, though."

"So've I," said the big ranchman; "an' I've got to nat'rally get through it fore I do anything. Having money worries me always. Guess I'm goin' on the tear for a week. Jack an' I mean to whoop things up. After that, maybe a huntin' trip for a month, till things get better. I can always keep myself goin', and I like change. Think it over, boys, an' if I can put you on anything, I will; only I warn you it ain't bright, an' if you see anything better, you take it. See you later. I must go and get the rest o' my outfit."

Ohio passed on, whistling cheerfully, and the boys consulted together.

"What do you say, old chap?" said Ben. "Where shall we make for? Calgary?"

"The other way!" said Vivian. "I give my vote for farther West. If ranching's so bad, let's chuck it—for the time, anyhow. Let's try lumbering."

"Lumbering!"

"Yes. Let's follow Mrs. Anderton's advice, and make for that lumber camp her brother's got. We're sure of jobs there, anyhow."

"Good notion!" said Ben. "I'm with you. I suppose we can learn to cut down trees, an' float log-rafts down the rivers as well as anything else. She didn't tell us much about it, except that there's mountains, and bears and Indians, though."

"I like the idea of it, anyhow. The only other thing to do would be to go with Ohio. That 'd be fun, too, maybe, but he owns it's no great catch. We might be out of work for months."

"Besides, you know what Ohio on the tear will be like," said Ben; "a little bit too hot stuff for me," he added, grinning. "We should get through our money in no time, and I don't care for tanglefoot whiskey myself."

"Dear, good chap, Ohio," agreed Vivian; "but, as you say, it won't

do us any good. We can't afford to be stranded—that's just what Strickland and my dear cousin would like. We've got our way to make. Let it be the lumber camp, then; only how to get there is more than I know. Hi, Jack!" he called, as Innes came past.

The cowboy asked the same question Ohio had put, and cordially offered to do all he could for the boys. He was anxious to help them, and sorry at the idea of parting with them, but he approved of their idea at once.

"Lumberin'?" he said. "It's a tough job, but there's money in it, and you might get a good show. If you've got cribs offered you, I say go by all means. It's out o' my line—I'm a roper. But you'll get seven or eight dollars a week—better wages than you do here. Lumberin's all right."

"How can we get there? Where's Moose Creek?"

"Three hundred miles north-west, an' you'll have to cross the Rocky Mountains, a mighty wild sort o' ride, too, an' right through the Creos an' Bloomsburg countries. You cross into British Columbia."

Ben's eyes sparkled. The ride would be worth while, at any rate. There would be nothing dull about it.

"A tough job when you get there, an' a tough country, but it's a good chance for you, if you pull through the journey. Here's your Injun pardner perhaps he'll go. I reckon you'd stand a better show with him."

"Flying Cloud, we're going lumbering to Moose Creek, on the Fraser River," said Vivian, as the Cree rode up. "Will you go as far as that?"

"I go anywhere you go," said Flying Cloud calmly: "a thousand miles and beyond. You not go without me."

"Good for you! Do you know where it is?"

"I find it all right," said the Cree confidently. "Find any place."

"What about horses?" said Vivian. "This Hudson gang won't let us have any. I've Red Fiend, of course, and Flying Cloud has his broncho—they're our own. But Ben's got none, and we want a pack-pony, too, at least."

"I've got three horses o' my own here, that I'm takin'," said Innes. "I only need one. There's the bay broncho, an' that little dun Injun pony—you're welcome to them, kids; take 'em from me for a keepsake. I don't want nary money."

"That's real white of you, Jack!" said Vivian, touched by the cowboy's generosity. "But you must let us pay for them—we'd feel skunks if we took 'em off you for nothing."

Jack protested he would take no payment. He was genuinely attached to the boys, and declared the horses were only a hindrance to him, and was durned if he'd sell them to the Querue outfit either.

But the boys prevailed on him to let them pay twenty dollars for the two, which was cheap enough in all conscience, but Innes would accept no more. They gave him an order on the bank at Calgary for the money, and Flying Cloud and Ben went off to buy a big supply of bacon and beans and coffee from the cook, who owned a lot of the stores, and was packing them up ready to go.

Vivian went off to saddle Red Fiend, and patted the big stallion's curving neck as he adjusted the bit to the beast's liking.

"A long ride in front of us, old chap!" said Vivian, as he swung himself into the saddle and rode out of the corral. "The deuce knows where we're going, and the dickens knows how we shall get there, but the Lone Trail's in front of us, an' Fate may settle the rest as it likes. I'm glad I've got you between my knees, anyhow."

As he rode out, Rene Hudson, having finished the taking over of the

ranch and accounts, came down from Fletcher's quarters with a very sour visage, and met Vivian face to face.

"Where are you takin' that air hoss?" he cried sharply. "Halt, there!"

"I'm taking that air hoss because he belongs to me," said Vivian, a dangerous light in his eye.

"That's a lie! He b'longs to the ranch! Thought you'd steal him, did you?"

"This horse is mine!" said Vivian, interrupting him. "Hank Fletcher gave him me because I broke him in."

"Hank Fletcher had no right to give him! You'll leave that hoss behind! You hear me?"

"I shall take him with me," said Vivian curtly, "in spite of you or a dozen yellow-faced mongrels like you!"

The half-breed whipped out a long revolver in the flash of an eyelid, and covered Vivian with it.

"Now I'll settle with you, you cub!" he said, in a voice quivering with passion. "Stan' back, the rest o' you! The first that touches a weapon that kid drops dead in his tracks! Git off that hoss!"

CHAPTER 19.

Into the Wilds.

RENE'S revolver-sights lined themselves steadily upon Vivian's breast, and, great though the anger of the ranchmen was, they held back.

Ohio's hand had dropped to the butt of his pistol, but he did not draw. The half-breed had been quicker than any of them, and though it would have taken but the half of a second to drop him in his tracks, Vivian's life would have paid the penalty first.

"You hound!" muttered Ohio. "If the kid dies, you'll die too! We'll fill your hide fuller of lead than an egg's full o' meat!"

Hudson knew it—if he drew trigger he would assuredly be riddled with bullets the moment after. But his rage was so great at being defied by the boy that he would brook no interference. Nor did anybody dare interfere, for that matter, since he undoubtedly had the "drop."

Vivian sat quietly on the yellow stallion's back, and he was perhaps the coolest of them all.

"Well," he said contemptuously to Rene, "you've got the pull. What is it you want me to do?"

"I've told you, ain't I?" cried the half-breed, with an oath. "Get off that horse, an' give him up! Dismount!"

"Oh, is that it?" said Vivian, kicking his feet out of the stirrups. "You'll take charge of him, will you?"

"Hain't I said so?" roared Hudson. "The horse is mine—mine, d'ye hear? An' I'm goin' to have him!"

A slow grin spread over Ohio's face, and the ranchmen, exchanging winks and glances among themselves, drew back some way and left a clear space.

"By ginn," chuckled Jack Innes, "the mongrel is buying trouble! Let him have it! Stand off a bit, boys, an' give 'em room!"

"I give you five seconds to get down," cried Hudson fiercely, "before I bling you!"

"I'm willing to oblige," said Vivian. "You're quite welcome to this horse of mine—if you can get him. Take him, an' be happy." B

The Red Fiend's ears had been cocked forward at Hudson like gun-hammers during this argument, and one of his fore-hoofs was pawing the

ground gently. His yellow-green eyes were absolutely flaming as they rested on the bully with the pistol.

Vivian did not wait for the five seconds to expire. With a quiet smile on his face, he slipped off the stallion's back, and walked over to where Ben and the Cree were standing.

Hudson lowered his pistol with a growl, and took a step forward to possess himself of the yellow stallion. He knew nothing of Red Fiend's pleasant reputation, nor cared whether he were Vivian's property or not. But he was not to remain long in doubt.

Hardly had Vivian left him when the stallion, with a shrill scream of fury, flew at Hudson like a thunderbolt, open-mouthed and with forehoofs striking out.

With a frightened oath the half-breed dodged aside, and only saved himself by an inch or two's space. Indeed, the horse's shoulder knocked him spinning, and Red Fiend went dashing by with so much impetus that he could not stop himself, but slid along in a cloud of dust.

Hudson recovered his balance, and immediately turned and ran for his life. The pistol had been knocked out of his hand, and he was solidly scared, and with good reason. The Red Fiend spun round and came after him full pelt amid roars of laughter from the whole assembly.

"Shoot him! Stop him!" screamed Hudson, sprinting for the corral at an amazing pace. He had only a few yards' start, and, making a wild sprint, he flung himself on his middle across the high top bar, and scrambled over.

He was not a moment too soon, for Red Fiend's teeth clashed like a steel trap behind him, and, missing his person, caught the seat of his buckskin breeches and tore it clean out, Hudson toppling over into the corral in a heap.

The gales and hurricanes of laughter that shook the assembly lasted for quite two minutes, and the river canyons echoed with the roar of it. Even Rene's gang laughed; and as for Ben, he sat down on the grass and shed tears.

The disappointed stallion, tossing the piece of buckskin into the air, came down on it with his hoofs again and again, as if he thought he were pounding Hudson to pieces. He fairly danced on the ragged piece of leather, and stamped it into the dust; and then, turning, rushed at the corral, as if he would tear it down with his teeth. Luckily for Rene, there was no chance of the horse getting in, and the half-breed got up, with a very pale and a banner of red shirt flying behind him, and shrunk back out of reach.

"What's the use of giving you a horse if you run away from him?" said Vivian, coming up and taking the ramping Red Fiend by the bridle. "A rocking-horse is more in your line, I should think."

The big half-breed was too shaken up and unmoved even to swear. He stared at Vivian helplessly; and Ohio, striding forward, picked up the long German-made revolver the man had dropped. He jerked the cartridges out of it, and the ranchman's brawny hands, taking a grip on the barrel and stock, gave one powerful wrench, and converted the piece into scrap-iron.

"Take your weapon," he said, hurling the two pieces over the fence at Hudson, "an' think yourself lucky to get off alive! If you'd fired the kid, you'd be squirming in the bight of a lariat by now, an' I got Mr. Rene Hudson, we'll let it go at that an' clear out o' sight of your saddle-coloured seum yonder. So good-bye to you!"

"I say ditto to that," added Vivian, swinging himself into Red Fiend's

saddle. "Is there anybody else in the crowd who'd like to take this horse from me? No? Then good-day to you!"

The cowboys—all that had their own horses—mounted and rode out on to the plain, where they assembled together, and those who were taking different directions bade each other hearty good-byes. There were none more warmly taken leave of than Ben and Vivian, and everybody was sorry to part with them.

"We'll all hitch up together again some day," said Ohio. "You're a blamed sight too white a pair of kids to lose sight of. Roll your tails an' ride, young 'uns, and if ever you want a friend, send for old Buck Ohio, an' he'll come!"

The ranchers parted with another hearty handshake all round, some leaving for the Edmonton trail and some for Calgary. Vivian and Ben, with Flying Cloud, were the only ones who were bound north-west towards the Rockies, and they struck out alone, each on his horse, and the pack-pony led by Ben.

They had not gone more than a few hundred yards when one of the cowboys, who had been the latest to arrive from Calgary, galloped after them.

"Say, kids," he cried, "this business at the ranch blamed near put it out of my head—I've a bit of news for you. That low-down Injun of yours, the one that shot at you, is loose agen!"

"What!" cried Ben. "Beaver-With-One-Eye?"

"That's him! The cuss has got away!"

"How on earth could he have done that?" exclaimed Vivian. "Are you sure? He was bound round the arms, and a sergeant of the Mounted Police had him."

"That's just it. It seems he got a hand loose, an' bided his time on the way down, an' bein' as he was ridin' close alongside the policeman, he snatched the revolver out o' the sergeant's holster an' shot him dead."

"Good heavens!" said Ben blankly.

"Least, he warn't quite dead; but a patrol found him two hours later, and he told 'em how it was before he pegged out. The Injun rode off full gallop as soon as it was done."

"And they haven't caught him?" cried Vivian.

"It rained hard that night, an' they couldn't strike his trail—washed away. Half the Calgary force is after him now, an' they reckon to get him mighty quick. One o' the patrols told me. They say he's gone to the Blood camp down Sharp Creek way, reckonin' on his tribe to help him, an' there'll very likely be trouble."

"What! An Indian revolt?" said Ben.

"Oh, nothing big! The police'll easy deal with it. Dare say it won't happen at all; an', anyhow, it'll be nowhere your way—you're going north."

"Fancy that beast getting away again!" said Vivian wonderingly.

"I thought you'd like to know, 'cause they won't want you for the trial at Calgary, unless he's caught again," said the cowboy. "I must get on back to the boys now. So long!" And, with a wave of the hand, he turned and galloped after his companions in the opposite direction.

"Well," said Flying Cloud to Vivian, "who was right now? You remember you take Beaver out of my hands, and I told you you wrong?"

"I suppose you've earned the right to crow, old fellow," said Vivian; "as things have turned out, we can't deny there's reason on your side."

"So I think, too," said Ben.

"But I'm not going to say I'm sorry the fellow wasn't burned," added Vivian. "We can't have that sort of thing, come what may. It's no

use talking, Flying Cloud; you and I look at these things so differently that we sha'n't agree."

"Burning—no!" said Ben. "That's beastly! But I must say I think it's a pity the murdering bruto wasn't shot down as soon as he was tracked, like a wolf or a skunk. See what comes of it. Here he is loose again, likely to raise all sorts of trouble and bloodshed!"

"The police aren't likely to let him slip through their fingers again!"

"When they catch him!" growled Ben. "And now he's gone home to his own charmin' people."

"The police think he gone down to the Blood camp in the Reserve," said Flying Cloud. "He will not go there at all. He will come north to the outlying people of his tribe, the Bloods yonder in the hills."

"We've got to pass by there, haven't we?" said Ben.

"Yes," said the Cree simply.

"How do you know he'll come up here?" asked Vivian.

"He will come where you are," answered Flying Cloud. "You have not forgotten what he said to you when the Shermogonish trooper led him away?"

"No," said Vivian, with a grim smile. "He promised me a death that would make the wolves howl for pity, and——"

"Oh, shut up!" said Ben abruptly. "Chuck it, Vivian."

"Yes; but we need have little fear of him," Flying Cloud replied.

"Thanks, old chap, I hadn't! He'd find the three of us rather a handful to tackle. When do you suppose he'd be likely to turn up?"

"Not till we are long way away from McLeod's ranch, and the police patrols," said the Indian, and he said no more.

He was unusually silent all the rest of the day, and though he generally took things easy on the march, he now insisted on keeping the pace up briskly all the way. The journey lay through a wilderness of forest and hills and narrow stretches of plain between, but the going was good most of the way, and when night fell the travellers found themselves thirty-five miles from their starting-place, in a district that looked as if it had never felt the foot of man before. They halted by a spring of fresh water, with good grazing at hand for the horses.

"We will camp here for the night, and go on again with the dawn," said Flying Cloud. "It is only the first stage of our journey, and till we are through Black Bear Pass, and beyond the Rockies, there will be little rest."

Everybody was in good spirits, none the less, as the evening meal was cooked and eaten, and when it was over, Flying Cloud insisted on taking the first watch. The boys rolled themselves in their blankets, and were asleep in a few seconds.

The Indian sat out under the stars, a silent, motionless figure, his rifle across his lap, and his catlike eyes piercing the darkness.

CHAPTER 20.

The Red Trackers.

NEITHER man nor beast disturbed the sleepers that night, and after a solid meal, taken at the first glint of dawn, the three companions set out again, riding through the dews of morning with the pack-pony trotting behind. When the sun rose and gilded the Rockies, chasing away the early mists, Red Fiend bolted twice with Vivian out of sheer lightness of heart.

He had to be taught also that he must not eat the pack-pony, because it would inconvenience the whole outfit. Otherwise, he behaved himself pretty well, being quite satisfied with his little victory over Hudson the day before.

Flying Cloud was still very silent, and seemed to be reflecting a good deal by himself. Every now and then he would gallop on ahead for half a mile, or out to either side. Often he went some distance out of the way to scale a piece of high ground, leaving his horse at the bottom, and from the summit, crouching among the trees or rocks, he would survey the whole district, looking behind rather than ahead, however.

"See anything?" the boys asked him more than once when he returned from these excursions. But he shook his head, and made no reply.

"When the shadows are shortest, I shall leave you, and ride heap way out to westward, he said, at last—"go far away. Catch you up again to-morrow."

"What for?" asked Vivian. "Hunting?"

"No. To see some of my people, and make them arm and rise. Need it plenty. I think the Bloods come after us soon, so we shall have the Crees to help us against them, for we are only three."

"Good!" exclaimed Ben. "Are there some of your folk up this way, then?"

"Plenty of my tribe in the hills—parties scattered here and there," said Flying Cloud. "Hunting camps, and such. They will tell me how the Bloods are moving, and, if need, they will help us. You will see if Bloods can face Crees!" he added. "And I think you will be proud of them."

"It was a good day's work for us when we got you from under that grizzly old bear," said Ben. "Where are the nearest of your pals?"

"I ride forty miles after leaving you till I find them," said the Cree: "perhaps sooner. To-morrow before sunset at most late, I come up with you again. Now, I tell you how you must go, and how I shall find you again. It will be plenty simple, if you do what I say. The Bloods will not follow on before I get back to you."

Vivian and Ben thought it would be an excellent thing for Flying Cloud to raise some aid in case they had trouble with the Bloods, and their guide detailed his plans as they went on, to the approval of both the boys.

Flying Cloud gave them full instructions for going forward by themselves, and as they knew nothing about the journey, and were in a wilderness where there was no kind of path or trail, they attended pretty carefully.

There was little fear of their going seriously astray, as the Indian said, for there were landmarks among the distant peaks of the Rockies, which he pointed out to them, that would be nearly always in view, except in passing through the denser forests. Various sorts of difficulties which they would meet with he told them how to overcome or pass round.

Already, under Flying Cloud's tuition, the boys had become very fair scouts, and he did not need to talk much to them. He warned them to take all precautions and keep a first-class look-out both in front and behind, and about eleven o'clock, when they came to a fork where two rivers joined, he bade them au revoir, and rode rapidly off to the westward by himself.

"We're on our own now, and no mistake," said Ben, when the Indian had disappeared. "What a desert it is! Grand country, though, all the same. It beats me how Flying Cloud can ride off to look for his friends in it as if they lived in the next street."

"Don't let's get lost, that's the main thing," said Vivian, "for except that we've got to make for that double-peaked mountain yonder, which must be eighty miles away, neither you nor I know where we're bound for."

"What price Moose Creek?" said Ben, grinning.

"It might be Timbuctoo, for all we know of its whereabouts. I hope nothing happens to Flying Cloud. Of course, we might live for a year with our rifles if we did the Wandering Jew trick, and lost ourselves; but I want to find that logging-camp, and get a job. Shove your gee along—he wants work."

The boys reeled off three hours' steady travelling, and kept the route well enough. Up hill and down hill, across fords, and through belts of forest they rode, keeping always a weather eye on all sides. At two o'clock they halted for a meal, and as Ben spread out the provisions, Vivian tethered the Red Fiend, and announced he was going on a prospecting expedition.

"Remember what Flying Cloud told us?" he said. "We'd better do a little scouting back. I'll climb that hill there, and have a look round, while you get the grub ready."

Vivian made his way up the hill from the north side. It was a steep, conical height, crowned with rocks and stunted pines, and rose some four hundred feet above the rest. The boy flattened himself behind a rock at the top, and took out a battered pair of field-glasses that he had bought in Calgary.

Hardly had he focussed them when he saw three dark, moving dots, far away back on a stretch of open plain which the boys had passed over an hour before. He turned the glasses on them, and saw that they were three mounted men, travelling at a slow pace.

Vivian studied them carefully for some moments, and then, under cover of the rocks, signalled to his chum down below. It was not very long before Ben joined him. Vivian pointed out the three dots, and handed him the glasses without a word.

"They're Indians," said Ben, as soon as he had the binocular on them. "You can see that by the way they ride. An' they're comin' the same way as we did."

"They're following our trail, that's plain," said Vivian, with a serious face. "The ground's dry as tinder, so they aren't tracking it very fast."

"Well, they must have done some quick travelling, all the same, to be where they are. And they can't be any of Flying Cloud's tribe from that direction."

"You can't see if Beaver's with them, can you?"

"They're much too far off. I can only see they look like Indians," returned Ben, looking steadily through the glasses.

"I thought I saw a fourth at first, riding hard away to the left of them, as if he meant to get ahead of the trail, and come right round; but I may have fancied it."

"I can only see three," said Ben; "but it's a sure thing they're Bloods, and that they're after us."

