

Various, King Charles

**Rancho Del Muerto and
Other Stories of Adventure
from «Outing» by Various...**



Various

**Rancho Del Muerto and Other
Stories of Adventure from
«Outing» by Various Authors**

«Public Domain»

Various

Rancho Del Muerto and Other Stories of Adventure from
«Outing» by Various Authors / Various — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

RANCHO DEL MUERTO, By Charles King, Capt. U. S. Army	5
FIRST PART	5
SECOND CHAPTER	12
A MIGHTY HUNTER BEFORE THE LORD, By Virginius Dabney	20
FIRST PART	20
SECOND PART	23
A CAHUTTA VALLEY SHOOTING MATCH, By Will N. Harben	27
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	32

Charles King Rancho Del Muerto / and Other Stories of Adventure from «Outing» by Various Authors

**RANCHO DEL MUERTO, By
Charles King, Capt. U. S. Army**

FIRST PART

NO denying it – there was something uncanny about the place at the very first glance. The paymaster admitted that to himself as his ambulance slowly drove in, and his escort of half a dozen troopers came clattering after. It was his first visit to the spot, and he shrugged his broad shoulders and murmured a word of caution to the silent clerk who sat beside him:

“I want you to keep eyes and ears open here, Staines. We’ve got to make a night of it. You remember that this is where Sergeant Dinsmore was murdered, and I’ve heard nothing but bad accounts of the people for the last six months.”

Mr. Staines was apparently a man who wasted no words. Acquiescence with him may have been expressed by silence. At all events he made no reply.

“Were you ever at the ranch before, when you made the trips with Colonel Forte?” asked the paymaster.

“No, sir, it’s – all strange to me hereabouts.”

“How far are we from Canyon del Muerto now, sergeant?” asked the officer of the bearded trooper who rode close alongside.

“Sixteen miles, sir, on a bee line, but at least twenty by the road. We’re off the direct trail now. We could have got through the canyon and reached the camp before this if that mule hadn’t gone lame.”

“Major,” said Staines in a low tone, “I can get a saddle horse or mule here, no doubt. Had I not better ride right on? I can reach Captain Rawlins’ camp by 9 or 10 o’clock. He will be mighty anxious at your non-arrival.”

“I was thinking of sending one man ahead; I don’t like to let you go. It will wear you out for to-morrow’s work.”

“Indeed it won’t, sir; I’m feeling fresh enough, and the change from wagon to saddle will just suit me. I think I’d better go.” And there was an eager look in Staines’ clear-cut face.

“I’ll think about it” was the dubious answer. “These cavalry men are the proper ones to send, not a paymaster’s clerk. If anything befell you on the route I would be crippled in making payments.”

“Nothing would be apt to befall me, sir; I know that road well.”

“I thought you said all was strange to you hereabouts” said the paymaster quickly. But the clerk showed no discomfiture.

“I said here, around the ranch. The direct road lies off there nearly nine miles to the southwest, sir. That is the one we always took going to Tucson.”

The paymaster relapsed into silence. It is all very well to have subordinates who know far more than does the senior officer, yet the latter does not always find it agreeable. His own clerk having resigned some six months previous and returned to the East, when Major Sherrick was ordered from San Francisco to Arizona he had employed Mr. Staines at the urgent request of the officer whom he relieved. Staines had property interests in the Territory, he was told, and wanted to remain. He was a man profoundly versed in his duties; accurate, temperate, reliable and of unimpeachable character, said his recommenders. Sherrick was glad to get him, for he himself had no head for figures, and had been made a paymaster from civil life simply because his uncle the Senator found him a failure in every other capacity, and demanded the appointment of an Executive who could not deny him, though he felt like kicking himself when he looked at the long list of grizzled, war-tried captains who were wistful applicants for the longed-for promotion.

A tall Mexican stepped forward with much urbanity and grace of manner to assist the paymaster to alight as the ambulance stopped in front of the ranch, and Major Sherrick looked with emotions of surprise upon Pedro Ruiz, the proprietor.

