

HARRY CASTLEMON

JULIAN
MORTIMER

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Julian Mortimer

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Harry Castlemon Julian Mortimer / A Brave Boy's Struggle for Home and Fortune

CHAPTER I THE WAGON TRAIN

THE SUN was just sinking out of sight behind the western mountains, and the shadows of twilight were beginning to creep through the valley, when two horsemen, who had been picking their way along the rocky and almost impassible road that ran through Bridger's Pass, drew rein on the summit of an elevation and looked about them.

One of them was a trapper – he never would have been taken for anything else – a man about forty years of age, and a giant in strength and stature. The very small portion of his face that could be seen over his thick, bushy whiskers was as brown as an Indian's; and from under the tattered fur cap that was slouched over his forehead, peeped forth a pair of eyes as sharp as those of an eagle. He was dressed in a complete suit of buckskin, rode a large cream-colored mustang, and carried a heavy rifle across the horn of his saddle. Around his waist he wore a leather belt, supporting a knife and tomahawk, and under his left arm, suspended by thongs of buckskin, which crossed his breast, hung a bullet-pouch and powder-horn. This man was Silas Roper – one of the best guides that ever led a wagon train across the prairie.

His companion was a youth about sixteen years of age, Julian Mortimer by name, and the hero of our story. He presented a great contrast to the burly trapper. He was slender and graceful, with a fair, almost girlish face, and a mild blue eye, which gazed in wonder at the wild scene spread out before it. It was plain that he had not been long on the prairie, and a stranger would have declared that he was out of his element; but those who were best acquainted with him would have told a different story. He took to the mountains and woods as naturally as though he had been born there, and Silas Roper predicted that he would make his mark as a frontiersman before many years more had passed over his head. There was plenty of strength in his slight figure, and one might have looked the world over without finding a more determined and courageous spirit. He was an excellent shot with the rifle, and managed the fiery little charger on which he was mounted with an ease and grace that showed him to be an accomplished horseman.

The boy's dress was an odd mixture of the simple style of the prairies and the newest and most elaborate fashions of the Mexicans. He wore a sombrero, a jacket of dark-blue cloth, profusely ornamented with gold lace, buckskin trowsers, brown cloth leggings with green fringe, and light shoes, the heels of which were armed with huge Mexican spurs. His weapons consisted of a rifle, slung over his shoulder by a broad strap, a hunting knife and a brace of revolvers, which he carried in his belt, and a lasso, which was coiled upon the horn of his saddle. From his left shoulder hung a small deerskin haversack, to which was attached an ornamented powder-horn. The haversack contained bullets for his rifle, cartridges for his revolvers, and flint, steel and tinder for lighting a fire. Behind his saddle, neatly rolled up and held in its place by two straps, was a poncho which did duty both as overcoat and bed. He was mounted on a coal-black horse, which was very fleet, and so ill-tempered that no one besides his master cared to approach him.

The trapper and his young companion belonged to an emigrant train which, a few weeks previous to the beginning of our story, had left St. Joseph for Sacramento, and they had ridden in advance of the wagons to select a camping ground for the night. This was a matter of no ordinary importance at that particular time, for during the last two days a band of Indians had been hovering

upon the flanks of the train, and the guide knew that they were awaiting a favorable opportunity to swoop down upon it. Hitherto Silas had had an eye only to the comfort of the emigrants, and in picking out his camping grounds had selected places that were convenient to wood and water, and which afforded ample pasturage for the stock belonging to the train; but now he was called upon to provide for the safety of the people under his charge.

The road, at the point where the horsemen had halted, wound around the base of a rocky cliff, which arose for a hundred feet without a single break or crevice, and was barely wide enough to admit the passage of a single wagon. On the side opposite the cliff was a deep gorge, which seemed to extend down into the very bowels of the earth. It was here that the guide had decided to camp for the night. He carefully examined the ground, and a smile of satisfaction lighted up his face.

"This is the place we've been looking for," said he, dismounting from his horse and tying the animal to a neighboring tree. "Now I will go out an' look around a little bit, an' you can stay here till the wagons come up. You won't be afeared if I leave you alone, will you?"

"Afraid?" repeated Julian. "Of course not. There's nothing to be afraid of."

"You may think differently afore you see the sun rise again," replied the guide. "Now, when the train comes up tell the fellers to take half the wagons an' block up the road, here at the end of the cliff, an' to put the others at the lower end. Then we'll be protected on all sides. The Injuns can't come down the cliff to get at us, 'cause it's too steep; an' they can't cross the gully nuther. They'll have to come along the road; an' when they try that we'll get behind the wagons an' fight 'em the best we know how. It's risky business, too," added Silas, pulling off his cap and digging his fingers into his head, "'cause if they are too many fur us we won't have no chance on airth to run. We'll have to stay right here an' die, the hul kit an' bilin' of us."

Julian, who had never seen an Indian in war-paint or heard the whistle of a hostile bullet, was amazed at the trapper's coolness and indifference. The bare thought of a fight with the savages was enough to cause him the most intense alarm, and yet here was Silas, who had more than once been a prisoner in the hands of the Indians, and who knew much better than Julian could imagine it, what the fate of the emigrants would be if their enemies proved too strong for them, apparently as much at his ease as though there had not been a hostile warrior within a thousand miles. The boy wondered at his courage and wished his friend could impart some of it to him, little dreaming how soon he would have need of it.

"Do you really think there is danger of an attack?" asked Julian, as soon as he could speak.

The trapper, who was in the act of untying a haunch of venison that was fastened behind his saddle, turned and looked curiously at his companion.

"Youngster," said he, "if you should diskiver a cloud as black as midnight comin' up over these mountains, an' should see the lightnin' a playin' around the edges, an' hear the thunder a grumblin', what would you say?"

"That we were going to have a storm," replied Julian.

"In course you would. An' when I know that thar are Injins all around us, an' that they are takin' mighty good care to keep themselves out of sight, I tell myself that they'll bar watchin'. When I see their trail, an' find out that thar are nigh onto three hundred braves in the party, an' that they haint got no women or plunder with 'em, I know that they are on the war-path. An' when they foller us fur two hul days, an' their spies watch us every night while we are makin' our camp – like that varlet over thar is watchin' us now – I know that they are arter us an' nobody else. The signs are jest as plain to me as the signs of a thunder storm are to you."

"Is there some one watching us now?" asked Julian, in great excitement.

"Sartin thar is. I've seed that copper-colored face of his'n peepin' over that rock ever since we've been here. If he was within good pluggin' distance all the news he would carry back to his friends wouldn't do 'em much good, I reckon."

As the trapper spoke he pointed toward the opposite side of the gorge. Julian looked in the direction indicated, closely scrutinizing every rock and tree within the range of his vision, but nothing in the shape of an Indian's head could he see. His eyes were not as sharp as those of the guide.

"Never mind," said Silas, "you'll see plenty of 'em afore mornin', an' they'll be closer to you than you'll care to have 'em. But you needn't be any ways oneasy. *They* won't hurt you. It's white men that you've got to look out fur."

"White men?" echoed Julian.

"Sartin. Thar's two persons in the world – an' I can lay my hand on one of 'em in less'n five minutes – who would be willin' to give something nice if they could get hold of you. I know a heap more about you than you think I do."

"You have hinted something like this before, Silas, and I don't know what you mean. I wish you would explain yourself."

"I hain't got no time now," replied the guide, shouldering his rifle and walking briskly up the road. "Keep your eyes open, an' don't go out of the camp till I get back. Don't forget what I told you about them wagons nuther."

The trapper quickly disappeared around a bend in the road, and Julian once more directed his gaze across the gully and tried in vain to discover the hiding-place of the spy. He began to feel timid now that he was alone. The thought that there were hostile Indians all around him, and that one of their number was concealed almost within rifle-shot of him, watching every move he made, was by no means an agreeable one. His first impulse was to put spurs to his horse and make the best of his way back to the train; and he probably would have done so had he not at that moment become aware that the train was coming to him. He heard the rumbling of the wheels and the voices of teamsters below him, and the familiar sounds brought his courage back to him again. He remained at his post until the foremost wagons came in sight, and then proceeded to carry out the instructions Silas had given him.

CHAPTER II

JULIAN HEARS SOMETHING

IN HALF an hour the preparations for the night were all completed, and Julian surveyed the camp with a smile of satisfaction. There were twenty wagons in the train, and of these two barricades had been made, one at the upper and the other at the lower end of the cliffs, as the guide had directed. The vehicles had been drawn close together, and were fastened to one another by chains so that they could not be easily moved from their places. The space between the wheels was blocked up with plows, harrows, stoves, bedsteads and chairs, thus rendering it a matter of some difficulty for any one to effect an entrance into the camp.

While this work was being performed the shadows of twilight had deepened into the gloom of night, and now all objects outside the circle of light made by the camp-fires were concealed by Egyptian darkness. Inside the barricades a scene was presented that was a cheering one to men wearied with their day's journey. A dozen fires blazed along the base of the cliff, and beside them stalwart pioneers reposed on their blankets, smoking their pipes and watching with hungry eyes the preparations for supper that were going on around them. Venison steaks were broiling on the coals, potatoes roasting in the ashes, and coffee-pots simmered and sputtered, filling the camp with the odor of their aromatic contents. Cattle and horses cropped the herbage that grew along the edge of the gully, and noisy children, all unconscious of the danger that threatened them, rolled about on the grass, or relieved their cramped limbs by running races along the road. But, although the camp wore an air of domesticity and security, preparations for battle were everywhere visible. The saddles and bridles had not been removed from the horses as usual, the emigrants wore their revolvers about their waists, and kept their rifles within easy reach. There were pale faces in that camp, and men who had all their lives been familiar with danger started and trembled at the rustle of every leaf.

Julian Mortimer, from a neighboring wagon, on which he had perched himself to await the return of the guide, watched the scene presented to his gaze, as he had done every night since leaving St. Joseph, and bemoaned his hard lot in life.

"Among all these people," he soliloquized, "there are none that I can call relatives and friends, and not one even to speak a kind word to me. How I envy those fellows," he added, glancing at a couple of boys about his own age who were seated at the nearest camp-fire conversing with their parents. "They have a father to watch over them, a mother to care for them, and brothers and sisters to love, but they do not seem to appreciate their blessings, for they are continually quarreling with one another, and no longer ago than this morning one of those boys flew into a terrible rage because his mother asked him to chop some wood to cook breakfast with. If he could be alone in the world for a few days, as I have been almost ever since I can remember, he would know how to value that mother when he got back to her. If the Indians attack us to-night some of the emigrants will certainly be killed, and the friends they have left behind them in the States will mourn over their fate; but if I fall, there will be no one to drop a tear for me or say he is sorry I am gone. There is nothing on earth that cares whether I live or die, unless it is my horse. If the Indians kill me perhaps he will miss me."

Julian's soliloquy was suddenly interrupted by a light footstep behind the wagon in which he was sitting. He turned quickly and discovered a man stealing along the barricade and examining it closely, as if he were looking for a place to get through it. Julian's first thought was to accost him, but there was something so stealthy in the man's actions that his curiosity was aroused, and checking the words that arose on his lips he remained quiet in his concealment, and waited to see what was going to happen. He had often seen the man during the journey across the plains, and

knew that he was one of the emigrants, but why he should seek to leave the camp at that time and in so unusual a manner, was something the boy could not understand.

The man walked the whole length of the barricade, turning to look at the emigrants now and then to make sure that none of them were observing his movements, and finally disappeared under one of the wagons. Julian heard him working his way through the obstructions that had been placed between the wheels, and presently saw him appear again on the outside of the barricade.

Almost at the same instant the boy discovered another figure moving rapidly but noiselessly down the road toward the camp. At first he thought it was the guide, but when the man came within the circle of light thrown out by the camp-fires he saw that he was a stranger. He was evidently a mountain man, for he was dressed in buckskin and carried a long rifle in the hollow of his arm, and the never-failing knife and tomahawk in his belt; but he was the worst specimen of this class of men that Julian had ever seen. His clothing was soiled and ragged, his hair, which had evidently never been acquainted with a comb, fell down upon his shoulders, and his face looked as though it had received the very roughest usage, for it was terribly battered and scarred. One glance at him was enough to frighten Julian, who, knowing instinctively that the man was there for no good purpose, drew further back into the shadow of the wagon-cover.