Vivian, after one more look, turned, and went rapidly down the hill.

"This won't do," he said seriously. "They'll be catching us up—perhaps at night-time—and we shall be in a precious mess. Say, they're four to two, and very likely others coming up behind. Flying Cloud's made a mistake; they've come after us quicker than he reckoned."

"It's Beaver's work, of course. Wonder how many he's got? I say, it'd be pretty beastly to fall into his hands!" said Ben gravely.

"And Flying Cloud'll never know. He'll be looking for us a whole day's journey farther on with his men. Look here, Ben, pack up that grub quickly, and let's ride. There's no feeding for us till we've thrown those brutes off our trail!"

"How the dickens are we to do that?" said Ben, as they rapidly stowed

the pack on the pony's back, and jumped into their saddles. "They're Bloods—regular hunters and trackers!"

"We've got to try. I believe I saw our chance when we were up that hill. Come on!"

Vivian cantered off, and in a little while came to a wide, shallow creek, where the water ran a few inches deep, and very thick, over a hard bottom of muddy sand. The banks were sandy, too, and the boys rode into the shallow water, and pushed right along. In a few hundred yards the creek joined a much wider river, shallow, and hard-floored, like the creek.

"Now then," said Vivian, "water's the only thing that'll cover our tracks, and we've got to keep in it. We've come down the creek, so they won't be able to see which way we turned, up the river or down."

"We ought to go down—that's the way Flying Cloud said."

"Yes, an' that's the way the Bloods will expect us to go, so we'll go up instead—right in the opposite direction," said Vivian. And he began to ride as rapidly as he could sharp to the left, and up the river. Ben followed in close silence behind.

The river ran at right angles to their path. Flying Cloud had told them of it, and said they should cross it, and go down its banks eastward for some distance, and then leave it and go ahead. If they went up-stream they would have to go farther before they could get round the long ridge of rocks on the other side.

"What if this puts Flying Cloud off our whereabouts?" said Ben. "We shall be going a different way to what he expects."

"We can't help that. If those brutes behind catch us up we're dead men!"

CHAPTER 21.

The Dead-Fall.

THE water was so little impediment that the horses could go a good pace, and they were made to do their utmost. Red Fiend could have done it all day, and with himself alone to consider Vivian could have laughed at any pursuing Indians. But Ben's broncho, though a good horse, had not the yellow stallion's magnificent stamina.

For two hours they forged along the river, several times having to go in up to the horses' girths, but most of it meant splashing along merely fetlock deep. Vivian did not dare leave the river to scout back, for fear of making tracks.

"I'll bet we've shaken them off now!" he said, his spirits rising at the end of the second hour. "Your beast's about done, Ben. Let's cross, and then strike out overland again."

"Right. We'd better scoot up the nearest hill an' make sure whether we've lost them. And take extra care we're not seen, too."

They did so, and on gaining a point of vantage that gave them a long view down the valley the boys could see nothing of any Indians in one direction or the other, though they watched for some time. They returned to their horses well satisfied.

"They've gone down the river all right, else we should have seen 'em," said Ben.

"Yes; but I wonder if they'd all go that way? They may have sent one of their number up in this direction just to make sure, and, being alone, he could keep out of sight—especially if his horse has been taken along by the others."

"Well, we don't mind one Indian much if he shows himself," said Ben,

"and we shall be passing over pretty open country presently, where there won't be such a chance of getting ambushed."

"No," said Vivian, "I don't mind the fellows in the open. They're a mean set of skunks, and unless there were a big lot of them, they'd probably shirk an attack. But it's being shot at from behind trees that I don't like at all. I've had one dose of it, and it's precious poor fun."

They made their way over a mile of rough ground and scrub on the far side of the river, and thence an undulating plain, rising into hills here and there, stretched for a long way—it was a relief to the boys to ride over it—and a mountainous ridge cut it off from the more easterly district into which it was likely the Indians had gone.

"It's a feather in our caps if we've really shaken off the beggars," said Ben, when, after three hours' steady riding, and the crossing of two more belts of woodland on to another plain beyond, they had still seen no signs of any pursuers.

"Better not crow too soon. I should say they're a match for us," Vivian replied. "Look here, the sun's going down, and there's a stream just ahead. I vote we halt here for the night, where we can see all round us. If we push on another half-hour we shall have to spend the night in the forests yonder, and very likely get stalked."

"Sound idea," said Ben, jumping down; "and my horse is about done up, too."

Vivian's plan of bivouacking on the open plain was a success, and gave them both much more chance of rest. The horses were hobbled in a low dip of ground near the stream, and after a cold meal—for to light a fire was not to be thought of—the boys took it in turns to watch and sleep, in a spot from which they could see all round them.

The wide plain, stretching away under the bright starlight, and with hardly a clump of grass anywhere that could shelter a man, was a comfort after the dark forests by night, where every tree seemed by fancy to hide an enemy with a rifle. The whip-poor-wills swept noiselessly overhead now and then, a prowling cougar sang its snarling song from time to time farther up the stream, but no human foe troubled the boys.

At the first glimmer of light in the east they were up and away, entering the pine forest just after the sun shot up above the edge of the prairie. The horses were fresh, and for a couple of hours they made good travelling.

"We've seen the last of those beauties!" said Ben jubilantly.

"Maybe," said Vivian. "I've got a sort of feeling that Beaver is no great way off us, wherever the others may be. The worst of it is, I believe those Indians travel half the night, which is useless for us to try. We're still heading for the mark Flying Cloud told us to make for, that's a comfort, though we're rather to the north of the line we should have gone."

"How the dickens are we to get round this bluff?" said Ben, pulling up his horse. "It looks as if it stretched across half the province."

The boys' path was stopped by a great barrier of rock that rose up out of the forest—a sheer cliff some seventy feet high; and it certainly looked as if it might be a day's ride to get round either end of it, for it stretched out of sight both ways.

Flying Cloud had told them of it, and also of a pass that led through it. Their original route would have taken them there; but now they were some miles farther west.

"It looks as if there's a gap somewhere up to the left," said Vivian. "We must stop and have some grub—we had no breakfast, and I'm famishing. You get it out, while I ride along and reconnoitre."

Vivian turned sharp to the left, while Ben unpacked the provisions,

and the Red Fiend carried his master parallel with the cliff for some distance. Vivian began to doubt the existence of the gap after all; the cliff was like a wall.

The travelling grew rougher, and the pine-trees, immensely tall and thick, grew closer together. Here and there it was a perfect jungle, with fallen logs and trees uprooted crossing each other, or lying almost in piles.

"Here we are!" said Vivian to himself. "A way through, anyhow!"

He came upon a deep cleft in the cliff, evidently leading right through, with trees growing thickly in it, and half-way up the steep, sloping sides of the gap. There was a narrow but clear passage through the middle.

Vivian rode up to it to inspect. There was a jumble of trees and logs, which had fallen naturally, but there were also signs that living creatures passed that way, for a well-worn trail was visible.

"It's a regular natural gateway," said Vivian to himself; "perhaps the only one for miles. If so, everybody going north in this direction must pass through it. One would know where to meet one's pals, if there were any. Good place to wait for big game, I should say."

The entrance was almost like a doorway, for a mounted man had to pass through a perfect criss-cross of fallen trees, logs, and so forth, though there was room enough for him to do so.

"Hobson's choice," remarked Vivian; "if one don't like it one can call next door—ten miles away very likely. We can ride through here all right with our outfit. Let's see."

He rode up to the tangle of logs, and Red Fiend suddenly planted all four feet, and refused to budge.

Vivian was rather surprised. He had not thought the fire-eating yellow stallion would object to any sort of travelling.

"Go on, boy!" said Vivian. "Don't put on airs with me. You don't mind timber, you old humbug!"

Not an inch further would Red Fiend go, however. He ecked his ears at the tangle of logs, overhead and below, and refused to go through.

Vivian applied the spurs, annoyed at the horse's obstinacy, and tried to force him through. Red Fiend reared straight up in the air, snorted, and began to buck. For a minute or two Vivian had nearly as lively a time with him as on the day when they first became acquainted.

"What on earth's the matter with you, you old fool?" said Vivian in exasperation, when he caught sight of something lying in the coarse grass just beyond the logs. It was nothing but the freshly-killed carcass of a deer, which some wandering cougar had doubtless killed the night before, and half eaten.

"That's what you're afraid of, is it!" exclaimed Vivian. "A little dead meat! I'll sell you for a lady's hack, you beauty! You'll be shying at bits of paper along the road next!"

"You want a bran-mash to steady your nerves," said Vivian scornfully. "I'll just go through the pass on foot, and then fetch Ben, and the pack-pony shall give you a lead through, you—you silly!"

Red Fiend stood quite still, and snorted and nuzzled his master's coat. Vivian left him and went back to the entrance to the gap.

"It must have been one of those mountain lions that killed the deer, and old Fiend doesn't like the smell off him," thought Vivian, as he stepped in among the tree-trunks. "I wonder if there's— Ah!"

A cry broke from his lips, there was a snap, a heavy blow, as he stepped over a fallen trunk, and he was struck down violently by a heavy body that came down on him from above. A hundred lights danced before his eyes, and he felt as though his back was broken.

Everything seemed dark for a moment; he could not get his breath and felt as if a ton weight were crushing him down. He opened his eyes and found himself lying across a heavy log, with a second lighter one in some strange way pressing him down, and holding him fast. So sharp had been the shock that at first he thought his back was broken.

This was why Red Fiend had refused to pass through—he knew there was danger in the tangle of timber, thought Vivian. What a fool he had been not to trust the horse's instinct!

He struggled, and tried to free himself, but he was held as if in a vice. Escape was impossible, and painful cramps began to seize him. Vivian twisted his head round to see how he was caught, and then the truth dawned on him with a thrill of horror.

It was no accident. He was trapped! A dead-fall had been set in the passage-way through the rocks, and he had walked right into it. Perhaps it had been set for bear—Vivian fervently hoped it was. But if—

"Ben, Ben!" he shouted hoarsely, trying to make his voice carry. His chum, he knew, was nearly a mile away, and there was little chance of his hearing, but the boy shouted, none the less: "Ben!"

There was a rustle in the bushes, and a man came slowly out. Vivian gave a horrified gasp, for it was not Ben, but a redskin. He came slowly forward and stood in front of the trap, his beady eyes fixed on Vivian with a cruel smile. It was the Beaver!

"You!" muttered Vivian.

The Blood trapper, without answering, feasted his eyes on his victim for some moments. Vivian's strained, painful breathing, coming in quiet sobs as the log pressed him down, seemed to give the redskin intense pleasure.

"You remember little promise I make you not long ago?" said Beaver in a low, hissing voice—"you remember—eh? I promise you a death that the very trees and the mountains shall remember."

"Flying Cloud was right!" said Vivian bitterly, and his voice was steady as the trap would allow it to be, though his face was white. "I was a fool to save you from the stake!"

"You gave me over to the Shermogonish," said the Beaver; "you pay now for that. First I take from you my trophy."

His thin, copper-coloured fingers twined through Vivian's hair, and, with a soft "snick," he drew the long knife from his belt.

CHAPTER 22.

Hoofs and Teeth.

BRAVE as he was, when Vivian felt that evil hand grip him by the head, and saw the dull gleam of the knife, the blood ran cold in his veins. Raising the blade, the Indian trapper, as if in mockery, made the sharp point tickle the boy's scalp all round in a rapid circle, and Vivian gave a shudder.

"Kill me, you beast, if you're going to!" he said hoarsely. "Do it, and get it over!"

"This not kill you," said the Blood, grinning brutally, his dark eyes feasting on Vivian's face. "First I take the sign that I have beaten you,

then I show you heap funny things. You die plenty slow, as I promised you."

"You dog and cur!" muttered Vivian. "You only dare to touch me because I'm helpless, and can't move. Yes, if I had my arms free you'd be running for your life!"

The Indian's face changed, and, with a grunt of rage, he twined his fingers tighter in Vivian's hair, and gripped the knife. In another moment the deed would have been done, when suddenly there was heard a thunder of hoofs close behind.

Beaver turned with a startled exclamation. For a moment Vivian thought that some mounted rescuer was at hand, but it was not so. It was the Red Fiend.

The great stallion, open-mouthed, and with eyes glaring, his bridle streaming behind him, and his stirrups flying, charged straight down at Beaver with a piercing squeal of rage, and was upon him in a moment.

With a cry of astonishment and fear, the Blood trapper made a bound to get out of the way, and only half succeeded in doing so. The yellow stallion dashed past him with clashing teeth, knocking the Indian off his balance, and the horse slid along with all four feet braced, nearly touching Vivian. In a moment Red Fiend had spun round again on his hind legs, and flew at the trapper.

Beaver made a wild slash at him with the scalping-knife as he passed, opening a wound in the horse's flank; but the Red Fiend was upon him again before he could strike a second blow. He was dashed to the ground, and fell, with a broken cry, on his face.

The two hammer-like fore-hoofs came down on him with a thud, and the next moment the Red Fiend had seized the man in his teeth, and hoisted him right up in the air.

The yellow stallion's rage was an awful thing to see. Squealing furiously, he shook the trapper like a rat, as easily as if he had been a pillow, and dashed him to the ground again. A charging tiger could not have been more terrible. The Blood lay prone and motionless; but, with hoofs and teeth together, Red Fiend hurled himself on the man once more, and wreaked his will upon him like a mad thing, till the grass was reddened and trampled down for yards around.

Vivian shut his eyes, nearly fainting. How long he remained so he could not tell, but when he opened them again Red Fiend was beside him, and Beaver was not to be seen. There was nothing there that might have been a man.

"You're worthy of your name, Red Fiend," groaned Vivian; "but you've saved my life." And then his senses left him, and he fainted.

The great horse, whinnying softly, passed his velvet nose over the boy, and tried to grip at the logs of the trap with his reddened teeth. His distress was plain to see. Then suddenly he threw up his head, and, turning, galloped off like the wind. In a flash he had disappeared by the way Vivian had come.

The boy remained half-conscious in the trap, the fainting-fit leaving him; but he scarcely understood any further what was happening to him. The cruel pressure of the logs numbed his senses. He hardly realised that he was rescued, at least, from a death by torture, or that further help might be at hand.

It seemed to Vivian that he was in the trap for hours, but in truth it was only five or six minutes before the thud of hoofs was heard again, and Red Fiend came flying along through the forest, flecked with foam and galloping like the wind. Ben, with a pale, anxious face, was on his back,

"Vivian!" cried Ben, as he flung himself out of the saddle. "My heavens, he's killed! What's this awful thing he's caught in!"

The boy, horror-stricken, knelt beside his partner, and a cry of thankfulness escaped him as he saw Vivian's lips move, though no sound came from them. In an instant Ben was hard at work trying to get the logs apart.

He had to examine them rapidly and carefully before he could move them. He found the log was held down across Vivian by a sort of side-catch, or heavy trigger, made of wood, at each end, acting like the spring of a watch-guard.

It was these that made escape from the trap impossible. Had the dead-fall consisted of a log heavy enough to trap the boy by its own weight, his back must have been broken. The trap was more complicated than any Ben had seen.

Not a moment did he lose, but, seizing a stout, straight branch of pine-wood, that lay near, he knocked both the triggers away, and, thrusting the point under the crosspieces, he forced them back. Ben levered up the log that lay across Vivian quickly and carefully, and rolled it back.

Vivian did not seem able to move. Ben lifted him up very gently, and, feeling nearly crazy with anxiety, laid him on the grass, and knelt beside him. The Red Fiend came and nuzzled his young master's breast, blowing out his own soft nostrils and whinnying quietly.

"Are you much hurt, old chap?" groaned Ben. "My heaven, if——"

"Water!" croaked Vivian.

Ben gave him some quickly out of the felt bottle at the saddle-horn, and the boy, feeling the life run through his veins afresh, sat up slowly.

"Don't sit up!" said Ben anxiously. "You must be hurt!"

"Don't think so," muttered Vivian. "Believe my bones are all sound. That beastly tree was squashing the breath out of me, and I felt as if I was bursting." He looked round him wonderingly. "How did you get here?"

"I was getting a bit anxious, so I left the horses and started to trail you down; but it was a very slow job. An' then Red Fiend came galloping along like mad, and pulled up alongside me. He grabbed me by the shoulder—didn't hurt me, you know—and seemed half crazy. Of course, I saw something must have happened to you, so I jumped on his back—he's never let me attempt to ride him before—and he laid himself out, and tore away down here as if devils were after him. When I saw you I thought you were done for sure!"

"That's the second time he's saved my life to-day, then," said Vivian, "and if I hadn't been a fool, and refused to trust him at first, I'd never have got into this mess at all. He knew it was a trap."

"Trap? Yes, I saw it was!" said Ben. "An' the horse didn't get caught?"

"He wouldn't face it. He's got more sense than I have, and he sniffed there was something wrong. There was no getting him to go through, so I tied him up back of the clearing there, and went to have a look myself. It wasn't ten seconds before I was fast between these logs, with the breath knocked out of me."

"I wonder you weren't killed!"

"I wasn't intended to kill," said Vivian grimly.

"Intended! I should have thought a man in a bear-trap——"

"Bear-trap be hanged! It was a man-trap, and it was Beaver-With-One-Eye who set it."

"Beaver! Where is he?"

"There—what is left of him," said Vivian grimly. "He was just going

to scalp me, as a start-off to a few other things, when Red Fiend broke away, and got hold of him and finished him."

Ben gave one look in the direction Vivian had pointed out, and turned his head away with a shudder.

"I suppose I should be looking much the same as that—that thing by now, if it hadn't been for the stallion," said Vivian. "There's an end of Beaver, at any rate. The first of Stride's accomplices is wiped out."

"Yes," said Ben, rising to his feet, and looking swiftly round, "hut not the last of them. We've got half the Bloods in Alberta after us now, for all we know. What about those fellows we saw yesterday? They may be close on our tracks at this moment. We ought to get ahead."

"The sooner the better," said Vivian, getting up with an effort.

"But are you fit to travel, old chap?"

"There's nothing wrong with me. I'm only bruised and winded a bit. I felt bad at first. It was like having a man sitting on your back for twenty minutes, but I've got my breath back now. Fit or not, I've got to travel. We can't stay here. Nip up behind me on Red Fiend."

Vivian called the stallion to him, and rather painfully climbed into the saddle. Red Fiend seemed to know that danger threatened, and allowed Ben to get up behind—a liberty he would have dared anyone to take at ordinary times.

"You're a tiger, but I love you!" said Vivian, smacking the stallion's arching neck. "Get on, boy, quick as you can travel!"

Away went the Red Fiend, right back along the trail, for Ben's horse and the pack-pony had to be fetched before they could go on. It took very little time to do this, and the two beasts were found where Ben had tethered them.

Ben was on his own horse again in a moment, and they cantered back towards the gap in the bluff. Red Fiend would not on any account allow the pack-pony to be led by his rider, and showed his willingness to eat the beast up if any such attempt were made. Red Fiend's whims had to be humoured, so it was Ben who was obliged to keep the pack-horse's lead rope. The little beast gave no trouble whatever, and came along easily enough.

"If it comes to a race on horseback, we may have to let the pack-horse go," said Vivian.

"We won't do that unless we have to. Yonder's the gap. I hope there ain't any more traps in it," said Ben anxiously.

"Not likely, but we'll have to see. I think Beaver was alone."

"Why?"

"I believe he was the fourth of the Indians we saw yesterday, the one who rode by himself to the westward, while the others went straight on. He must have circled right round, and got ahead of us here, and waited."

"How the dickens should he know where to wait?" said Ben.

"It's plain enough, isn't it? If the other Indians headed us up this way that gap in the bluff is the only place for miles that can be got through. He knew we must come to it, unless the others caught us. Well, Beaver was a trapper, as far as he ever did anything honest."

"So he was."

"And as he was alone, I suppose he set this trap as the surest way of getting one of us down, at least. He was hiding up, close by, for he came as soon as I was caught. He wasn't the sort to tackle two of us openly."

"His pals can't be far to the east of us," said Ben. "There must be no more halts for us till we find Flying Cloud, if we ever do."

They had reached the cleft in the rocks, and a very ugly significance the place had for both of them. There was no saying what other treachery

it might conceal, and to reconnoitre it first was impossible. But it had to be tackled, for every moment of delay was perilous.

"Trust your horse," said Ben. "Go ahead."

Red Fiend cocked his ears at the boys, and Vivian, leading the way, rode right forward into the entrance.

CHAPTER 23.

The Swollen River.

THIS time Vivian's horse, although he walked with a high step, and his ears twitching forward, made no objection to going through the gap.

The trap was sprung, and the intelligent beast seemed to know there was no further danger. Beside the track lay the fresh-killed body of the deer which Vivian had noticed before, but Red Fiend passed by with hardly a glance at it.

