

EDWARD ELLIS

ACROSS
TEXAS

Edward Ellis

Across Texas

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Ellis E.

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Edward Sylvester Ellis

Across Texas

CHAPTER I.

A LETTER AND A TELEGRAM

NICK RIBSAM, of whom I had considerable to tell you in “The Young Moose Hunters,” returned to his humble home in Western Pennsylvania with his health fully restored by his stirring experience in the mountainous forests of Maine. He was naturally strong and active, and one glance at his bright eyes, his ruddy cheeks, and his alert movements told his sister Nellie and the beloved father and mother that the prescription of the physician had worked like a charm.

Nick was now a sturdy youth, a bright scholar and a general favorite with all who knew him. His parents were not of the kind that are demonstrative, but their hearts were wrapped up in their worthy son, and they were full of gratitude that he should come back to them at the end of what, after all, was only a brief absence, without a trace of the weakness that caused them so much misgiving when he went away.

They felt a strong friendship and affection, too, for Herbert Watrous and his parents, through whose kindness the trip down East was brought about. There was no “discounting” the fondness of the Watrouses for the manly youth. Mr. Watrous, as has been shown, possessed large means, and denied his son nothing, his affection for Herbert leading him astray in that respect. But he saw the great good done his boy through his association with Nick. You know that the most forceful sermon ever preached is that of example. It matters little what a person says, but it is everything what he does. It is not the profession, but the life which must be the test, as it certainly will be before the final Judge of all mankind.

Mr. Watrous and his wife welcomed Herbert home, and their eyes sparkled at sight of the immense stuffed moose forming a striking trophy of the young man’s visit to Uncle Dick Musgrove. He could not be blamed for feeling proud over his prize, and for having a number of large photographs struck off and sent to his friends, but that which touched the parents’ hearts was the change in Herbert himself. He had always been fond of them, but with that feeling was now mingled a tender respect that had been wanting before. He never forgot their wishes; he showed a deeper interest in his studies; he abandoned habits and associations which he knew his parents disliked; he made a confidant of his father as well as his mother, and consulted with them and asked their counsel in whatever important step he had in mind.

Now, what had wrought this change in Herbert Watrous? Nick had done very little “preaching” to him. True, whenever the chance was inviting, he dropped a word or two that clinched an important principle, and now and then, when their long talks took a favorable drift, he gave his views with a power and point that could not be mistaken, but it was the daily life of Nick that did the blessed work.

A family holding the social position of Mr. Watrous in New York has no lack of privileges for a son; but there was nothing that gave Herbert the genuine pleasure that he gained by a visit to Nick Ribsam, in his quiet country home in Western Pennsylvania. The pure air, the healthful food, the perfect cooking, the cleanliness that was everywhere, the cheerfulness, the mutual love and confidence, the warm welcome from everyone – these brought to him an enjoyment and satisfaction far beyond what mere wealth can buy.

It was during the early autumn succeeding the incidents told in “The Moose Hunters,” that Herbert paid his second visit to Nick. The latter met him at the railway station, but the delight

of welcoming his old friend to his country home was sadly marred by the appearance of Herbert. Beyond a doubt he was in a bad way. He was nearly six feet tall, very slim, with a flushed face, a dragging walk, short breath, and, indeed, with every sign of incipient consumption.

"I know what you are thinking about," said he, with a wan smile, "but I don't look any worse than I feel."

"You do look bad," replied Nick, as he drove homeward in their old-fashioned carriage. "What does it mean?"

"I hardly know; the doctor says I am growing too fast, have studied too hard, and haven't had enough exercise. You know I meant to enter Yale this fall and have been boning like the mischief. But I have given up that and postponed college for a year at least, and," he added with a sigh, "perhaps forever."

"You mustn't talk that way," said Nick, pained beyond expression; "you must stop all study and live outdoors for a few weeks. You have no bad habits, Herbert?"

"None at all, though I may be reaping the penalty of my former foolishness; but I haven't touched tobacco or alcohol in any form for six months."

"I see no reason why you should not come out all right in a short time," added Nick, uttering the wish rather than the belief he felt.

"I have a letter in my pocket from my father to your father; I know what is in it, but I will let him tell you himself."

Home being reached, the team put away, and a kind welcome given to Herbert by Nellie and her parents, all sat down to the meal awaiting them. At its conclusion, Herbert handed the letter he bore to Mr. Ribsam, who curiously broke the seal.

When he saw it was written in English he smiled and passed it to his son.

"I vill lets Nick read him, cause I don't English reads as vell as German as I don't."

Nick took the missive and read aloud, the others listening attentively:

"New York, October 13, 18 —

"My Dear Mr. Ribsam:

"My son Herbert has expressed the gratitude which his mother and myself will ever feel toward your noble son Nicholas, for the immeasurable good he has done my boy by his precept and example. That influence will follow him like a blessing through life, and you and your good wife are to be congratulated on having such a worthy child.

"I am about to ask a great favor of you. We are alarmed for Herbert's health. It is certainly singular that last winter it was your son whose condition was bad, while now it is my own who is in a condition that causes us the gravest alarm. I have consulted the best physicians in New York, who tell me that he is threatened with consumption; that medicine will not cure him, but, like your own son last year, he must give up his indoors life at home and secure a radical change of air and surroundings.

"I would arrange to have him spend a few weeks with you, where I know he is welcome, but the medical men tell me that he runs a risk so long as he is exposed to a northern climate, with its sudden and violent changes.

"We have considered the question of a sea voyage, and a winter in the Bermudas, the West Indies, or in Southern France; but there are objections to all these, the principal of which is our dislike to have him go out of our own country, where he would have to meet a new language, different kinds of people, and unfavorable surroundings.

“The plan we have decided upon is to send him on a tour through the southwestern section of our own country. We have arranged for him to visit Texas, Arizona, New Mexico, and Southern California, hoping that by the return of spring he will be so fully restored to health that he can come home as sound in body as your own son.

“The favor I ask of you is that you will consent that Nicholas shall accompany him. I am aware that this is asking a great sacrifice of you, and I have hesitated a long time before putting the request on paper. You need your boy at home with you; it will cause you and his mother and sisters great misgiving to let him go away for five or six months, and no doubt involve considerable pecuniary loss. Still, my solicitude for my own child forces me to ask this great sacrifice at your hands.

“In doing so, there are several conditions upon which I shall insist. The first is that under no circumstances shall it cost you or your son a penny. My position in railway matters enables me to secure, without trouble, passes on the leading lines from your home over the entire route and return. These passes are now in Herbert’s possession. Other expenses will be involved, as some of the travelling will have to be done in stage coaches and on horseback, to say nothing of the cost of living. All this is provided for. My son has letters to bankers at various points *en route* which will secure him ample funds. They will need no outfit until they reach San Antonio, and start further westward. It is my earnest wish that if Nicholas accompanies Herbert, doing so as his friend, companion, and, in one sense, his escort, I shall be permitted to make compensation therefor, as properly due you for loss of his valuable services.

“If you will consent that your son shall go with him, I advise that the start be made at once from your house. If you feel that I am presuming too much on your kindness do not hesitate to say so, and I will try to make other arrangements.

“I am, my dear sir, very truly yours,
“J. H. Watrous.”

To quote a familiar expression, the reading of this letter produced a sensation. Every eye was fixed on Nick, as he sat in his chair with the missive in his hand, and pronounced the words in a clear voice.

It is not necessary to give the conversation that followed, for it was a long one in which all shared, but late that afternoon Nick harnessed up the old roan again and drove to the railway station with Herbert. Hastily leaving the vehicle, they passed into the telegraph office, where the city youth wrote out a telegram addressed to his father, and it ran thus:

It is all fixed: Nick and I leave for Texas and the southwest to-morrow. Good-by, and love to you and mother.

Herbert.

CHAPTER II. THROUGH TO TEXAS

LET ME skip a great deal of what may be called introduction, for of necessity it bore a resemblance to that which has already been told, and has little if any connection with the main events of my story.