“You don’t mean to say that’s the scoundrel we heard so much bad talk about at headquarters?” he whispered to Staines at the first opportunity.

“The very same, sir; the most accomplished cutthroat in Arizona, if we can believe our senses and disregard evidence.”

“Where are his men? He seems alone here, all but that old greaser yonder.”

“Dios sabe,” answered the clerk briefly, though his eyes glanced quickly away toward the purpling range to the south. “But we shall need our guards every moment we are here, sir, that’s certain.” An hour later night had settled down upon the broad valley, black and forbidding. All day long the wind had been sighing about the corral, whirling clouds of dust from the loose, sandy soil and sifting it in through many a chink and crevice over the floor of Pedro’s ranch. The great ranges to the northwest, the Sierras to the south, were whitecapped at their lofty summits, but all over the arid miles of surrounding desert the sun had been hotly blazing from noon to the dewless eve, and not until it sank behind the western wave did the wind sweep down untempered. Through its shallow bed the Gila rolled, a lazy, turbid current, not a rifle shot away. Quicksands and muddy pools flanked its course for miles and barred all attempts at crossing except at the point where thrifty Pedro had “corduroyed” the flats with boards that had formerly done duty at the agency building, and, having originally cost the paternal Government something in the neighborhood of \$1 apiece, had now come down to the base uses of daily trampling under foot. The stage to the Gripsack Mines, the huge ox teams and triple-hitched wagons, the nimble pack mules, even the buckboard with the United States mail, paid reluctant tribute into Pedro’s dingy palm, though the owners mentally damned him for a thief.

Everybody in that part of Arizona well knew that in the unprecedented rise of the Gila, a few years back, two of the agency storehouses had been floated away down the stream, accompanied by a dense flotilla of joists, scantling and clapboards, which had been piled up on the river bank after weeks of laborious transportation from Plummer’s saw mill in the San Gabriel. So, too, had sundry casks of bacon, barrels of beans and bales of Indian goods; and while portions of this flood-swept assortment were found stranded and scattered along the winding shores as far down as Pedro’s bailiwick, not so much as a solitary shingle had passed beyond, and the laws of flotsam and jetsam had received at the hands of this shrewd “greaser” their most liberal construction. More than once had the Federal authorities been compelled to proceed to stringent measures with Pedro and arraign him before a jury of his peers on charges of having robbed and defrauded the General Government, and more than once with prompt and cheering unanimity had the jury pronounced him not guilty, a service which he never failed to requite in kind when Garcia, Gomez or Sancho came up for his turn. And now the old Mexican was proprietor of a goodly ranch, built mainly of adobe, it is true, as were his roomy corrals and storehouses, yet roofed, floored, partitioned, doored and menu for

either breakfast, dinner or supper, at a charge of \$1 a head for any and all travelers who sought to appease their appetite at his table. He kept a bar, too, and dealt out villainous “tanglefoot” and windowed, too, by the unwilling contributions wrung from Uncle Sam.

For three years he had furnished bacon, *frijoles* and fried eggs, the unvarying fiery mescal to such stomachs as could stand the onslaught and the tax of two bits a thimbleful. He ran a “brace game” of monte whenever the packers were drunk or strangers fool enough to play. He was a thorough-paced rascal in the opinion of every “gringo” who passed that way, and a man of unimpeachable character according to all records in the case. He was a “greaser” of whom everything had been said and nothing proved; that is, to the satisfaction of an old-time Arizona jury. But Mr. Whitlock, the new United States District Attorney, was said to be “laying” for Pedro, and between those who knew them both and were aware of the possibilities of finding twelve better men and truer outside of Maricopa County, bets were even as to the result.