"That's what I thought he didn't like last time," said Vivian to Ben. "Like a fool, I thought he was scared of a lump of dead meat, when he was really trying to save me from getting smashed up. Phew! My spine feels as if an elephant had been sitting on me!"

"You're jolly lucky to get off as you did, so don't grumble!"

"Yes, if Beaver had started operations on me with that knife of his, I should be a pretty-looking object by this time!" said Vivian, with a grim laugh. "Penny plain, and twopence coloured!"

"Don't joke about it," said Ben, shivering. "It may be our fate yet, for all we know," he added, as they rode on through the narrow cleft between the high, rocky walls. "Beaver's not the only Blood in our tracks. If we fell into their hands——"

"I wonder," said Vivian thoughtfully, "if a fellow would be justified in shootin' himself, supposing he got the chance, when he found he was bound to be a prisoner?"

"No," said Ben angrily, "he isn't justified!"

"I don't know. If you'd felt as I did when I was fast in the trap, and that brute was going to cut me up alive, you might have wished you could put a bullet in yourself, and end it."

"And a mighty fool you'd have looked, wouldn't you," said Ben, "if you'd been able to, and done it? Lucky you couldn't——"

"I don't say I should have."

"A chap with as much grit as you have doesn't need to talk such rot," said Ben. "You knew where to put your trust. Here you are, riding out, alive and well! You're a bit shaken up, Vivian, or you wouldn't talk like that," he added stolidly. "I say, this place seems an easy passage enough. There's the other end, ain't it?"

The narrow gorge was of no great length, and the voyagers found no more obstacles in it. It widened out all the way, after the middle was passed, and finally gave gradually on to a far-reaching plain.

"Careful, now," said Vivian. "This is the sort of place we can be seen upon for miles."

They pulled up, keeping in cover, before leaving the gorge, and took a careful survey all round the horizon. No signs of life were to be seen, save a herd of deer in the distance. A long way to the right the plain was bounded by a range of steep, craggy hills, and far away in front of the boys the forests and high lands could be seen stretching up towards the base of the Rockies.

"Don't see anything of the enemy" said Ben.

"That don't prove they aren't there, though," Vivian answered. "However, there's no cover for us, and we must just strike straight across, and take our chance. Make for the forests on the other side, that's all we can do. And where Flying Cloud is, or how he's to find us, would puzzle Buffalo Bill to tell, it seems to me. He may be fifty miles away, and probably is."

"Push ahead!" was all Ben said; and they started out across the open. As if by way of an omen, a tremendous rolling clap of thunder, a long way off over the hills to the westward, greeted them as they left the shelter of the gorge.

"Be a lively look-out if that catches us in the open," said Ben, as he rode, casting an eye at the ink-black thunder-clouds, for he had seen one or two of the tremendous tempests that gather out of the Rockies.

"Jolly good thing," rejoined Vivian. "There'll be torrents of rain, which will wash away all tracks. Lightning—eh? I'm blessed if it isn't a mighty quick, and pleasant way of getting wiped out, compared to being caught by the Bloods, and made into an entertainment for the tribe!"

They quickened their pace, loping out swiftly over the sun-burned grass, the pack-pony travelling beside Ben's horse. The growls of the distant storm grew louder and louder, and it was evident that a tremendous down-pour was in progress up in the hills. It was only the tail-end of the tempest that passed over the plain, but the boys were soaked to the skin in less than a minute after it started.

"Thank goodness for water-tight cartridges!" said Ben, ducking his head to the thrashing sheets of rain. "Hope we don't have to cross any rivers. They swell up all of a sudden into a regular torrent, when there's so much rain up in the hills."

The rain cleared off as abruptly as it began, and the sun shone strongly again. The boys were within a couple of miles of the forest, and were passing at no very great distance from an outlying spur of the hills on their right, when something that he saw in the latter direction caught Vivian's attention.

"Did you see the sun glint on something out that way?" he said, after looking carefully.

"No," answered Ben, following his example. "A bit of mica in the rocks, perhaps, or water."

"Don't think it was that," muttered Vivian. "I know the wink of metal in the sunshine when I see it."

A little further on, still keeping his eyes fixed to the right, he suddenly pulled Red Fiend to a standstill, and unslung his fieldglasses. Ben halted, too, and his companion searched the hillside keenly.

"By Jove! There they are!" he exclaimed. "Indians—four—five of them, and all mounted. They're waiting in the entrance of that ravine there. I knew I was right. You can make them out with the glasses."

"It's three-quarters of a mile away," said Ben. "Can they be Flying Cloud's lot?"

"Why should they be hiding, then? I don't fancy this. Sharp round to the left, old chap, and make for the forest the nearest way. Ride hard!"

Wheeling to the westward, the boys set off at a gallop. Hardly had they done so, when six mounted redskins poured out, and swept across the plain in hot pursuit.

"They're after us!" cried Ben. "It depends on the horses now whether they get us or not!"

Away sped the boys, urging the horses forward till the wind whistled in their ears. The breeze bore down to them the shrill, yelping cries

of the pursuing Bloods, for such they were. And, unlike any of the others that had been seen, they wore the three eagles' feathers upon their heads such as the braves of the tribe occasionally don.

"They've got their war-paint on!" said Ben, glancing back. "The brutes mean business! Is the whole country up, I wonder?"

"They're most likely the same lot we saw yesterday," said Vivian, judging the distance anxiously with his eye. "Expect they got ahead of us somehow, and lay there in wait. Our only hope is to out-ride them."

"You go ahead, then, old chap!" cried Ben. "Let that horse of yours out; he can go half as fast again as these two. Perhaps you'll see a way out of it if you go in front."

"What d'you take me for?" said Vivian fiercely, for it was true Red Fiend could easily have left the other two far behind, and out-distanced Indians and all. "Of course, I stick with you. Do you suppose I'd sneak off and leave you? Besides, there's no sense in it," he added, with a glance backward; "we're leaving them fast enough."

"If we can keep it up," said Ben to himself, for he felt his horse tiring under him; "but our beasts have had a hard doing as it is, and theirs are fresh."

The Bloods were mounted on Indian ponies of great cleverness and agility, but not a match for the larger ranch-horses in a straight-ahead race. The fugitives were increasing their distance fairly rapidly. The pack-pony, when urged to do his best, kept up easily with Ben's horse at the utmost speed of the latter, for the little animal had a light weight to carry, while Ben rode over twelve stone.

"We're doing them!" cried Ben, his hopes rising. "I'll bet they're gnashing their teeth!"

The Indians, however, were doing nothing of the kind. They had settled down in pursuit, as if they felt sure enough how it would end; and Vivian did not like the business-like way in which they rode. Then, as he rode over a rise in the ground, a shout broke from him:

"Water ahead! By George, this is bad! If we don't get across before they reach the bank we're done for!"

A broad river, not half a mile in front, lay between them and the forest. The rising ground between had hidden it from them till now, but it was easy to see what a terrible obstacle it would be.

"Now for it!" cried Ben, spurring his horse to still greater efforts. "If we can ford it, and get into cover beyond before they come up, they won't be able to cross; we can pick them off with our rifles."

"And if we're not out of it in time, they'll do the same for us," said Vivian, between his teeth.

Once more Ben urged him to ride ahead and cross over, but Vivian cut him short and refused.

The last stage of the race was a hard strain on beasts and riders. With necks outstretched, Ben's horse and the pack-pony flew over the ground, while the Indians were now flogging their ponies onward at a furious pace; and the two foremost braves shook their rifles in the air, and yelled savagely.

The river was no mere stream of the plains; it was two or three hundred yards wide, and to reach the other side before the Bloods came to the bank looked a very doubtful chance.

"Can we ford it?" shouted Ben; for amid the rattle of the twelve hoofs and the whistling of the wind it was hard to make himself heard.

"It's all shallow," returned Vivian. "It doesn't look as if there's a foot of water, but the river's swelling fast!"

He was right. The broad shallows of the river at most times were only a few inches deep at that spot, with a hard, sandy bottom, and would have stopped the horses but little.

But the torrents of rain in the hills had had their effect, and already the rivers were swelling. So swiftly does this happen below the foot-hills, that a quarter of an hour is often enough to change a trickle of water into a torrent. The river was beginning to flow thick and turbid even as the boys reached it.

One glance they flung behind, and saw the six Blood braves flogging their ponies along madly, not a half a mile behind. Without pausing an instant the boys galloped straight into the stream.

CHAPTER 24.

Captured!

WITH a splatter and a rush they took the water, flinging the spray around in showers. Till more than half-way across they kept up a good pace, not for a moment allowing the horses to slacken their efforts. But once past the centre, every stride became harder, and the water deeper, though the bottom was at the same level.

"She's swelling like a mill-race with the sluices up!" cried Ben.

"The horses'll be up to their hocks soon," returned Vivian, giving the Red Fiend his head; "and those murdering brutes will be on the bank in another minute!"

Onward they pressed, the horses panting heavily. Behind, the Indians' ponies were rapidly nearing the bank. Another half a minute and the farther shore was within twenty yards of the fugitives, but there came a surging, swelling rush of water, and the three horses were swept off their legs and were swimming in a turbid flood.

"Make your beast go!" cried Vivian. "Drive him hard, or we're dead men! Here they are at last!"

The Indians, reaching the bank the boys had just left, coming up at full gallop, pulled the ponies back on to their haunches and gave an ear-splitting yell. The next moment their rifles were levelled, and four or five sharp cracks rang out.

The boys were within a few yards of the farther shore, straining every nerve to reach it. Between them swam the pack-pony, loose, but managing to keep up with both the mounted horses.

Phut! phut! phut! came the bullets, snacking into the water with vicious thuds, and throwing up spurts of spray. There was a cry, almost human, from the pack-pony, as, with a bullet through his skull, he rolled right over and was swept away by the torrent.

A rifle-ball grazed Vivian along the ribs, searing his flesh like a hot iron, and making him gasp. The boys bent as low and flat as they could, spurring on to the bank, and the floundering horses, now thoroughly blown, reached it and scrambled out in the nick of time, amid a spatter of shots and the sharp cracking of the rifles from the other side.

"Poor shooting!" panted Vivian, as the Red Fiend plunged up the bank. "In among the trees, quick!"

The boys rode at full speed into the forest, followed by a bullet or two that slapped into the pine-trunks, or zipped through the branches. Once there the boys were safe, and Vivian, wheeling, jumped down from the

saddle in a moment as he saw the Bloods, with yells of disappointment, urge their horses into the stream.

"The fools!" cried Vivian. "Down, Ben; take cover behind a tree, and let 'em have it! Do they think we can't shoot? We'll show 'em two can play at that game!"

The horses were instantly placed behind a thick group of tree-trunks, and, unslinging their rifles, the boys instantly opened fire on the Bloods.

They soon learned why it was the Indians had missed, and that judging distance over running water is one of the most difficult of feats. The first two shots had no effect, but the boys, being on foot and steady, had far better chances than their pursuers, who had fired from horseback.

The enemy were all abreast in the stream, which had risen still higher. Doubtless they had thought that the boys would ride on rather than stop to fight, and they found themselves sorely mistaken. As the first shots came singing into their midst, however, they turned back for their own bank at once with all speed.

"One down!" cried Ben, as the tallest of the Indians pitched out of his saddle and was swept away by the stream, which was now bank high.

The others had scrambled out, and just as they drew clear of the water a bullet from Vivian's rifle, after three misses, struck a second Blood. He swayed to and fro as his pony set off at a gallop, and then slowly rolled off, and fell among the long grass, while his mount careered away, riderless.

The other four, as soon as they were out of the stream, bent low to their ponies' necks, and streaked away as fast as they could go towards the direction from which the river came. The boys quickly sent a few shots after them, but without effect, and the Bloods disappeared over the other side of the rising ground.

"That's two of them gone to pay for the pack-pony," said Ben, jumping up, and making for his horse. "A good little beast he was, with a heart too big for his body, and worth fifty dirty redskins."

"Poor little chap! He got the worst of it," said Vivian. "No chance to do anything for him; and we were lucky not to get hit ourselves. I've had a stinger over the ribs myself. Mount and ride for it, Ben; we must push on as long as our horses can move a leg."

"We've shaken that lot off, anyhow," said Ben, as they galloped along through the aisles of trees. "The river's rising still, and now we're over it's fairly cut us off."

"I wish I could think so," Vivian rejoined. "I'd like to be sure they won't cross at some place a little higher up, and then circle round, and get ahead of us somewhere. They know every inch of the country, and we don't."

They rode on for some time in silence. The horses had had time to breathe, but Ben's was going very heavily, and had had more than enough of it.

"You're right about the country," said Ben rather despondently. "Even if we've shaken off those vermin behind, where are we going to? I'd take a trifle of odds we don't see Flying Cloud again."

"If not, I suppose we'll have to try and cross the Rockies on our own, as best we can. I don't know where Brown Bear Pass is. We must look for it, that's all."

"Without any provisions, or blankets, or spare ammunition? We lost everything when the pack-pony was shot."

"That's a fact. I've got about a hundred rounds of ammunition about

me, in the pouches and bandolier. You have some, too. We must live on our rifles, or try to. There'll be no worrying about close time or game laws, now," added Vivian grimly.

"A close time for burning white men 'ud be more useful!" growled Ben. "I never thought there was anything of this sort up here nowadays. Wonder the Government doesn't send up and wipe all the beasts off the face of the earth. And I suppose we're a long way out of range of any Mounted Police patrol. Fancy an Indian raid in—"

"It isn't an Indian raid," said Vivian impatiently. "It's just a feud—a party of Bloods trying to murder two unlucky youngsters, who only want to be left in peace. Stride's got a hand in it, you can bet your life; and the one who's at the bottom of the whole thing is really my scoundrelly cousin Boyle, who's sitting at home in Wiltshire, with his eye on our grandfather's fortune. I wonder if there's anything a blackguard wou'd do to get money?"

"I can promise you I wouldn't stop any redskin from scalping Stride," growled Ben; "and I only hope he'll lose his hair that way before he's done. Hadn't we better pull out up the hill there, and look round to see if that lot are after us still, or which way we'd best go?"

"I vote for riding straight ahead, and stopping for nothing," Vivian replied. "The Bloods aren't shaken off so easily, and you've seen for yourself that we can't beat them at scouting. Whenever we spot them, it's pretty clear they spot us. Every time they've done us. All we can hope for is to keep ahead of them."

"Don't see how that's to be done, when we're in the very thick of their country," said Ben, with a shrug. "Still, I suppose you're right. I'd give something for a whack of grub," he added ruefully. "I'm absolutely famishing."

"Take up a couple of holes in your belt. Goodness knows when we shall be able to feed again," said Vivian. "Ah, look there! I feared it!"

On the summit of the very hill Ben had proposed to climb, a redskin showed himself for a couple of brief moments, looking no taller than a man's hand. The boys were passing through an open tract of the forest, and the Indian's keen eyes spied them out at once. They saw him raise his rifle high above his head with one hand, looking back as if signalling to others behind him, and then immediately he disappeared.

"They're on to us again!" said Vivian bitterly. "There can only be one end to this, it seems to me. You must push your horse along, if it breaks his heart, Ben. Sharp—the other way, now, and ride for it!"

They galloped their horses right away from the hills, plunging into the deeper parts of the forest, and for a quarter of an hour they rode steadily. There were no signs of the pursuers, but they might have been close behind, and yet unseen.

A tangle of woodland, so thick that it could not be ridden through, soon lay right across the path of the boys. They skirted round it, coming into a more open space, when suddenly a redskin leaped up close in front of them.

"Look out!" cried Ben, who was in front, unslinging his rifle.

The words were hardly out of his lips when a horde of Indians appeared instantly on every side, all on foot, and they seemed to spring out of the very ground.

Three shots rang out, and Ben's horse, shot through the breast, went down heavily, and threw its rider to the earth. Yelling like demons, a score of painted Blood warriors rushed forward and surrounded the boys.

CHAPTER 25.

Beaver's Kinsman.

VIVIAN whipped out his revolver, and fired point-blank into the yelling crowd, three shots in rapid succession. Even at that moment he might possibly have charged through, and got away, trusting to the Red Fiend; but Ben was down, and to desert him was not to be thought of.

Crack! crack! crack! barked the revolver. The first two shots missed, but the third brought one of the onrushing Indians upon his face in the grass, and the fourth laid another low. It was all done in a few seconds, and scarcely had he drawn trigger for the fourth time, when the crowd were upon him.

The Red Fiend reared and plunged violently, striking one painted warrior to the earth, and then he dashed ahead; but a crashing blow from behind, full upon the back of his head, beat Vivian out of the saddle, and he rolled over among the whooping savages, who flung themselves upon him, and secured him instantly. Not a shot had been fired by them since Ben went down, but they had Vivian upon the ground, and his arms bound fast, in a twinkling.

Dazed, and hardly in possession of his senses, Vivian saw dimly that a tremendous commotion was going on close by him. The Red Fiend, riderless and unhampered, was causing it. A Blood brave had caught him by the bridle, and instantly the redskin was killed by one snap of the terrible yellow stallion's teeth, that crushed his temples like an eggshell. The crowd that surrounded the great horse to secure it found they had better have tackled an infuriated bull than Red Fiend. He dashed right at them; his forehoofs smashed the breastbone of one, and laid him low, and the others scattered like chaff. The ramping stallion dashed after the nearest like an arrow, and it is hard to say what havoc he might have made among the captors of the boys if he had not come to grief. A young half-breed, who was not painted like the rest, sent a horsehair noose spinning out with unerring aim, and caught the stallion round the hind legs. In a twinkling a turn was taken round a tree trunk with the rope, and Red Fiend was flung to the ground with a tremendous shock.

A second noose quickly encircled his neck, and he was soon stretched out, helpless, screaming and rolling, and frothing at the mouth, his eyes glaring hatred at his foes. The man-killer was secured, and the Bloods turned to their human captives.

Ben was already made fast, with his arms tight to his sides by a coil of raw-hide rope, and Vivian was treated in the same way, feeling giddy and sick from the blow he had received. The redskins, standing round the boys, spoke to each other in deep, guttural tones, and one of the tallest of them strode forward.

He was a lean, hawk-faced man, with cruel, glittering eyes, his cheeks painted in a fantastic design with deep red. The boys had never seen this decoration before, but they guessed it was the Blood warpaint, from which the tribe takes its name. He was as cruel a looking ruffian as Ben or Vivian had set eyes upon, and after glaring at Vivian for a moment or two with a sort of gloating triumph, he struck the boy heavily across the face with the quirt he carried in his hand.

"Get up!" he said, deep in his throat.

Two of the others jerked Vivian roughly to his feet, for his legs were not tied. The boy faced his assailant silently, a livid wheal stretching across his cheek.

"Beaver you kill," said the tall redskin gutturally. "Do to you same. Turu! March!"

He drew his knife, and stabbed Vivian's shoulder sharply several times with the point, pointing out the way he should go as the two braves who had charge of him drove him off like a hobbled horse. It was an act of sheer cruelty, for the sake of inflicting pain, as the nature of the red man is, and Vivian set his teeth and made no sound. He would have given any chance of life he possessed to take his assailant by the throat just then for thirty seconds.

Ben was hauled to his feet with a kick, and the boys were marched off, side by side, leaving the dead horse where it fell, one of the Bloods taking off the saddle and bridle, and bearing them with him. A length of rope, attached to a wrist of each of the boys, kept them from straying. Vivian had half feared to see the Red Fiend's throat cut when they had him down; but, instead, the stallion, securely hobbled, was led along behind them, a slip-knot round his jaws, from which a rope was led under his chest and tied fast to his tail, so that he could not raise his head. It was deftly done by the young half-breed.

"It's all up now!" muttered Vivian. "They've got us fast. We're done for, and we'd better recognise it."

"There's no getting out of this!" sighed Ben. "I hope I don't show the white feather to these brutes."

"You won't; I may. Not sure I'm not doing it now," said Vivian listlessly; "only I don't feel I care much what happens to us."

"Wonder what they mean to do?"

"Don't talk about it!" groaned Vivian. "They meant to have us alive, you can see that. They could have shot us easily an' quickly enough. Are you hurt?"

"No; it was my horse they shot. You wiped out two of them, didn't you? I'm thankful for that. And the stallion put two more out of action. Didn't that ugly brute with the painted phiz say something about Beaver?"

Vivian made no reply. He did not feel up to talking. They were urged onward by their captors, and when they had gone a quarter of a mile or less they were joined by four mounted Bloods on ponies, doubtless those who had tried to ford the river.