The emigrant who had left the camp in so suspicious a manner, discovered the stranger the moment he reached the outside of the barricade, but he did not appear to be surprised to see him. On the contrary, he acted as if he had been expecting him, for he placed one foot on the nearest wagon-tongue, rested his elbow on his knee, and when the trapper had approached within speaking distance, said in a suppressed whisper:

“How are you, Sanders?”

The latter paid no more attention to the greeting than if he had not been addressed at all. He advanced close to the wagon in which Julian was concealed – so close that his brawny shoulders were almost within reach of the boy’s hand – and peered through the barricade, taking in at one swift glance all that was going on inside the camp. He next looked up and down the road, fixing his eyes suspiciously on every tree and rock near him that was large enough to conceal a foe, and having satisfied himself that there was no one near him, he dropped the butt of his rifle to the ground, and growled out:

“Wal!”

“Well,” replied the emigrant, “I have been to Missouri, and I have returned, as you see.”

“I reckon you’re satisfied now, hain’t you?” he asked.

“I am. I am satisfied of four things: That the boy is alive and hearty; that he remembers more of his early history than we thought he would; that he has come out here to make trouble for us; and that he is at this very moment with this wagon train.”

As the emigrant said this he folded his arms and looked at his companion to observe the effect these words would have upon him. He, no doubt, expected that the trapper would be surprised, and the latter’s actions indicated that he certainly was. He stepped back as suddenly as if a blow had been aimed at him, and after regarding the emigrant sharply for a moment, struck the butt of his rifle with his clenched hand, and ejaculated:

“Sho!”

“It’s a fact,” replied his companion.

“Wal, now, I wouldn’t be afeared to bet my ears agin a chaw of tobacker that you’re fooled the worst kind,” said the trapper, who was very much excited over what he had heard, and seemed quite unable to bring himself to believe it. “The boy was young when he was tuk away from here – not more’n eight years old – an’ do you ’spose he could remember anything that happened or find his way across these yere prairies to his hum agin? Don’t look reason’ble.”

“It’s the truth, whether it looks reasonable or not. I have seen Julian Mortimer, and talked with him, and consequently may be supposed to know more about him and his plans than you who have not seen him for years. What was that?”

Julian, astonished to hear his own name pronounced by one whom he believed to be a stranger to him, uttered an ejaculation under his breath, and forgetting in his excitement how close the men were to him, bent forward and began to listen more intently.

The very slight rustling he occasioned among the folds of the canvas cover of the wagon was sufficient to attract the attention of the emigrant and his companion, who brought their conversation to a sudden close, and looking about them suspiciously, waited for a repetition of the sound.

But Julian, frightened at what he had done, and trembling in every limb when he saw the trapper turn his head and gaze earnestly toward the wagon in which he was concealed, remained perfectly motionless and held his breath in suspense.

The men listened a moment, but hearing nothing to alarm them, Sanders folded his arms over the muzzle of his rifle, intimating by a gesture that he was ready to hear what else the emigrant had to say, and the latter once more placed his foot on the wagon-tongue, and continued:

“It is time we had an understanding on one point, Sanders. Are you working for my cousin, Reginald, or for me?”

“I’m workin’ fur you, in course,” replied the trapper. “I’ve done my level best fur you. I had my way with one of the brats, an’ put him whar he’ll never trouble nobody.”

“Has he never troubled any one since that night? Has he never troubled *you*?” asked the emigrant, in a significant tone. “Could you be hired to spend an hour in Reginald’s rancho after dark?”

“No, I couldn’t,” replied the trapper, in a subdued voice, glancing nervously around, and drawing a little closer to his companion. “But that thar boy is at the bottom of the lake, an’ I’d swar to it, ’cause I put him thar myself. What it is that walks about that rancho every night, an’ makes such noises, an’ cuts up so, I don’t know. You had oughter let me done as I pleased with the other; but you got chicken-hearted all of a sudden, an’ didn’t want him rubbed out, an’ so I stole him away from his hum for you, an’ you toted him off to the States. If he comes back here an’ makes outlaws of you an’ your cousin, it’s no business of mine. But I am on your side, an’ you know it.”

“I don’t know anything of the kind. It is true that you did all this for me, and that I paid you well for it; but I know that you have since promised Reginald that you would find the boy and bring him back here. Will you attack this train to-night?”

“Sartin. That’s what we’ve been a follerin’ it fur. If you want to save your bacon, you’d best be gettin’ out.”

“I intend to do so; but I don’t want the boy to get out; do you understand? You know where to find me in the morning, and if you will bring me his jacket and leggins to prove that he is out of the way, I will give you a thousand dollars. There are a good many boys with the train, but you will have no trouble in picking out Julian, if you remember how he looked eight years ago. You will know him by his handsome face and straight, slender figure.”

“I’ll find him,” said the trapper; “it’s a bargain, an’ thar’s my hand onto it. Now I’ll jest walk around an’ take a squint at things, an’ you had best pack up what plunder you want to save an’ cl’ar out; ’cause in less’n an hour me an’ the Injuns will be down on this yere wagon train like a turkey on a tater-bug.”

The emigrant evidently thought it best to act on this suggestion, for without wasting any time or words in leave-taking he made his way carefully through the barricade into the camp.

The trapper watched him until he disappeared from view, and then said, as if talking to himself, but in a tone of voice loud enough for Julian to hear:

“A thousand dollars fur doin’ a job that you are afeared to do yourself! I don’t mind shootin’ the boy, but I’d be the biggest kind of a dunce to do it fur that money when another man offers me

\$5,000 for him alive an' well. If that youngster, Julian, is in this camp, I'll win that five thousand to-night, or my name ain't Ned Sanders."

The trapper shouldered his rifle, and with a step that would not have awakened a cricket, stole along the barricade, carefully examining it at every point, and mentally calculating the chances for making a successful attack upon it. When he had passed out of sight in the darkness, Julian drew a long breath, and settled back in his place of concealment to think over what he had heard.

CHAPTER III

A RIDE IN THE DARK

TO DESCRIBE the feelings with which Julian Mortimer listened to the conversation we have just recorded were impossible. He knew now that he had been greatly mistaken in some opinions he had hitherto entertained. He had told himself but a few minutes before that there was no one on earth who cared whether he lived or died; but scarcely had the thought passed through his mind before he became aware that there were at least two persons in the world who were deeply interested in that very matter – so much so that one was willing to pay a ruffian a thousand dollars to kill him, while the other had offered five times that amount to have him delivered into his hands alive and well. It was no wonder that the boy was overwhelmed with fear and bewilderment.

“Whew!” he panted, pulling off his sombrero and wiping the big drops of perspiration from his forehead, “this goes ahead of any thing I ever heard of. I wonder if Silas had any reference to this when he said that there were two men in the world who would be willing to give something nice to get hold of me! I’m done for. If I am not killed by the Indians, that villain, Sanders, will make a prisoner of me and take me off to Reginald. Who is Reginald, and what have I done that he should be so anxious to see me? I never knew before that I was worth \$5,000 to anybody. Who is that emigrant, and how does it come that I am in his way? He says that he has talked with me and knows all about my plans, but I am positive that I never spoke to him in my life. I never saw him until I found him with this wagon train at St. Joseph. I have had some thrilling adventures during the past few weeks, and I can see very plainly that they are not yet ended.”

Julian, trembling with anxiety and alarm, clambered out of the wagon, and leaning on the muzzle of his rifle, looked down into the gorge, thought over his situation, and tried to determine upon some plan of action. His first impulse was to acquaint the emigrants with the fact that one of their number had been holding converse with an enemy, and have the traitor secured at once. His next was to provide for his own safety by collecting the few articles of value he possessed and making his way back to the prairie; but he was deterred from attempting to carry out this plan by the fear that while he was fleeing from one danger he might run into another. The savages had probably surrounded the camp by this time, and he could not hope to pass through their lines without being discovered. The best course he could pursue was to wait until the guide returned. He would know just what ought to be done.

Julian was so completely absorbed in his reverie that he forgot to keep an eye on what was going on around him, and consequently he did not see the two dark figures which came stealing along the road as noiselessly as spirits. But the figures were there, and when they discovered Julian they drew back into the bushes that lined the base of the cliff, and held a whispered consultation. Presently one of them stepped out into the road again and ran toward the camp. He did not attempt to escape observation, but hurried along as though he had a perfect right to be there. He seemed to be ignorant of the boy’s presence until he heard his voice and saw the muzzle of his rifle looking straight into his face.

“Halt!” cried Julian, standing with his finger on the trigger, ready to enforce his command if it were not instantly obeyed. “Who are you?”

“A friend,” replied the man. “Don’t shoot!”

“Come up here, friend, and let us have a look at you.”

As the stranger approached Julian saw that he appeared to be very much excited about something, and that he breathed heavily as if he had been running long and rapidly.

“If you are a friend what are you doing on the outside of the camp?” asked the boy.

“Why, we’ve been trappin’ here in the mountains, me an’ my pardner have, an’ to-day the Injuns driv us out,” replied the stranger. “We jest had to git up an’ dig out to save our har, an’ left all our plunder in the hands of the redskins – spelter, hosses, traps, an’ every thing except our rifles. While we were a makin’ tracks fur the prairie we come plump agin somebody; an’ who do you ’spose it was? It was Silas Roper. We used to be chums, me an’ him did, an’ have hunted and trapped together many a day up in the Blackfoot country. We found him watchin’ the camp of Ned Sanders an’ his band of rascals, an’ Silas said that if he had just one more man he could kill or captur’ the last one of ’em. He told me whar his wagon train was, an’ axed me would I come down an’ get one of the fellers to lend a hand. He said that Julian Mortimer was plucky an’ a good shot, an’ he’d like to have him. Mebbe you know him an’ can tell me whar’ to find him.”

“I can. I am Julian Mortimer,” replied the boy, proudly.

“You!” The trapper seemed to be first surprised, and then disappointed. He surveyed Julian from head to foot, and then continued: “Sho! I expected to see a *man*. What could a little cub like you do with Sanders and his gang?”

“I am man enough to put a ball into one of them if I get a fair chance,” replied Julian. “I know something about Sanders, and have reasons for wishing him put where he will never see me again.”

“Wall, you’re spunky if you are little, an’ spunk is the thing that counts arter all. Mebbe you’ll do as well as any body. Will you go?”

“Of course I will, if Silas sent for me.”

“Nough said. Go easy now, an’ do jest as you see me do.”

The trapper shouldered his rifle and started down the road at a rapid run, with Julian close at his heels.

When they passed the first bend in the road a man came out of the bushes, where he had been concealed, and followed after them with noiseless footsteps. Julian did not see him, and neither did he see the dark forms that were hidden behind the trees and rocks on each side of the path; he saw no one except his guide until he came suddenly around the base of a cliff and found himself in front of a camp-fire, beside which lay half-a-dozen rough-looking men stretched out on their blankets.

Julian stopped when this unexpected sight greeted his eyes, but his guide kept on, and seating himself on the ground before the fire, jerked his thumb over his shoulder toward the boy, and coolly announced:

“Here he is, fellers. Leastwise, he says that’s his name.”

Julian stood like one petrified. He looked at his guide, at the trappers that were lying around, and then his gaze wandered toward an object which he had not before noticed. It was Silas Roper, who stood on the opposite side of the fire, with his back to a tree, to which he was securely bound.

One glance at him was enough for Julian, who now saw that he had been duped. He understood the trick that had been played upon him as well as though it had been explained in words, and wondered at his own stupidity. If it had been true, as the strange trapper had told him, that Silas was keeping guard over the camp of the outlaws, and needed just one more man to enable him to effect their capture, would he have sent for an inexperienced person like himself when there were at least a score of old Indian-fighters among the emigrants? Julian told himself that he ought to have known better.

These thoughts passed through his mind in an instant of time, and in his excitement and alarm, forgetting everything except that he was in the presence of enemies, he faced about and took to his heels; but he had not made many steps when the man who had followed him from the camp, and who was none other than Sanders himself, suddenly appeared in his path.

“Not quite so fast!” said he, in savage tones. “You’re wuth a heap to us, if you only knowed it, an’ we couldn’t think of partin’ with you so soon.”