“Just let me get that thieving greaser across the line into Yavapai,” said a local luminary, “and I’ll find a jury that will hang him on sight or lynch him on general principles.” But Pedro knew better than to venture northward along the tempting shores of the Hassayampa. Even the chance of collecting a bad debt from a fellow countryman, known to be lurking in Wickenburg, failed to lure Pedro thither. He smiled suggestively, showing his white teeth and waving aside the blue smoke of his cigarrito with sinewy brown hand. “A – Wickenburg is too damn close to Yavapai, and Yavapai to ‘ell,” he remarked. And it had more than once been said of Pedro that he spoke English like a native.

“Rancho Ruiz” was the sonorous and pretentious title he had bestowed upon the establishment to which the winding Arizona roadway led. “Cutthroat Crossing” was what the soldiers and placer miners had called this half ferry, half ford of Pedro’s ever since the body of young Sergeant Dinsmore had been found stranded on a sand bar of the Gila two miles below, his neck and his money belt slashed by the same knife. Going into Yuma with well-lined pockets, Dinsmore had been warned to make no stay among the gang of monte players always hovering about Pedro’s. But he had been a bold and successful gambler at Tucson. He had nothing but contempt for Mexican bravos and confidence in his own prowess as a shot. The card table had attractions he could not well resist, but the ranch had still another – Pedro’s daughter.

Now it was when he was sent thither with a squad of a dozen troopers, hunting up the missing sergeant, that Lieutenant Adriance caught sight of this siren of a senorita. She could not have been more than seventeen, and her mother would have denied her even that number of years. “She is a mere child,” protested Senora Dolores, when the subject was mentioned. Pedro had moved up from Sonora only a few years before, and had lived a while at the old Mexico-Spanish town of Tucson, whither, ere long, there came unflattering tales as to the cause of his change of residence. He had money, and that in Arizona covered more sins than charity. The boundary line lay conveniently near. Extradition was an unpracticed art in the days whereof we write. Apaches of the mountains and assassins of the mines found equal refuge across the border, and in exchange we received such choice spirits as proved too tough for even a Mexican town to tolerate. Of such was Pedro; but no one to look at Pedro’s daughter would have called her a felon’s child.

The night that Adriance reached the rancho on the search just mentioned he had purposely left his little escort some distance up the Gila, and advanced alone to reconnoitre. It was a perfectly still evening, soft and starry. The hoofs of his broncho made no sound upon the sandy waste of road, and not even the dogs about the corral seemed aware of his coming. Adriance had thrice visited the ranch before, when returning from scout or pursuit of Apaches, and never once had he been greeted by feminine voice about the premises. It was with no little surprise, then, that he heard the tinkle of a guitar and the sound of low, soft, girlish tones singing a plaintive melody. He had heard many a Mexican ditty, and had pronounced the singers twangy, shrill and nasal; but this was different. He had come to Rancho Ruiz with every expectation of finding evidence of the murder

of one of his most valued troopers, and here, on the instant of his arrival, was disarmed by a song. East of the ranch there stood a little lattice-work structure, something after the manner of a summer house, and from thence the sounds proceeded. The lieutenant leaped from his horse and strode to the entrance, wondering what manner of woman he should find beyond. There was not light enough to distinguish either form or feature, but over in the farther corner was a shadowy something in white. The song continued but a moment before the singer became aware of the equally shadowy form at the entrance, and stopped abruptly.

“Leon!” spoke a girlish voice in the Spanish tongue, “you frightened me. Is that you?”

“I am Felipe, otherwise Phil. Adriance, of the American Cavalry, seniorita, and far more surprised than you are at seeing me.”

The girl started to her feet as though flight was her first impulse, then hesitated. Did not the “Senor Teniente” bar the way in merely standing in the entrance?

“Do not be alarmed, I beg of you,” implored the young officer, “it is so long since I have heard a song in a woman’s voice. It is such a surprise to hear one now. Do sing for me again. I will have to stand here where I can hold my horse.”

For a moment she was silent, then: “You have been to the rancho? You have seen my father?” she asked at length, her voice tremulous and almost inaudible.

“I? No, I have just come; I am alone, and heard your song and forgot everything else.”