"It was a trap," thought Vivian. "One of them must have showed himself on the top of that hill, so as to send us off in the other direction, where this lot was waiting for us. How did they manage to get the news ahead? Well, it's no good puzzling over that. They've got us, and I'd give my right arm to be out of it."

There was much talk between the mounted Indians and those who had taken the boys. The former looked at the prisoners with dark, lowering faces, and Ben, though he could not understand a word that was said, guessed they were promising themselves vengeance for their fellow-tribesmen who had fallen at the ford of the river.

The young half-breed, who was dressed in the same attire as the rest, but showed his origin by his paler face, and almost white hands, came alongside the boys as they marched, and spoke to them in a jeering voice.

"You look heap pleased with yourselves—eh? We have plenty fun with you soon," he said, with an ugly leer; yet he seemed almost good-natured in comparison with the others. "That horse of yours, he devil to fight!"

Vivian looked at the man.

"I wish he had you by the nape of the neck," said Vivian grimly. "If you hadn't stopped him, he'd have made all these rats run for their lives."

"You will find rats can bite," said the half-breed, with a sour grin. "They can gnaw and nip, and many things besides. Only wait a little. You killed two of our men at the ford—eh?"

"In fair fight!" broke out Vivian. "Did we begin this game? Why don't you let us alone?"

"There is Beaver to make square for. You send Beaver to the police," said the half-breed. "Then there is money paid, too, I think—money to catch you. I know not how much, but the chief, he know."

"Money! Yes, I suppose the bill for this will be sent to Stride," said Ben bitterly. "And it will be your beast of a cousin in England, Vivian, who'll find the money for it! I'd like to see him at the stake! I wouldn't say a word to save him from it, as I did for that red-skinned brute the Beaver!" His voice shook with passion. "If we'd left him to burn, we might be free men now!"

"It certainly seems queer that we've got to be killed because we saved him from it," muttered Vivian.

He relapsed into silence again, and the boys marched on wearily. The half-breed taunted them from time to time, but they took no notice of him. The tall warrior with the painted face glanced back at the captives occasionally, always with the same malignant glitter in his eyes.

"I wonder who that long ruffian is?" murmured Ben. "The chief of the band, I suppose."

"No, that is Musquash—the Musk Rat, we call him in our tongue," answered the half-breed, who overheard Ben. "He is kiusman to Beaver-With-One-Eye, who you kill this morning."

"That's what he looks so ugly about, is it?" growled Vivian. "I'd like to see him in the same plight as his cousin. As a matter of fact, I didn't kill the Beaver."

"You or somebody with you did," answered the half-breed, "or perhaps it was that devil of a horse of yours. He was nearly torn to pieces. It is all the same. You will pay for it."

"How did you know Beaver was killed?" asked Ben, looking at him askance.

"He was found by the trap in the canyon. With the Bloods, news travels fast. You thought to get away from us," he said, with a mocking laugh. "I tell you, it was impossible. When my people are up, no white man can escape them here in the hills."

"You call them your people," said Vivian, looking at him in disgust. "You are half white, by the look of you. Why do you hunt with a pack of vermin like these?"

"It is the Indian blood in me," said the man, his eyes gleaming fiercely. "My father he was French-Canadian, and my mother was a Blood squaw. I hate the whites; I go with my tribe."

"You're a meaner skunk than any of them!" growled Ben, but the half-breed only laughed.

"You have not many hours to live," he said, "and you'd best be civil. I care nothing what you think."

"Where are they taking us to?"

"To the meeting-place of the two bands who are out raiding. We agree to meet yonder—see, we come to the place now! They soon settle your hash for you, my young Britishers!"

"Are they going to burn us?" Ben could not help asking, though the man looked into his face to see if he was afraid.

"I cannot tell. They kill you, anyhow."

The meeting-place was a wide clearing, a couple of hundred yards across, ringed all round by the forest, and with a shattered tree-stump or two here and there.

A tall Indian, of greater stature and breadth than any of the others, and in full fighting costume, rode in at the other end of the clearing, with a

band of eight or ten Blood warriors on ponies around him. He was talking gravely with his companions or bodyguard, and rapidly the clearing filled with another score of mounted Indians, making, with the band of captors on foot, at least fifty.

"That is Long Spear, the chief," said the half-breed, "the tall man on the black mustang. He decide your fate."

The captors of the boys strode forward and saluted the chief, who returned the salute haughtily. He said a few words to them in his own tongue, commending them for the capture, and there was an outburst of grave, guttural talk all round as the Indians pressed up, and stared with their dark, grim faces at the boys. A horse was heard cantering among the trees, and a stranger rode hastily into the clearing—a white man, on a sorrel broncho.

"By gum," exclaimed Ben, "it's Stride!"

CHAPTER 25.

The Stake and the Torch.

STRIDE it was, sure enough. His lean face was very pale, and his hair was still curiously matted, showing the effects of the tarring the cowboys at McLeod's had given him.

He caught his breath, and his eyes lit up as he saw the boys. The ex-stableman rode up to the chief, Long Spear, with whom he was evidently on terms.

"You've got 'em, then!" he said triumphantly. "Well done, chief! You've done what them other fools made such a mess of. Make sure of 'em, chief—make sure of 'em!"

Long Spear saluted him gravely, and beckoned to the half-breed. The chief seemed to speak little or no English. He said a few words to the half-breed, who turned to Stride.

"The chief says the two white prisoners are the ones who have done ill to the Blood tribe, who have lost several of their men. The young pale-faces will be put to death."

"That's right enough!" said Stride. His back was turned to the boys, and his evil face looked strained and eager. "They've earned death; let 'em have it! Only don't delay; finish 'em now."

Long Spear spoke again.

"The chief says that these are also the white cubs for whose death a sum of money was promised, and he demands payment."

"I'll pay him as soon as the job's done!" said Stride, with an oath.

"Then you stay here and see them die," returned the half-breed. "You hate them—eh? It will be very pleasant to you. They take a long time to die, I think. The cousin of Beaver, who is here, will have the killing of them."

The ex-stableman turned rather paler. Scoundrel as he was, and quite without pity, he felt he could hardly stand and see with his own eyes an Indian execution in cold blood, and that the sight might haunt him longer than he cared for.

"I've got business down South," he said. "I'm satisfied they'll be made a job of, but I ain't got time to stop an' see it. I must get away and report as quick as I can, don't you see?"

Long Spear, on this being translated to him, said something very sharply.

"The chief says," resumed the half-breed, "that the money is to be paid

now, before you leave him, for how does he know that he will ever see you again?"

"But I'll send the money, or meet him anywhere he likes, and pay it, when the job's done."

"It must be paid now. You can stop and see the prisoners die, or pay the gold first and go."

"Well," said Stride, hesitating, "I suppose I can be sure they're goin' to be finished, if I pay?"

"Have no doubts about that. They will die in any case; but do not anger the chief. Pay him his just due, or there will be bad trouble for you."

Stride, at this, pulled out a small buckskin bag that jingled as he handled it. He gave it to Long Spear, who received it with a grab, and, emptying a number of gold coins out of it into his coffee-coloured palms, looked them over. There was a considerable sum.

The Blood chief stowed the bag somewhere about his person, and waved his hand to Stride, saying something in a low voice, which the half-breed translated.

"You won't stop and see the fun?" added the latter.

"No," said Stride hurriedly reining his horse round. "I wish I could. I must get away."

He passed close to the boys, shooting one swift side glance at them, but he did not meet their eyes. Vivian called out to him:

"Go back and tell Boyle you've got the job done cheap!"

"If you are not hanged for this one day, you sneaking blackguard," said Ben, choking with rage, "I shall think there's no justice left in the world!"

Stride made no reply. He set spurs to his horse, and galloped off southwards through the forest. As soon as he had gone the Bloods gathered round Ben and Vivian, making a wide circle about them. The half-breed, grinning evilly, took his place beside them. From time to time, as if it delighted him, he told the boys what was being said.

"Whence come the prisoners?" asked Long Spear, fixing his dark eyes on them.

"From across the Great Water," answered a wizened old warrior, whose hair was whitening. "They were not born in this country."

"How many of our people have fallen to these cubs before they were taken?"

"Long Spear, there are five," returned the old man. "There was Beaver at the canyon, and two who were shot at the ford of the river. You bade us take them alive."

"That's true," said the chief gravely.

"Two more were killed by the young paleface's pistol before we unhorsed him, which makes all. Then there were two other that the yellow horse felled, and I do not think they will ever move again. But these did not owe their deaths to the captives, and it remains to know what you wish us to do with the horse."

"Let the horse be for the present," said Long Spear. "There must be some strange medicine to a horse of that kind, and I have never seen his like. As for the two paleface cubs, put them to death, here and now."

There was a growl of approval all round.

By the knife or the stake, O great chief?" asked the old warrior.

Before Long Spear could answer, a tall, painted Blood pushed out from the crowd, and faced the chief.

"These cubs," he cried, his lean hand pointing to them, and his eyes gleaming, "betrayed my kinsman, the Beaver, into the hands of the

Shermougouish but a week ago, and now since he has escaped they have killed him! And they are friends of the Crees, whose name I spit upon! Chief, I demand that they die the worst death we know!"

"You have reason," said Long Spear gravely. "You have the right to ask it."

"Give them over to me and my squaw, and they shall die as the Cree fur-trapper died whom we captured in the hills two years ago!"

Long Spear made an impatient gesture.

"There is no time for that," he said; "it takes too long. It would be very well if we had an hour or two before us, but we must get this thing done, and then scatter, lest it should be known. The death shall be a shorter one."

"The nails? The fire?" called several of the warriors

"The fire," said Long Spear; "there is time for that. Let it be done quickly. Tio then to the tree-stumps yonder. Hasten!"

The Musk Rat shook his bronze fists above his head, and cried out with rage.

"The fire! They shall not have so light a death!" he shouted. "It is not fitting, when they betrayed my kinsman! Are we to be cheated out of our pleasure, all of us?"

The chief held up his hand for silence, but the Musk Rat continued to rave.

Beaver, who was my consin, vowed they should have a death that would be talked of in the mountains by our children's children. I say they shall not—"

"Peace, thou!" said Long Spear, in a voice of thunder. "or I will have you burnt beside them! Bind the paleface cubs side by side, and bring brushwood and faggots quickly."

Beaver, silenced by the chief, slunk back from the circle, growling. Long Spear's orders were instantly obeyed, and the men on foot hurried to carry them out.

The boys were led into the middle of the clearing, where two jagged pine-stumps, strangely charred and blackened, stood side by side. To these the captives were securely lashed with wet, green, raw-hide, drawn cruelly tight in coil upon coil.

From out of the forest piles of grass and pine-needles and dried fern were brought. These were set about the feet of the boys, and branches of pine-wood, oozing with pitch and resin, were piled high around their knees.

"My heavens," said Ben, with a gulp, "they're goin' to burn us!"

"It—it might have been worse!" muttered Vivian, his mouth so dry that he could hardly speak. "We've got to die—we've got to die! There's no hope for us!" He drew a long breath. "Am I going to show the white feather before these red brutes?"

The faggot-piles were complete, and the Indians, silent now, some on their horses and some afoot, or squatting on the ground, watched the boys with dark, impassive faces. The Musk Rat, in the forefront of them, seemed to be gloating over the plight of the captives, and his beady eyes, that were exactly like those of his animal namesake, glittered uncannily.

Ben's eyes had closed, and his lips were moving in a silent prayer. Vivian followed his example. What the boys felt in these awful moments, with a hideous death so close, cannot be put on paper.

At a sign from the Musk Rat, a brave came forward, bearing a blazing torch of pinewood. Slowly, amid dead silence, and with a face as stolid as a statue's, he walked up to the stakes with it.

"It's all up!" said Vivian, between his teeth. "Good-bye, old chap!"

"Good-bye!" said Ben hoarsely. His face was drawn and rigid. "Don't let—don't let them see we're afraid. P'r'aps the smoke may kill us before the fire——"

He broke off as the man with the torch bent down to apply it to the dry ferns beneath the sticks. Then came a sudden rustle—a strange sound somewhere at the back of the forest. The chief, Long Spear, started in his saddle, and listened.

It was the sound of horses' hoofs, suddenly surging into a thunderous noise. Every Blood in the clearing leaped up, and, with a wild, fierce whoop, a great body of red-skinned horsemen swept like an avalanche out of the forest, and charged into the clearing, firing right and left, and riding down the Bloods* as a storm-wind scatters chaff. And at the head of the raiders, shaking his rifle above his head, and yelling like a madman, rode Flying Cloud.

CHAPTER 27.

The Rescuers.

"T'S the Crees!" shouted Vivian, beside himself with excitement, struggling in his bonds, and forgetting he was tied fast. "We're saved, Ben, we're saved!"

"Hurrah, Flying Cloud!" yelled Ben frantically. "Give it 'em! Cut 'em down!"

There were fully sixty horsemen in the attacking party, and the first shock had broken up the surprised band of Bloods, and scattered them.

A dozen of the latter went down at the first discharge of the gallopers' rifles, and Flying Cloud, spurring straight at Long Spear, unhurt by a shot that seemed to be blazed in his very face, beat the Blood chief out of his saddle with one fierce blow of his gunstock before Long Spear could avoid the encounter. Down went the chief with his skull broken, and Flying Cloud raged through the crowd, plying his clubbed rifle right and left.

The Bloods, rallying from their first panic, met the Cree riders desperately, and a blazing crackle of rifle and pistol shots, with furious hand-to-hand struggles, in which knives were the weapons, every here and there, filled the whole clearing like an inferno let loose.

The ringing war-cries of the Crees sounded high above the din, as the fighters stamped and struggled backwards and forwards over the ground. Ben and Vivian, wild with excitement, and unable to move or help, their lives depending on the upshot, strained at their ropes, and shouted as Blood after Blood went down.

"Smash them! Scatter the brutes!" roared Ben, hardly knowing what he said in the relief of the rescue. "Well done, Crees! Go it, Flying Cloud!"

A stray bullet out of the fight struck and splintered the stake just over his head, for the air was noisy with flying lead, and a second scored Vivian's wrist, and drew blood freely; but he felt it no more than the sting of a mosquito. He was shouting for somebody to cut him loose, and give him a weapon, that he might join in the fight. But neither friend nor foe gave a moment to so much as glance at the boys.

The Crees very soon showed that when it came to fighting they could make short work of any Blood band. From the first charge, the victory was as good as their own. Not two minutes did the struggle last. Already the Bloods were turning tail. Half their number were down, and Flying Cloud's men had very few losses. As if at a signal the remainder of Long Spear's warriors broke completely and ran for their lives, the Cree horsemen pursuing them without mercy, and shooting or clubbing them down.

"After them!" shouted the Cree leader to the band in his own tongue.
 "Let none escape!"

Flying Cloud, who had fought like three men, came galloping back to the stakes where the boys were bound the moment the enemy was fairly in flight. He flung himself from his horse, and, cutting the raw-hide ropes, set the boys free.

"I thought I never find you!" he cried. "I thought you dead!" He gripped the boys by the hand, and never was there a more fervent greeting between red man and white. "But my scouts see you captured, and I bring this band to rescue you. How?"

Vivian staggered slightly. He felt quite dazed. The shock of all he had gone through made him almost fail to realise what had happened.

The stakes and the brushwood, the torch that still burned and smouldered on the ground, the clearing strewn with dead—it all seemed to him like a dream.

"Heaven bless you, Flying Cloud!" he said hoarsely. "You came in the nick of time. I—I thought we were done for! I—"

He would have sunk down if Flying Cloud had not held him up. Ben, too, was white as a sheet now the danger and strain were over. They had had a terrible day of it, and the Cree saw quickly that they were near a collapse. He cast a glance round over the blood-stained clearing and the men of his own band who were coming back, and he led the boys, unresisting, away back among the trees.

"Come to the spring—drink some water," he said, "so you feel better. I been very anxious about you, you bet! If anything had happen through my going away, I kill myself. You could not go by the way I told you!"

"No," said Vivian, when he had relieved his parched throat with some water, and revived a little, "we had to strike out northwards; we've been on the run two days, with these beggars after us all the time."

He told his rescuer what had happened on the way—how they had been forced to alter their route, and the events of the gorge through the rocks and the river ford.

"You have fought and killed five of them! Well done!" exclaimed Flying Cloud. "I guessed you had seen them, and which way you would have to come, so I struck out north this way with the men of my tribe, who hate the Bloods. I see you taken, from top of the big hill, five miles west."

"You did?" exclaimed Ben.

"Yes, and we came down fast as the horses could go. Track you to this place; it was not hard. Flying Cloud find you, if you thousand miles away! We come up very quiet—fools of Blood had set no watchers—and then we come in on our horses heap quick, and stamp those Bloods into the earth. The rest you know plenty well yourselves. How were those men killed we find at the place you were caught? Two were shot, but two others not."

"Red Fiend killed them," said Vivian, rising quickly to his feet. "Where is he? They hobbled him, and brought him along. Let's get back, and see after him— Yes, I'm all right now, Flying Cloud—really I am! How can we ever repay you for this?"

"Wah!" exclaimed Flying Cloud. "We are blood brothers, I tell you again. Come, now—you feel better—eh?"

"Stiff and sore, that's all," said Ben, staggering to his feet, and looking round him. "What did we come here for?"

"It was well you should be away from the clearing, and leave my people to themselves for a little while," said Flying Cloud smoothly. "Where is the horse you rode, Ben?"

"They shot him when they captured us," Ben replied, "poor beast! But

Vivian's they roped, after he'd made hay of them, and they brought him along——"

"Yes. Where is he?" cried Vivian, hurrying forward as fast as his stiff limbs would let him. "I shall never forgive myself if anything's wroug with him! He's fought as gallantly as anything on two legs to-day!"

"Yonder he is, the wicked old beggar!" said Ben, as they came to the clearing, and saw Red Fiend lying helplessly on his side some way behind the stakes, unable to get up for the hobbles on his legs. Vivian ran forward with a cry of delight, and cut him loose instantly. The great horse staggered up. He was unhurt, save for a stray bullet that had clipped one ear, and the cut he had received before from Beaver's knife. He whinnied eagerly, and thrust his nose into Vivian's breast.

"Ay, you're glad to see me on my pins again, aren't you, old chap?" said his master. "We've both had a narrow squeak of it. Flying Cloud, why did they make a prisoner of him, instead of shooting him?"

"I cannot tell. They are very—how you call?—superstitious, these Bloods," said Flying Cloud, with a shrug. "They must have thought he was some dead warrior's spirit in form of a horse, you know, by way he fought. Very superstitious people." Flying Cloud himself, though he spoke so scornfully, believed in all the demons and spirits of the woods. "Here come my braves back. I hope they have done well."

Ben and Vivian glanced round the clearing, and shuddered. It was like a shambles.

"It was in fair fight," said Ben, with a glance at Vivian. "Poor beggars, they were well wiped out. But they'd have burnt us alive, and I can't pity them."

"They—they're not scalped, thank goodness!" muttered Vivian. "I say, Flying Cloud——"

"No," said the Cree, shaking his head; "I know you not like it. I gave orders that there should be none of it. It was very hard on my young men, you understand; but they know me, and they obeyed—here, at least. What they have done away, I cannot tell. Oho!" he called to a powerful-looking, handsome young brave, who came riding back just then, with five or six others behind him.

Flying Cloud spoke to him for some time in his own tongue.

Kicking Horse, which was the young brave's name, turned to the boys with a sunny smile. He looked like a man who had thoroughly enjoyed himself.

"Only six they get 'way," he said, in very broken English, holding up six fingers. "We take no hair—no. Why you not like we take hair? Yes, six alive, I think. The chief, Long Spear, he there." The Cree pointed to where the dead lay thick in the clearing.

"But the Musk Rat," said Flying Cloud—"the Musk Rat—is he caught?"

"'Fraid he one of six; he not seen," said Kicking Horse, shaking his head. "Heap slippery—always sneak away."

"A pity!" said Flying Cloud, with a grunt of disappointment.

"I shouldn't be sorry if he were laid out," said Ben. "He's Beaver's brother, it seems, an' he wanted some extra-special brand of tortures for us."

"He worse than Beaver," said Flying Cloud; "but we get him yet."

"Nothing seen of Stride, I suppose," asked Vivian, "the white man?"

"White man!" exclaimed the young brave. "We have seen none."

"Stride," cried Flying Cloud—"has he been here?"

Rapidly Vivian told him of the renegade's visit, and what had come of it.

"Which way he go?"

"Straight away to the southward," said Ben, pointing out the direction.

"We'll have him," cried the Cree, "before the sun sinks behind the hills!"

Flying Cloud darted to his horse, and, springing into the saddle, clapped his hand to his mouth, and gave a shrill, quavering cry.