As the trapper spoke, he twisted the boy’s rifle out of his grasp, tore the belt which contained his revolvers and hunting-knife from his waist, and then seized him by the collar and dragged him

toward the fire – Julian, who knew that it would be the height of folly to irritate the ruffian, offering no resistance.

“I call this a good night’s work,” continued Sanders, who seemed to be highly elated. “We’ve been waitin’ fur both them fellers fur more’n a year, an’ we’ve got ’em at last. This is Julian. I knowed him the minute I sot my eyes onto him, and could have picked him out among a million. He hain’t changed a bit in his face, but he’s grown a heap taller an’ stouter, an’ p’raps is a leetle livelier on his legs than he was when me an’ him run that foot-race eight year ago. Remember that – don’t you, youngster?”

“No, I don’t,” replied Julian. “I never ran a race with you in my life. I never saw you until to-night.”

“Didn’t! Wol, I’ve seed you a good many times durin’ the last two months, an’ have talked with you, too; but I was dressed up like a gentleman then, an’ mebbe that’s the reason you don’t recognize me now. Dick thinks he knows more about you than anybody else, but I reckon he don’t.”

“Who is Dick?” asked the boy.

“He’s the feller who was talkin’ to me to-night while you were settin’ in that wagon listenin’ to us. I didn’t know you were about thar until Dick had gone back into the camp, an’ then I seed you come down from the wagon. I wanted to get you away from thar, ’cause I was afeared that if you were in the camp durin’ the fight some of the Injuns might send a ball or arrer into you, an’ that would have been bad fur me an’ my mates, ’cause it would have tuk jest \$5,000 out of our pockets. I didn’t see no chance to slip up an’ make a pris’ner of you without alarmin’ the emigrants, so I come back here an’ got one of my men, an’ me an’ him made up that story we told you. It worked first-rate, didn’t it.”

“But you have not yet told me who Dick is,” said Julian, without answering the outlaw’s question. “How did he become acquainted with me; and what reason has he for wishing me put out of his way? I heard him say that he would give you a thousand dollars if you would kill me.”

“Them’s his very words. But you needn’t be no ways skeary, ’cause I wouldn’t hurt a hair of your head – not while I can make more money by takin’ good care of you. As fur the reasons Dick’s got fur havin’ somethin’ agin you, that’s his business an’ not mine. Mebbe you’ll know all about it one of these days. But I reckon we might as well be movin’ now. What have you done with the critters, Tom?”

The man who had guided Julian to the camp of the outlaws arose from his seat, disappeared in the bushes, and presently returned leading three horses. At a sign from his captors Julian mounted one of the animals, Sanders sprang upon the back of another, and seizing Julian’s horse by the bridle rode off into the darkness, followed by Tom, who brought up the rear. The boy wondered what the outlaws were going to do with him, and hoped that Sanders, who had shown himself to be quite communicative, might see fit to enlighten him; but the trapper seemed to have relapsed into a meditative mood, for he rode along with his eyes fastened on the horn of his saddle, and for half an hour never opened his lips except to swear at Julian’s horse, which showed a disposition to lag behind, and to answer a challenge from the foremost of a long line of Indians who passed them on the road.

When Julian saw these warriors he thought of the emigrants, and knew that the fight the guide had predicted was not far distant. It was begun that very hour, and the signal for the attack was a single, long-drawn war-whoop, which echoed and re-echoed among the cliffs until it seemed to Julian as if the mountains were literally filled with yelling savages. No sooner had it died away than a chorus of frightful whoops arose from the direction of the camp, accompanied by the rapid discharge of fire-arms and the defiant shouts of the emigrants, which came to Julian’s ears with terrible distinctness. Although he knew that he was at a safe distance from the scene of the conflict, and in the power of men who would protect him from the savages, he could not have been more terrified if he had been standing side by side with the pioneers battling for his life.

“What do you think of it, anyhow?” asked Sanders, noticing the boy’s agitation. “Never heered sounds like them afore, I reckon.”

“No,” replied Julian, in a trembling voice, “and I never want to hear them again. It is some of your work. Silas says the Indians would not be half as bad as they are, if it were not for white renegades like you and your friends, who are continually spreading dissatisfaction among them, and urging them on to the war-path.”

“Wouldn’t!” exclaims Sanders. “I don’t reckon we’re any wuss than other folks I’ve heern tell on. Thar are men in the world – an’ some of ’em don’t live so very far from here, nuther – who walk with their noses in the air, an’ think themselves better’n everybody else, an’ yet they are bad enough to offer men like me an’ my mates money to put some of their own kin out of the way. We’re jest about as good as the rest if we are outlaws.”

For the next two miles the route pursued by the trappers and their prisoner lay through a deep ravine, where the darkness was so intense that Julian could scarcely see his hand before him, and at every step of the way the reports of fire-arms and the whoops and yells of the combatants rang in his ears. There was a fierce battle going on at the camp, and the boy wondered who would gain the victory.

The question was answered in a few minutes, for when the three horsemen emerged from the valley, and reached the summit of a high hill, over which the road ran, Julian looked back and saw a bright flame, which increased in volume every moment, shining over the tops of the trees. Then he knew that the emigrants had failed in their attempts to beat off their assailants. The savages had succeeded in setting fire to the wagons which formed the barricade, and when that protection was swept away, the battle would be changed to a massacre. The Indians would pour into the camp in overwhelming numbers, and surrounded as the emigrants were on every side, not one of them could hope to escape.

“Thar’s another wagon train gone up,” said Sanders, with savage exultation. “It’s a pity that every one of them can’t be sarved the same way. Why don’t folks stay in the States whar they belong, instead of coming out here whar they know they ain’t wanted? How would you like to be in that camp, youngster?”

“I don’t know that I should be in a much worse situation than I am now,” replied Julian. “If I were with the emigrants I should probably be killed, and I am not sure that I shall fare any better at the hands of the man into whose power you intend to deliver me.”

“That’s a fact,” said Sanders, reflectively. “If I was in your place, an’ was tuk pris’ner, I believe I’d as soon be among the Injuns as in the hands of Reginald Mortimer.”

“Reginald Mortimer!” repeated Julian, in great amazement.

“He’s the very feller whose name I spoke,” replied Sanders, turning around in his saddle and facing his prisoner.

Julian looked earnestly at the trapper for a few seconds and drew a long breath of relief.

“I begin to understand the matter,” said he. “I knew you were mistaken as to my identity.”

“Which?” exclaimed Sanders.

“I mean that you have got hold of the wrong boy. Because my name happens to be Mortimer, you think I am the one this man Reginald wants; but when he sees me and knows my history, he will release me.”

When Sanders heard this he threw back his head and burst into a loud laugh, in which he was joined by Tom. Julian could not see that he had said anything calculated to excite their mirth, but the outlaws could, and they were highly amused – so much so that it was fully five minutes before they recovered themselves sufficiently to speak.

“Wal, you are a green one,” said Sanders, at length. “The minute Reginald puts his eyes on you he will say that you are the very chap he’s been a-lookin’ fur so long, an’ instead of releasin’

you he'll lock you up whar you'll never see daylight again. Maybe he'll do something wuss – I don't know.”

“I wouldn't put myself in your place and run the risk,” chimed in Tom. “But I'd a heap sooner be rubbed out to onct than be shut up in that rancho of his'n. Sich queer doin's as they do have thar! The ole man can't keep a thing in his house.”

“What is the reason?” asked Julian.

“‘Cause it's stole from him, that's the reason – money, we'pons, clothes, grub – everything. He can't keep nothing.”

“Why doesn't he lock his doors?”

“Haint every door in the rancho got mor'n a dozen bolts an' chains onto it, an' don't he keep three or four big dogs on the outside of the house, an' as many more inside? An' haint he sot up night after night with his pistols in his hands watchin' fur the thieves? It don't do no 'arthly good whatsomever. Things is missin' all the while, an' nobody don't know whar they go to. You see,” added Tom, sinking his voice almost to a whisper, “thar's some folks besides the ole man livin' in that ar rancho, an' they don't need doors an' winders. They can go through a keyhole, or a crack an inch wide, and even a solid stone wall can't stop 'em. I slept thar one night, an' if I didn't see – ”

“Hold your grip, Tom,” interrupted Sanders, hastily. “Somehow I don't like to hear that thing spoke of. That rancho is a bad place to stop at, that's a fact; an' I'd as soon fight a fair stand-up battle with the biggest grizzly in the mountains as to spend an hour thar arter sundown. I wouldn't be half so bad skeered.”

After saying this Sanders relapsed into silence again, and so did Tom; and Julian, who had heard just enough to excite his curiosity, tried in vain to induce them to continue the conversation. He wanted to learn something about Reginald Mortimer, and know what the trappers had seen in his house that frightened them so badly; but they paid no heed to his questions, and Julian was finally obliged to give it up in despair.

How far he traveled that night he did not know. He was so nearly overcome with fear and anxiety, and so completely absorbed in his speculations concerning the future, that at times he was utterly unconscious of what was going on around him. All he remembered was that for five long hours Sanders kept his horse at a full gallop, leading the way at reckless speed along yawning chasms and under beetling cliffs which hung threateningly over the road, that he became so weary that he reeled about in his saddle, and that finally, when it seemed to him that he could no longer shake off the stupor that was pressing upon him, Sanders suddenly drew rein and announced that they were at their journey's end.

Julian looked up and found himself in an extensive valley, which stretched away to the right and left as far as his eyes could reach. In front of him was a high stone wall, over the top of which he could see the roof of what appeared to be a commodious and comfortable house. The building was evidently intended to serve as a fortification as well as a dwelling, for the walls were thick and provided with loop-holes, and the windows were protected by heavy iron-bound shutters.

All was dark and silent within the rancho; but when Sanders pounded upon the gate with the butt of his revolver, a chorus of hoarse growls arose on the other side of the wall, and a pack of dogs greeted them with furious and long-continued barking. Presently Julian heard a door open and close in the rancho, and saw the light of a lantern shining above the wall. Then came the rattling of chains and the grating of heavy bolts, and a small wicket in the gate swung open and was immediately filled by the bull's-eye of a powerful dark lantern. The person who handled the lantern, whoever he was, could obtain a good view of the horsemen, but they could not see him, for he remained in the shade. He consumed a good deal of time in making his observations, and Sanders began to grow impatient.

“Wal, Pedro,” he growled, “when you get through lookin’ at us you’ll let us in, won’t you? We’ve got business with the ole man, an’ we’re in a hurry. I don’t want to stay about this place no longer than I can help,” he added, in an undertone.

The sound of the outlaw’s voice must have satisfied the man as to the identity of his visitors, for he closed the wicket, and after a short delay opened the gate, and Sanders led the way into the rancho.

CHAPTER IV

JULIAN FINDS A RELATIVE

HAD JULIAN been entering a prison, knowing that he was destined to remain there for the term of his natural life, he could not have been more terrified than he was when he found himself surrounded by the gloomy walls of the rancho, and heard the ponderous gate clang behind him. He was playing an involuntary part in a strange and mysterious drama, and the uncertainty of what might be the next scene in which he would be forced to assist, kept him in a terrible state of suspense. But he was blessed with more than an ordinary share of courage, and when the first momentary thrill of terror had passed away, he called it all to his aid, and prepared to meet whatever was in store for him with an undaunted front. He appeared to be much more at his ease than the two trappers, for they had suddenly lost their swaggering, confident air, and were gazing about them uneasily as though they were apprehensive of discovering something they did not care to see.

"He's all grit, haint he?" whispered Sanders, who, as well as his companion, seemed surprised at the captive's coolness and indifference. "He's a genuine Mortimer."

"Mebbe he'll look different afore he has been many hours inside these yere walls," replied Tom, in the same cautious whisper. "Wait till he gets into the house an' sees *him*, as I saw him one night."

"Well, if you're going in you had better dismount, hadn't you? Or do you intend to ride your horses in? Who's this you have here?"

It was Pedro who spoke. He had lingered to fasten the gate, and now came up and elevated his lantern to take a survey of the trappers and their prisoner. When the rays from the bull's-eye fell upon Julian's features he staggered back as if he had been shot, his face grew deadly pale, and his whole frame trembled violently.

"It isn't – it isn't –"

Pedro tried to pronounce some name, but it seemed to stick in his throat.

"No, it isn't *him*," replied Sanders; "it's the other."

"Not Julian?" exclaimed the Mexican, plainly much relieved.