Mr. Watrous' arrangements for the comfort of the boys was perfect. The ride to St. Louis in the famous Limited Express was the luxury of railway travelling, and they landed in the Mound City within twenty-four hours after leaving Philadelphia, where Nick met his old friend, Ned Osmun, who had given to him his wonderful ride on his engine to Jersey City. He wished them every pleasure on their long journey, which he said caused him a touch of envy, but he meant to even-up matters by another fishing excursion in Western Pennsylvania, with a call on Nick's parents and pretty Nellie.

They stayed overnight at the Lindell in St. Louis, but were in such a hurry to reach their destination that, without spending any time in visiting the sights and interesting scenes, they left the following morning over the Iron Mountain Railway for Texarkana.

This ride, though long and at times tedious, was enjoyed by both, for the scenes and incidents gave a foretaste of what was coming. A number of cattlemen were on the train, and the boys struck up an acquaintance with them. They found them pleasant and ready to impart all the information that was asked for.

There were long hours of riding through the dismal pine woods of Missouri and Arkansas, where, mile after mile, they saw only an occasional settler's cabin, with the half-dressed children playing around the door. In several cases, the openings between the logs were so large that they could look through both the front and rear of the structure and see the trees on the other side.

They left the train at Malvern, and took the narrow gauge railway to the celebrated Hot Springs, twenty-five miles distant, where they stayed overnight. One of the interesting facts learned here was the clever manner in which "Diamond Jo," who built and owns the narrow gauge railway, outwitted the Arkansas Legislature, which forbade a charge of more than five cents a mile on every line in the State between any two places. The capitalist named had been charging and receiving ten cents a mile, and he now flanked the law by locating the western terminus of his line within two or three feet of the boundary of Hot Springs, and continued serenely to receive his excessive rates as before.

They reached Texarkana Saturday evening, and, since there was no travelling westward on Sunday, that day was spent in the town, which lies partly within Texas and partly within Arkansas, and includes within its odd name a portion of the appellation of each of the two States.

They attended church, which was capable of accommodating fifty people by crowding, and whose walls contained but a single placard, which was a request for the attendants not to spit on the floor.

The next stopping place was at Austin, the capital of Texas. The weather was quite warm, but the nights were cool and breezy, and the glimpses of the snowy cotton fields were a treat to the boys, who looked upon them for the first time.

They spent one night and a portion of a day in Austin, visiting the capitol and strolling through the city, which contains many fine buildings of white marble-like stone, peculiar to the vicinity. In the capitol they saw several fine paintings of the early heroes of Texas. On the cenotaph (since destroyed by the burning of the capitol), was the inscription to the memory of the defenders of the Alamo, which is one of the most striking tributes ever conceived by man: "THERMOPYLÆ HAD ITS MESSENGER OF DEFEAT: THE ALAMO HAD NONE."

The railway line to San Antonio had recently been finished, and they arrived in that quaint old town as night was closing in. A bright moon was shining in an unclouded sky, and, after registering at the Menger House, facing the Plaza, they strolled through the city and enjoyed a view of the Alamo by moonlight. The brown adobe walls were softened in the mild radiance, and, as Nick described the defence made by the garrison of less than two hundred men against four thousand Mexicans under Santa Anna, it seemed to Herbert that he was witnessing that tremendous fight, which continued for eleven days, until only a dozen grimy, panting, and exhausted defenders were left. The terrible Colonel Bowie was shot in his sick bed, and Davy Crockett was among the handful that at last surrendered, under the promise of honorable treatment, but were treacherously massacred by Santa Anna.

The winding Colorado was impressively beautiful in the moonlight, and the adobe mission houses, which were visited the next day, were viewed with the interest that all tourists feel when they first look upon them. Each was over a century old. One, in a fine state of preservation, was pointed out, where the Jesuit fathers were besieged by the Comanche Indians for nearly two years.

Among the curiosities noticed in San Antonio were the Mexican dogs, without a hair on their bodies, and the other canines, known as “tramps” or “nobody’s dogs,” who roam over the country between the city and the Rio Grande, picking up their food, as do their biped brothers, and confessing to the ownership of no one. That portion of San Antonio called Mexico was squalid, and made up of old residents, many of whom cannot speak a word of English, while in other sections nearly everyone understands English, Spanish, and German.

The boys stayed several days in this city, for they looked upon it as their real starting point or entrance into the great southwest. They had talked over the question while on their way thither, and agreed upon the line to be followed. Herbert had a letter of recommendation to Mr. Lord, a banker, by which he could secure all the funds needed, and who showed a wish to help him in every way in his power.

He invited the boys to visit him at his house, where they spent an evening with the gentleman, who, having been a resident in Texas from a date several years before the Civil War, was able to give the very knowledge and counsel they needed. He told them a fact that they had not noticed. San Antonio itself is a resort for invalids threatened with, or suffering from, pulmonary weakness, who find the mild, equable climate very helpful. He had known of cases in which it had wrought a complete cure.

“But I see,” he said with a smile, “that that doesn’t suit your ideas; while there are many sights here that you have not seen – such as the Colorado Springs – yet you could not content yourselves in our sleepy town for more than a day or two longer. You can take the stage from here to El Paso, but the ride is tiresome, and, at this season of the year, dusty and trying to a degree.”

“I don’t think we should fancy that,” said Nick, who refrained from giving a hint of the plan they had formed.

“I suppose you are both good horsemen?” was the inquiring remark of the banker.

They answered that they were fairly good riders. Nick had learned to ride horses almost as soon as he could walk, and Herbert had taken instructions at an academy in New York for a couple of years past.

“Everybody rides a horse or burro in Texas,” said Mr. Lord, “and the only caution you need is to make sure you possess a clear title to the animal you throw your leg over. There are few people hanged in Texas for murder, but plenty are strung up every year for horse-stealing. You would be objects of suspicion if you should take a walk out in the country. My advice, then, is to buy three excellent ponies, provide yourselves with a good outfit, including a fine repeating Winchester rifle and a revolver apiece, with plenty of ammunition. You will need an extra animal to carry your luggage. Then strike out for New Mexico. You will have to ride a clean five hundred miles before crossing the boundary, but it is the right season of the year, and the ride will do you good.”

“Do you advise us to go alone?” asked Herbert.

“By no means; you must have companions who are familiar with the country, and they can be easily secured.”

“How?”

“There are hunters, miners, prospectors, and adventurers in San Antonio all the time, who have either just come from the wild regions beyond or are about to set out for them. They may be rough in their ways, but they are generally honest and trustworthy, and there will be no trouble in engaging them as companions.”

“You have laid out the plan Herbert and I had fixed upon, but we felt doubts about being able to carry it out. We have informed ourselves, so far as we can, concerning the country over which we wish to ride, and the more we learned, the more we saw the need of having men who were familiar with it. How about the Indians?”

“Well, you are liable to meet them, but I do not think there is much to be feared, as I have heard no disquieting rumors lately, though,” added the banker significantly, “I was shot at myself, within the present year, by a party of marauding Comanches, within six miles of San Antonio. When you get into New Mexico, you will be likely to find matters more lively.”

“Can you help us in engaging the right parties?”

“I think so; call around at my office to-morrow afternoon, when I am quite sure I will be able to put you on the track of the ones whom you ought to meet.”

The lads assured their host that they would be glad to do so, and, declining his kind invitation to spend the night at his home, bade him good-evening and started on their return to the Menger House.

CHAPTER III. IN SAN ANTONIO

NICK and Herbert stopped on the Plaza to inspect a bear, which a lank Texan had fastened to a staple by a rope, and was waiting thus late at night for a purchaser. The moment the boys passed, the owner began urging them to buy, offering the brute for fifteen dollars, and dwelling with much eloquence on the great bargain it was for anyone.

Our friends, however, had no use for any animals of that species, and, taking care to keep beyond reach of the beast, who showed a desire for closer acquaintance, they sauntered toward the hotel.