From all directions the Cree braves came pouring into the clearing. Flying Cloud shouted to them, and in a twinkling all were dashing away to the southward as hard as their horses could carry them.

CHAPTER 28.

The Mounted Police Captain.

BY Flying Cloud's order, only four of the Crees remained behind with the boys, the young brave, Kicking Horse, being in command of them. As for the rest, they were gone before there was time to ask a question, or say a word to their leader.

"What a score, if they get hold of Stride!" exclaimed Ben. "He's done for now if they do, for we're witnesses of the bargain the scoundrel made with Long Spear."

"That's enough to lock him up for the rest of his days," said Vivian. "If it can be done, Flying Cloud will do it! Stride's got a long start, though."

"They'll scatter out to find his tracks," added Ben, "and then ride him down. What a dickens of a hurry Flying Cloud was in!"

"Heap need for hurry," said Kicking Horse gravely. He walked out from under the trees, and held out his hand. A heavy drop or two of rain was falling, and he felt it. The heavy clouds, for the second time that day, were gathering, and ready for a deluge.

"Why do you think they won't catch the white man?" cried Vivian.

"Heap water soon—make very hard find—wash away all tracks," said Kicking Horse.

"We ought to know that. The rain saved us this morning for a time," said Ben. "If it comes down heavily, it'll make it impossible to trail Stride, unless they get right away beyond the storm and strike his tracks fresh—which surely they can't do. He's been gone too long. What do you think, Kicking Horse?"

"I think they catch him," said the Cree. He caught Vivian suddenly by the arm, for the boy was sinking to the ground. "Wah!" he said anxiously. "You got wound, eh?"

"No," said Vivian thickly, his eyes half closed. "I'm all ri——"

"He's dead beat," said Ben, whose face looked very white and exhausted.

"So'm I. We've had an awful time of it to-day."

"You come 'way," said Kicking Horse quickly; and the other Crees, at a sign, helped the boys along. "We go little way on, and make camp. Food and sleep you heap want—else have fever. We wait then till others come back."

"What about the dead?" muttered Ben, glancing back at the clearing.

"Let the carrion bury itself," said Kicking Horse, in his own tongue. "I do not defile myself with dead Bloods—it is enough honour to them to kill them. Wah!"

The boys were hoisted on to their horses, Vivian on Red Fiend, and Ben on an Indian pony, and the little band struck away through the forest north-westwards. The two boys could hardly sit in the saddles—indeed, they were asleep and snoring as they rode in five minutes, which is no new thing to travellers who are dead beat.

They went only a short distance—half a mile or less from the scene of the fight. The rain began to come down in torrents, and the Indians, increasing their speed, made for some hilly ground a little to the left of their path. A vast jumble of rocks, crags, and gullies broke up the forest here, and several deep caves ran back into the crags. The Crees, who evidently knew the spot well, reached one of the driest and largest of the caves before the rain soaked the party, and Ben and Vivian literally fell off their horses, and were hauled into the cave like bags of grain, snoring. They were more completely worn out than ever they had been in their lives.

The Indians herded the horses into another cave, until, in a couple of hours, the torrents of rain ceased, and they were hobbled and turned out to graze.

Kicking Horse managed to wake the boys up, and gave them a plentiful supply of dried deer meat, which they ate hungrily, and immediately dropped off to sleep again.

The night passed quietly enough, and the dripping forest was strangely silent. At the mouth of the cave a watchful Cree sat, his rifle across his knees, and his keen eyes peering into the darkness. Down from the direction of the scene of the fight came the long howl of a timber wolf, answered by another, and another. The sharp yelping cry of coyotes was heard from time to time, and Ben, opening his eyes once in the night, heard it, knew well what it meant, and shuddered. But he was soon in deep slumber again, and knew no more till the dawn.

When the boys awoke, thoroughly refreshed after a solid twelve hours' rest, and ravenously hungry once more, they found the whole cave full of Crees. Flying Cloud had returned, and was sitting on his haunches on a stone, chewing a strip of dark, dried meat, and looking at the boys.

"Hallo!" said Vivian, starting up, "you're back, then! Have you got him? Have you found Stride?"

Flying Cloud shook his head.

"'Fraid you wouldn't," said Ben, as Vivian's disappointment showed in his face. "If it could be done, I know you'd have managed it. The rain made it impossible, eh?"

"It was not only the rain," said Flying Cloud. "We must ride away at once," he added—"away to the north."

"Why, what's up?"

"In ten minutes we must go," the Cree repeated. "I can give you not more time. Have food quickly, and then to saddle. Must get on into the Rockies."

Flying Cloud's face was as expressionless as a block of wood, and the boys could get no more out of him. He spoke to his men rapidly, and set about making immediate preparations for departure.

"What's this mean, d'you think?" said Ben, as the two boys left the cave. "Why's he so keen to be moving?"

"Can't say. It's like trying to make a blessed stone talk to ask Flying Cloud anything which he doesn't choose to tell you. He's generally right, anyhow; so if he says git, we'd better do so."

"All right. There's just time for a bathe to freshen us up."

Sleeping in their clothes was a thing neither of the boys minded in the least, but going without a bath after it they strongly objected to, and, hurrying down to the stream below the rocks, they stripped and had a plunge in one of the pools, ate some pemmican and corn-bread, and were ready within the time mentioned by Flying Cloud. So sound a guide and scout was he, that, in a district of which he knew every inch and they knew nothing, the boys were quite willing to leave everything in his hands.

They found Flying Cloud splitting the party up. A drove of ten Indian ponies, which had belonged to the departed Bloods, and had been rounded up and driven in at daybreak, stood together, with six Crees in charge. A good amount of booty was strapped on the backs of several of them, and the two best of the lot, with a pack apiece, were placed on one side.

"These we will take for pack-ponies," said Flying Cloud to the boys, "for yours is lost. And you have no horse, Ben, eh? This one do for you, you think?"

One of the Crees led out the big dun mustang which Long Spear, the Blood chief, had ridden, and a capital, strong animal it was.

"By George, this is ripping!" said Ben, taking the bridle. "Do? Should think he will! He's worth three of my poor old cayuse. You're a brick, Flying Cloud, as I've frequently remarked before." He swung himself into the saddle, the horse rearing up and snorting. "All aboard! Right away!"

Flying Cloud called out to his men, and nearly the whole band, driving the herd of ponies with them, cantered rapidly away to the south-westward among the wooded hills, waving an adieu to their comrades with a shrill yell just before they disappeared. Flying Cloud, with the ever-cheerful Kicking Horse and six of the young braves, remained with the boys.

"Off we go! Heap long ride to-day," said Flying Cloud, leading the party away at a fast loping pace to the northward. The pack-ponies were led on ropes between two of the braves, and, the sun now mounting well above the Rockies, they made good travelling of it.

"Where have the other johnnies gone to?" asked Vivian. "They went the other way."

"Yes, they gone off with the ponies and the loot," said Flying Cloud. "Not good for have that with us. They get heap far away into mountains, among my people, whence I fetched them. These seven plenty 'nough to go with us."

"Ample, I should say. We're jolly glad to have an escort, all the same," replied Vivian, as Red Fiend leaped over a fallen log. "But what is it we're in such a hurry for?"

"Better we get on quick. Might be soon bad weather in the mountains," said Flying Cloud—"perhaps snow."

"That's not the reason, you old fox," said Vivian, shaking his head. "I know you. Dash it! You don't think we'll be frightened if you tell us, do you? We've had a pretty good seasoning. Are you expecting a lot more Bloods to come and give us trouble?"

"No," said the Indian. "We have no more fighting with the Bloods, unless whole tribe rise, and that not likely. But we not waste time—lost plenty already."

"That's a whopper," murmured Ben, "considering you and I have been scurrying along for two days at a regular breakneck pace. Whatever we've lost, it isn't time."

Flying Cloud seemed disinclined to talk, however. He did not exactly hustle the party, but he kept them going at a good brisk pace, and his impatience did not show until after two hours' travelling they came to a broad river that lay right across their path.

The river was in flood, as badly so as the one the boys had crossed the day before. The rains of the previous night had swollen it into a torrent. Flying Cloud gave a guttural exclamation and frowned when he saw the state of it. The boys pulled up on the bank, guessing that to ford it was not possible; but Flying Cloud spurred his horse into the stream.

It was too much for him, as he soon found out; indeed, he probably knew

it. The swirling flood overpowered his horse, and he had to turn back for the bank. Horse and rider were helped out by the others, and Flying Cloud was fortunate to escape, as Kicking Horse told him. The elder man replied sharply in the Cree tongue, and spoke in emphatic tones for some time. Kicking Horse smiled, shrugged his shoulders, and lit a copper pipe of tobacco. Whatever it was that troubled Flying Cloud, the other did not seem to mind it so much.

"Heap big confounded water!" said Flying Cloud to the boys. "We got to wait here."

"Can't we get across somewhere else, like the Bloods did over that other river, yesterday?" said Ben.

"No. No way across this for miles. We must wait. Water falling fast," said the Cree. "In an hour we can go over. Heap cuss!"

The water was falling fast, as he said, and in the hill rivers, once the fall begins, it is nearly as rapid as the rise; but it took a good hour and a half before the torrent had raced away enough to make the ford passable.

Flying Cloud sat down, and smoked philosophically enough, but it was plain he was not pleased. As soon as ever there was a chance of crossing, he made a start, and though it was no easy task for the pack-ponies, the cavalcade reached the other side safely.

They took a breather as soon as they were on the bank, and Flying Cloud looked back long and carefully across the river and the hills beyond.

They started off again, and for half an hour pushed on through the foot-hills and forests. They were passing through a wide, open space, with woods on either side, when Ben saw Kicking Horse look up and listen.

"I can hear horses' hoofs," said Vivian, a minute later. "I say, Fl——"

He never finished the sentence, for from the woods to the right, riding at full gallop on soaking-wet and foam-covered horses, came twenty troopers of the Mounted Police, headed by a burly captain on a great black horse, and in a twinkling they had surrounded the party.

"Surrender yourselves!" shouted the captain, holding up his gloved hand. "Keep your hands off your weapons, you beggars! Where's that rip Flying Cloud? Give him up!"

CHAPTER 29.

Flying Cloud Disappears.

THE Cree braves, their rifles before them across the saddle-bows, showed not a jot of surprise, nor did they move a step. They had pulled their horses up, and remained perfectly stolid and silent.

Not so the boys. They were as amazed at the sight of the police and the stern summons they had just heard as if a troop of Cossacks had stopped them.

"What the deuce does this mean?" cried Vivian.

"It's you, is it?" exclaimed the captain, riding forward. "Are you young Vivian Charters?"

"Yes; and this is Ben Wainwright. What's up?"

"Up?" said the captain roughly. "Here's a score and a half of redskins cut up down at Elk River, and you've the cheek to ask what's up! You were in it, were you? I guess I'll have the lot of you down to Calgary. Where's that beggar Flying Cloud? It's him I want!"

The boys had a second surprise, but this time they took good care not to show it. The surprise was that Flying Cloud was nowhere to be seen. He had completely vanished.

"Where is he?" said the captain, scanning the faces of the other braves, and seeing that his man was not there. "Isn't he here?"

"Here? No," said Ben. "Can't you see he isn't?"

"Say, don't try to act the funny dog with me!" snapped the Mounted Police leader, while all the constables drew round. "Where is he?"

"I know no more where he is than you do," said Vivian, "and that's the solid truth."

"It is," said Ben solemnly, wondering where the elusive Flying Cloud could have got to.

"Do you mean to tell me he hasn't been riding with you?" cried the captain.

"I mean to tell you nothing whatever, when you speak to me in that tone!" said Vivian.

"Won't you?" said the captain, with an oath. "I'll teach yer better, my son!" He turned to his constables: "Scatter, and see if you can find any signs of the beggar. It's my belief he's around somewhere."

The troopers departed at once, ringing out in all directions, and the captain turned to the boys again.

"What was that you said just now?" he asked grimly.

Vivian looked at him. The boy had the greatest admiration for the Mounted Police, and rare good friends he had found them so far, but this blustering, swaggering person put Vivian's back up at once.

He would not have believed there was such a man in the N.-W.M.P. service.

"I'm just wondering whether I'm mad, or whether you are," said Vivian.

"What the dickens you can mean by talking about arrests and surrendering beats me. What has Flying Cloud done?"

"Done?" cried the captain. "If you want to know, he's turned out his derned tribe on the warpath, raised a feud with the Bloods, an' killed enough of them to stock a graveyard. I always said the beggar ought to have been hanged after that business with Frogfoot. And don't you try to shelter him, you sassy young rips, or you'll find yourselves in derned hot water! He's raised half the Territory, so now you know!"

Vivian laughed aloud, and not very pleasantly.

"Well," he said to the astounded captain, "I've rather respected the Mounted Police till now, but I wonder where they raised you? Flying Cloud stirred up the Creeks to murder some innocent Bloods. Is that your story? Do you know what he did do? He did what you couldn't. He brought his men up in time to save Ben and I from the stake!"

The M.P. captain blurted out a surprised oath, and stared at Vivian.

"That's what he did!" cried the boy. "You're supposed to keep order, aren't you? It's the boast of the Mounted Police a man can ride from end to end of this country unarmed. I don't say that you fail to do it, either; but this time you're a lot too late. The Bloods have been chasing Ben and I three whole days.

"They've tracked us up hill and down dale and over rivers; they've trapped us and shot at us, and we both bear the marks of it. They've killed our pack-pony with a bullet that was meant for us. It was only yesterday that ruffian the Beaver, who was arrested by one of your men last week and got away, had his fingers in my hair and his scalping-knife out. My horse killed him, and you'll find what's left of him in the gorge through the big bluff."

"Great snakes!" said the captain. "That's so; we did find it there. Was that Beaver?"

"Don't I tell you? And later they caught us both, and tied us to

stakes in the clearing—didn't you see the stakes?—and were going to burn us, when Flying Cloud and his men, who'd seen our capture, came up and rescued us. The Bloods fought, and got jolly well wiped out. Don't you allow a Cree to rescue white men from the stake in this country? Is he to be shoved in prison for that?"

The captain, staring at him, could find nothing to say.

"If you're so anxious to arrest somebody, it had better be the Bloods who got away, I should think," snorted Ben; "or, better still, a hoond of a white man called Stride, who wanted us wiped out, and paid their chief a bag of money under our noses for doing it!"

"Well," growled the captain, "how was I to know anything about this? I've only got your word for it. This affair's got to be sifted out, and Flying Cloud'll have to take his trial. You two have got to come down to Calgary with me and tell all this to the superintendent."

"I sha'n't do anything of the kind!" cried Vivian. "We're going into British Columbia."

"Do you think you're goin' to defy me?" exclaimed the captain, glaring.

"I say we won't go! You'll have to arrest us if you want us to go, and you daren't do that!" said Vivian hotly. "You've got no right to make us go. You can send for us for the trial if you want us—that's the proper way—when you've got Flying Cloud. You'll get a good hauling over the coals at Calgary if you bother us after what's happened. We'll raise Cain about it if you do!"

"Isn't it enough to get nearly burnt alive, and lose all our goods, without being hauled back five hundred miles and made to start all over again?" said Ben. "Why don't you let us alone? We've done all right without you, and got ourselves out of the mess. We're going to a job we've got on the Fraser River. We didn't come out here to be mucked about all over Alberta by a chap who turns up when the fighting's over!"

The M.P. captain fairly gasped. He would have been pleased enough to take the boys at their word, and arrest them, but he dared not do it, for he knew he had made a sufficient mess of things already.

He was in charge of the district, and had no business to let the Bloods get out of hand and go raiding, as they had done, for three whole days without a check.

"The man I want is Flying Cloud," he said, "and if you're right about it's bein' the fault of the Bloods, that's got to be proved. I shall take two of these men who are with you back with me. If you won't go, they'll have to."

Vivian turned and spoke to Kicking Horse, who addressed himself to his men. Two of them agreed to go at once. They did not at all object to a jaunt to Calgary.

Vivian promised to come south and back them up if there was any trouble; but they needed no assurance—they were as pleased as children to go.

Both the boys by now had a very shrewd suspicion that Flying Cloud was not going to let the police get their hands on him. The captain was beginning to storm again—not at the boys, but at some of the troopers, who were turning up.

"Haven't you got the fellow?" he cried.

"No, sir," said a big constable.

"Dern it!" muttered the captain; and then he turned to the boys:

"Look here, I want the straight cinch from you! You don't know where Flying Cloud is?"

"On my honour we don't!" said Vivian, which was perfectly true.

"Well, did he clear out after the fight, then?"

"Yes."

"See here," called the captain to his constables, "half of you ride back to the clearing with me, and ring round the whole way to see if you can strike his trail. These kids are blamed fools; there's nothing to be got out of them. The other half of you search round here again, near and wide. I ain't so sure now that he isn't within hail of us."

"Very well," said Vivian. "I hope you'll have luck. And as we want to be getting on, we'll wish you a good-day."

The captain cast a very sour look at Ben and Vivian as they turned and rode off. He would have liked to prevent them, but lacked the initiative to do it. Most Mounted Police officers in his place would have acted very differently, as the boys knew.

However, paying no more attention to him, they rode away with their remaining three Cree attendants. When they were a little way off through the trees the big trooper Gillispie stopped them, and held out his hand.

"Just a shake to wish you luck on your journey, kids!" he said. "You're white, as you always was."

"Same to you, Constable Gillispie!" said Vivian, gripping his hand.

"And I wish you a better commander."

The big man shrugged his shoulders.

"Blamed glad we haven't many of his sort in the corps!" he said.

"But never mind that. Say, I saw old Ohio on his way south, an' he told me to grip your fist for him if I ran across you. So-long, sonnies! Guess you was right in stickin' out not to go to Calgary."

The trooper nodded, and rode away. Ben winked to Vivian, and all five put their horses to the gallop, and said nothing till they had placed a couple of miles between themselves and the police.

"Kicking Horse," said Vivian, the first to break the silence, "I've been bursting to ask you ever since we struck that captain fellow where in the dickens' name is Flying Cloud?"

Kicking Horse grinned, but made no answer.

"Don't pucker up your face like that, you copper-coloured heathen! Can't you talk? Do you think he's all right, then?"

Kicking Horse smiled more sardonically still, but not a word would he say.

"Grinning idiot!" said Vivian crossly. "It's a rum 'un, isn't it, Ben? I never saw him go—did you? I hope to goodness that sweep of a captain doesn't get hold of him!"

"If he does, we shall have to go back to Calgary, after all, and attend the trial. We must get him out of it."

"That'd be an awful bore. But the captain fellow thinks he hooked it after the fight yesterday—"

"Yes, you told him so," said Ben.

"Well, it was all true, wasn't it, you cuckoo? He didn't hook it before the fight, did he?"

"No. I think it put the M.P. off the track."

"I'd have done a good deal more to do that. One doesn't stick at trifles to help a fellow who's saved one's life. I only hope he's well out of it; and if he isn't, we must do everything we can for him."

What had become of Flying Cloud was still a mystery, however, and

the little party rode on for a good four miles, the boys rather moody, and speaking little to each other.

"I wonder if these chaps we've got now know the way to Moose River?" said Ben presently—"supposing they mean to stick to us."

Vivian at once asked Kicking Horse if he had any idea of the way to reach the place, and where it was. That cheerful redskin said he had never heard of it.

"Perhaps it's got an Indian name that we don't know of," suggested Ben.

"It seems to me a pretty poor look-out," said Vivian, "in an uninhabited country like this, to go looking for a place we might miss by a couple of hundred miles."

"You not worry. Get to place all right," said Kicking Horse, over-hearing.

In less than five minutes more the boys discovered what he meant to their great surprise. They passed round the base of a mound of rocks, and there on the other side, resting quietly on a boulder, his horse's bridle hooked under his arm, sat Flying Cloud.

CHAPTER 30.

The End of the Journey.

THE boys' astonishment made Kicking Horse chuckle hugely. They had never thought of coming upon him from behind in this manner.

They imagined he must be hiding in some hole or cave near where they had been stopped by the police, and that if he were lucky, and escaped, he might overtake them a day later.

"By gum!" exclaimed Ben. "Talk about a jack-in-the-box!"

Flying Cloud himself smiled at the boys' surprise but as neither of them laughed in return, he sprang to his feet and looked grave.

"You not think I desert you?" he cried anxiously. "You not blame me for run away?"

"Great Scott, no!" said Vivian. "Of course we don't, old chap! We're thundering glad to see you!"

"It was not for myself I care," exclaimed the Indian, "but if the police had catch me they would have taken me to Calgary; and how then should you get to Fraser River without me through the Blood country? So I come on here to join you when police gone. I knew they not interfere with you. It's me they want."