"Yes, Julian, an' nobody else."

"Why, how came he here? Where did you find him?"

"Now, Pedro, you haven't offered us \$5,000 to bring him to you safe an' sound, have you? Them's questions we don't answer for nobody except the ole man. We want to see him, an' purty quick, too."

Sanders dismounted from his horse, and at a sign from him Tom and Julian did the same. Pedro led the way toward the door of the rancho, shaking his head and ejaculating in both Spanish and English, and turning around now and then to look sharply at Julian as if he had not yet been able to make up his mind whether he was a solid flesh and blood boy or only a spirit. He conducted the trappers and their captive into the house, and after pausing to fasten the door, led them through a long, wide hall, the walls of which were hung with old-fashioned pictures and implements of the chase, and ushered them into an elegantly furnished room; and after taking one more good look at Julian, waved his hand toward a couple of chairs and asked the trappers to be seated.

"I will go and tell the governor who you are, and whom you have brought with you," said he.

"Hold your horses!" exclaimed Sanders, suddenly, and in great excitement. "You haint a-goin' to take that light with you an' leave us here in the dark? I wouldn't stay here fur all the money the ole man's got stowed away in that cave of his'n, if it's \$50,000."

“Fifty thousand!” sneered Pedro. “You have queer ideas of wealth. Better say fifty million; and he don’t know where it is any more than you do. He’ll find out now, however,” added the Mexican, with a hasty glance at Julian.

“Wal, put that lantern on the table if you’re goin’ out,” repeated Sanders.

Pedro muttered something about having any thing but an exalted opinion of a man, who, after braving innumerable dangers, was afraid to remain in a dark room for a moment or two, but he complied with the request. He placed the lantern on the table and went out, leaving the trappers and Julian to themselves. The latter sunk helplessly into the nearest chair, while Sanders and his companion, after looking all about the room to make sure that there was no fourth person present, moved up closer together and stood regarding one another with an expression of great amazement on their faces.

“Fifty million!” whispered Sanders, who was the first to speak. “Do you believe it?”

“That’s a monstrous heap of money,” replied Tom – “more’n the hul State of Californy is worth. But I’ve allers heern tell that old Reginald had more yaller boys stowed away in this rancho than a wagon train could haul away. If it’s a fact, we’ve made a mistake by – ”

He finished the sentence by jerking his thumb over his shoulder toward Julian.

“Sartin, we have,” replied Sanders. “We hadn’t oughter give him up for no \$5,000. Pedro told us that the ole man don’t know whar the money is any more’n we do, but that he would find out all about it now; and when he said that he looked at Julian. Did you notice?”

Tom replied in the affirmative.

“That means that the money is hid somewhars; but it can’t be that the boy knows whar it is, ’cause he was so young when he was took away from here. Thar’s a heap o’ things about this house an’ family that I would like to have made clear to me. But I know one thing, an’ that is, we can make up on the other feller what we lose on Julian; an’ besides, we can watch our chance an’ steal the boy out agin when – what’s that? Did you hear anything, youngster?”

Sanders’ voice trembled as he asked this question, and facing suddenly about he gazed first toward the farther end of the room, and then toward Julian, who had started to his feet, and stood looking the very picture of bewilderment.

“I did,” replied the boy, in a scarcely audible whisper; “and I saw something moving those curtains, too.”

The walls of the room into which Julian and his captors had been conducted, instead of being plastered or papered, were concealed by crimson hangings which extended from the ceiling to the floor. These were the curtains of which he had spoken.

As he sat listening in a dreamy sort of way to the whispered conversation of the trappers, he heard a grating noise on the other side of the hangings resembling that which would be occasioned by a key turning in a rusty lock.

A bright, dazzling light blazed up for an instant and was extinguished, and then the hangings were pushed aside and a pair of eyes appeared at the opening and looked into the room.

Julian saw a portion of the face to which they belonged and sprang to his feet in great astonishment, for he thought he recognized the features of the emigrant whose conversation with Sanders he had overheard. But the face was withdrawn almost as soon as it appeared, and Julian was not allowed a second look.

“What did you see?” cried Sanders, his face ghastly pale, and the hand which rested on the lock of his rifle trembling visibly.

“I saw some one looking in here,” replied Julian, “and it was the same man who offered you a thousand dollars to put me out of the way.”

“Dick Mortimer!” Sanders almost shrieked.

The expression of terror on his face gave way instantly to a look of profound astonishment. He dropped the butt of his rifle heavily to the floor, and Tom uttered a long-drawn whistle.

The two men stared vacantly at one another for a moment, and then with a common impulse sprang across the room and tore aside the hangings.

There was no one there. Nothing was revealed except the solid stone wall which formed that side of the room. Where could the emigrant have gone? He certainly had not come into the room, and neither could he have retreated through the wall. Julian stood transfixed.

"I know I saw him there," said he, as soon as he could speak. "It beats me where he could have gone so suddenly."

"That's nothing," replied Sanders. "You'll be beat wuss than this if you stay in this rancho all night, I can tell you that."

But the trapper's actions indicated that it was something, after all, for as soon as he had satisfied himself that the emigrant had disappeared, he dropped the hangings as if they had been coals of fire, and snatching the lantern from the table retreated toward the door with all possible haste, with Tom close at his heels. Nor was Julian far behind the trappers when they reached the hall.

He did not wonder now that they were impatient to transact their business and leave the house. He would have been glad to leave it himself. His captors had told him that there were some "queer doings" in that rancho. Did they refer to scenes like this? Were people who, like this emigrant, had no business there, in the habit of walking about the house every night, and of vanishing after such a bewildering fashion when discovered; and was he to be compelled to remain there a witness to such proceedings.

The boy trembled at the thought. He was not superstitious. He knew that he had seen the face of a man peeping out from behind the hangings, and he believed, too, that his sudden and mysterious disappearance could be explained, and that there was nothing supernatural about it; but nevertheless he resolved that as long as he was allowed the free use of his feet he would not remain in a dark room in that house without company.

When the trappers retreated into the hall he went with them, and like them, kept his back turned toward the room, and impatiently awaited Pedro's return. Nor was he obliged to wait long.

In a few seconds he heard a door open and close, a light flashed into the hall, and two men came hurrying toward him. One of them was Pedro, and the other was a tall, foreign-looking gentleman, in dressing-gown and slippers, who came along with a smile on his face, and his hand outstretched, as if about to greet some friend from whom he had long been separated.

Upon reaching Julian's side he threw his arms around him and clasped him in a most affectionate embrace – to which the boy submitted without uttering a word. He had not expected such a reception as this; and, if one might judge by the expression on the faces of the trappers, they had not expected it either. Their underjaws dropped down, they stared at one another for a moment, and then Tom gave utterance to another long-drawn whistle, and Sanders pounded the floor with the butt of his rifle.

"Julian! Julian! is it possible that you have returned at last?" cried the gentleman, holding the boy off at arm's length for a moment, and then straining him to his breast once more. "Don't you know your Uncle Reginald?"

"It's him sure enough, ain't it?" asked Sanders.

"Of course it is he," replied the owner of the rancho, still clinging to Julian as if he never meant to let him go again. "I should have recognized him if I had met him in Asia. No one but a Mortimer could ever boast of such a face as that. Where did you find him? Julian, why don't you tell me that you are glad to see me?"

"I say, guv'nor," interrupted Sanders, "couldn't he talk to you jest as well arter we are gone? Me an' my pardner are in a monstrous hurry. How about them \$5,000?"

"I will place it in your hands this moment. Come with me."

Seizing Julian by the hand, Reginald Mortimer – for that was the gentleman’s name – led the way along the hall, and into a room which the prisoner saw was used as a sleeping apartment, for there was the bed from which this man, who claimed to be his uncle, had just arisen.

Conducting the boy to a seat on the sofa, and leaving the trappers to stand or sit as suited their fancy, the gentleman produced a bunch of keys from his desk and unlocked a strong box which was standing at the head of his bed.

When the lid was thrown back Julian opened his eyes and leaned forward to obtain a nearer view of the contents of the box.

Such a sight he had never seen before. The box was literally filled with gold coin – some of it packed away in little drawers, and the rest tied up in canvas bags. Two of these bags the owner lifted out of the box and handed to the trappers, saying:

“There is the money I promised to give you if you succeeded in restoring Julian to me safe and sound. I give you my hearty thanks beside, for you have rendered me a most important service. Pedro, show Sanders and his friend to the best room in the house.”

“Nary time, if *you* please!” exclaimed the trapper, with a frightened look. “We’ll feel a heap better, an’ sleep a sight easier, if we camp in the mountains.”

“But I want to talk to you about Julian. Where did you find him?”

“We’ll tell you all about that when we bring the other feller to you.”

“The other fellow?”

“Yes; that is, if we can come to tarms.”

“Whom do you mean?”

“Silas Roper. Say another five thousand fur him, an’ we’ll have him here to-morrow bright an’ arly.”

“Silas Roper!” exclaimed the gentleman, gleefully. “Am I not in luck? Certainly, I say it; bring him immediately.”

“It’s a bargain. Come on, Tom.”

“Well, go, if you must, and remember that although I am under obligations to you now, I shall be vastly more your debtor when you give that man into my hands. My plans are working splendidly.”

When the door had closed behind the trappers Reginald Mortimer locked his strong box and once more turned toward Julian. The latter, who since his arrival at the rancho had moved like one in a dream, aroused himself by a strong effort and looked squarely into the man’s face. He gazed at him a moment, and then sprung to his feet with a cry of alarm and ran toward the door.

CHAPTER V

JULIAN'S HOME

WE HAVE said that Julian Mortimer was the hero of our story, and in order that you may understand what brought him to the mountains, and how it came that several persons whom he believed he had never seen before should take so deep an interest in him, we must go back and relate some events that transpired previous to the beginning of our story.

On the banks of the Missouri River, about fifty miles below St. Joseph, was a small clearing, in which stood a dilapidated cabin inhabited by the family of John Bowles. It was a gloomy-looking place, and that was not to be wondered at, for Jack, as he was familiarly called, was not the man to waste any of his time or money in beautifying his home. Both were much too precious for that. His time was spent in hunting and trapping, and his money – what little he earned – was devoted to the purchase of bad whisky, of which he was exceedingly fond. He was a tall, heavy, broad-shouldered man, and looked the very impersonation of laziness. His two boys, Jake and Tom, were chips of the old block, and his wife was a sharp-featured, ill-tempered woman of wonderful strength and daring, and it was said that in a fair rough-and-tumble fight – for things came to that sometimes in the cabin of Mr. Bowles – she was more than a match for her redoubtable husband.

The neighboring settlers had but little to do with Jack. They remarked that his family went clothed in rags from one year's end to another; that they were sometimes destitute of even the common necessities of life; and that Jack hunted early and late and spent every cent he made at the grocery at "The Corners." But one stormy night a stranger was seen to ride rapidly away from the cabin, and from that hour things seemed to take a turn for the better with Jack Bowles. He and his family appeared in brand new suits of clothing; the boys sported silver-mounted rifles in place of the rusty single-barreled shot-guns in which they had before taken so much delight; a neighbor, who knew something of the use of carpenters' tools, was employed to patch up the cabin, and Jack gave up hunting and spent his days and nights in lounging about the grocery, drinking whisky and showing large rolls of bills and handfuls of gold and silver. The settlers noticed, too, that the cabin had an inmate whom they had never seen before – a slender, fair-haired boy about eight years of age, who seemed to be altogether out of his element there. And they told one another also that Jack and his wife had reasons for wishing to keep him out of sight as much as possible, for whenever any one passed the clearing the boy would be summoned into the house by the shrill voice of Mrs. Bowles, and the door closed upon him.

From this they naturally concluded that the boy and the money Jack spent so freely were in some way connected; and, when hard pressed, Jack acknowledged that such was the fact. He said that the boy's name was Julian Mortimer; that he had been brought to the cabin by a stranger who wished to leave him there for a month or two while he went on a business tour to New Orleans; and that he had paid a few weeks' board for him in advance. There was one thing, however, that Jack did not see fit to disclose, and that was that the stranger had cautioned him to keep strict watch over the boy, and under no circumstances to allow him far out of his sight. For awhile the settlers wondered greatly at this story; but it soon ceased to be the topic of conversation, and finally even the circumstance of the stranger's visit was forgotten.