Just before reaching it, someone touched Nick's arm in such a timid manner that he turned, wondering what it could mean.

A lad about twelve years of age, ragged and the picture of distress, asked in a tremulous voice:

"Please, sir, you're from the North, aint you?"

"Yes," replied Nick; "is your home there?"

"Yes, sir," said the lad, swallowing a lump in his throat, "and I would give the world, if I had it, if I was back there again."

"How is it you're here?"

"Me and Dick Harrison run away from home; we lived in Philadelphia, and we haven't had anything to eat since yesterday."

"Where is Dick?"

"He's off yonder, on the other side of the Plaza; he's just dead broke up, and says he won't try nothin' more, but is goin' to lay down and die."

"I don't believe anyone has ever died of starvation in San Antonio; can't you get work?"

"We have been trying for two weeks; we got a job or two that fetched us a little to eat, but we can't do nothin' more."

"Take us over to where Dick is," said Herbert, whose heart was touched, "and let us see him."

"Come on," said the boy, so cheerfully that Nick and his friend were satisfied he was telling the truth. On the way across the Plaza, they questioned Fred Beekman, as he gave his name, still further.

"What made you run away from home, Fred?"

"Me and Dick started out to kill Injins and grizzly bears."

"How did you make out," asked Herbert, who recalled that it was not so long since he had indulged in similar ambitious ideas.

"We haven't killed any yet," replied Fred, in such a doleful voice that the others could not help smiling.

"How did you get the money to come to Texas?"

"Dick and me stole it from our folks; we bought rifles and pistols, but when we got to Texarkana we was took up and the guns took away from us; we managed to sneak off, and had enough money left to come to Santone; here it give out, and we've had it hard since."

"Had you pleasant homes?" asked Nick.

This question set Fred to crying. His fingers were in his eyes, and he stumbled along for several paces before he could answer:

"Nobody ever had better homes, but we got it into our heads that it would be nice to shoot grizzly bears and Injins, and here we are. If we only had enough money to keep us from starvin' we could walk home like reg'lar tramps."

"You are a good many miles from Philadelphia," said Nick. "If you could get there, would you go straight home, or would you start off on some other wild-goose chase like this?"

"Oh, if I could see father and mother and my brother and two sisters, I would work and go to school and do anything; I never knowed how good a home I had till I run away, and Dick feels the same way."

A few minutes later they reached the spot where Dick had been left, but he was nowhere in sight. Fred looked around in wonder, and then became frightened.

"I'll bet he's gone and drowneded hisself," he said, in an awed whisper, "for he felt 'nough like it."

"Boys like him don't drown themselves," replied Nick, who began to distrust the truthfulness of the lad; "if you want us to give you any help you must find Dick and bring him –"

"There he is!" broke in Fred, pointing to a figure lurking among the shadows some distance off, as if afraid to venture closer. "Here, Dick, come here! you needn't be scart, they won't hurt you!"

Seeing the lad approaching, Nick said: "Now, Fred, I don't want you to speak a word till I get through with Dick."

With considerable hesitation Dick ventured nearer, and Nick immediately took him in hand. After much questioning, he became convinced that the story told by the two was true. They were equally ragged and wretched looking, and, despite their coarse language, gave evidence of having belonged to good families.

Nick and Herbert provided them with an excellent supper. They were as ravenous as wild animals, and left no doubt that they were half famishing. Then, having made sure that they had a place to sleep during the night, Nick told them to call at the hotel in the morning, and he would see whether he and his friend could do anything for them.

During the interview, Nick managed to get the addresses of their parents in Philadelphia, without either suspecting his purpose. On reaching the Menger, he at once telegraphed to each father, asking whether a son whose name he gave was missing. He hardly doubted their story, but it was well that he took means to make sure, before acting upon that belief.

In the course of the evening, a reply came to each message, saying that the boys had been missing for six weeks, begging Nick to send both home without delay, and pledging that the expense would be paid by the senders of the telegrams, or, if desired, funds would be telegraphed. Nick notified the parents that the boys would start northward in the morning, and a statement of the money expended would be forwarded by mail.

When Fred and Dick presented themselves to Nick and Herbert, and were told that word had been received from their relatives, who would be delighted to receive them, they could hardly believe it, but were finally satisfied that there was no deception about it.

Herbert and Nick took the boys to a clothing establishment, where they were provided with comfortable outfits, a through ticket was furnished to each, enough money given to pay their expenses, and then, with a few words of counsel, they were despatched homeward, the happiest boys in the big State of Texas.

Then Nick inclosed the memoranda to the proper parties, and dismissed the subject from his mind, for weightier matters required attention.

Upon calling at the banker's office in the afternoon, they were surprised to find he had not only selected the two men that were to bear them company, but they were present, by appointment with Mr. Lord, who knew at what time the youths would arrive.

The individuals were typical cowboys, with their broad-brimmed sombreros and rattlesnake bands, their heavy shirts, trousers tucked in the tops of their boots, immense spurs, long wavy hair, handkerchiefs knotted about their necks, bright eyes and not unhandsome countenances.

Arden Strubell, the elder, was about thirty-five years of age and wore a long moustache and goatee, which, like his hair and eyes, were of a dark auburn. Baker Lattin, his companion, was a few years younger, with lighter hair, a faint moustache, no goatee, was wide across the temples, and his eyes were light blue or gray, but his appearance was as alert and intelligent as the other's.

These men were old friends of banker Lord, who had engaged with them upon several hunting excursions. It had fallen within his power to do for them a number of monetary favors, and they were the men who were ready to show their gratitude in any way he desired.

Strubell and Lattin intended to start in the course of a day or two for a ranch in New Mexico. They expected to travel the entire distance on horseback, accompanied by a single pack animal. Both once belonged to the mounted rangers of Texas, and had probably ridden over as much of that vast area as any other man within its limits, from No Man's Land on the north, through the Pan Handle and across the Llano Estacado to the Rio Grande and the Pecos on the south and west.

Strubell had been in several brushes with the terrible Geronimo and his dusky desperadoes, but he did not expect to reach the section where there was danger of collision with them, their stamping ground being further to the west.

Banker Lord had been offered a ranch over the line in New Mexico, at such reasonable figures that he was much inclined to buy it, but, with his usual caution, he desired to know of a certainty its value before investing the money. Strubell and Lattin had been employed, therefore, to make a thorough examination and to report on the same to him.

This happened most opportunely for Nick and Herbert, who thus were furnished with the very best company on their long and dangerous ride through Western Texas, while the ranchmen were ordered to go with them, if necessary, beyond into Arizona and Southern California.

CHAPTER IV. A STARTLING INTERRUPTION

IT did not take the boys long to become acquainted with Strubell and Lattin. The former showed by his conversation that he possessed a fair education, though Lattin was barely able to write his name. They were frank, outspoken, courageous, ready of resource, familiar with all the dangers they were likely to meet on the long ride toward the northwest, and the finest horsemen the boys had ever seen.

Through the help of the Texans, Nick and Herbert secured three excellent animals, two of them possessing great speed and endurance, while the third was the equal of the best burro or mule for carrying a heavy burden. The Winchesters were the best, too, of their kind, the men being similarly armed. Nick and Herbert took care to provide themselves with an excellent field-glass apiece, for nothing was more likely than that they would find abundant call for their use. The rest of the supplies were bought on the advice of the cowboys.

They passed near a number of towns and settlements during the first week, in one of which they generally stayed overnight. So long as they were able to secure the comforts of ordinary travel through a settled section, they would have been foolish to decline it.

It had been so long since the boys had ridden far on horseback, that they were stiffened for the first few days, so that, when they dismounted, they were hardly able to walk. This, however, soon wore off until they were able to stand a ride of forty or fifty miles without any ill effects.

No physician could have watched a patient with greater care than Nick watched Herbert. He tried to keep it from the knowledge of his friend, and thought he succeeded, though Herbert told him afterward that he knew all the time what he was doing.