"And precious cleverly you've given 'em the slip!" said Vivian delightedly. "That beast of a captain was a perfect nuisance. But hang me if I can see how you did it!"

"Heap easy," said the Cree. "I knew they coming. No use try and stop them. So I slip away just before they arrive, and go up course of small stream to cover my tracks. Then I ride due west as hard as horse can go for two miles, cover tracks again, and gallop out this way to cut you off. They will never track me now, except little way; then they lose trail. They trouble us no more."

"You're a wonder!" said Ben. "I'd be sorry for the Mounted Policeman who had the job of catching you."

"Flying Cloud heap bully-boy!" remarked Kicking Horse.

"Deuced sage remark of yours, my dusky friend!" Vivian replied, as they rode onward again. "He's a peach, as they say in this country. And now, as we've no police or Bloods or other nuisances to worry us, what do you say to grub?"

They went five miles farther on, however, before their guide considered it wise to halt. All the afternoon they travelled forward at a steady pace, no longer keeping up the hurried rush with which they started in the morning; and by nightfall they had covered a very satisfactory distance indeed.

They chose a good spot for the night's camp, and after a hearty meal—most of it composed of loot from the conquered Bloods—they turned in—or, rather, the boys did.

Flying Cloud insisted on their sleeping all night, as the six Indians were ample to keep guard by turns. The boys were glad enough of the chance, for they were feeling pretty well worn out.

Their guide declared there was no danger of any kind; and, indeed, the night passed as peaceably as if they had been in the hotel at Calgary.

"You think all our troubles are over, then, don't you?" said Ben, as they started at sunrise next morning, riding up the dew-washed slopes.

"I could not say that," returned Flying Cloud. "They never be over till your enemies are dead. Up here in the mountain we do not forget."

"We're rid of Stride, anyhow. I wonder if he's sent the message of our death home to Boyle?" said Vivian, laughing grimly.

"How do you know you are rid of him?" said the Cree. "For the present, yes; but I think you see him again before many days. He will have learnt from the Bloods who escaped in the fight that you were rescued. That man will never leave your trail till you or he is dead."

"Always plenty better get your enemy's scalp," put in Kicking Horse, who was listening; "then you know he no more trouble."

"I draw the line at scalps," said Vivian; "but you may be sure I'll never lift a hand again to save Stride's life if it's in any danger. He'd have been lynched at Red Dog but for us."

"An' his reward to us was to get us burnt at the stake, as he thought," said Ben. "I'm with you. We were fools to save either him or Beaver, and we've learned better. All the same, I believe he'll never show up again after what's happened. He'll go south, and chuck it."

They rode on hour by hour, and the travelling grew more and more difficult. They were now under the very shadow of the Rockies. The plains and foothills were left far behind, and the mighty snow-clad peaks seemed to tower into the very skies, while below the snow-line the black forests clothed the mountain-sides, or gave way to enormous rocky slopes.

"Gee! Isn't it magnificent!" said Ben. He never cared much for scenery, but the mighty range of peaks overawed him, as they do all who see them. "They're a bit higher than the Wiltshire Downs—eh, Vivian? Have we got to climb them?"

"No," said Flying Cloud, smiling. "You could not do that. We go through the pass."

The boys could not see how the mountainous barrier was to be traversed at all, but round the shoulder of one of the hills they opened up the view of Brown Bear Pass.

They camped the first night far up among the hills, and found they wanted all the blankets they had with them after dark.

Next day they continued their way upwards, having to lead the horses most of the way, and by ten o'clock they reached the wide, open level of the pass itself.

The travelling then became better, and they went ahead steadily for a couple of hours, till the keen mountain air forced them to halt for the mid-day meal.

They had just finished it, and were resting under the loom of a patch of dark pine-forest, when a quick, hissing sound came from Kicking Horse,

who sank flat behind a rock, and pointed back by the way they had come as his companions turned to him.

Instinctively the boys ducked down also, and lay flat; but though they scanned the pass carefully, nothing could they see.

Flying Cloud, who was as prone as a rattlesnake in the grass, had his eyes fixed on the same distant spot as the other brave.

"What is it?" said Vivian, in a low voice. "I can't see anything."

"Can't you?" muttered Flying Cloud. "Our enemies have lost no time. Give me that rifle, and don't lift your head. Lie flat!"

CHAPTER 31.

A Long Shot.

FLAT as a partridge in the grass lay Flying Cloud, and his thin red fingers nimbly focussed the glasses Vivian gave him, as he directed them over the low rock in front, and swept the mouth of the pass. The boys, taken by surprise, thought at first he had discovered game worth stalking.

"Heap big game," returned Flying Cloud grimly, and with one hand he took up Vivian's long-range rifle. "No," he muttered, after a pause, laying it down again. "Too far."

"I can't see anything," said Vivian wonderingly, his eyes scanning the distant heights. "Is it bear?"

"Men," said the Cree laconically, without lowering the glasses.

"By George! Not the police again?"

"It is Stride and the Musk Rat," murmured Flying Cloud. "They have followed fast. Look! Don't you see—there, on the hill?"

"Stride!" muttered Ben. "I didn't think he could be within eighty miles of us."

"I see where you mean," said Vivian. "On that low hill, near the mouth of the pass, among the rocks."

"I've got 'em now," exclaimed Ben. "Two men, leading their horses. But who they are I couldn't say. You can only just see them. They must be fifteen hundred yards away."

Flying Cloud handed him the glasses, and one steady look through them convinced Ben.

"You're right. It's Stride—the beast! And an Indian with him."

"The Musk Rat, I tell you."

Vivian threw a quick glance at Kicking Horse. That active young brave, with a rifle in his hand, was travelling away through the grass as swiftly as a snake, going flat on his stomach, and making for the cover of the trees. In a few seconds he had disappeared. The four specks in the distance—for they were not much more to the naked eye—were still passing slowly across the hill, the ground being too rocky to ride.

"The Musk Rat?" echoed Ben. "Have they got the tribe with them?"

"The Bloods? No," said Flying Cloud grimly. "They are alone; but you can see they hope get us yet. That white dog Stride, there is no stopping him. He come for money, and Musk Rat come for hate."

"I think it's as much hate as money with Stride, too," said Vivian, "or fear of the law, after what's happened. I think I could put a halter about Stride's neck now. Have they seen us?"

Flying Cloud shook his head. He believed they had not. The horses of the little party had been tethered back among the trees near by, out of sight, for the Crees never neglected any precaution.

"They expect to track us down, or snipe us, I suppose," said Ben. "I don't think we need be— Where's Kicking Horse?"

"He gone on a little trip by himself," said Flying Cloud, with a queer smile. "You wait still. Not show yourselves. Not do anything. Watch!"

The boys waited, lying just as they were. The two distant trackers continued their journey down the rough slope. Two or three times they stopped, and seemed to be scanning the pass in front of them.

"What's going to happen?" murmured Ben.

"The trackers are being tracked, I fancy," replied Vivian drily.

He was right. The approaching enemy had little notion that they, in their turn, were being stalked. Suddenly, from about five or six hundred yards on the boys' front, among the rocks, a shot rang out.

It was Kicking Horse's rifle that spoke, though he himself was invisible. The foremost of the two distant men was seen to throw up his hands and stagger back on to the one behind him. The next moment both had disappeared, dropping flat behind a line of boulders.

Crack! came a second shot, and one of the ice horses, still in view, dropped in its tracks.

"It got him!" cried Vivian excitedly. "Which was it?"

"The Musk Rat is hit," said Flying Cloud calmly, the glasses still at his eyes.

"Killed?"

"No. By what I could see, he was hit in the arm; but not quite sure. It will not stop him, but it is a good thing. I wish we could have waited here and ambushed them both," added the Cree, "but that no good. The ground not allow of it; they would have seen us in time."

"Pity it wasn't Stride!" growled Ben; "only it would save the hangman a job."

Kicking Horse appeared ten minutes later, this time walking back erect, out from the trees. He looked disappointed, as Flying Cloud said something to him.

"Heap long shot," said the young brave in reply. "Thought I get him proper. But sun make the air jump all time—no could sight right. Do better next time."

"Let us go on," said Flying Cloud, leading the way into the wood, and mounting his horse. "We beat them now. No use to go back after them—waste heap time. Soon throw them off."

"It was a nailing good shot of yours, Kicking Horse," said Vivian, as he swung himself into Red Fiend's saddle.

"Right enough, as they're after our scalps, I suppose," said Ben. "I didn't like to see the horse shot, though. Stride, or that torturing brute of a Blood, 'ud be no loss, but a horse is a better sort of animal."

Flying Cloud shrugged his shoulders.

"I love horses heap much as you do," he said, "so all Indians. But like my own, not my enemies'. Now they only got one horse, not catch up with us."

"The simple ehild of the forest is right," said Vivian, smiling grimly. "We've found it don't pay to be squeamish, Ben. Say, Flying Cloud, you think we sha'n't have the rest of the Bloods down on us any more?"

"Not unless they think they have real soft job—how you say?" returned the Cree. "If they think it quite safe to kill us all, then, perhaps, come." He urged his horse along at a faster pace. "This place you go to, Moose Creek, is it very lonely place, eh?"

"I don't know anything about it," said Vivian, "but I should say it must

be. It's a long way beyond any part of the Bloods' country, though. Right out of reach, surely?"

Flying Cloud nodded, and said no more. He led the party along at a good pace, and by the middle of the afternoon they were within sight of the end of the pass.

"Will those beggars behind find out where we're going?" said Ben.

"They will find you there, sooner or later, if they keep on," returned Flying Cloud, "but on the journey we shall not see any more of them. And at these logging camps there are plenty of white men most times, I know. We see when we get there. Look! Now we come to the new country!"

The pass opened out on to the vast territory west of the Rockies, which divided it from Alberta as by a gigantic wall. It was a magnificent prospect that lay before the boys. The country was more thickly clothed with forest than ever, and cut up into great valleys with foaming rivers running through them, while steep slopes and craggy hills were everywhere.

"That's British Columbia, isn't it?" exclaimed Ben. "Gosh! It's fine to look at."

"A couple of thousand miles of it, right away down to the Pacific," said Vivian. "Forests and rivers and salmon all the way. Is there much game, Flying Cloud?"

"Heap more than in Alberta," said the Indian. "See there!"

A troop of splendid black-tail deer came across the mouth of the pass, and, seeing the travellers, were off like the wind.

"The season's open now, isn't it?" said Vivian, his eyes sparkling. "I'd give something to get one of those chaps."

"Yes," said the Cree. "I soon put you on to one; better game than that, too. Big elk here in the hills. But first we get plenty way along before dark."

Instead of going straight forward, Flying Cloud led the party by a most circuitous route, winding out through the hills to the northward, and when at last sundown overtook the travellers they were well out from the range, and had covered a long distance. Flying Cloud halted for the night beside a rushing rocky torrent, overshadowed by enormous pines, and sent the four braves to take up their positions some way at different points of the trail.

"Now," said the Cree leader, unsaddling his horse, "we have thrown off those coyotes who are following us; and even if they come this way by accident, my men would account for them. Sleep easy to-night, all of us."

He was a true prophet, for they had no trouble, either that night or on the long day's march that followed it. At the end of their second day's journey they were a hundred miles out into the country, crossing one or two high grassy plains on the way, but most of the route—if such it could be called, for there was neither path nor trail through the wilderness—lay through forest and mountain scenery. The travelling was fairly good, crossing the torrential rivers being the chief difficulty.

On the second evening Vivian had his desire, and, leaving the party, managed to stalk and shoot a fine young black-tail buck. It was brought into camp, and the whole party feasted off it that night, Kicking Horse roasting the haunches and quarters over a glowing red fire. The meat, having been dressed and cooked before the deer had time to grow cold and tough, was delicious; and even Ben was astounded at the amount the young Cree managed to put away. Kicking Horse ate at least six or seven pounds of juicy collops, and looked as if he could manage as much more without difficulty. The braves fell to on the remainder of the meat in the morning, and finished the lot.

"I shouldn't like to run a boarding-house with you fellows for customers," said Vivian, as they mounted, and rode on.

"It's a comfort to know we've got the deer with us," chuckled Ben, "even if it's travelling inside. Have we got to climb those hills ahead, Flying Cloud?"

"We not reached them yet," said the Indian; and it was a fact that the hills, which, in that pure air and strong light, looked hardly a mile away, were not reached till midday, after several hours' hard travelling.

Progress was slow as they wound their way up the steep slopes, but it was well worth it when they reached the top. The finest prospect of all was spread out before them. In a vast, wooded valley, with mountainous slopes that looked steep as the gables of a house, an immense rocky river was running, three times the size of any they had seen, in great rapids and swirling pools and waterfalls.

CHAPTER 32.

Moose Creek at Last.

"THE Fraser River!" said Flying Cloud.
"Hurray! Home at last!" cried Ben. "Where's Moose Creek, then, and the logging camp?"

"The blessed river's over seven hundred miles long, I've heard," said Vivian, "so it may take a bit of finding. The great thing is, do we go up stream or down? Which is it?"

Flying Cloud shook his head. He was far out of his own country, and though he knew how to find the Fraser, or any other river, he knew nothing of the logging camps. All he could say was that most of them were hundreds of miles nearer the coast.

They decided to go down-stream, however, and after half an hour's ride along the heights, they sighted the first human being they had seen since leaving Brown Bear Pass. He was an Indian, of a sort the boys had not yet seen, belonging to the Alonquin tribe, and subsisted by spearing and netting salmon in the rivers.

He was a peaceful person, and looked rather alarmed at the haughty, warlike bearing of the Crees. The language Flying Cloud spoke was hardly intelligible to him, but they managed to understand one another after a fashion. The Cree put several questions to him, and when they were answered, the fisherman seemed anxious to get away as soon as he could.

"Heap poor men here," said Flying Cloud, with a sniff. "Not proper for call Indian at all. But he says we are going right, and Moose Creek is only four hours' ride along. We get there easy before dark."

The boys rode on, in good spirits at the prospect of finishing their long journey.

"Mrs. Anderson'll be jolly well surprised to see us," said Vivian. "Wonder what her brother's like? Hope he's a decent chap."

"If he's anything like her, he'll do. The great thing is whether they've got a job we're up to? I say, this country is a lot wilder than McLeod's Ranch and Red Dog. How is it the Fraser flows due north like this? Don't run to the North Pole, does it?"

"No; I think it doubles right round on itself further along, an' flows south again, an' then west to Vancouver. Thundering great river, anyhow. Must be immense lower down. When are we going to feed, Flying Cloud?"

"One hour farther, at top of the ridge, if you will. For then we must separate."

The boys did not know what he meant, till after the halt and the meal, with a short rest to follow, Kicking Horse rose, and fetched his horse. Then he turned to the boys, with a smile, and held out his hand.

"How!" he said. "We go back now, I and the others—back to our own people. You not need us any more."

"What! Must you go?" said Vivian, springing up. "By George, we shall be sorry to lose you! It's been awfully good of you to come with us all this way."

"Like it," said Kicking Horse, shaking hands heartily. "Had bully time—wah! Ever you need us, we come again. Only got to tell Flying Cloud, or send message. We come with the wind."

The braves all bade the boys a warm farewell, and Vivian wanted to make them all presents out of the packs. They would take nothing, however, save a memento apiece—any odd trifle, which the boys rummaged their pockets to find.

Vivian gave Kicking Horse a small silver watch-charm, which the brave declared should always be a "totem" in his tepee, and bring him luck. And so, with mutual regret, they parted, and the Creses rode away into the forest.

"I stick to you," said Flying Cloud to the boys, as they prepared to go forward again, "you bet!"

"Good for you, old chap," said Ben. "We've got you to thank for our skins, as it is. What decent fellows those were! I feel as if we'd treated them pretty rough, bringing them hundreds of miles out of their way, and they get nothing out of it."

"Wah!" said Flying Cloud. "They not have missed it for anything—like it heap too well. Not often our young men get chance to go on war-path now. But we need them no more; you are nearly at camp."

"What do you mean to do there, old chap?" asked Ben. "Will you take a job at cutting down trees or rolling logs?"

"Not I," said the Cree, rather proudly. "Never have done work in my life!"

"That's something to boast of," said Vivian, laughing. But he was not sure he didn't envy the redskin.

"I shall hunt among the hills," added Flying Cloud. "They will like game at the camp, eh? I get them all they want for nix. Hist!" he said, suddenly reining his horse in. We talk of it, and here it is. Elk tracks, and quite fresh. Let me see."

He jumped out of the saddle, and examined some faint, slot-like tracks in the ground that the boys had missed.

"Big bull elk," said the Indian, in a low voice. "Very likely not far away. Here your chance. Will you try for him?"

"Will a duck swim? Ripping if we could take a good big one into the camp for a peace-offering—what!" said Vivian, unslinging his rifle.

"Don't count on him before he's found; beastly unlucky," said Ben, following suit. "Shall we follow him up, Flying Cloud?"

"Get down from your horse. You cannot ride after elk," said the Indian; and in a short time the horses were tethered, and he led the way along the trail.

For several hundred yards the boys followed him, and presently he went down flat on the ground, and signed to them to do likewise. A short stalk brought them to the edge of a large open space, dotted with dwarf fir-trees, scrub, and long grass, and surrounded by woods. Flying Cloud raised his head, and looked for some time across the open.

"He is there," he said. "Out in the middle, and lying down among the grass."

"I don't see him," whispered Vivian.

"No. White men have no eyes. But you go round behind the trees, and stalk out towards the middle, and he will get up. I leave him to you."

The boys went eagerly, separating, and each taking one side of the clearing. They disappeared into the woods, and set about the stalk.

They had not gone far before a magnificent elk started up out of the scrub, and stood for an instant gazing at Vivian, some hundred and fifty yards away. He was a splendid brute, rather like a huge Highland stag, his antlers branching back as he threw his head up.

Only for the fraction of a moment did he pause, and then dashed away at full gallop just as Vivian took a rapid sight and pulled trigger. The sudden start of the animal caused him to shoot behind and make a clean miss.

A shout came from Flying Cloud in the background. The elk was dashing along with tremendous speed, when Ben, from the other side, took a quick sight and swung his rifle well in front as he pulled.

The elk came down with a crash, rolling clean over, the bullet taking him just at the withers, and breaking his spine. A wild cheer broke from Vivian, and the boys raced to the spot, Flying Cloud arriving as soon as either of them. The great stag's eyes were glazing in death, and it was lucky he was struck in so vital a spot, or the boys' rush in might have cost them their lives.

"What a nailing shot, Ben!" cried Vivian. "By Jove, you're a trump! I thought we'd lost him!"

Flying Cloud gralloched the elk, and, indeed, it was all the three of them could do, after great efforts, to hoist the carcase on to one of the pack-horses, who looked as if he hoped he would not have to carry it far.

Nor did he, for another three-quarters of an hour brought them to a rough trail, which presently led out on to the high ground above the river again; and there, at the mouth of a deep, still creek, where it joined the Fraser, they saw a snug little settlement. There were two large, substantial log cabins, and three white tents pegged out on a wide clearing on the river-bank.

"That is it!" said Flying Cloud. "Moose Creek Camp, as the Alouquin man told me."

CHAPTER 33.

The Rapids.

"JOLLY-LOOKIN' place!" said Ben. "Snug as a bug in a rug! What a heap of timber there is about! Why, the river's simply lined with it!"

"Why, there isn't a soul in sight!" said Ben. "Where are they all? Hallo! There's Mrs. Anderson! Hurrah! How are you, ma'am?"

It was Mrs. Anderson sure enough—the good-looking, plucky little widow who had befriended them last at Calgary. She came to the door of the larger cabin, hearing the sound of horses' hoofs, and stood transfixed with astonishment as she saw the boys and their silent, dusky guide. Then she ran to meet them.

"Why, Vivian," she cried, in great delight, "is it you? And Ben Wainwright! How in the world did you get here?"

The boys dismounted at once, and their greeting was of the warmest.

"Yes; short cut, you know, ma'am. This is a great friend of ours—Flying Cloud. We shouldn't have got here alive but for him. Best chap going!"

Mrs. Anderson shook hands with the tall, grave redskin, who treated her with great respect.

"You see, ma'am," said Ben, "we got your letter a fortnight ago, and as our ranch has been sold up, we've taken you at your word, and hope we might get the jobs you said were going."

"Jobs! You couldn't have come at a better time. We're short-handed, and shall be very glad of two good strong helpers. Oh, yes, you'll soon learn the work! But come in and rest and have some food. The men are away at the elutes, but they'll be back directly. There they come. That's my brother, John Mackellar, and there's Diekey. You remember Diekey?"