To his surprise she came hurriedly forward out of the dusk, and stood close to his side, looking fearfully over toward the night lights at the bar, whence the sounds of Mexican voices could be heard.

“Alone? You came here alone? O senior, ride on or ride back. Stay not here! Not at the rancho! There are wicked men – not my father; not Pedro Ruiz, but – there are others.”

“Is this true? Are you Pedro’s daughter?” queried the lieutenant, evidently far more impressed with this fact than with her tidings. “I never knew he had a child like you, and I have been here often and have never seen you.”

“But I – have seen you, senior, when you were last here, and I saw you, too, at the *cuartel* at Tucson. Do you know – do you remember the day of the race?” And her dark eyes were for one instant lifted timidly to his.

“Is this possible?” he exclaimed, seizing her hand as it fell listlessly by her side. “Let me see your face. Surely I have heard your voice before.” But she shrank back, half timid, half capricious.

“I must not; I must go, senior, and you – you must ride away.”

And now her eyes glanced half fearfully toward the house, then sought his face in genuine anxiety. He had been fumbling in the pocket of his hunting shirt, and suddenly drew forth a little silver case. The next instant, while he held her wrist firmly with one hand, the brilliant flame of an electric match flashed over her face and form.

“Oh, senior,” she cried, even when bowing her blushing face upon her bared arm, “this is madness! Put it out!” Then, like a frightened deer, she went bounding to the ranch, but not before he had recognized in her the pretty Mexican girl with whom he had thrice danced at the *festa* at Tucson and whose name he had vainly sought to learn. Nor did he again see her on this visit. Nor did he hear again her voice. Returning with his men at dawn, he began the day’s investigations and had occasion to ask many questions of old Pedro, who promptly answered that he well remembered the sergeant and that the sergeant had drunk at his bar; had partaken of his cheer; had stabled his horse at the corral; but that, after gambling with “los otros,” men of whom he, Pedro, knew naught, the sergeant had gone on his way. More he could not tell. He shrugged his shoulders and protested his ignorance even of the names of the men with whom Dinsmore had gambled.

“You enter my house, Senior Teniente. You ask for food, for drink. You pay. You go. Ask I you your name – your home? No! Should I demand it of any caballero who so come and go?”

And failing in extracting information from the master, Adriance sought the hirelings and found them equally reticent. Shrewd frontiersmen and campaigners in his little detachment were equally unsuccessful until nearly night, when a brace of prospectors rode in and said they saw what looked to be a human body over on a sand bar down the Gila. Then Pedro's face had turned ashen gray, and one of his henchmen trembled violently.

Poor Dinsmore was given such soldier burial as his comrades could devise, and Pedro, of his own accord, and with much reverential gravity of mien, had graced the ceremony with his presence.

Every man of the cavalry detachment felt morally certain that Pedro Ruiz knew far more than he would tell, but there was no way in which they could proceed farther, and civil process was ineffectual in those days except in the court of final jurisdiction of which Judge Lynch was sole presiding officer.

Adriance rode away with a distinct sense of discomfiture at heart. What business had he to feel baffled and chagrined at his failure to see that girl again when the original object of his mission had been the discovery of Dinsmore's fate? What right had he to wish to speak with the daughter of the man whom he believed an accessory to the sergeant's murder? "Do not let them know you have seen me" she had whispered ere she scurried away to the ranch, and as neither mother nor daughter once appeared during the presence of his escort about the corral, there seemed no way in which he could open the subject.

Six months passed, during which period he had been sent to Tucson on escort duty, and while there had sought and found some well-to-do Mexican residents whom he remembered as being friends of the graceful girl who had danced so delightfully with him at the *baile* only the year before. From them he learned her name, Isabel, and something of her history. And the very next scout down the Gila found him in command and eager to go, and this very night, black and forbidding, that had settled down on Rancho Ruiz after the arrival of Paymaster Sherrick and his train, who should come riding noiselessly through the gloaming but Lieutenant Adriance himself, as before, all alone.