Weeks grew into months, and months into years, and Julian Mortimer was still an inmate of Jack Bowles' cabin, which he had learned to call home. The money that had been paid for his board had long ago been squandered at The Corners, and Jack had been obliged to overhaul his long-neglected implements of the chase, and resume his old occupation of hunting and trapping.

The cabin was in a worse condition now than it was before it was repaired. It was built of rough, unhewn logs, and contained but one room. It had no floor – the ground, which had been

trampled upon until it was as hard as a rock, answering that purpose. The only furniture it could boast of were two miserable beds, and a three-legged pine table that had been pushed against the wall to enable it to retain its upright position. As for chairs, there were none; the places of these useful articles being supplied with boxes and empty nail-kegs. There were no windows in the cabin, all the light and air being admitted through the door, which was allowed to stand open during the coldest days in winter.

A ladder on one side of the room led to the loft where Julian slept. It was the most uncomfortable part of the house, for some of the boards at the gable-end had fallen off, the shingles on the roof were loose, and during a storm the rain and sleet rattled down on his hard pillow. There was nothing inviting about Julian's bed, for it was simply a pile of husks, with a large gunny sack, a tattered blanket, and one or two ragged coats spread over it. But he always went to that bed aching in every muscle after his hard day's work, and slept as soundly there, in spite of the cold wind and rattling shingles, as if it had been a couch of down.

One end of the cabin was occupied by an immense fire-place, with a stick chimney, which leaned away from the building as if about to topple over. A fire was burning brightly on the hearth one cold afternoon in March, and before it stood Mrs. Bowles, watching some venison steaks that were broiling on the coals, and smoking a short cob pipe, which was held firmly between her teeth. She was angry – that was plain enough to be seen – and, indeed, it would have been difficult to find her in any other mood. She thought she had good reasons for showing her temper occasionally, for “that Julian,” as she called the household drudge, was the plague of her life. More than half an hour ago she had sent him out after firewood, and although she had called him three times, and promised to dust his jacket for him the moment he came within reach of her arm – a threat that never failed to quicken the pace of her sons – he had not yet returned. She watched the broiling steaks for a few minutes, listening the while for the sound of footsteps, and then went to the door, removed the pipe from her mouth, threw back her head and shrieked:

“You, Julian! Have you gone clear to St. Joe arter that firewood?”

This time her shrill tones reached the ears of a young fellow about sixteen years of age, who was at work in the edge of the woods at a short distance from the house. We ought rather to say that he *had* been at work, and was resting from his labor, leaning on his ax and gazing thoughtfully at the ground when the woman's sharp voice broke in upon his reverie.

“There it is again,” said he, with a long-drawn sigh, lifting his ax and resuming his work. “It's Julian! Julian! from morning until night. Julian has to do everything that is done on the farm. I shouldn't mind the work so much if they would only give me some warm clothes and say a kind word to me now and then; but they won't do it. Look at that,” he added, pausing, with his ax suspended in the air, and gazing down at his boots, which were so sadly out of repair that they afforded his feet but very little protection from the mud, and none whatever from the sharp, biting air. “This coat is so thin that the wind blows right through it; and as for this hat – well, perhaps it is better than none at all, but not much. These are the only clothes I have in the world, and they are the best I have owned since I came to this place eight years ago. I have money enough to buy others, but I dare not do it, for fear that they will be taken away from me and given to that lazy Jake or Tom. And as for the treatment I receive – why, there isn't a dog on the place so badly abused. I suppose I shall get another beating now for keeping Mrs. Bowles waiting for this firewood.”

When Julian had finished his soliloquy and his chopping, he threw down his ax, and shouldering one of the heavy back-logs he had cut, made his way slowly toward the house. Mrs. Bowles was too busily engaged with her preparations for supper to think of the rawhide which she had taken from its accustomed nail behind the door and laid upon the table close at her side, and Julian succeeded in transferring his pile of wood from the edge of the clearing to the cabin without attracting her attention. This done, his work for the night was over, and he was at liberty to attend to a little business of his own.

Drawing on a pair of tattered gloves he left the house, and walking briskly past the corn-cribs, struck into the path that led through the woods to The Corners, turning his head now and then to make sure that there was no one observing his movements. Had he taken pains to look closely at one of the corn-cribs as he went past it, he would have discovered two pairs of eyes peering through an opening over the door; and had he glanced behind him when he reached the cover of the woods, he would have seen the door fly open and two figures spring out and run swiftly along the path in pursuit of him.

Julian had set out to visit his traps. Minks, foxes and raccoons were abundant in the woods about the clearing, and he was very expert in taking them. During the last two winters he had earned a sum of money that was quite a respectable fortune in his eyes; and more than that, he had purchased an excellent rifle, a supply of ammunition and a fine young horse, which he intended should some day carry him miles and miles out of the reach of Mrs. Bowles' rawhide.

The rifle, together with his money and stock of furs, was concealed where no one would ever think of looking for it; but the horse was claimed by Tom Bowles, Jack's younger son, who took possession of the animal as soon as Julian brought him home. But that was a matter that did not trouble our hero. Of course he was denied the pleasure of riding the horse – for Jake and Tom followed the example set them by their parents, and tyrannized over Julian in every possible way – but he knew where to find him when he wanted him; and when he was ready to undertake the journey he had been planning and thinking about, he intended to take possession of him without consulting Tom Bowles or any one else.

On the day that Julian first brought the horse home he created quite a commotion in the Bowles family. When he told Jack, in the presence of his wife and sons, that the animal was his own private property, and that he had paid \$75 in cash for him, the inquiry very naturally arose, where did the money come from? That was a matter that Julian did not care to talk about. If he replied that he had received it for the furs he had trapped, he knew that Jack and his boys would hunt the woods over until they found his dead-falls, and then rob and destroy them.

He declined to enlighten them on this point, and that created an uproar at once. Jack swore lustily; Mrs. Bowles flourished her rawhide; Tom took charge of the horse and led him off to the stable; and Jake threatened to black his eye for him. But Julian, who was not one of the sort who are easily frightened, remained firm, and Jack and his boys were compelled to change their tactics and resort to strategy.

They told one another that they would keep a sharp eye on all Julian's movements, and follow him wherever he went; and if they did not find out what he did in the woods while he was there, and what it was that took him away from home so regularly every night and morning, they would know the reason why.

But even this plan failed, for Julian was always on the alert and could not be caught napping. His ears, as sharp as an Indian's, always told him when he was followed. On such occasions he would stroll carelessly about through the woods, as if he had no particular object in view, and finally make his way home again and go to work. Then Tom and Jake would be angrier than ever, and Julian was certain to suffer for his watchfulness.

On this particular evening, however, Julian was not as careful as usual. The plans he had been so long maturing were almost ready to carry into execution, and he was so completely wrapped up in his glorious anticipations concerning the future that he did not hear the light footsteps of Jake and Tom as they dodged through the bushes behind him.

He walked straight to the creek, and from the force of long habit, paused on the bank to look about him. Having satisfied himself that there was no one in sight, he sprang into the bed of the stream, and looking under the overhanging roots of a beech where he had set one of his traps, discovered a large mink caught by one of his hind feet.

A blow on the head with a stick stilled the animal, and after resetting and baiting the trap, Julian picked up his prize, and rejoicing in the thought that the skin of the mink would bring \$2 more to be added to his little fortune, hurried on up the creek.

For an hour Julian continued his walk, stopping now and then to bait and set a trap that had been sprung by some animal too cunning to be caught, or to take a fox, mink or raccoon out of another, and finally he stopped at the foot of a precipitous cliff with \$13 worth of furs thrown over his shoulder – not a bad afternoon's work for a trapper of his years.

He now became more cautious than ever in his movements. His first care was to convince himself that there was no one following him; and in order to set his fears on this score at rest, he dropped his game and ran back along the bank of the creek, peering through the trees in every direction, and passing so close to Tom and Jake, who had thrown themselves behind a log to escape discovery, that he could have touched them. But he saw no one, and believing himself to be alone in the woods, he once more shouldered his game and made his way up the cliff until he reached a thicket of bushes that grew near the summit.

Here he paused, and began pulling away the leaves with his hands, presently disclosing to view a small door which had been set into the face of the cliff. The opening of the door revealed what appeared to be the mouth of a cave, extending down into the ground. Julian threw in his foxes and minks one after the other, and then crawled in himself and closed the door after him.

CHAPTER VI

JULIAN MEETS A STRANGER

JULIAN'S first move, after he had shut the door, was to strike a match, and his second to light a candle which he took from a shelf close at hand. As the light blazed up, he held it above his head and took a survey of the cave, or, as he called it, his "store-house." It was a very small one – not more than six feet square – but it was large enough to contain all Julian's earthly possessions. All that could be seen was a quantity of furs, some already cured and neatly baled up, and others hanging against the walls stretched upon boards and frames to dry; but there were other valuable articles stowed away there, and as soon as Julian had glanced about the room to see that nothing had been disturbed during his absence, he placed his candle on the floor and proceeded to bring them to light.

The walls, floor and ceiling of the room were composed of small saplings, and two of these saplings concealed treasures that were of more value to Julian than all his furs. One of them was in the floor, and when it had been lifted out of its place by the edge of a hatchet, some of the young trapper's wealth, which would have made Jake and Tom open their eyes in amazement could they have seen it, was disclosed to view.

It consisted of a silver-mounted rifle, inclosed in a strong canvas bag to protect it from the damp and dirt, a hunting-knife, an ornamented powder-horn and a fawn-skin bullet-pouch, both the latter filled with ammunition.

Julian looked at these articles long and lovingly. He had come by them honestly – they were the first valuables he had ever owned, and he had worked so hard for them! He took the rifle from its case, drew it up to his shoulder and glanced along the clean brown barrel, as if drawing a bead on an imaginary deer's head, held it in a dozen different positions to allow the light to shine on the silver mountings, and finally returned it, with all the accouterments, to its hiding-place, and went to look after his other treasures. He removed one of the saplings that formed the ceiling, thrust his arm into the opening and drew out a small tin box, which contained money to the amount of \$80 – the proceeds of two winters' work at trapping. Julian ran hastily over the bills to make sure that they were all there, then put back the box, returned the sapling to its place, and drawing his knife from his pocket sat down to remove the skins from the animals he had just captured.

"I'm rich!" he exclaimed, looking about him with a smile of satisfaction. "Counting in my money and what my horse, hunting rig and hunting furs are worth, I have at least \$250. I have purchased everything I need, and some fine, frosty morning, when Mrs. Bowles calls for 'you, Julian,' to get up and build the fire, he won't answer. He'll be miles away, and be making quick tracks for the Rocky Mountains. I only wish I was there now. There's where I came from when I was brought to Jack Bowles' house. I just know it was, because I can remember of hearing people talk of going over the mountains to California, and I know, too, that there were gold diggings on my father's farm, or rancho, I believe he called it. I'm going to try to find my father when I get there, and if I ever see him I shall know him."

Julian's thoughts ran on in this channel while he was busy with his knife, and in half an hour the skins had all been stretched, and the young trapper was ready to return to the miserable hovel he called home. He extinguished his candle, crawled out of the cave, and after concealing the door by piling leaves against it, hurried down the bluff and into the woods, happy in the belief that no one was the wiser for what he had done; but no sooner had he disappeared than Jake and Tom Bowles came out of the bushes in which they had been hidden, and clambered up the cliff toward Julian's store-house.

It was rapidly growing dark, and Julian, anxious to reach the cabin before his absence was discovered, broke into a rapid run, which he never slackened until he reached the road leading from The Corners to the clearing. There he encountered a stranger, who, as he came out of the bushes, accosted him with:

“Hold on a minute, my lad. I believe I am a little out of my reckoning, and perhaps you can set me right.”

Julian stopped and looked at the man. He could not get so much as even a glimpse of his face, for the broad felt hat he wore was pulled down over his forehead, and his heavy muffler was drawn up so high that nothing but his eyes could be seen; but the boy at once put him down as a gentleman, for he was dressed in broadcloth, and wore fine boots and fur gloves. Julian looked at his neat dress, and then at his own tattered garments, and drew his coat about him and folded his arms over it to hide it from the stranger’s gaze.

“Is there a hotel about here?” continued the gentleman, approaching the place where Julian was standing.