The elder youth felt bad when they reached St. Louis, and was still worse on their arrival in San Antonio. The long ride in the cars made him feverish, and he had little appetite, but the new scenes and surroundings, the cheerful company of Nick, and his own ambition did wonders in the way of keeping him up.

He showed an improvement within twenty-four hours after arriving in the City of the Alamo, and this continued steadily, until the second day out, when the beautiful weather, that they had been having for weeks, was broken by a norther which, however, was not severe, though it brought so much rain and dismal weather that they were compelled to lie by at one of the straggling frontier towns for several days.

They rode through the hills and highlands between Fredericksburg and Fort Clark, fording a tributary of the Llano River, and pushing almost due northwest toward New Mexico, whose southeast corner they were aiming to strike at the point of intersection between the twenty-sixth meridian and thirty-second parallel.

The country now began to assume a wilder appearance. The weather was like a dream, and Nick could well understand how it is that more than twenty thousand people in Texas never sleep under a roof from one year's end to another. He could appreciate, too, the reason why the immigrant, no matter how homesick, who braves it out for six months, never leaves Texas unless for a brief visit to his northern home, returning to die in the Lone Star State, which has become the land of his adoption.

The appearance showed the country, or rather that portion of it, to contain a great many more people than the boys supposed before entering Texas. The settlements were generally miserable collections of shanties, with the inevitable gambling and drinking saloon and the quota of "bad men," on the lookout for tenderfeet, or those of their own class that were ready to mingle in a

row off-hand. Everyone rode on horseback, and carried his revolver and rifle, the latter generally a Winchester of the repeating pattern.

The cattlemen were numerous, some of them nearly always in sight among the hills, or on the broad, rolling prairie. Occasionally an Indian was met, but he was far from being the romantic individual that boys generally have in mind, when reading about the noble red man. He was untidy and sullen looking, with an appetite for whiskey that was never sated, and the odor of rank tobacco around him.

It was about a week after the departure from San Antonio that the youths noticed a marked change in things. The country became more broken, the settlements disappeared, and during the middle of the afternoon, when Herbert swept the horizon with his field glass, he made known, with an expression of surprise, that there was not a living person, so far as he knew, in sight.

"We've put a good piece of country behind us," said Strubell, "and if nothing goes wrong, we ought to strike New Mexico in the course of the next ten days."

Nick laughed.

"I fancied we would make it in less time than that."

"So we mought," remarked Lattin, "if there was any call to hurry; but, as I understand this business, we aint runnin' the pony express for Santa Fé or Rincon."

That night their camp was in a section which charmed the boys, for there was an air of loneliness, and the danger that seemed to be brooding over the vicinity was of a kind not yet encountered since entering Texas.

In some respects, the camp reminded them of their moose hunt in Maine, though the contrast in the season was marked. There were the hills, rising almost to the dignity of mountains, the boulders and rocks, the stream of water, not more than a few inches in width and depth, and the beautiful blue sky overhead.

The weather was cooler than it had been, and the hunters shook their heads, and hinted about a norther that was liable to break over them before many hours. There were no signs of Indians, and had there been, the aborigines would have been held in no greater dread than those of their own race. The party were so far westward that the arm of the law was weak, and everyone must depend on his own vigilance and alertness.

When the wood, which was not over abundant in those parts, was collected for the fire by which they intended to cook the meat obtained from a maverick earlier in the day, the horses were turned loose, and the four friends gathered around the blaze, which was kindled in an open space, where the light was visible for a long way in nearly every direction. Around this they sat, and, while the men smoked their pipes, they recalled many a thrilling encounter with the red men in the Pan Handle, in Arizona, and in New Mexico. Strubell and Lattin were equally interested in the story which Nick told of their hunt for the king of moose in Maine. That species of game was unfamiliar to them, and when they learned of the gallant style in which Herbert brought down the big fellow at the moment he was charging upon his companion, they looked upon the tall youth with something like wonder and admiration. They had no idea of having such a hero "in their midst."

Since it was necessary that everyone should bear a hand in guarding against the perils on which they were entering, the hunters arranged that the youths should regularly take part in standing watch each night. Their method made it easy and safe for all, since the watches were four in number, each about two hours long. Everyone was able to keep awake for that length of time, even while sitting on the ground, and the turns alternated, so as to equalize the task all round. Had the watches been longer, the youths, as was the case while down East, would have been likely to slumber on their posts.

Arden Strubell was stretched out on the further side of the fire, flat on his back, his head resting on a stone, which was softened somewhat by his hands that were clasped between it and the back of his head, with the elbows projecting like wings from each side. One leg was partly drawn

up, with the other crossed over it, his position being the picture of indolence and ease. The pipe, whose stem was in the corner of his mouth, was only gently puffed at long intervals, for it was Arden's turn to sleep until eleven o'clock. He was, therefore, taking no share in the conversation which went on in such gentle, murmuring tones that it tended more to drowsiness than wakefulness on his part.

Matters were in this form, and the night was progressing, when Lattin, who was sitting directly opposite his friend, raised his hand for silence, and said in a frightened whisper:

"Arden, don't move or you're a dead man!"

"I know it," was the quiet reply from the Texan, who did not stir a muscle, "but what can I do? I'm a dead man anyway."

CHAPTER V. A TEST OF ONE'S NERVES

NICK RIBSAM and Herbert Watrous could hardly believe their own senses, and for a second or two looked at each other and at the cowboys, to make sure they had heard aright.

The youths were lolling near each other, Nick leaning on his elbow and looking in the broad face of Lattin, who just then was telling of a scrimmage in which he had had the closest call of his life while hunting Geronimo, while Herbert sat more erect.

Strubell, as has been told, was lying on his back on the other side of the camp fire, his hands clasped behind his head, and resting on his stone pillow. His sombrero lay on his forehead, in such a way that a part of the rim shaded his eyes, whose view of the outer world was obtained by gazing down along the front of his face and chin. He could see his slowly heaving breast, the cartridge belt, and the one leg crossed over the other and partly crooked at the knee. Off to the left was the glowing camp fire, and, by turning his eyes without moving his head, he could trace a part of the figure of Lattin, who was discoursing for the entertainment of his young friends.

This was the shape of matters, when the younger cowboy abruptly checked his narrative, and, looking across the fire at his companion, warned him not to move on the penalty of instant death, to which the other, without stirring a muscle or giving any evidence of alarm, calmly replied that he was aware of his situation, which was so hopeless that he considered himself the same as dead already.

“Don’t move,” added Lattin in a whisper to the boys, “or you will scare it; keep on talking the same as before, and maybe it will let him alone.”

“What are you referring to?” asked the perplexed Nick.

“There’s a tarantula lying on Arden’s breast; don’t you see it?”

The hideous thing was sitting on the chest of the cowboy, directly over his heart. Where it had come from no one could say, but probably the warmth of the fire or that of the body of the Texan had drawn it to the spot, and it was now making an exploration, on its own account, ready to inflict its deadly bite on the least provocation.

Strubell was half asleep, when, looking along the front of his body, he saw the outlines of the spider in the yellow light of the camp fire. It caused a slight tickling sensation, as it slowly felt its way forward. He knew its nature the instant he caught sight of it, and he observed that it was of unusual size and fierceness. He had seen a comrade die from the bite of a tarantula, which is held in greater dread than the famous rattlers of Texas, for it gives no warning of its intentions, which most frequently come in the form of a nipping bite whose effects are not only fatal but frightfully rapid.

Arden might have slowly unclasped his hands and given the thing a quick flirt, but the chances were a thousand to one that, if he did so, it would bite his finger. If let alone, it might change its purpose and crawl off into the darkness. It was not likely to injure him so long as it stayed on the front of his shirt, for it was hard for it to bite through that. It preferred the naked surface of the body in order to do its worst.

It could not very well bite the hands, since they remained clasped behind the Texan’s head. The nearest favorable points were the neck, where the shirt was open, and the face. If the spider crept upward, it was evident that it was making for one or the other, and there seemed no way of checking it, for the first move on the part of any one of the friends would rouse its anger, and cause it to bite the man on whose body it was resting. All that could be done was to do nothing, and pray to Heaven to save the poor fellow from impending death.