"I should think I do!" said Vivian, as Mrs. Anderson's little son, on a wiry, forest-bred pony, rode in with the lumbermen, who were returning from work, and with whom he was evidently a great favourite. He gave a cry of surprise as he saw the new arrivals, and, jumping off his pony, fairly hurled himself at Vivian.

"Why, it's Vivian, who saved me when I fell off the steamer! Is he going to stay with us, muvver? Isn't this prime!"

"How are you, old chap?" said Vivian, patting the youngster on the head. "Jolly glad to see you! We've got to be greater pals than ever, you and I."

"This is my brother John," said the widow, as Vivian turned to shake hands with a big, bronzed man who carried a long, steel-shod staff over his shoulder. "You've heard all about Vivian and Ben, haven't you, John? They've taken the jobs we offered them in that letter."

"Welcome to Moose Creek!" said the big man, with a fine Scotch burr. "Ay, I ken all about ye, an' I wouldn't ask for better laddies in the camp: An' this muckle chap is Ben? Fra' Wiltshire, are ye? Man," he said, thumping the young giant on the chest, "ye're fit to be a Scotsman! An' the Injun's your frien', is he? He looks a better breed than the red loons we've got hereabouts. Let's get to the grub, Maggie, an' then we can hear all about it. What's that great muckle stag you've got there? Eh, he's a beauty!"

"That's our peace-offering to the camp," said Vivian. "We hope you'll accept it. It's Ben's, not mine—I missed it clean."

The elk was greatly admired, and Mackellar's opinion of the boys rose higher. It was decided a feast should be made of it for the whole camp. Meanwhile, the boys were glad enough to sit down to a capital meal in the log-cabin with Mrs. Anderson and her son and brother, Flying Cloud joining them. There was fresh salmon, pickled pork, doughnuts, and coffee.

During the meal the boys gave an account of their adventures, and the journey from Red Dog, which surprised even the stolid John Mackellar.

The boys, for all their hardiness, were not sorry to sleep in a bed again. They were given a side-room—there was plenty of space in the big log-cabins—-with two home-made pine cot-beds in it.

In the morning they were up and out with the first streak of dawn, much to Mackellar's satisfaction, who was a peep-o'-day man himself; but work did not start till sunrise, as there was no need to ride miles to the work, as at McLeod's. After a Scotch breakfast—which is the only breakfast worthy of the name, and was as good as many a dinner—the boys started out with John, each of them being furnished with a steel-shod pole.

"I'll take ye under my wing this morn'," said John. "Now, there's four sorts o' work in the camp, an' ye'll have to tak' the one ye can best do. There's fellin' the trees; but that, I reckon, ye ain't up to yet, an' we've

pleuty of axemen. Then there's haulin' them to the river, or sendin' them down the chutes. Then there's markin' the logs; an', lastly, there's clearin' the log-jams in the river, to let 'em swim down clear.

"Ye'll do fine, wi' a little practice," continued Maekellar. "But, wind, there's many jams ye can never dare to go out on to. In certain places it's as good as death to try it, an' we have to clear them fra the shore—above the big rapids, for instance; if ye made any mistake there, ye'd be either drowned or pounded to jelly by the logs in a jiffy. Hi, Abe!" he shouted to a man on the bank with an axe. "Any trouble below?"

"There's a bad jam or two, boss," called out the man. "Guess you'll need a gang for some o' them."

"Gang! My two haunds an' a pole are gang enuch for me," said Maekellar, as they went down-stream and found a large, tight mass of logs blocking the way past a sand-bar. "I'll have a look at this one, though. Tak' a east down-stream, laddies, an' let me know if there's any more."

The boys went off by themselves. For some way the river was clear. Round the next bend, however, it widened greatly, and roared on its path through the rocks.

"Here's a real big 'un!" said Ben, as they came upon a regular raft of logs fixed tight, scores of them together, hanging across a spur of boulders, with the current rippling past. "Best let old Mae know. I should think this one ought to be cleared before his, or it'll be worse than ever."

"Why shouldn't we try it ourselves?" said Vivian eagerly. "This new game suits me. Look! If we knocked those crossed ones out there, all the lot 'd go. Be a score for us if we did it on our own."

"Come on, then!" said Ben, leaping out across the logs.

They hardly heard the roar of the river below them as they strove with the shod staffs. It was a fascinating game, and they soon saw they were right. The key-logs were shifting, and the whole lot was moving. Of the warning they had had, never to tackle a jam at the head of the big rapids, they recked nothing, being new to the river.

"Down she goes!" shouted Vivian, poling the logs free; and then suddenly he saw the danger. "By Jove, the whole raft's melting to pieces like sugar! How are we to get ashore? Look out, Ben! Hold up!"

Amid a foam of broken water and rushing logs, the boys suddenly found themselves cut off from the shore. Ben staggered and lost his balance, as his log reared up on end, and he fell, striking his head heavily. Down went Vivian, too, jumping clear.

He came up alongside Ben, who was unconscious and deadly white. Vivian, with a sudden thrill of fear, saw his condition, and that they were being swept into the most perilous part of the river. He flung an arm round Ben, and grasped desperately at a floating trunk. The next moment, amid a hurly-burly of plunging logs, they went whirling down the rapids, where the fanged rocks awaited them.

CHAPTER 34:

Down the Rapids.

VIVIAN and his burden were ducked clean under as they swirled into the rapids. Choking and gasping, but never letting go his hold of Ben, Vivian came to the surface again, the river roaring deafeningly, in his ears.

"Help! Ahoy! Help!" he shouted with all his might, in the desperate hope that somebody might hear.

The thundering noise made by the rapids in the narrow gorge drowned

his voice, and even if there had been anybody in sight they could hardly have heard him.

The water seemed to be piled up in heaps. As it scoured over the rocky bed it broke up into wild eddies and whirlpools, tossing up huge foaming waves every here and there. Swimming was impossible—the boys were simply swept along like straws.

Once Vivian's feet touched bottom for a fleeting moment, but it was only on a sunken bar of pebbles, and to get a foothold was impossible. An instant later he was swept onward again, and bumped against a rock with a force that nearly knocked the breath out of his body.

"It's all up!" groaned Vivian, as he felt himself sinking, and his strength seemed to vanish from him. The foaming river swam before his eyes. Something grazed against him, and he flung an arm over it. It was a short log, and never was he more grateful for the company of anything.

If the other logs had nearly knocked out his life, this one saved it for the time being. He could not have kept up another ten seconds without its help.

With a desperate effort Vivian tried to pull Ben across the log, but it was impossible; his strength was no longer equal to it. He held on to his chum as well as he could. Ben's face was very white, and his eyes were closed.

They were still careering down with the current out of the worst of the broken water. Not far ahead Vivian saw the river narrow into a deep channel between smooth beds of boulders, right out in the middle, and beyond this he could see a fresh set of rapids, tossing and foaming far more viciously than those he had come through.

"If we get among those now, we're dead men," said Vivian, between his teeth. The boys and the log were sweeping rapidly towards the rocks. Then suddenly the tree jammed across two of them, and Vivian felt his feet ground on a bed of sand.

The water was not much more than up to his waist, but the force of it was still terrific, and even with the log to hang on to Vivian knew he could not keep hold much longer. It was only a question of a minute or two. He tried to bestride the log, but it ducked and rolled badly, and threatened to float loose and go charging on again.

But down the narrow strip of grass between the river and the forest a small mounted figure came galloping as hard as he could go. It was little Dicky Anderson. He was spurring his forest-bred pony along at its utmost pace, his eyes fixed on Vivian out in the stream.

"The little brick!" thought Vivian. "He's got a rope with him!"

Luckily for the two boys, he had. Dicky was a great hand at playing at "cowboys," and his saddle was a miniature of a ranchman's. On the horn lay a small but lengthy lariat of thin horsehair rope, with which the youngster was always practising at roping the camp pigs and other live stock. He came flying to the spot, flung himself off the pony's back, and threw the lariat to Mackellar.

The big Scot had a length of rope with him, and, quick as thought, he knotted the two together. He clambered out across the rocks and gullies as close as he could go, and then, whirling the coils of line round his head, shot them out with all his force.

John Mackellar was a lumberman, and no roper. His throw went wide, but it was powerful enough, and the rope, falling some way above Vivian, was swept down on to him by the current.

He managed to grasp it with one hand, bracing his feet on the sand-bar, and his body against the log with all his might. There was only one possible way to get ashore, he knew. It meant being hauled bodily through the water, an dover the bars of shingle; but glad enough was Vivian of even

that chance. He contrived to get the noose over Ben's shoulders and under his armpits, and drew it tight.

Mackellar hauled away instantly, and poor Ben was dragged away across the current like a sack. Vivian's heart was in his mouth as he saw what a strain there was on the rope, and how the twisted horsehair sprang and stretched. But it was splendidly elastic, and Mackellar was an expert at managing anything in the water. After some very rough handling by the current, and dragging bodily across a bar with only a few inches of water on it, Ben was hauled in and secured. Mackellar seized him, and pulled him out, carried him rapidly to a place of safety, and, coiling up the line again, flung it out once more.

Vivian thought it was all up with him at last, for the rope fell too far below. He felt his hold slipping, and watched with straining eyes as John frantically gathered in the line for a second try. If that one failed, the boy knew he could not hold out long enough for a third. How he wished Ohio were there to handle the rope with his unerring skill!

This time, however, it fell just above Vivian, who at once seized it, and drew the noose round him. Even as he did so, he felt the current sweep him away once more. But the rope tightened, and Vivian found himself rolling and kicking at the end of it like a freshly-hooked salmon.

Half drowned, and gasping, he still had the sense not to struggle, and, forcing himself to keep quiet, left the rest to his rescuer. How long it lasted, he could not have told. It seemed like an age, and only now and again could he get a breath of air. He did not even know what was happening to him, when at last Mackellar's sinewy arms seized him and lifted him out.

The big Scot carried both the boys across the rocks to the bank, one after another, as if they had been feather-weights, and laid them on the grass, white-faced and dripping.

"Thank Heaven!" he panted. "Powers be guid to us, but I thoct ye was both gone, laddies!"

The colour slowly came back to Ben's face, and he stirred. There was a scarlet bruise across his forehead, but soon he looked round him, shivered, and coughed.

"Are we out of it?" he muttered. "Are you there, Vivian? I cannot remember what happened."

Vivian raised himself to his feet, feeling very giddy, and as if he had been beaten from head to foot.

"We've got you to thank for our lives, sir," he said. "It was our own fault. We started the log-jam."

"Well, ye're a cool hand!" said Mackellar, in surprise, as Ben got up and shook himself. "Both o' ye are!"

"We've been knocked about a goodish bit in the last six months, sir, an' it ain't a bit of a wetting and a bruise or two that'll lay us up," said Ben. "We won't go into hospital this time. Shake hands, Mr. Mackellar. You can reckon on us to your last day. My life ain't much account, maybe, but I'd never go back on a man that saves it. An' I reckon we've been pretty foolish, too. Yes, sir, we can walk."

CHAPTER 35.

The Second Foe.

THEY made the best of their way to the camp, Dicky urging Vivian to ride his pony, which Vivian laughingly declined, saying that the steed was hardly up to his weight.

Mrs. Anderson came out of the big log-hut on their arrival, and on seeing

the condition the boys were in—Ben's forehead now looking like a sunset painted in oils—she was all anxiety to know what had happened, and on hearing of their narrow escape she turned very white, caught Dicky up, and thanked Heaven that the boys had escaped, and that her small son had been able to pay a little part of the debt he owed.

Mrs. Anderson, greatly disturbed, was for putting the boys to bed instantly, between hot blankets, and giving them some physic and a basin of gruel. But the boys laughingly declined, though they had a good deal of trouble to escape the ordeal. After a rub down, a spare suit of lumberman's clothes apiece, and an hour's rest, they felt more than ready for the mid-day meal.

"Hey, laddies, are ye yourselves again?" cried Mackellar, as they came out into the open. "We're goin' to have all hands in to help eat that stag o' yours, an' a braw feast we'll make of it! No more work till Monday!"

The elk Ben brought in had been quartered, and was roasting in huge joints over a couple of dry-wood cooking fires. The lumbermen were trooping in from work, axes and poles over their shoulders. It was Saturday, and the second half of the day was a holiday to all.

"That feels more like home, doesn't it?" said Ben afterwards. "They're a tough crowd all the week, but they're good fellows, you bet. I like the Moose Creek camp better than McLeod's, I think. I wonder where our dear Stride is, and his pal?"

"Back in Alberta, I should think," said Vivian; "had enough of this country. The Musk Rat won't be any the sweeter for that hole in his arm."

On Monday at daybreak they started to work in earnest. Mackellar had to go up the hills with the loggers, and the boys were put in charge of a big, genial Irishman called Barry, who was a first-rate hand at handling log-jans.

Of the week that followed there is not much to tell, save that the boys soon learned the trick of freeing the logs, Ben being rather better than Vivian at it, and at the end of that time Mackellar told them that they were well worth their full wages.

In the middle of the second week, however, Flying Cloud, who had appointed himself huntsman to the camp, reminded them of it unpleasantly. He came riding in with a fat deer slung across his horse in front of him.

"Wah!" he said quietly, as he met the boys. "I see our friend again. He not far off."

"Who?" exclaimed Vivian.

"The white coyote, Stride. I told you he would come."

"The beast! I thought we'd done with him!" growled Ben. "Where was it? What did you do?"

"I see him across valley on other side, going along very quiet behind rocks. I was not expecting him. He see me at same time, jump on his horse, and ride away fast as he can go. Out of sight over top of hill before you say knife! You find it better I shoot him, eh, when I see him next?"

"Well, I don't know," muttered Vivian. "Of course, if he does anything—if he goes for you. But you can't murder him."

"There's one sure thing," said Ben sharply, "he'll murder us, if he gets a chance. That's what he's here for. I for one, if I see him, will put a bullet in him before he does the same for me; and we don't want any more sentiment, Vivian. What else did you see, Flying Cloud? Wasn't his pal with him—that ruffian Musk Rat?"

"No; he not there. Think he gone back to Blood country."

"That's one good thing!" said Vivian.

"Don't know what you call good thing," grunted the Indian. "I not like it half. Much rather see him here. But there is another white man in the district, and I think he has joined Stride."

"Another white man?" ejaculated Vivian. "Who on earth is it?"

"I don't know. Not seen him. Some of the Alonquin men tell me, who see his tracks in the woods. They think he come up from the south, far down where the railways are—this side the Rockies."

"A white man with Stride!" muttered Vivian. "I don't think so. Can't imagine who it can be, unless one of those ruffians of Hudson's back at the ranch. They would't come all this way."

"Anyhow, they'd come through the pass, and not up from the Canadian-Pacific Railway," added Ben.

Vivian did not relish the news. However, he had no longer any fear of Stride by himself, for he had tried that ruffian's courage often enough, and found it wanting. Here among the Moose Creek lumbermen, too, he was among friends who would make short work of Stride if he made any attempt on the boys near the camp. But who the second "white man" could be Vivian could not imagine, and he put it down to a fable concocted by the Alonquins, who, the lumbermen told him, were surprising liars, even for Indians.

Nothing more was heard of Stride, when, two days later, Vivian saddled Red Fiend and rode out along the north-western trail, with a message from Mackellar to four of the lumbermen who were in camp a couple of miles lower down, cutting red pines there.

Vivian had had several messages to carry in that way, he owning by far the best horse in the camp; and, indeed, it was the only way Red Fiend got any exercise.

The yellow stallion was tremendously fresh that morning, first trying to eat Dick Anderson's pony, and, when balked of that, bolting up the hill with Vivian for over a mile. The tremendous slopes of the Fraser Valley soon took it out of him, however, and he had had enough when he got to the top of the ridge.

Vivian was riding homewards after delivering the message, and had not come more than half-way, when, on rounding a sharp corner on the trail, he came suddenly face to face with a white man stealing along on foot.

The man stopped dead, and as for Vivian, he reined Red Fiend back to his haunches, unable to believe his own eyes as he saw the stranger's face.

It was his cousin, Boyle Charters!

Boyle, sure enough, and no other. He was dressed in the typical English riding-kit—breeches with puffed thighs, and polished gaiters—so despised in the West, but rather travel-stained and the worse for wear.

A gasp broke from Boyle as his eyes met Vivian's, and his sharp, pale face grew paler yet. Then, without a word, he turned and bolted into the forest, as if he expected a bullet to be sent after him.

CHAPTER 36.

The Truth Prevails

VIVIAN was so utterly amazed that at first he did nothing but stare incredulously. Until Boyle turned to bolt, he felt sure his eyesight was playing him a trick. Then he spurred Red Fiend ahead, and went in pursuit.

A few yards off the trail he had to pull up. The fugitive had bolted

into a thicket that no horse could go through. Vivian sprang out of the saddle and followed on foot.

He had not seen where Boyle first entered the thicket, after diving through the trees, nor could he find any tracks. The ground was hard and rocky, and not a trace of any footprints was to be seen. Vivian pressed his way into the thicker part of the wood, but soon saw the quest was hopeless. There were several miles of that sort of ground in front, and Boyle might be anywhere.

The boy went back to his horse, and rode on to the camp at a rapid pace. He still scarcely believed it was his cousin he had seen. Not for a moment had he dreamed that Boyle was anywhere but in Wiltshire, seven thousand miles or so away. He did not know what to think. But he found Ben coming up from the river when he reached camp, and told him what he had seen.

"I suppose you'll think I'm mad," said Vivian, "but there the beggar was, as large as life!"

Ben gave a long, amazed whistle.

"No," he said, "I don't think you're mad at all. Boyle's here, right enough. He must be the other 'white man' that Flying Cloud spoke of. I tell you what it is, Vivian, the fellow's grown desperate, an' he's come out here to tackle the job himself. He knows his time's short."

"He said that he might, in that letter we captured from Stride. But I never believed Boyle had the pluck to face the music himself."

"You don't know what any cur will do when he's cornered. Boyle must know of the proofs you've got against him, and that you may soon use them. Something may have happened at home that we don't know of. You didn't see Stride?"

"Not a sign of him. Where's Flying Cloud?"

"Gone right away somewhere, I believe. Haven't seen him for a long time. He's out of reach."

"I don't half like this," muttered Vivian, unsaddling his horse and going to the log-cabin.

"Don't see that Boyle's much to be feared, do you?" said Ben. "We've dealt with enemies out here that'd make twenty of him."

"You don't know my dear cousin as well as I do," said Vivian drily. "He's the man to bring things to a head. He's got a quick wit, and won't be slow to use it. If he's here, there's something uncommon in the wind. Hallo! What's this?"

He saw a letter with the English postmark lying on the chair by his bedside.

"That came two hours ago. The district agent brought it up, with some letters for Mackellar," said Ben. "I took it from him, and put it there."

"It's from my grandfather!" cried Vivian, ripping it open.

He glanced through it, with a face that showed his surprise, and then read it out:

“Charters Grange, Wiltshire.

“My dear Vivian,—For some weeks past I have felt more and more convinced that there is something wrong. It appears to me that my letters do not reach you, though I have written several times. Three days ago information reached me which caused me to harbour a terrible doubt whether I have treated you justly.

“I am an old man, and perhaps there may be little time before me to set things right and learn the truth. I intend to take no chances of being wrong again, and I shall come right out to you, wherever you are, and judge for myself.

“You may be surprised to hear that I shall almost certainly follow close on this letter, and possibly within a day or two of your receiving it. Therefore, I will say no more now; but be prepared to receive a visit from your affectionate grandfather,

“‘WELDON CHARTERS.’”

“My word!” said Vivian, flushing red. “The dear old chap hasn’t written to me like that since—since the row at home!”

“He’s got an inkling of the truth, somehow!” exclaimed Ben. He seized the envelope. “The letter’s addressed to McLeod’s, at Red Dog, but it’s never been there.”

“No. I wrote to the post-office at Calgary, asking for all letters to come here direct. Of course, it must have taken a good while to come all this way up the Fraser, even then. We’ve no regular postman. The grandfather may have started already.”

“A week ago, very likely,” said Ben.

“Then there’s no way to stop him. I wish he weren’t coming here, somehow,” said Vivian uneasily. “There’s no saying what may happen now Boyle’s arrived. He doesn’t say anything about Boyle. But if the old man says he’s coming, he’ll come—that’s sure.”

“What are you going to do?”

“One thing, first of all, I shall send to the bank at Calgary for that forged letter of Boyle’s, and the one we took from Stride, too.”

“D’you think that’s wise—to have them up here?”

“Yes. Because if my grandfather comes, and anything happens to us, I want to make all clear, and prove to him that the crime I’m accused of is untrue. He shall know that for certain, even if I’m wiped out the day after! I’ll have my character cleared!”