Nearing the lights of the rancho and moving at slow and cautious walk, his ears alert for every sound, the lieutenant became aware of the fact that Roderick, his pet horse, was pricking up his own ears and showing vast interest in some mysterious and unseen presence which they were steadily approaching. Before he had got within two hundred yards of the dim light of the house he caught sight of a lantern or two flitting about the corral. Then Roderick quickened his nimble walk and began edging off to the right front, where presently, against the low western sky, Adriance could distinguish some object like a big covered wagon, and plainly heard the pawing and snorting of a horse. Roderick evidently wanted to answer, but the lieutenant reined him abruptly to the left, and veered away southward.

Just now it was not the society of his fellow men he sought. A woman's voice, one woman's at least, would have called him eagerly forward from the darkness into the light of her waiting eyes. As it was, he made wide circuit, and not until well to the south did he again approach the silent walls of the corral. And now the wind, blowing toward him, brought with it the sound of voices, and Adriance was suddenly warned that someone was here, close at hand. Dismounting, the lieutenant slowly led his horse toward the dark barrier before him, but not until he had softly traversed the length of the southern wall did he become aware of other voices, low toned and eager. Around the corner, on the western side, the dark forms of a horseman and someone afoot were dimly defined, then a brief conversation became audible:

"You have no time to lose, Leon. Go softly until you are a mile away, then ride like hell.

"I understand, but the money?"

"That shall be yours to-morrow – now skip."

The jingle of a Mexican spur, the soft thud of mustang hoofs upon the yielding soil were heard a moment, and the horseman rode slowly away southwestward, the broad stiff brim of his

sombrero revealed against the starry sky; then all was silence. The American, whoever he was, still stood there. Adriance felt sure he had heard the voice before. As for the horseman – Leon – that was the name he heard her speak the night he surprised her in the little summer house. Who was Leon?

Presently the American turned and strolled slowly back toward the rancho. Slipping Roderick's rein over the post at the angle, the lieutenant followed. Keeping close to the wall, the stranger led the way, all unconscious of pursuit or observation, yet when he reached the next corner, whence could be seen the night lights of the rancho and the far-away gleam of the camp fire, out toward the Gila, he stopped and peered cautiously around.

Mindful of the evil fame that hung about the premises, Adriance halted too and waited. The next moment his heart beat hard. A woman's voice – soft, silvery and young – had accosted the stranger. It was Isabel's.

“You have sent my brother away again, when he had but just returned. Why is this, señor? Whither has he gone?”

“Never mind about Leon, Belita,” said the American, soothingly, “he's all right. He has simply ridden over to let Captain Rawlins know of our mishap.”

“It is not true, señor! I heard him speak to my father. It is to Sancho and to Manuel he rides, and for no good. To what new crime do you lead him? Why are they all gone? Why are we alone here this night? Why – ”

“Don't be a fool, girl,” said the man curtly, as he took her by the wrist. “Come, Leon's gone. Come back to the house.”

“He has not gone. He promised me he would not go from me without a word to-night. The moment I saw you I knew that trouble would come, and I warned him when he returned. You have made him wicked – you Americanos. You are all – ”

“Oh, yes, all, even Teniente Adriance, Isabel. I heard all about you and your affair with him. Have a care!”

“No. He is good. It is not in him to make a gambler and a rover of my brother.”

“He would make worse of your brother's sister, you fool,” the man muttered, with brutal emphasis. “Come now, no nonsense with that fellow; he's as good as married already, I tell you; he is to be married in two months.”

“Oh, it is not true!” was the fiery answer. “You lie!” And then, with feminine inconsequence, “Who is she? Who does he marry?”

“The Senorita Abert – a lovely girl, too, and rich – in San Francisco.”

“Yes, it is a lie, Staines, and you know it!” came in cool and measured tones, and Mr. Adriance suddenly stepped from the corner of the wall.