“We mustn’t show by anything we do,” said Lattin, “that we are excited. A quick move – a loud call, or any unusual motion may lead it to use its teeth. It’s the biggest and ugliest tarantula that I ever laid eyes on, and if it gives Arden one nip, he’s a goner.”

“But it is terrible to sit here and see him die,” said Nick, who was so nervous he found it hard to remain still, while Herbert trembled as if with a chill.

“It’s all we can do,” replied the Texan, who nevertheless kept a sharp eye on the thing, as if he was meditating some desperate resort to save his comrade’s life. “We will talk on, as though nothing has took place out of the usual run, and while we’re at it we’ll keep an eye on the critter.”

“What good will it do to keep an eye on it,” was the sensible question of Nick, “if we do nothing?”

“Leave that to me and don’t either of you stir. You know that we’re on our way to look after a ranch that Mr. Lord thinks of buying in New Mexico?”

He paused and gazed at the boys, as if in doubt whether they understood the matter. They nodded their heads and he continued:

“George Jennings owns the ranch and wants to move east. Last year he had another in Arizona. It was too small to suit him, and he came over this way, and now, as I said, wants to get out of the bus’ness altogether. You know, I s’pose, that they have warm weather in Arizona at certain times in the year?”

Once more the cowboy checked himself, as if he desired a reply. He seemed to be looking at the boys, but in reality was watching the tarantula, which was motionless on the breast of Strubell, as if he, too, was debating what was best to do.

“I don’t know of any part of the country where they do not have pretty hot weather in the course of the year,” said Nick.

“But Arizona lays over ’em all,” said Lattin, as if proud of the fact; “I’ve seen it day after day there, and night, too, when the thermometer doesn’t get below a hundred. Wal, it was on one of them blazing afternoons, that Jennings stretched out on the floor in his low front room to take a nap. His wife had gone to San Pedro a couple of days before, under the escort of the two ranchmen hired by him, and he was looking for ’em back every hour.

“That’s the way it came about that the father was left with his little gal Mabel, which was only six years old. Jennings loved that gal more than the apple of his eye, and would give his life any time to keep her from harm. I b’lieve you’ve a little sister, Nick, that you think a good deal of?”

“I have, God bless her!” replied Nick, as the moisture crept in his eyes; “there is nothing I would not do to save her from suffering and pain.”

Again, Lattin seemed to be looking at the countenance of the honest youth, but in reality his eyes were on the tarantula, and his right hand was moving slowly down his side toward his revolver in the belt at his waist.

“That bein’ so, you can understand how much Jennings thought of his little gal Mabel. Wal, he was in the middle of a nap, when he jumped to his feet as if he had seen a rattler crawling over the floor toward him. The reason why he jumped up so quick was ’cause he heard his little gal scream. He went out the door as if shot from the mouth of a cannon.

“The sight that met the ranchman was enough to set any father wild. Two of Geronimo’s Apaches, each on a pony, was galloping off on a dead run. One of them held Mabel in his arms, and the little gal, at sight of her father, reached out her arms and called to him to come and take her away from the bad Injun. Don’t you think that was enough to turn a father’s brain?”

“There can be no doubt of that,” replied Nick, shuddering at the mental picture of his sister Nellie in such an awful situation.

During the momentary pause, Lattin placed his hand on the butt of his revolver. The tarantula had not stirred more than an inch since he was seen, but that was in the direction of the Texan’s face, and his peril was becoming more imminent than before.

“Be careful, boys,” said Strubell in his ordinary tones, “the creature is getting nervous. He is now looking at me, and is coming a little closer to my face. Don’t try to brush or knock him off: maybe he’ll hunt for some other pasture, but the chances are against it.”

“All right, Ard,” replied Lattin with assumed cheerfulness; “we see your fix and are prayin’ for you. As I was sayin’, the sight that met Jennings’ eyes, when he jumped out of his door, was enough to set any man frantic. He was back into the house again, and out once more like a flash. He had his Winchester with him this time, and brought it to his shoulder, but the Apache that had his little gal was on the watch and held her up in front, so that the father couldn’t fire without killing his own child. So Jennings just give one groan and staggered back into the house and almost fell on to the floor.

“The poor fellow was in a bad fix. The nearest fort was a hundred miles off, and it was almost as far to San Pedro. The two Apaches had rode to the ranch on one pony, but, when they went away, the one that didn’t have the little gal was on the back of Jennings’ horse, and, since his wife and escort was absent, there wasn’t a single critter on the place.

“The first Apache had got so far off that he was beyond rifle-shot before Jennings was outdoors. He come out a few minutes later, and, shading his eyes, looked off across the dusty plain, where his child had disappeared. He thought the horses which he seen were growing plainer. They were coming toward him, and he didn’t know what it meant.

“For a while he didn’t stir, but kept looking closely. Bimeby, he seen there was but one horseman and he was Sam Ruggles, one of them that had acted as the escort of Mrs. Jennings when she went away. He was mounted on his own horse, and leading that of Mrs. Jennings, who he said would start home the next day.

“‘The country is so open,’ said Sam, ‘that she thought I had better start at once, so as to give you what help I could with the cattle – what’s the matter, George?’ he asked, observing the white face of his friend.

“‘Where did you get my horse?’ asked Jennings, striving hard to control himself.

“‘Up near the ford,’ said Sam; ‘just as I stopped to let my pony drink, someone fired at me from the bush, and I dropped out the saddle to the ground. I wasn’t hurt a bit; it was a dodge of mine to trick the redskin. The next instant, there was a whoop, and an Apache galloped out of the bush toward me, sure of another scalp. Wal,’ added Sam, with a grin, ‘an Apache can mistake, the same as other folks, and I needn’t give you the partic’lars. Your horse seemed to think he was at liberty to travel home, and he went so fast that I didn’t overhaul him till about a mile out. I was worried thinkin’ something had happened, and was glad enough to see that everything was right.’ Now that was a big mistake of Sam, wasn’t it?”

Nick and Herbert turned toward the speaker, as both answered his odd question, and observed that he now held his revolver in hand.

“Boys,” called poor Strubell, “the tarantula is creeping toward my face; I guess he means to bite; don’t stir, and if he gets much closer I’ll make a sweep at him.”

CHAPTER VI. TWO GOOD SHOTS

“WAL, then, Jennings tells Sam everything that had took place. It was wonderful the control the ranchman showed over himself. His face was as white as death, but he didn’t tremble, and talked as if he was speaking about the cattle. Sam thought that the Apache, having the extra load of the child and dead warrior, would not be able to travel fast, and there was a chance of fetching him off his pony, but Jennings feared there was a party of the varmints near by, and that he would jine them.

“Howsumever, you may be sure they didn’t lose any time talking, but jumping into their saddles, was off across the plain like a couple of whirlwinds. The trail showed that the Apache, with the gal and dead warrior, had kept close to the bushes that grew along the stream, which was not very broad, and runs into the Gila.

“A mile from the ford the two were surprised to come upon the body of the Apache that had been tumbled from the horse by Sam’s Winchester. The other must have got tired of carrying him, or was afraid his load would get him into trouble.

“‘At any rate,’ said the father, ‘Mabel is alive, though there’s no sayin’ how long she will stay so.’

“Just then both caught sight of the very Apache they was after. He was coming from the bush on a swift gallop, and still holding the crying child in front of him.

“Now, that Apache showed less cunning than is generally showed by his people, for, by thus hanging back, he gave the pursuers the very chance they wanted to come up with him. Even then he had so little fear that Jennings and Sam believed there was a party near at hand, though, as it turned out, it wasn’t so.

“As he come out of the bush, he struck across the open plain, with his pony on a sharp gallop, while little Mabel, seeing her father, stretched out her arms agin toward him and begged him to take her home.