“No, sir,” was the reply; “none nearer than The Corners, and that’s ten miles away.”

“Is there no dwelling-house near?”

“There is a shanty about a mile distant belonging to Jack Bowles, but I wouldn’t advise you to go there.”

“Then I am on the right road after all,” said the stranger, with a sigh of relief. “Jack Bowles! He’s just the man I want to see. I have some important business with him. He can accommodate me with a bed and supper, can he not?”

“He can give you some corn bread and venison, but as for a *bed*, that’s a thing he doesn’t keep in his house. If you happen to have half a dollar in your pocket, however, he will stow you away somewhere. Jack will do almost anything for half a dollar. Why, what’s the matter, sir?”

It was no wonder that Julian asked this question, for the gentleman, who had now advanced quite near to him, took just one glance at his face, and started back as if he had seen some frightful apparition. He pushed his hat back from his forehead, pulled his muffler down from his face, and stared at Julian as if he meant to look him through. The boy was astonished at his behavior, and he would have been still more astonished if he had been able to look far enough into the future to see all that was to grow out of this meeting.

“Boy!” exclaimed the gentleman, in a voice which his agitation rendered almost indistinct, “who are you? What’s your name?”

“Julian Mortimer,” replied our hero.

“Julian! Julian Mortimer!” repeated the man, as if he could scarcely believe his ears. “It cannot be possible. Why, boy, you’re just – ahem! I mean – what a striking resemblance.”

The stranger spoke these last words hurriedly, and then, as if recollecting himself, hastily pulled his hat down over his forehead again, and once more concealed his face with his muffler – all except his eyes, which he kept fastened upon Julian.

“No doubt you think I act very strangely,” he continued, after a moment’s pause, “and perhaps I do, but the truth of the matter is, you look so much like a young friend of mine – a relative, in fact – that for a moment I was almost sure you were he. But, of course, you can’t be, for he is dead – been dead eight years. If you are ready we will go on.”

Julian was forced to be contented with this explanation, but he was not quite satisfied with it. It was made in a bungling, hesitating manner, as if the man were thinking about one thing and talking about another. More than that, the excitement he had exhibited on the first meeting with Julian seemed to increase the longer he looked at him; and now and then he rubbed his gloved hands together as if he were meditating upon something that afforded him infinite pleasure. He continued to watch the boy out of the corner of his eye, and finally inquired:

“Is this man Bowles, of whom you spoke, your father?”

“No, sir,” replied Joe, emphatically. “I live with him, but he is no relative of mine. My father, as I remember him, was a different sort of man altogether.”

“Eh!” ejaculated the stranger, with a start. “As you remember him? Ah! he is dead, then?”

“Not that I know of, sir. He was alive and well the last time I saw him. I’ll see him again in a few weeks.”

“Where is he?”

“Out West. He owns a rancho near the mountains with a gold mine on it.”

“Then why are you here?”

“Because I can’t help myself. I didn’t come here of my own free will, but was brought by one who will have good cause to remember me if I meet him again when I become a man.”

“Do you think you would know him if you should see him again?” asked the stranger, looking sharply at Julian, and putting his hat lower over his eyes.

“I am quite sure I should. He stole me away from my home and brought me here; but why he did it I can’t tell. I don’t intend to stay any longer, if it would do him any good to know it. I’ve got a good horse and rifle, and plenty of money, and I am going to leave here in a few days and go back to the mountains where I belong, and I shall not ask Jack Bowles’ consent, either.”

“Do you think he would oppose it?”

“I know he would. He would beat me half to death, or his wife would, and lock me up in the smoke-house till I promised never to think of such a thing again. I’m going to run away, and by the time he misses me I shall be a long distance out of his reach.”

The man listened attentively to all Julian had to say, and when the latter ceased speaking he placed his hands behind his back, fastened his eyes on the ground, and walked along as if he were in a brown study. He did not look up until they reached the door of the cabin where Jack Bowles, who had just finished his supper, stood smoking his cob pipe.

“Wal, who have ye got thar?” was his surly greeting.

“A gentleman who wishes to find a place to stay all night,” replied Julian.

“Why don’t he toddle on and find it, then?” growled Jack. “I ain’t a hinderin’ him, be I? He can’t stop here. I don’t keep a hotel to take in every Tom, Dick and Harry that comes along. Wal, I be dog-gone!”

Jack suddenly took his pipe from his mouth, and stepping hastily up to the stranger, bent forward and peered into his face. Then something that was intended for a smile of recognition overspread his own countenance, and extending his hand with as cordial an air as he could assume, he continued:

“I allowed I had seed ye somewhar afore, Mr. – eh?”

Jack paused before the name he had been about to pronounce escaped his lips, interrupted by a hasty gesture from the stranger, who glanced toward Julian and raised his hand warningly.

“You are mistaken, my friend,” said he, blandly. “You have never seen me before, but I hope the fact that I am a stranger to you will not prevent you from extending your hospitality to me for the night.”

Jack stared, took a few long, deliberate pulls at his pipe, looked first at the eaves of the cabin, then down at the ground, and finally turned to Julian for an explanation.

“What’s he tryin’ to get through hisself?” he asked.

“He wants something to eat and a bed to sleep in,” replied the boy.

“Oh! Why didn’t he say so, then? Wal, stranger, I reckon we can hang ye up somewhar,” added Jack, who had seen and comprehended the warning gesture; “although, as I told ye afore, we don’t make a business of takin’ in every tramp that comes along. Ye see, in a new country like this it ain’t safe. Ole woman, make up another batch of them corn-dodgers an’ fry a slice or two of that bar’s meat. Julian, what be ye a standin’ thar gapin’ at? Cl’ar yerself. Come in, stranger – come in an’ set down.”

Julian moved around the corner of the cabin and remained out of sight until he heard Mrs. Bowles laying the table for the guest, and then he also entered.

It was not a very sociable party he found in the house. Mrs. Bowles was moving about preparing the corn-dodgers and bear meat; the visitor, who had removed his overcoat and muffler, was comfortably seated on a nail-keg in a dark corner of the room, and Jack Bowles sat in front of the fire, his elbows resting on his knees and his hat pulled down over his eyes, which were slowly moving over the stranger's person and scrutinizing his dress and ornaments.

Julian noticed that his gaze rested long on the watch chain that hung across the stranger's vest, and on the diamond ring that glittered on his finger, and the expression he saw on Jack's face alarmed him and made him wish most sincerely that he had never conducted the gentleman to the cabin.

No one spoke until supper was ready, and then the guest was invited to "draw up and pitch in." Julian tried to obtain a glimpse of his features as he came out of his dark corner, but the man, as if guessing his intention, kept his head turned away from him and took his seat at the table with his back to the fire, so that his face still remained in the shadow.

While he was busy with his corn-dodgers and bear meat, Jake and Tom came in. They glanced curiously at the guest, and Tom seated himself beside the fire opposite Julian, whom he regarded with a triumphant smile, while Jake went to one of the beds that stood in the room and carefully hid something under the pillows. Julian afterward recalled the movements of these two worthies, and wondered why his suspicions had not been aroused.

When the stranger had satisfied his appetite, the three boys, at a sign from Mrs. Bowles, sat down and made a very light meal of that which was left, and no sooner had they arisen from the table than they received a second signal from Mr. Bowles, who pointed with his thumb over his shoulder toward that part of the room in which the beds were situated.

The boys all obeyed the order, but one of them, at least, had no intention of going to sleep. It was Julian, who, as he slowly mounted the ladder that led to the loft, told himself that he was in some way connected with the stranger's visit to the cabin, and that he would learn something about the matter before morning, if there was any way for him to accomplish his object. He stretched himself upon his hard bed, and drawing one of the coats over his shoulders, waited impatiently to see what was going to happen.

For half an hour all was still; then some one began to move softly about the cabin, a step was heard on the ladder, and a light flashed upon the rafters over Julian's head.

Presently a hand grasping a tallow dip appeared above the edge of the loft, closely followed by the grizzly head and broad shoulders of Jack Bowles, who stopped when he reached the top of the ladder and gazed at our hero long and earnestly.

Julian was wide awake, and through his half-closed eyelids could see every move Jack made, but the latter, believing him to be fast asleep, descended the ladder and joined his guest.

"My suspicions are confirmed," soliloquized Julian. "They intend to talk upon some subject that they don't want me to know anything about. I am going to learn something now. Perhaps I shall find out who I am and where my father is, and why I was brought here. What if this man should prove to be my father, who, for reasons of his own, does not wish to reveal himself to me?"

Julian, highly excited over this thought, rolled noiselessly off the bed upon the floor, crept to the edge of the loft, and looked over into the room below. Jack had just placed his candle on the table, and was approaching his guest with outstretched hand.

"Now, then, Mr. Mortimer," said he, "the boy is out of the way fur the night, an' thar's no use in settin' back thar away from the fire. Draw up an' give us a shake."

"*Mr. Mortimer!*" was Julian's mental ejaculation.

His heart seemed to stop beating. He opened his eyes to their widest extent and kept them fastened upon the stranger, who pulled his nail-keg in front of the fire and seated himself upon it.

CHAPTER VII

THE FLIGHT

WHEN THE gentleman came out of his dark corner, and the light of the candle fell upon his features, Julian took a good look at him, and an expression of great disappointment settled on his face.

“Whoever he is, he is not my father,” said he, to himself, “for my father had gray hair. This man is a stranger, and as it would be a mean piece of business in me to stay here and listen to his conversation I will crawl back to my pile of husks and go to sleep.”

Acting upon this resolution Julian began a slow and cautious retreat; but he had not gone far when a thought struck him, and he crept back to the edge of the loft and looked over into the room again.

“Jack called him *Mr. Mortimer*,” soliloquized the boy, “and I should like to know who and what he is. The manner in which he acted when I met him in the woods makes me believe that he has seen me before, and that he knows something about me that he wishes to keep hidden from me. I have a good deal at stake and it will do no harm to listen a while anyhow.”

It was a very handsome face that Julian’s eyes rested upon, and one that he did not think he should ever forget. Although the man’s language indicated that he was an American, his features had a decided Spanish cast. His face was dark and wore a haughty expression, his hair was long and waving, and like his mustache and goatee, was as black as midnight. Julian looked at him attentively, and was surprised to see that he shook hands with Mr. Bowles and his wife, as if they were old acquaintances whom he was glad to meet once more.

“It’s a long time since I’ve seed ye, Mr. Mortimer, but I allowed I knowed ye as soon as I clapped my eyes onto ye,” said Jack, drawing his nail-keg a little closer to the side of his guest.

“And you came very near making a mess of it, too,” replied the latter, with some impatience in his tones. “I believe that boy suspects me – he looked at me as if he did – and I would not have him know who I am for the world. You’re sure he is asleep?”

“Sartin, ’cause I went up to look. We’ve kept him safe an’ sound fur ye, ’cordin’ to orders, hain’t we?”

“An’ now you have come to take him away from us – I jest know ye have,” exclaimed Mrs. Bowles, raising the corner of her tattered apron to her left eye. “I don’t know how I can let him go, ’cause my heart’s awfully sot onto that poor, motherless boy.”

“We’ve done our level best by him,” chimed in Jack. “Ye told us when ye brought him here that he was a gentleman, an’ a gentleman’s son, an’ we’ve treated him like one.”

“When *he* brought me here,” repeated Julian, to himself; and it was only by a great exercise of will that he refrained from speaking the words aloud.

He became highly excited at once. Mr. Mortimer was the one who had stolen him away from his home and delivered him up to the tender mercies of Jack Bowles and his wife – the very man of all others he most wished to see. He had been a long time coming, almost eight years, and now that he had arrived, Julian found that he was destined to become better acquainted with him than he cared to be. He watched the guest more closely than ever, carefully scrutinizing his features in order to fix them in his memory. He hoped to meet him some day under different circumstances.

“He haint never had no work to do, an’ we never struck him a lick in our lives,” continued Jack. “We’ve treated him better’n our own boys. He’s got a good hoss of his own, an’ I’ve been a feedin’ it outen my corn ever since he owned it, an’ never axed him even to bring in an armful of wood to pay for it. An’ my boys do say that he’s got a heap of money laid up somewhars. If ye have come to take him away I reckon ye’ll do the handsome thing by us.”