“Well, if that’s the way you look at it, you’re right,” said Ben. “Write to Calgary for the letter now, to be sent up by registered post, and the agent can take it back. He goes in twenty minutes.”

Vivian sat down and wrote the order at once. Ben saw it into the agent’s hands, and the boys could then do no more.

Never did they miss Flying Cloud so much! He seemed to have vanished out of the district altogether, and nobody had any news of him. Neither Stride nor Boyle were seen again for three whole days, and at the end of that time a registered package was brought, which Vivian eagerly opened.

"It's the letter and Stride's bit of birch-bark!" he said. "Both of 'em. Neither Stride nor Boyle, if they knew of it, dared stop the Government agent. Ben, these are worth——"

"Laddie," said John Mackellar, striding in, "there's an old gentleman ridin' up the trail on a grey horse, an' they tell me he's seeking ye."

Vivian ran out, and at that very moment, sitting erect on a tall, grey down-country horse, Mr. Weldon Charters himself came riding into camp, and dismounted. The old gentleman looked very weatherbeaten and lined about the face, and covered with the dust of the trails, but as handsome and stately as ever.

"Grandfather!" cried Vivian, running to meet him.

"Ah, my boy Vivian, is it you?" said Mr. Charters, greeting him with intense pleasure. "I've come far to see you, and now we're together again at last! May I come into the house, sir?" he said to Mackellar. "Thank you! I have travelled seven thousand miles to speak with my grandson, and have much to say to him."

He went into the front room of the log-cabin with Vivian.

"Don't go, Wainwright," he said, shaking hands heartily with Ben. "I believe I shall have to thank you for your loyalty to my son, and what I have to say to him I want you to hear."

He seated himself wearily, for the long ride had tired him.

"First, Vivian," he said, "I've got to say this. You refused to shake hands with me when you left England, saying you would take the hand of no man who believed you to be a blackguard. You were right. I condemned you too hastily on the word of a scoundrel! I mean, that man Stride."

"I refused, sir," said Vivian, "and I'm sorry for it now. You spoke of Stride——"

"I know him to be a scoundrel. I believe, from proofs that have fallen into my hands, that it was he who drugged my horse Hotspur. But how you yourself came to be charged with that abominable crime, and how the false proofs—for certainly they must have been false—were concocted and laid before me, I hardly dare to think! It was Boyle who came—who said——"

Mr. Charters halted, unable to go on. Then he looked up at Vivian.

"Can you throw any light on Boyle's action?" the old man said.

Vivian was silent for some moments.

"I hate to speak of Boyle, sir," he said bitterly. "He is my cousin, and I would rather for many reasons let the thing pass, and say no more. But it has gone too far for that. I owe it to myself to speak, for Boyle has dishonoured and disgraced me, and blackened my name in sight of you and of all England. Not content with that, he seeks my life now, to make himself safe. So I shall speak.

"Stride is Boyle's confederate, and there is no doubt they hatched the plot between them; but of that you shall judge. For six months Strido has followed me wherever I went in Canada, by Boyle's order, and in his pay, trying to bring me to grief, and even to get me murdered. Boyle

has played his own part in England meanwhile. Here are the proofs, sir."

He laid before Mr. Charters the letter of Boyle's with the instructions to Stride to hunt Vivian down. And beside it he placed the fateful scroll of birch-bark with Jake's confession.

Mr. Charters read them both through, and his face turned white.

"I see," he said, in a low voice, "the truth at last. And now tell me all, Vivian—everything, you understand. I command you, keep nothing back!"

Vivian obeyed, and as briefly as possible he told all that had passed between him and Stride and Stride's accomplices, from Quebec to Red Dog, and Red Dog to Moose Creek.

The old man bowed his head in his hands, and sat silent at the table, when all was told.

"And this coward and charlatan is my flesh and blood," he said, in a broken voice. "Not so near as you, Vivian—thank goodness for that! But the shame is great. Thank Heaven I have you, Vivian—and forgive me! Boyle must have known he was near to being discovered, for he left home a fortnight ago, and where he is I do not know. Evidently he has fled."

"Boyle, sir! Boyle is here, with his accomplice!" said Vivian. "He is in the hills near by. I saw him not three days ago!"

Mr. Charters gave an exclamation of amazement, but before he could reply, Flying Cloud, his dark eyes flashing, strode into the room, looking more excited than the boys had ever seen him. He was limping heavily, and evidently wounded.

"The horses! Get to the horses!" he cried.

"Why? What has happened?" exclaimed Vivian, springing up.

"The tribe has risen at last—the Bloods! Musk Rat has brought them through the Pass, and they are closing on the camp now! They shoot my horse and wound me, but I get through to warn you. There may be time to get away yet, if we ride for our lives! They have sworn to kill all men in the camp—every one, and the two white men are with them! They seek your lives—you and the old white chief there! Quick—mount and ride!"

CHAPTER 37.

The Attack on the Camp.

A MOMENT'S dead silence followed on Flying Cloud's announcement. The Indian, without saying another word, glided swiftly out of the log-cabin, and vanished.

John Mackellar had entered in time to hear the news, and stood at the door, dumb with astonishment.

"Now we know what Stride and Boyle are here for!" muttered Ben.

"By George!" exclaimed Vivian excitedly, "this is their last move—the final stroke! The villains! They know you're here, grandfather. They mean to wipe the lot of us clean out, and then Boyle's crimes will be

beyond detection, and his way clear to everything you own, sir. He's playing his last trump, that's what this means!" he added grimly.

The proud old squire set his teeth as he thought of his kinsman's treachery and dishonour, but the news of the danger affected him not an atom.

"What i' gudeness' name does it mean, laddie?" cried Mackellar.

Vivian turned to him quickly, and in as few words as possible told him how the ease stood, and of the peril that threatened. The big Scot whistled drily.

"Hech!" he said. "This is a bonny kettle of fish!"

"Look here, sir, we must go!" exclaimed Vivian, catching up his whip and rifle. "It's not to be thought of we should bring this danger upon your camp; it'll mean your being wiped out, with every soul in the place. We've no right to bring it on you. Come, Ben!"

"What d'ye mean, laddie?" interposed Mackellar.

"There's no time to explain!" cried Vivian. "You keep Mr. Charters here; he'll be safe. Ben an' I will clear out, and run for it to the southward. That'll draw them off, and they'll leave the camp alone. There are women and children here. It's us the redskins want, an' they'll go on our trail!"

"But if they catch you, Vivian!" exclaimed Mr. Charters.

"If they do, it can't be helped. We'll do our best to get clear. Hurry, Ben!" cried Vivian, raking for the door.

John Mackellar stretched out a long arm and stopped him.

"Here, ma canny laddie! D'ye think I'll let ye go to your death like that? Why, they'd catch ye in half an hour! Na, na! We'll stiek together here, an' defend the camp, an' we'll beat the murdering devils off!"

"You don't understand!" cried Vivian. "The tribe's risen, an' we know to our cost what the Bloods are. We musn't bring them down on—"

"Hoots! Shut your teeth, laddie! D'ye think a Highlander's goin' to show his back to a mob of copper-skinned wild-cats like you? Not another word! Ye'll stay by the camp—their's my orders!"

"And so say I!" said Mrs. Anderson, who had come in, and was as little scared by the news as her brother. "I can use a rifle as well as any of you!"

Flying Cloud dashed in again. He had just ridden his smoking pony down from the crest of the hill. Vivian, aghast at the idea of bringing down destruction upon the logging-camp, appealed to him.

"If you leave, you are a dead man!" said the Cree quickly. "And more, there is no chance to go now; they have ringed the camp round a mile out, and we are surrounded. There is no getting away, and they will close in on us so slowly."

"Then that settles it!" said Ben, flinging off his coat. "No more talk; let's make ready. Logs for the barricades!"

"Yes, we must stay and fight," agreed Vivian grimly, following suit. "How many are there against us?"

"I think about forty," said Flying Cloud.

"Might be worse," muttered Vivian, running to the armoury for the

spare rifles; "but it's four to one. We shall be lucky if we don't lose half our men, even if we can hold the brutes off at all."

In less than a minute the whole camp was humming with the preparations for the defence. Vivian was sent off to call in the lumbermen who were out on the river or the hillsides. He jumped on Red Fiend's back without waiting to saddle him, and very soon had all the men in camp. He saw nothing of the Bloods during his ride; indeed, the forest had never seemed more quiet.

At first Vivian had wished the cowboys of McLeod's ranch had been the defenders, but he soon altered his opinion. The stalwart lumbermen proved themselves as good frontiersmen as any horse-wrangler in the North-West, and as handy with their rifles.

Logs were brought out swiftly to barricade the open parts of the cabins, and others were built across the paths to make them difficult of approach. The windows of the chief cabin, to Vivian's surprise—for he had not noticed it before—had sheet-iron shutters, which were quickly closed and bolted. There were slit-holes in them, through which a rifle could be fired. Loop-holes were made in every place where it was possible, and Mrs. Anderson, plucky as ever, was busily loading the magazine rifles, and placing them with stores of ammunition at the points of vantage where they would be wanted.

In the plan of campaign that followed hastily, Weldon Charters was foremost. He was an old soldier, and had served with distinction at the head of one of the crack light infantry regiments. He showed how the loopholes should be arranged in the second cabin so as to deliver a deadly cross-fire with those of the main loghouse.

In less than twenty minutes, all hands working their hardest, the preparations were finished, the men all at their posts, and the peaceful logging-camp was transformed into a fortress, with every inmate armed and ready to fight for his life.

By Flying Cloud's advice, everybody was within the two cabins, which were fastened up, barred, and sealed. An enemy approaching might well have thought they had been purposely locked up and abandoned. Not a scout was allowed outside, nor a window open, but watchful eyes swept the clearings and the river banks through every loophole.

"They will not be long coming. They are close upon us now," said Flying Cloud quietly, as he took his post of vantage in the angle of two of the walls with a loophole on either side; "but they heap suspicions, and not attack in force at once. Do not fire till you are plenty sure of your man."

The dead silence, and the long wait that followed were the hardest part of all. So still were the woods, and so long was the attack delayed, that Ben found it hard to believe the enemy existed at all. For fully three-quarters of an hour the strain of waiting continued.

Ben was at one of the windows, with little Dicky Anderson, who refused to stay by himself, ready to load his spare rifle for him, at which the boy

was very deft and quick. Vivian was behind the closed door with John Mackellar. There were two loopholes in the door, and the upper half of it, like that of a stable, could be opened outwards, if necessary.

"There's nae sign o' them," muttered Mackellar at last. "D'ye think yon Cree friend o' yours has given a false alarm?"

"I'd trust his word as soon as any man's in all Canada," said Vivian.

The words were hardly out of his lips, when a dark shadow was seen stealing out of the forest. It was a Blood warrior in full warpaint, rifle in hand, creeping flat on his face, slowly and unsuspectingly. He raised himself on his hands, and peered at the silent loghouse.

There was a ringing crack from Mr. Weldon's loophole, and the Blood leaped convulsively to his feet, stretched up his arms, and fell prone.

The echo of the shot had hardly died away, when, with shrill, fierce yells, a score of redskins, their faces daubed in spiral streaks with the crimson warpaint of the tribe, dashed out of the forest on all three sides, and ran towards the cabins, firing as they went.

"Let 'em have it!" cried Mackellar.

The two loghuts, silent as the grave a moment or two before, now began to spout fire from every loophole. The magazine-rifles, directed with deadly aim, made scarcely a miss at that short range.

Finally a dozen Blood braves fell at the first rush, the very walls and shutters of the cabins seeming to spout death at them. Still more came on out of the forest, and the spluttering of rifles gave them a hot reception.

"If they get in it's all up," said Ben coolly, as he changed his empty, smoking rifle for the fully loaded one Dicky Anderson passed to him, and continued firing without a break.

Not a man in the camp but knew that too well. If the Indians managed to get in under the fire, and beat a door or a window down, the yelling hordes would pour into the houses and make short work of the little handful of defenders.

Thirty seconds decided the first rush. The Bloods had fired only a scattering volley when they first left cover, and the rest had been a frenzied attempt to reach the walls. A single bullet, ploughing in through a cranny, had wounded one of the lumbermen, but the rest had wasted themselves on the thick log walls, or rung in the iron shutters. The deadly reception the Bloods got was too much for them, and, breaking before the hail of lead from the magazine-rifles, they fled back to cover, leaving fifteen dead and wounded behind upon the trampled ground.

"By gum, we shall do 'em, after all!" cried Ben.

A hail of bullets began to pour in upon the cabins from the forest, which seemed to positively blaze with rifle-fire all round.

"Dinna shoot back!" cried Mackellar. "Just stan' away from the loopholes, an' let the loons fire till they're sick of it! Not a shot in return till they rush again! Ay, laddies, we'll show the red-skinned de'ils the way o't!"

"All depends on next rush," said Flying Cloud coolly. "Then they

come in full force, and if we can drop enough of them then, they will break, and fly for good. If we not make them break, they kill us plenty easy. See, now, they come!"

"Chuck the top half of the door open!" cried Vivian. "Let's have space to give it 'em from the shoulder!"

Back flew the door, John Mackellar unlatching it, and, in one savage, yelling charge, the attacking force hurled themselves out of the forest, and straight at the hut.

Crack! Crack! Crack! R-r-r-r! went the rifles, the instant the Bloods showed themselves. The attack was in earnest. This time it was all or nothing. The Bloods had a couple of hundred yards to cover before they could reach the cabins.

They fell fast, but it seemed as if they must reach their goal. Then suddenly they came into the full cross-fire from the two cabins converging from both angles, and as they entered that zone of death they went down right and left, as if smitten by invisible hail. Out of every ten men that raced past it, but two got through alive.

"Keep it up! We've got 'em!" yelled Vivian. "Look out your side, Ben!"

A big Blood medicine-man got right up to the wall, rifle in one hand, and heavy wood-axe in the other. He reached Ben's window, but had barely got there, when he collapsed, with a bullet through his skull.

"There's the last o' them! Watch out, laddie!" exclaimed Mackellar, as six men, led by a tall Blood warrior, came racing for the door, safe past the fire-zone

"It's the Mnsk Rat!" cried Vivian, snatching another rifle, and throwing down his empty one. He saw the look of hate on the Blood's face, as his eyes met Vivian's, and the two flung up their rifles and took swift snapshots almost at the same second.

The Musk Rat leapt into the air with a shriek, a crimson spot flashing out on his chest, and down he went upon his face. Those behind him were checked for a moment, two of their number dropped, and they gave a shrill cry and fled. On all sides, what was left of the Bloods broke and dashed away into the forest in utter rout.

"After them!" cried Flying Cloud, flinging open a window and leaping out. "Don't let them go!"

A swift sortie was made, and Mackellar's men gave chase, firing as they went. The Bloods lost four more of their number, and the rest, not half a score in all, escaped to the northward.

Then such a ringing cheer arose in Moose Creek Camp as never woke the echoes of the forest before.

CHAPTER 38.

Conclusion.

DARKNESS was stealing down upon the Fraser Valley. The relics of the grim fight of noontide had been blotted out and done away with. Mackellar, according to his excellent custom, had held a thanksgiving service, rough but earnest, out under the shadow of the pines, rendering grace for their deliverance from danger.

Inside the big log-cabin Weldon Charters was mapping out the future, and listening to the tales of their life in Alberta, when voices outside were heard calling, and into the hut rushed a white man, breathless and dishevelled, his face deadly pale, save where it was scratched and streaked with blood.

"Save me! Save me! Don't let them get me!" he shrieked, flinging himself down in an agony of terror. "Keep them out!"

"It's Boyle!" exclaimed Vivian, in utter amazement. It was his cousin, sure enough—the last man in the world they expected to see.

"What do you want here? Who is after you?" said Ben sternly, stepping across, and gripping him by the shoulder. "What are you about, you scoundrel? Is this some trick?"

"The Bloods!" gasped Boyle, trembling from head to foot. "You won't let them take me?"

"Bloods! Where are they?" cried Ben, shaking him. "Where have you come from, and where's Stride?"

"They've killed him!" said Boyle, shuddering, and burying his face in his hands. "They are after me, too. They promised me the same death. Oh, Heaven! I escaped—rode away—till horse fell dead! You'll save me from them, won't you? They're devils—devils!"

He fell on the floor in a dead faint. Weldon Charters, who had started up, drew back from him in horror and disgust. Flying Cloud had entered the room, and glanced down at the fugitive.

"Ah!" he said grimly. "I know what happen. I not expect he would get away, but the Bloods are few, and dare not stop. You understand, eh?"

"They've killed Stride!" muttered Vivian.

"I ride out and see. Soon let you know. Take care of that dog!" said Flying Cloud pointing scornfully to Boyle, as he went out.

The boys wished to accompany him, but the Indian insisted on going alone, and in a very short time he was galloping off along the trail on his pony.

Vivian raised Boyle's head, but he showed no signs of consciousness, and his dead-white face showed his plight. Vivian signed to Ben, and between them they lifted Boyle into the inner room, and laid him on a camp bed. Mr. Anderson came in, and, asking no questions, took charge of the unconscious youth, and applied restoratives. It was plain Boyle had had no ordinary shock.

In two hours' time Flying Cloud returned, a very grim look about his face.

"Your white man—Stride—he never trouble you again!" said the Indian quietly. "He has paid the price!"

"Dead!" exclaimed Ben.

Flying Cloud quickly told them what had happened. He had found Stride's body three miles up the valley, and had heard the tale from a prowling Alonquin Indian.

The retreating remnant of the Bloods, on their way north, had fallen in with Stride and Boyle. Furious with the disaster that had happened to them, and putting the blame on Stride—for it was he who had persuaded the tribe to send the expedition, promising them great rewards—they proceeded to take vengeance on their white allies, that the spirits of the departed Bloods might rest in peace.

"Stride died as he had lived—like a coward," said Flying Cloud. "The Bloods they scalp him, and go on their way. They will not go far," he concluded, with a grim snifle. "My people will meet them in the Pass, and not one will ever get back to the Blood country."

"So Stride's gone, poor beggar?" said Vivian, with a shudder. "He has played with edged tools too long. Let's see how his accomplice is getting on!"

Boyle was in sorry case when he came to. Fright, shock, and exhaustion had brought a fever on him, his dissipated life making him an easy prey to it. For a day and night he was delirious, but careful nursing brought him round, and on the fifth day he was on his feet again. It was then that he asked to see Mr. Charters.

Boyle began a whining story, but Mr. Charters cut him short.

"You have too narrowly escaped death to lie in that manner," he said sternly. "I am acquainted with the whole history of your villainy, Boyle. If I did my duty, I should hand you over to the law, for you are a murderer in will, if not in deed!

"Of your claim on any part of the Charters' estates or fortune there is now no question. I utterly disown you. The only mercy I will have on you is this—you shall have the means of subsistence, and no more. On the first day of every week you may call at the Bank at Calgary, and they will pay you the sum of five dollars. If you are absent a single pay-day, the payment will be stopped for good and all. Therefore, for your own sake, and to avoid the law, do not go too far away from Calgary. Your appearance in England will be the signal for your immediate arrest! You can fall no lower, Boyle Charters!" said the old man sternly. "Whether you rise depends on yourself. I know you too well to hope for it. Go!"

Boyle slunk from the room, and Weldon Charters turned to his grandson, with both hands outstretched.

"Vivian, I ask your pardon for ever having doubted you. You have shown yourself sterling metal right through, and from this day you come into your own!"

There is little more to tell. Old Mr. Charters spends his declining years in retirement at Charters Grange, wishing only for quiet and peace. He

leaves the management and revenues of the whole wide estates and the racing stud in Vivian's hands, who, with Ben as his constant companion and agent, handles them excellently.

It would be pleasant if one could record that Boyle Charters came to any good, but such is not the case. He is still that thing of contempt in the Colonies, a "remittance man," drawing his £1 per week, on condition of keeping away from the country which had the misfortune to give birth to him, and where he had disgraced his name beyond recall. Refusing to do any sort of work, he subsists on his weekly stipend, without which he would certainly starve. He considers himself very ill-used, albeit he is, in reality, extremely lucky not to be in a Canadian gaol for the rest of his life. And so we may leave him.

Flying Cloud came to England last year at the boys' express invitation—he is now chief of the Crees—and had a great desire to see what a white chief's tepee in England was like. Vivian and Ben gave him a splendid time for three months, after which he became homesick for the Rockies, and returned there, begging the boys to follow him.

And will they? Charters Grange and its wealth and acres are extremely pleasant. But many a wistful glance does Vivian often cast at the old stock-saddle hanging on the gun-room wall, and the foot-beats of his crack racehorse at exercise outside on the Wiltshire turf seem to turn to the drumming of Red Fiend's hoofs upon the prairie of the Great North-West.

THE END.

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