“‘Leave him to me,’ said Jennings, bringing his Winchester to his shoulder. The redskin raised the child again, but he was just a second too late, for he rolled off his horse with a hole bored through his skull, as dead as dead could be.

“Mabel was bruised by her fall, but the Apache was killed so quick that he hadn’t a chance to put her out of the way, as he would have done had he knowed what was comin’. She was soon in her father’s arms, and all come out right as it does in the stories.”

Despite the interest in the incidents related by the Texan, the eyes of all three were fixed on the dreaded tarantula, which had been comparatively motionless for some minutes. It now began creeping toward the face of Strubell, who said in the same unwavering voice:

“He’s coming this time sure! He means to bite, boys, and it’s all up with me – ”

At that instant, the oppressive stillness was broken by the sharp report of Lattin’s revolver, which he had extracted from his belt a few seconds before. He levelled and fired the weapon with such marvellous quickness that his friends hardly caught the movement.

But the aim was perfect. The tarantula that was straddling across the chest of the prostrate Texan, surcharged with virus and about to inflict its fatal bite, vanished as though it had never been. There was a faint whiz, and it was gone into nothingness.

Arden Strubell did not stir, but remained with his hands clasped behind his head and every muscle motionless. Then, as his comrade pronounced his name, his elbows fell and the head partly rolled to one side.

“By George!” exclaimed Lattin, springing up, “that’s the first time I ever seen Ard faint away.”

"I don't wonder that he did!" said Nick, as he and Herbert also hurried to his relief.

They were hardly at his side and stooping over him, when he opened his eyes with a wan smile, and said faintly:

"It seems to have been a little too much for me, boys."

But he quickly rallied and assumed the sitting position.

"I had just made up my mind to give the spider a flirt with my hat," he said, "but the tarantula is so quick, I knew it would get in its work before I could brush it off. If I had struck at it with my hat when I first saw it there would have been an even chance, but I felt as though my arms were made of iron, and I was like a man with the nightmare, who cannot force his limbs to move. That was a good shot of yours, Baker."

"I'm rather proud of it," replied Lattin, settling back on his blanket, "and I thought it must come to that from the first, but I was so afraid of missing, that I put it off to the last second. If I had failed, the report would have started it into bitin' you before I could give it a second shot."

"I wonder whether there are any more of them around," said Herbert, glancing furtively about.

"That's what has troubled me," added Nick.

"I don't think any more of them will bother us," remarked Strubell, quick to recover from his fright; "we must expect these little annoyances in this part of the world."

"Yes," observed Lattin, "when you find such a fine climate as we have, and everything else just right to make you the happiest chap in the United States, which means the happiest in the world, you oughter be willing to pay for it."

"Well," said Nick, who, now that the oppressive burden was lifted, could smile at the conceits of his friends, "when we come to add the sum total, it will be found pretty much the same the world over. It seems to me, after the fright we have all had, that none of us will be able to sleep."

"What time is it?" asked Strubell. Nick looked at his watch, and replied that it was near eleven o'clock.

The Texan gathered the folds of his blanket around him, turned on his side, and within five minutes was asleep. The youths were amazed, but, as Lattin remarked, it was all easy enough when you became used to it.

It was the place of Herbert to watch over the camp from eleven until one o'clock, at which hour Nick would take his turn, Lattin and Strubell following in turn. The former willingly kept company with the boys while they discussed the startling occurrence early in the evening. By and by, however, the Texan became drowsy, and, bidding his young friends good-night, he too gathered his thick blanket about his muscular form, and joined his comrade in the land of dreams.

When Herbert took out his handsome watch to wind it, he leaned forward, so that the light from the fire fell upon its face. It happened that both hands were exactly together at the figure twelve, so that it was midnight and his duty was half over.

He looked round at the impressive scene. The fire was burning cheerily, though with the help of their thick, serviceable blankets the warmth was not needed. The horses were lying down, or cropping the grass, which was not very abundant in the immediate vicinity, and were too far off in the gloom to be seen. Each of his friends was so swathed that he resembled a log of wood when viewed from a short distance. The feet of all were turned toward the blaze, that being the general rule when sleeping in camp. The saddles, rifles, and extra luggage were loosely piled at one side, and Herbert, who was always inclined to be pressed down by his responsibility at such a time, could not help reflecting how completely a party of Indians or outlaws could place the hunters at their mercy by a sudden dash from the gloom.

But that kind of danger was not thought of by either of the Texans, who were not riding though this section for the first time.

It was only a few minutes later that Herbert heard one of the horses emit a slight whinny, as if something had disturbed him. The youth peered in the direction whence it came, but there was no moon and he discerned nothing.

"I wonder what it is," he said, pressing his Winchester to make sure it was actually within his grasp; "it may be another tarantula, a rattlesnake, a bear, or some other wild animal or wild person trying to steal into camp without alarming us."

One of the other ponies snuffed the air, the noise being as distinct in the stillness as was the sound of his watch when he wound it.

Herbert would not have been blamed had he awakened Strubell or Lattin, but he decided to wait before doing so. There was barely a possibility of peril from Indians or white men, and he considered himself able to meet any other kind.

The air, that had been oppressively still, was stirred by a breath which brought to him a peculiar sound. It lasted only a moment, and resembled the faint tapping of myriads of hammers on the earth – so numerous indeed that he suspected its meaning.

Applying his ear to the ground, he caught it with greater distinctness. It was as he supposed: an immense number of cattle were galloping over the plain, beyond the hills. They might be on their way to water or had been startled by some trivial cause, which often stampedes a drove that numbers thousands.

"Now if I find they are coming this way," thought the youth, "I will wake Strubell. They wouldn't be likely to enter the hills and run over this fire, but they might make trouble for our ponies."

At intervals of a few minutes he pressed his ear to the earth as before, and listened closely. The second time he did so he was certain the peculiar sounds were more distinct; but, waiting a brief while, he tried it again, and concluded they were neither louder nor fainter.

"They can't be standing still," was his logical conclusion, "and must soon come nearer or go further off."

Only a few minutes were required to settle the question: the cattle were receding, and doing so with such rapidity, that, much sooner than would have been suspected, the sounds had died out altogether.

CHAPTER VII. AN INTRUDER IN CAMP

THE minutes pass slowly at such times, and, though Herbert's duty lasted only two hours, they seemed double the length of that period during the day, or when his companions were awake.

The listening ear caught no further sounds of the multitudinous feet, and he dismissed the matter from his mind. The still air now and then was moved by what seemed a slight breeze, or eddy of wind, but it was barely sufficient to stir the blaze. Once he heard the report of a gun, startlingly distinct, though he knew it might have been fired fully a mile away.

"We are not the only people in this part of the world," he mused, giving expression to his reveries; "and that shot may have ended the life of some person."

It was a disturbing thought, and, as if to drive off the oppressiveness that was weighing him down, he rose to his feet and threw more sticks on the flames. His watch showed that it was only half-past twelve. He held the time-piece to his ear, suspecting that it had stopped running; but the familiar ticking was audible, and a glance at the tiny second-hand showed that it was really moving, though it never seemed to creep so tardily around the little circle.

Then he watched the indicator as it marked its course, and resorted to the many artifices that occur to those who find time dragging wearily on their hands. No hour ever seemed longer than was required for the watch to show that a fourth of that time had passed forever.

"But it will be worse for Nick," he concluded; "I think his task more wearisome than mine. We have all to take our share, however, as I suppose everyone must in the good and bad of life."

Herbert waited till the full time was up, and several minutes over, when he stepped to where Nick was lying, and gently shook his shoulder. He awoke readily, prepared to act his part as sentinel for the next two hours.

The elder told his friend what had occurred, adding that he discovered nothing else to disturb him. Then bidding him good-night, he wrapped himself in his own blanket and lay down with his feet toward the fire, falling asleep almost as quickly as had the cowboys before him.