“My friends,” interrupted the guest, as soon as he saw a chance to speak, “I know all about Julian, for I have talked with him. I know what he has got and what he intends to do. Have you ever told him anything about his parentage?”

“Nary word,” replied Jack.

“Then I wonder how it is that he knows so much about it. He knows that his home is near the mountains; that he was stolen away from it, and that he has a father there. More than that he intends to go back there very soon, and is laying his plans to run away from you.”

“Wal, I never heered the beat in all my born days!” exclaimed Mrs. Bowles, involuntarily extending her hand toward the rawhide which hung on the nail behind the door. “I’ll give him the best kind of a whoppin’ in the mornin’. I’ll beat him half to – What should the poor, dear boy want to run away from his best friends fur?”

“The leetle brat – the ongrateful rascal!” said Mr. Bowles. “That’s why he’s bought that ar hoss; an’ that’s why he’s been a huntin’ an’ trappin’ so steady – to earn money to run away from us, is it? I’ll larn him.”

And Jack turned around on his nail-keg and looked so savagely toward the loft, where Julian was supposed to be slumbering, that the eavesdropper was greatly alarmed, and crouched closer to the floor and trembled in every limb, as if he already felt the stinging blows of the rawhide.

“It seems that my visit was most opportune,” continued the stranger. “If I had arrived a day or two later I might not have found Julian here. He would probably have been on his way to the mountains; and if he had by any accident succeeded in finding his old home, all my plans, which I have spent long years in maturing, would have been ruined. I came here to remove him from your care. It appears that certain persons, who are very much interested in him, and who have been searching for him high and low ever since I brought him here, have by some means discovered his hiding-place, and it is necessary that I should remove him farther out of their reach. I shall take him to South America.”

“What’s that? Is it fur from here?” asked Jack.

“It is a long distance. I came down the river from St. Joseph in a flatboat,” added the visitor. “I found that the captain is a man who will do anything for money, and I have arranged with him to carry us to New Orleans. It will take us a long time to accomplish the journey, but we cannot be as easily followed as we could if we went by steamer. If you will accompany me I will pay you well for your services. I can say that the boy is a lunatic and that you are his keeper.”

“Nough said!” exclaimed Jack. “I’m jest the man to watch him.”

“But you must not watch him too closely,” said Mr. Mortimer earnestly. “If he should accidentally fall overboard during the journey it would not make any difference in your pay.”

“In course not,” replied Jack, with a meaning glitter in his eye. “If he gets one of them ar’ crazy spells onto him some dark night an’ jumps into the river, why – then –”

“Why then you ought to be handsomely rewarded for your faithful services while in my employ, and discharged.”

“Perzactly. Whar is this yere flatboat now?”

“I left her about twenty miles up the river. I told the captain to lay up for a few hours until I could have time to come down here and transact my business with you. She will be along about noon to-morrow. Have everything ready so that we can hail her, and step on board without an instant’s delay.”

“I don’t fur the life o’ me see how I can let him go – my heart is so sot onto him,” sighed Mrs. Bowles, once more raising her apron to her eyes. “He do save me a heap o’ steps, an’ he’s a monstrous good hand to cut wood an’ build fires o’ frosty mornin’s.”

“But he hain’t never had it to do,” interrupted Jack, who, for reasons of his own, thought it best to impress upon the mind of his guest that Julian’s life under his roof had been one continual round of ease and enjoyment. “We allers makes our own boys roll out o’ mornin’s and cut wood,

an' Julian can lay in his comfortable bed, as snug as a bug in a rug, an' snooze as long as he pleases. The reason we've tuk sich good care of him is, 'cause we thought ye sot store by him. Ye're some kin to him, I reckon. Ye're names is alike."

"That is a matter that does not interest you," answered the guest sharply. "I pay you to work for me, and not to ask questions."

"I didn't mean no offense. But when I see a man like yerself totin' a boy about the country, an' leavin' him hid in a place like this fur eight year, an' then huntin' him up agin, an' runnin' him off to some other place, an' hear ye say that if he falls into the river an' gets drowned ye won't be no ways sorry fur it, I think there's something up, don't I? Ye don't do that fur nothing; an' since the boy ain't ole enough to be a standin' atween ye an' a woman, I naterally conclude that he stands atween ye an' money. Howsomever, it hain't no consarn of mine. I know which side of my corn-dodger's got the lasses onto it."

"Pap! I say pap!" suddenly cried a voice from one of the beds. "Ye think yer sharp, ye an that feller do, but ye ain't so sharp as ye might be."

"Hush yer noise, boy, an' speak when ye're spoken to," exclaimed Jack angrily. "Ye needn't be no ways oneasy, Mr. Mortimer," he added, seeing that his guest arose hastily to his feet and appeared to be greatly excited to know that their conversation had been overheard. "We're all true blue here, an' my boys has too much good sense to blab what they hears – leastwise while they are paid to keep their mouths shet. Ye, Jake, roll over an' go to sleep."

"All right, pap," said Jake, obeying the first part of the order. "If ye wake up in the mornin' an' find that yer bird has flew ye needn't blame me, 'cause I told ye."

"Eh?" roared Jack, jumping up in great amazement.

"O, he won't be here, an' ye can bet yer bottom dollar on it. He's heered every blessed word ye said."

"Who? Julian?" gasped the visitor.

"Sartin. I seed his head a stickin' over the hull time ye was a talkin'."

Had a bomb-shell burst in the room the two men could not have been more astonished. They stood motionless for a moment, and then, with a muttered imprecation, Jack bounded across the floor and went swiftly up the ladder that led to the loft, closely followed by his guest, whose face was as pale as death, while Mrs. Bowles snatched the rawhide from its nail, and rolling up her sleeves took her stand in front of the fire-place, prepared for any emergency.

Jack sprung into the loft when he reached the top of the ladder and ran straight to the bed, expecting to lay his hands upon the eavesdropper; but he was not there. With eager haste he threw aside the tattered coats and blankets, and even kicked the corn-husks about, but no Julian was hidden among them. Nor was he anywhere in the loft; for there was no furniture there, and consequently no place of concealment large enough to shelter a squirrel.

"Dog-gone!" roared Jack, stamping about so furiously that the boards which formed the floor of the loft creaked and bent, and seemed on the point of breaking beneath his weight and letting him through into the room below.

"He's gone, as sure as ye're a foot high."

"He probably escaped through this hole," said Mr. Mortimer, running to the gable-end of the cabin where the boards had fallen off. "It isn't more than ten feet to the ground, and he could easily drop down without injuring himself. He must be brought back at any cost."

"In course he must, an' I know how to do it. I've got a hound that'll trail him. Ole woman, stick yer head outer that door an' holler for Nero."

While Mrs. Bowles was shouting out the hound's name, awaking the echoes far and near with her shrill voice, Jake and Tom were pulling on their clothes with all possible haste.

"Here's a fine chance for a spec," said the former, slyly pulling a small tin box from under his pillow and putting it carefully into his pocket. "Mebbe that feller in the store clothes will give

something to have Julian brought back. The ole man'll never ketch him 'cause he can't run fast enough; an' Julian's too sharp to give a hound a chance to foller him. We know jest the place he'll make tracks fur, an' if we go thar we can gobble him."

"Ye Jake!" cried Mr. Bowles, hurrying down the ladder, "when I get time, I'm a goin' to give ye the best wallop in ye ever heern tell on."

"Ye needn't mind," replied Jake, in great alarm.

"But I *will* mind, I tell ye; an' I hain't a-goin' to forget it, nuther."

"I hain't been a doin' of nothing, pap."

"That's jest what's the matter. I'm goin' to lick ye fur not doin' something – fur not tellin' me that ye seed Julian a listenin'. Here he comes! Here's the feller that'll bring the runaway back to us in less'n five minutes."

At this moment the door was dashed violently open and in bounded Nero, who seemed to know that there was work for him to do, and was impatient to begin it. He was a magnificent brute – so large that when he sprang up and placed his paws upon his master's shoulders his head was on a level with Jack's. He showed a frightful array of teeth and growled threateningly at the visitor, who constantly shifted his position in order to keep Jack's burly form between himself and the savage beast.

"Thar's the dog fur ye, Mr. Mortimer," said Bowles, looking proudly at his favorite. "He'll ketch any thing ye tell him to, from a bar down to a chicken. Hand me that rope, ole woman. I'll have to hold him in the leash, or he won't leave enough of Julian to make it wuth while to take that trip down the river. Now, then, hunt 'em up, ye rascal!"

Having made one end of the rope fast to the hound's collar, Mr. Bowles wrapped the other about his hand and arm, snatched a blazing fire-brand from the hearth, and hurried out of the door and around the house, to examine the ground there, and ascertain if Julian had really escaped from the opening in the gable-end. The hound struck the scent at once, and uttering a loud bay dashed off into the darkness, dragging the clumsy Jack after him.

"Now's your time," whispered Tom, when the yelping of the dog and the encouraging yells of his master began to grow fainter in the distance; "speak to him."

"I say!" exclaimed Jake, addressing himself to Mr. Mortimer, who was pacing nervously up and down the floor; "pap'll never ketch him, but we can, 'cause we know whar to look fur him."

"Then why don't you do it?" demanded the guest, angrily. "I will give you \$10 apiece if you will bring him back to me."

"Wal, that's business. We were jest waitin' to hear ye say something of that kind. Come on, Tom."

The two boys rushed out of the house, and running swiftly along the path that led by the corn-cribs, were soon out of sight.

CHAPTER VIII

CHASED BY A BLOOD-HOUND

JULIAN did not remain long enough in his concealment to overhear all the conversation we have recorded, for an action he witnessed on the part of Jake Bowles, shortly after that worthy got into bed, turned his thoughts from the stranger, and his plans into another channel. He saw Jake thrust his arm under his pillow and draw out a small tin box, which he opened, and after looking over his shoulder to make sure that his father and mother were too much engaged with their visitor to pay any attention to himself, he drew out of it a roll of bills. He ran his fingers over them caressingly, held them above his head to allow the firelight to shine upon them, and exhibited in various other ways the delight he experienced in having them in his possession; after which he returned them to the box, replaced it under his pillow, and settling himself comfortably between the blankets, threw his arm over his head, and as Julian thought, prepared to go to sleep. But Jake did not intend to do anything of the kind, for he saw the top of the eavesdropper's head over the edge of the loft.

"That's my box," thought our hero, his cheek growing suddenly pale, and his heart beating against his ribs with a noise that frightened him. "I've been robbed."

The knowledge of this disagreeable fact came upon him with a force so stunning and bewildering, that for a few seconds he lay as motionless upon the floor of the loft as if he had been stricken down by some powerful hand. His secret was discovered after all his pains, and by the very ones from whose knowledge he had wished most to keep it hidden.

"My horse went first," thought Julian, striving hard to choke back the tears that arose to his eyes, "and now everything else is gone; for, of course, if they found the box they must have found my furs and my rifle also. And I was always so careful never to go near my store-house until I had satisfied myself that there was no one in sight. I shan't give up those things, and that's all about it. Because I have never resisted their tyranny, Jack and his boys think I am a coward, but now I will show them what I am made of."

Very slowly and cautiously Julian drew back from the edge of the loft, and retreated toward the opening in the gable-end of the cabin. So stealthy was he in his movements that even the wakeful Jake did not hear him as he crept across the floor, swung himself down from the gable-end and dropped to the ground.

The instant he landed on his feet he darted off at the top of his speed, directing his steps toward the corn-cribs.

"That much is done," panted Julian, "but the work is yet to come. It will be no trouble to saddle my horse and secure my rifle and furs, but how am I to obtain possession of that money? It is mine, and I am determined to have it. Here, Billy! Here, Billy!"

Julian's horse, which was standing under a dilapidated shed, raised his head on hearing his name pronounced, and seeing his master open one of the cribs, came up, expecting the ear of corn which the boy never failed to have ready for him whenever he passed through the stable-yard. Julian knew where Tom kept his saddle and bridle, and it was but the work of a few seconds to place them on the horse. When this had been done he climbed over the corn to the farther end of the crib, and began tossing aside the ears, muttering as he did so:

"This place is a regular repository for stolen goods. I have found more than one article belonging to me stowed away here, and unless I am very much mistaken – ah! I thought so. Here are my furs – all baled up and ready for transportation, thanks to Tom and Jake – my rifle and my hunting-knife. Now, if they had only left my money here I would be on my way to St. Joseph in less than five minutes. I must have it if it takes me a week to get it."