Nick examined his rifle and saw it was ready for instant service, as was his pistol, with which he had practised until quite expert in its use. He sat down just beyond the circle of illumination thrown out by the blaze, for, somehow or other, it always seemed to him that such a course was not only safer, but that he could maintain more effective watch by doing so. He was able to see every one of his friends, while a prowler was not likely to observe him, unless his approach to camp was such as to place the guardsman between him and the blaze. In that event, he was quite sure to notice his outlines against the fire.

That this was a wise proceeding was proven by what followed.

He had been on duty for a half hour or more when he was disturbed by the same cause that startled Herbert. One of the horses uttered a slight neigh, giving no other evidence of alarm, if that was the meaning of the sound.

At this moment Nick was well back, on the opposite of the camp from the animals. He was therefore confident that if anything threatened them, he himself was invisible to whatever it might be.

After listening a few minutes, he decided to investigate for himself. This he did, not by proceeding in a direct line, as he could have done, but by making a circle which took him beyond the light of the fire until nigh enough to observe the animals.

They were on the ground, as though they had cropped their fill, and now enjoyed rest more than food. They appeared to be reposing quietly, and he concluded that the slight noise which he had noticed signified nothing. Horses and other domestic animals often start in their sleep, as though

disturbed by dreams, the same as do we, and that which Nick heard may have been evidence of the fact.

Still, it is also a truth that men, when in situations of peril, frequently find it safer to rely more on the acuteness of their horse than upon their own vigilance. The animal seems to have his senses sharpened to the finest point, for his master's good.

"I guess there's nothing wrong," said Nick to himself, after inspecting the ponies; "but it is best to act as though danger always threatens. That's what Strubell and Lattin say, and everyone must see its logic."

The fire was now burning so low that he gathered up a lot of wood and threw it on the flames. While thus employed, his gun lay on the ground near the feet of Herbert. The thought that, if any hostile prowler was near, it was the easiest thing in the world to pick him off, caused a strange feeling to come over the youthful sentinel, and his relief was great when able to catch up his gun and slip back in the protecting gloom of the night.

He had taken occasion, while near the fire, to glance at his watch, and, like his companion, was astonished to learn how brief the time was that he had been on duty. It was less than half an hour.

About the same period passed without the most trifling alarm. Nick studiously held himself in the background, where he moved slowly about, dreading to sit down, though often tempted to do so. He knew that so long as he kept the erect posture his senses would be at command, and it was far easier to do this by motion, no matter how slight, than by standing still.

He had reached the conclusion that the night was to be as uneventful as those that had preceded it, when once more one of the ponies uttered the same sound that had disturbed him before. Nick was startled, for the belief flashed upon him that this signified something. There must be some cause for the alarm of the animals, outside of themselves.

He reflected for a minute upon the most prudent thing to do. He dismissed the thought of awaking the Texans, for, like Herbert, he shrank from asking their help until certain it was needed, for, by so doing, he confessed his own inability to meet the danger, whatever it might be.

He now determined to make a much larger circuit than before, his object being to bring the horses between him and the fire. This would not only show the animals, but was likely to reveal the disturbing cause. At the same time, Nick himself could remain in the gloom, where it was hardly possible to be seen. The moon, which might have interfered with the success of this plan, would not be above the horizon for several hours to come.

In order to traverse the distance he had in mind, he was forced to move around several large rocks and boulders, cross the small stream which flowed near the camp, and pick his way with the utmost care. Stillness was necessary above all things.

The darkness, while favorable in many respects, had its disadvantages, as was quickly proven. At the moment when he believed he was opposite the ponies, and, therefore, near them, he stepped upon a rolling stone, and despite his expertness, fell with a thump to the ground.

He was impatient with himself, and could hardly repress an angry exclamation, for a snuff from one of the animals showed how alert they were to the slightest disturbance.

"The next thing to be done," reflected Nick, "is to shoot off my rifle; then the job will be in fine shape."

But, so far as he could judge, no harm had been done, and he pressed on with greater care than before. It took considerable time to reach the desired point, but it was attained at last. The horses were in a direct line with the camp fire, and he began stealing toward them.

This was the time for extreme caution, for, if the least noise betrayed him, all chance of success would be destroyed. It may be doubted, however, whether either of the Texans himself could have carried out the plan more skilfully than did Nick Ribsam.

When he halted, he was not fifty feet from his own animal, and had approached him so silently that no one of the ponies was disturbed. They were silent, as if asleep.

But at the moment when Nick was motionless and carefully studying the dark figures, whose upper parts were shown against the background of the fire, he saw one of the animals raise his head higher than the others and emit a snuff, louder than ever.

“It couldn’t be that I caused that,” was the decision of Nick, who was in a crouching posture; “it’s something else that alarmed them, and, whatever it is, it is closer to them than I am.”

He was right, for hardly had he begun creeping forward, when the head and shoulders of a man slowly rose between him and the horses, and in a direct line with the camp fire, which revealed the upper part of his body as distinctly as if stamped with ink against the yellow background of flame.

“It’s a white man,” was Nick’s conclusion, “and he is there for no good.”

The presence of the intruder now helped the youth in his hurried but stealthy approach; for, when the horses showed additional excitement, perhaps, at the coming of a second person, the stranger would believe it was caused wholly by himself. Apprehending no approach, too, from the rear, he would give no attention to that direction, but keep his eye on the camp to be ready for any demonstration from that quarter.

It is quite possible that he saw Nick when he withdrew beyond the light, but he had no reason to suspect he had flanked him and passed round to the other side.

It took the sentinel but a few more minutes to satisfy himself of the errand of the intruder. Nick’s own pony was approached and obliged to rise to his feet. The stranger was a horse thief, making a stealthy raid upon the camp, while all the campers but one were asleep.

Taking the head of Nick’s horse, he was in the act of flinging himself upon his bare back, when the youth stepped forward in the gloom and called out:

“Hands up, quicker than lightning!”

Nick imitated as nearly as he could the voice and manner of one of the Texans when making a similar startling demand.

CHAPTER VIII. BELL RICKARD

NICK RIBSAM had no wish to figure as a rough border character, who ordered his captive to "throw up his hands," when able to secure "the drop on him"; but the youth had the native shrewdness to suit himself to the situation. He and Herbert had been in the Lone Star State long enough to pick up a good deal of information.

When he discovered the stranger among the horses, there could be hardly a doubt of his business, but he waited till he was in the act of riding off with his own horse before he called out the startling words which told the thief he was caught.

A man who is used to getting the drop on others is quite sure to know when that little point is made on him. The intruder was on the point of leaping upon the back of Nick's pony, but checked himself and promptly reached both hands upward.

"You've got the drop on me, pard, this time, but go easy," said he in a voice as cheery as if he were talking about the weather.

"Face toward the fire, walk straight forward and don't stop, turn round, or try anything till you get the word from me."

All this time, the thief was striving to gain a sight of the individual who held him at his mercy. It was evident he did not recognize the voice, and there may have been something in Nick's tones which led him to think he was not a full grown man. He was standing erect, with his Winchester levelled, and nothing in the world was easier than for him to send a bullet through his body.

Border law never would have questioned the act: rather it would have blamed him for showing mercy. But Nick Ribsam, like every right-thinking person, looked upon the taking of human life in its true light, and as never right unless to save his own. The man before him was trying to steal his property, but nothing more. No doubt he would have been quick to shoot Nick if their situations were reversed, but this could not affect the views of the youth. As yet he had no right to harm him.

Nick assumed a ferocity that he was far from feeling. He was playing a part, and doing it well.

When the thief heard the command, he hesitated, as if unwilling to obey it.

"I guess you hadn't better insist on *that*," he said, with a half laugh, full of significance.

"What do you mean, sir?"

"If you start to foller me to the camp, my pard, just behind you, will give it to you in the neck."

This was alarming, and for a moment Nick was in doubt what to do. If he should start to drive the horse thief before him, only to find that his armed companion was doing the same with him, the tables would be turned in the highest style of the art.