Julian hastily pulled the canvas cover off his rifle, and slung the weapon over his shoulder by a broad strap that was attached to it, buckled his hunting-knife about his waist, placed his furs, which Tom and Jake had tied up in one bundle, close at hand, and once more began throwing the corn aside, searching everywhere for his powder-horn and bullet-pouch. While thus engaged his attention was attracted by a great uproar which suddenly arose in the house. He listened, and could hear the tramping of heavy feet and the sound of angry, excited voices, with which were presently mingled the shrill tones of Mrs. Bowles, who thrust her head out of the door and shouted for Nero.

“The blood-hound!” gasped Julian. “I didn’t think Jack Bowles was as bad as that. Oh! for just one load for my rifle! But why should Nero harm me? He has known me as long as he has known any of the family. I have often shared my meals with him, and perhaps if he overtakes me he will recognize me.”

Julian knew too much, however, of the nature of the fierce brute to indulge long in this hope.

Nero was the terror of the neighborhood, and when aroused he had been known to defy Jack Bowles himself. Our hero was perfectly well aware that the hound would trail him as he would a deer, and that if by any chance he succeeded in overtaking him, he would pull him down and throttle him without the least mercy. His heart beat a trifle faster than usual when he thought of the probable results of a fight with the terrible animal, and his hands trembled as he caught up his bundle of furs and clambered over the corn toward the door.

He had left Billy with his head in the crib, feasting on the corn within his reach, and he believed that he would remain there until he was ready to mount him; but when he came out of the door he saw him at the farther end of the yard, prancing and playing about in high glee.

The boy ran toward him, pronouncing his name in a low voice, but Billy, instead of obeying the call, kicked up his heels and galloped away to the other side of the yard. Just then Julian heard the door of the cabin thrown open, and looking back saw the hound spring into the room and fawn upon his master.

“I’m caught,” thought our hero, in intense alarm. “I dare not wait to secure my horse, and on foot I can never hope to escape from that dog. I might as well give up now as any time.”

The boy’s actions, however, did not indicate that he had the least idea of surrendering himself without a struggle for his freedom.

After one more unsuccessful attempt to capture his unruly steed, he threw his pack of furs over his shoulder, leaped the fence that inclosed the stable-yard, and striking the path that led to the woods, ran for his life. He did not waste time in looking back, and there was no need of it, for his ears kept him posted in all that was going on. He knew when Jack and his dog came out of the cabin, and the cold sweat started out from every pore in his body when Nero’s deep-toned bay, and his master’s exultant yells, rang out on the still air, telling him that the trail had been found and the pursuit commenced.

Calling to his aid all the power he had thus far held in reserve, Julian flew along the path with the speed of a frightened deer, and with a few bounds reached the cover of the woods.

Without in the least slackening his pace, he threw his bundle of furs into the bushes on one side of the path, and pitched his rifle as far as he could in the opposite direction. His second move was to pull off his coat and wrap it around his left arm, and his third to draw his hunting-knife from its sheath, and tie the thong of buckskin which was attached to the handle around his wrist. His face all this while wore an expression that would have astonished Jack Bowles could he have seen it.

Being now relieved of every encumbrance, Julian flew along with redoubled speed, through darkness so intense that he could scarcely see his hand before his face, leaping logs and ditches, and struggling through thickets of briars and cane that at almost any other time would have effectually checked his progress, all the while listening to the baying of the hound, and wondering why the animal was so long in overtaking him.

When he had accomplished nearly half a mile, and the sounds of the chase began to grow fainter, showing that his pursuers were losing ground, he uttered an exclamation of delight, and slackened his pace.

“I thought Nero’s music did not ring out as loud and clear as usual,” said he to himself; “and now I know the reason. Jack is holding fast to him, and the dog is choking himself to death trying to get away. Mr. Bowles never saw the day that he could catch me in a fair race. I may as well go slower and save my breath.”

But, even as these thoughts were passing through Julian’s mind, he heard a sound behind him that brought from him a cry of alarm, and caused him to spring forward again with all the power he could command. It was a yell of rage from Jack, accompanied by a loud, ringing bay, such as Nero usually uttered when following a trail. The eager hound had escaped from his master’s control.

The fugitive shuddered at the thought, and would not permit himself to believe it; but in a few seconds the fact became too apparent. Nero’s bays sounded nearer and nearer, and presently Julian heard him crashing through the bushes behind him.

His lightness of foot could not save him now. The fight he so much dreaded could not be avoided, and the sooner he was prepared for it the better.

To think, with Julian, was to act. He at once decided that the little open glade he was then traversing should be the battle-ground. It was almost entirely free from undergrowth, and moreover, the branches of the trees overhead were not so thick as to entirely shut out the light of the moon, which, just then, as if in sympathy with the fugitive, made a feeble effort to shine through the clouds that obscured it.

A few rapid steps brought him to the opposite side of the glade, and to the foot of a huge poplar. Here he faced about, and taking his stand with his back against the tree, so that the shock of the first collision might not knock him off his feet, he wrapped his coat closer about his arm, and fastened it there by tying the sleeves in a knot with his teeth, grasped his hunting-knife with a firmer hold, and calmly awaited the appearance of the blood-hound. Nor was the contest long delayed.

Stimulated by the freshness of the trail, Nero came on with long and rapid bounds, and at last broke from a thicket on the opposite side of the glade, and with a bay which rang in Julian’s ears like the knell of death, moved swiftly toward his victim.

The fugitive had barely time to settle his hat more firmly on his head and brace himself for the shock, when the fierce animal arose in the air and launched himself at his throat. The arm with the coat wrapped around it was quickly interposed, and Nero’s ponderous jaws closed upon it with a power that, for an instant, rendered Julian incapable of action. He was borne back against the tree by the weight of the brute, but rallied in a moment, and then began the most desperate struggle of his life.

The hound was as quick as a cat in his movements, and seemed endowed with as many lives; for, although the boy’s long, keen blade found lodgment in his body more than once, it appeared to make no impression upon him. He clung to Julian’s arm with the tenacity of a bull-dog, never once loosening or shifting his hold; and now and then, throwing all his strength into the effort, he gave his antagonist a shake that brought him to his knees.

To make matters worse, Jack Bowles was not far behind. He was soon near enough to shout directions to his hound. He heard the sounds of the struggle, and believing that his favorite was gaining the mastery, ordered him to let go his hold.

“He is past minding, Jack,” shouted Julian, whose courage and determination had never once flagged during all the doubtful contest; “and when I am done with him he will be past hearing you.”

Jack heard every word, and comprehended the situation as well as if there had been light enough for him to see everything that was going on. It was wonderful how quickly his tone changed.

“Hi! hi!” he yelled, forcing his burly form through the bushes with all the speed of which he was capable, “pull him down, Nero! Shake him to death, ye rascal! Drop that ar we’pon, Julian, or I’ll larrup ye within an inch of yer life. I wouldn’t have that dog hurt for \$100.”

“You ought to have thought of that before you put him on my trail,” replied Julian. “There! Thank goodness that ends it.”

The hound ceased the battle as suddenly as he begun it. He became limp and lifeless all at once, and sank to the ground in a heap, dragging Julian with him. But even in death his jaws would not relax their hold. His long teeth had caught in the coat, and Julian could not release his arm.

Just then, Jack Bowles burst from the bushes, and came lumbering across the glade. He saw Julian kneeling beside the hound and knew instinctively what had happened. His astonishment and rage knew no bounds.

“Dog-gone!” he roared; “ye’ve done it now, boy. I wouldn’t be in yer cowhide shoes fur no money. Hold on, thar! Come back here, or – ”

The oaths and threats with which Jack awoke the echoes of the forest made Julian’s blood run cold, but they did not check his flight.

Finding himself unable to obtain possession of his coat, he slipped his arm out of it and fled, leaving the garment in the hound’s mouth.

He was out of sight in a moment.

CHAPTER IX GOOD FOR EVIL

JULIAN, almost exhausted by his violent exertions, was in no condition to continue his fight. He simply ran to the opposite side of the poplar, in front of which the fight had taken place, and threw himself flat between the roots, where he lay trembling with fear, and hardly daring to breathe lest Jack should discover him. But that worthy was too angry to see anything except his prostrate hound. He bent over the animal for a moment, and then rushed frantically off in the direction he supposed Julian had gone, stamping through the bushes like a mad man and stopping now and then to listen for the sound of the fugitive's footsteps. He made a wide circuit through the woods, searching everywhere for the object of his vengeance, and finally came back to his favorite again.

He seemed to be unable to bring himself to believe that he had seen Nero alive for the last time. He placed him upon his feet, called him by name, and even shook him to make him show some signs of life; and when at last he had satisfied himself that the dog was really dead, he jumped up and spurned him with his heavy boot.

"Only think!" he exclaimed aloud; "a hound that could pull down a four-pronged buck as easy as he could a chicken, that could stretch a two-year-ole bar while ye was a thinkin' about it, an' chaw up a full-grown wildcat every mornin' afore breakfast, has met his match at last in that leetle pale-face Julian, who doesn't look as if he had pluck enough to face a mouse. Nero, I am teetotally ashamed of ye. Whar is that Julian? If I don't ketch him I shall lose the money I was goin' to make by that trip to Orleans. But I'll make more outen Mr. Mortimer. I'll have that watch an' that ring, an' everything he's got in his pockets afore daylight. I hain't a goin' to be swindled on all sides, I bet ye."

When Jack had finished his soliloquy – every word of which Julian had overheard – he once more began his search for the fugitive. The boy remained quiet in his concealment until the sound of his footsteps had died away, and then with a long breath of relief arose to his feet and went to recover his coat. He found it where Jack had thrown it after freeing it from the teeth of the hound. It had never been a very valuable piece of property since it came into his possession, and now it was in a worse condition than ever; but Julian, knowing that he was destined for months to come to live entirely in the open air, could not think of leaving it behind. He threw the garment over his shoulder, and taking a last look at the hound, and shuddering as he recalled the incidents of the fight, bent his steps through the woods toward his store-house. He wanted to see what Tom and Jake had done to it. Perhaps they had left something there worth saving. He was very cautious in his movements, stealing along with a step that would not have awakened a cricket and pausing every few feet to listen. But he heard no suspicious sounds, and when he reached the cliff in which his store-house was located he was satisfied that he had seen the last of his enemies for that night at least.

He found the ruins of his store-house lying all along the side of the bluff, for the young robbers, not content with taking possession of Julian's valuables, had pulled out the saplings of which the house was built and scattered them far and wide. As Julian stood looking at the ruins of the cabin, thinking how hard he had worked to build it, and wondering how Jake and Tom had ever discovered it, he heard a slight rustling in the bushes by his side, and before he could turn to see what occasioned it, he found himself lying flat on his back with a heavy weight on his breast holding him down. At the same instant he felt a strap passed around his wrist.

Had his assailant conducted his operations in silence, Julian, who believed that he had fallen into the clutches of Jack Bowles, and that it would be folly to resist, would have suffered himself to be bound without even a word of remonstrance, but his antagonist, having a confederate close

by, and believing that he was likely to have more on his hands than he could well attend to, shouted lustily for help.

“Here he is, Jake,” he yelled. “Hurry up. I’ll hold him an’ ye can tie him. The \$20 are our’n.”

“Tom Bowles!” cried Julian.

“Sartin; an’ ye’ll find it out as soon as we get ye fast. Don’t go to bein’ sassy now, ’cause we won’t b’ar it. Tie that ar strap around his arms, Jake.”

“Perhaps Jake isn’t man enough to do it,” replied our hero; and the sequel proved that he was not.

Julian arose to his feet as easily and quickly as though there had been no one there to prevent him, and seizing Tom by the collar, gave him a trip and a push that sent him heels over head down the cliff.

Without waiting to see what had become of him, Julian turned upon Jake, and then began another fight, which, although by no means of so serious a character as the one Julian had had a few minutes before, was quite as furious and determined. Jake was older and larger and stronger than Julian, but by no means as active. He was fighting for the \$10 his father’s guest had promised him if our hero was brought back to the cabin a prisoner, and to retain possession of the \$80 he carried in his pocket.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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