But the youth's brightness came to his aid. He knew that if this man had a comrade in his wrong doing, he would have put in an appearance before matters had reached this interesting stage: he never would have remained in the background, while Nick was securing the drop on the other.

He had no one with him. He was alone, and was trying a trick on his captor.

"Walk on," said Nick; "when your partner shows up, we'll attend to *his* case."

The rogue saw there was no help for it, and, without another word of protest, walked sullenly in the direction of the camp fire.

The prisoner seemed to have concluded that, inasmuch as he had to submit, his true plan was to do so gracefully. He walked with a certain dignity along the line pointed out, while Nick kept a few paces to the rear, with his Winchester ready for instant call.

It was the first time he was ever placed in such a situation, and, as may be supposed, his emotions were peculiar. As the figure in front grew more distinct in the light of the camp fire, he

saw that he was of unusual size, being at at least six feet tall, long-limbed, and thin of frame. There could be no doubt he was fully armed, with the exception of a rifle, which, for some reason or other, was absent. He had probably left it near by, in order that nothing might hinder the best use of his arms while committing his crime.

Nick cleverly shortened the space separating them, for he was afraid of some trick on the part of his captive. The scamp might open on the sleeping cowboys and riddle them before he could prevent. But such fears were causeless. A course of that kind, as he himself well knew, would insure his instant death at the hands of his captor. It would have been more reasonable had he turned like a flash, when in the partial gloom, and let fly at Nick, instead of pointing both hands at the stars with such readiness when ordered so to do.

Had the fellow known what he learned a few minutes later, he would have done that very thing, and with almost certain success; for his revolver could have been drawn and fired before the youth would have suspected what was going on.

At the moment the stranger came into full view, near the fire and the sleepers, his captor called:

“Halt! that will do!”

To Nick’s astonishment he saw two figures rise like shadows from the ground. They were Strubell and Lattin, who, flinging off their blankets, stood each with revolver in hand, ready for business. In fact, the loud call of Nick was meant to awaken one or both of them, for matters were assuming that shape that the young man felt he must have their help at once.

His loud summons, however, was unnecessary, for the words which had already passed between the captor and his prisoner had brought them to their senses. Men like them are light sleepers, and they were quick to discover what was going on. More than that, they recognized the voice of the intruder as that of Bell Rickard, one of the most desperate horse thieves in the Southwest.

Had the fellow tried the trick on Nick, the Texans held themselves prepared to bound into the affray, and rush it to a conclusion like a cyclone, but the words they overheard gave them a clue to what was going on. They saw that the great connoisseur in horse flesh had put his foot in it in the worst kind of a way. He was in the power of a boy, who had actually made him a prisoner – a feat which the sheriffs of half a dozen counties had been trying for months in vain to do.

They hardly expected Nick to bring him into camp without trouble; and though Strubell and Lattin lay motionless on the ground, listening and awaiting events, they had loosened their blankets, drawn their weapons, and were on the alert.

But the great Rickard, at the moment of halting, found himself face to face with the two cowboys, whom he had known well for several years, and with whom he had exchanged more than one shot, each fired with the intent to kill.

“Howdy, Bell?” said Strubell, with a smile on his handsome face which had a world of meaning; “I hope you feel well, pard.”

“Tollyble, thank you,” replied the rogue, extending his hand to each of the cowboys in turn; “how is it with you?”

Lattin answered for both that they were well, and then invited the new arrival to a seat by the fire. Rickard returned thanks as courteously as if he were receiving the greatest favor that could be granted him.

The next moment the three were lolling side by side, as smiling and seemingly on as good terms as though they were brothers. Bell carried his brierwood with him, and Strubell passed him his little sack of tobacco, from which he helped himself, the party mingling their smoke, smiling and even laughing at the jocosely remarks that were passed.

Herbert Watrous slept on, undisturbed by the noise, while Nick Ribsam stood in the background, viewing the scene, which impressed him as the most extraordinary he had ever witnessed.

“Let me see,” said Lattin reflectively, “it’s several months since we last met: do you remember where it was?”

“I think,” replied Rickard, looking thoughtfully at the stars, as if busy with memory, “that it was in Laredo, at Brown’s place.”

“You’re right,” struck in the cowboy; “we had a shooting scrap, and I came near passing in my checks.”

“Yes,” laughed Bell, “I thought I had you that time, but I fired too quick; the lights went out, and then the room was full of smoke and bullets. When things cleared up, you wasn’t there.”

“No,” said Lattin, “you folks were too thick for me, and I lit out; I swum the Rio Grande, just as Ben Thompson did when he got caught in the same place and in the same way. He got off without a scratch, as he did hundreds of times before, only to catch it at Santone at last, as he was bound to do sooner or later.”

CHAPTER IX. DEPARTURE OF THE GUEST

"BEN and me done travelled a good deal together," said Rickard, with a faint sigh; "he was the quickest chap on the shoot I ever met; I never knowed him to miss when he had any show at all, and he was the luckiest fellow that ever walked. Do you know what Ben's rule was?" asked Rickard, turning toward the cowboys, as if about to impart a piece of delightful news.

"It was to shoot whenever he had the slightest excuse," replied Strubell, who evidently had little respect for one of the most famous characters that Texas ever brought to the surface.

"Whenever he got into a shooting scrap he always let the other chap fire first; for then, when *he* let fly, he had a good case of self-defence. He always done that, as he told me himself."

I may be allowed to say that this remark about Ben Thompson, once City Marshal of Austin, was true. He informed me that he had followed the rule for years, and it doubtless helped to secure his acquittal in a large number of the cases where he was tried for slaying others, though the shameful admiration shown him by all classes had much to do with his immunity from legal punishment. As has been hinted, however, there came a time when Ben's rule failed to work satisfactorily for himself. It was down in San Antonio, the scene of more than one of his crimes, that a half dozen men worked in a volley from their Winchesters ahead of Ben's revolver, and he died with his boots on, the last shot which he fired before breathing his last causing the death of one of his assailants.

It is hardly worth while to give the conversation which went on by the camp fire for fully two hours, for it was not of a character that can be commended to readers. There were stirring reminiscences of those "bad men," known a few years ago respectively as Bill Longley and John Wesley Hardin. I suppose that Texas never produced two more desperate men. When I saw Longley, he was as handsome a person as I ever met, and proved to be one of the few legally hanged individuals in the Lone Star State, his taking off occurring some years ago in Galveston.

Hardin was more ill-favored, as to personal appearance. He was the son of a preacher, and was named for one of the great founders of Methodism. When I last talked with the stumpy, broad-faced desperado he was in the Austin penitentiary, serving a twenty-five years' sentence for horse stealing, the numerous capital crimes he had committed not being taken into account.

The point I am making is that Bell Rickard, who, in his way, was as evil a man as any one of those whom I have named, having entered the camp as a prisoner, was treated as a guest. No one unacquainted with the circumstances would have suspected there was any feeling other than the strongest friendship between them.

They recalled the numerous stirring scimmages in which they had taken part, and generally with Strubell and Lattin as the deadly enemies of Rickard and his friends. They laughed over the many close calls, when their mutual escapes seemed to turn on a hair, and even referred to those that were likely to occur again in the near future.

Nick Ribsam grew so interested that he forgot his duty as sentinel, and, leaning on his gun, stared with open mouth at the attenuated Texan, with his scraggly beard, restless gray eyes, and alert movements, as he smoked and laughed and talked.

Suddenly Strubell turned to the youth and said:

"Nick, I guess you had better take a look at the animals; Bell may have some friends around; if you get sight of any, don't bother to ask questions, but drop them at the first shot."

Rickard stopped in the middle of a remark he was making, and looked at the young man with a smile. Then he resumed his words, and the conversation went on as before. Nick walked slowly

out to where the ponies were lying on the ground, wondering and puzzled by the new phase of southwestern life as he saw it for the first time.

“Wal,” said Rickard, after talking a while longer, as he rose to his feet, stretched his limbs, and yawned, “I guess I’ll have to be going, pards. By-by.”

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