Staines dropped the captive's hand and recoiled a pace or two with a stifled exclamation, half amaze, half dismay; then with sudden effort strove to recover himself. “Well,” he exclaimed, with a nervous laugh; “talk of angels and you hear the rustle, etc. Indeed, lieutenant, I beg your pardon, though; I was merely joking with our little Mexican friend.”

“That will do, Mr. Staines; I know a joke when I hear one. Wait here a moment, if you please, for I want a word with you. Pardon me for startling you, señorita. Will you take my arm?”

The girl was trembling violently. With bowed head and fluttering heart she leaned upon the trooper's arm and was slowly led away toward the rancho, never seeming to note that the little brown hand that had been so firmly taken and drawn within by his was still tightly clasped by that cavalry gauntlet. The moment they were out of the earshot of Staines the lieutenant bent down.

“It was to see you I came here, Isabel; I had hoped to find you at the summer house. Come to me there in ten minutes, will you? I must see you before I go. First, though, I have to investigate that fellow Staines.”

“Oh, I cannot! I dare not! I slipped away from my room because of Leon. They will lead him into trouble again. Indeed, I must go back. I must go, Señor Felipe.”

“You remember my name, then, little one!” he laughed, delightedly. “I have been to Tucson since I saw you that blessed night, and I heard all about you.”

“Hush, señor! It is my mother who calls. List! Let me go, señor!” for his arm had suddenly stolen about her waist. “Promise you will come – promise!”

“I dare not! O Felipe, no!” she cried, for he had with quick impulse folded her tightly in his strong embrace and his lips were seeking hers. Struggling to avoid them she had hidden her face upon his breast.

“Promise – quick!” he whispered.

“Ah, if I can – yes. Now let me go.” His firm hand turned her glowing face to his; his eager lips pressed one lingering kiss just at the corner of her pretty mouth. She hurled herself from him then and bounded into the darkness. An instant more and he heard the latch of the rear door click; a stream of light shot out toward the corral and she was gone. Then slowly he returned to the corner of the wall, fully expecting that Staines had left. To his surprise, there was the clerk composedly awaiting him.

“Where have you sent Leon Ruiz?” was the stern question.

“I do not recognize your right to speak to me in that tone, Mr. Adriance. If you have nothing else to ask me – good night!”

“By God, sir! I heard your whispered talk with him and I know there is mischief afoot,” said the lieutenant, as he strode after the retreating form. “This thing has got to be explained, and in the major’s presence.”

Staines halted, and lifting his hat with Castilian grace of manner bowed profoundly to the angry officer. “Permit me, sir, to conduct you to him.”

An hour later, baffled, puzzled, balked in his precious hopes, Mr. Adriance returned to the bivouac of his little command. Major Sherrick had promptly and fully confirmed the statement of his clerk. It was he who told Mr. Staines to employ a ranchman to ride by night to Captain Rawlins, and the mysterious caution that surrounded the proceedings was explained by the fact that Pedro had refused his permission and that Leon had to be bribed to disobey the paternal order. Adriance was dissatisfied and suspicious, but what was there left for him to say?

Then he had hastened to the summer house, and waited a whole hour, but there came no Isabel. It was nearly 10 o’clock when he turned his horse over to the care of the guard in a little clump of cottonwoods near the Gila.

“We remain here to-morrow,” he briefly told the sergeant. “No need to wake the men before 6.” With that he went to the little wall tent, pitched for his use some yards away.

How long he slumbered Adriance could not tell. Ill at ease as to the strange conduct of Staines, he had not slept well. Conscience, too, was smiting him. Something in the tones of that girlish voice thrilled and quivered through his memory. What right had he even to ask her to meet him? What wrong had he not wrought in that one kiss?

Somebody was fumbling at the fastening of the tent flap.

“What is wanted, sergeant?” he quickly hailed.

“Open, quick!” was the low-toned answer. “Come to the door. No, no, bring no light,” was the breathless caution, as he struck a match.

“Who is this?” he demanded, with strange thrill at heart – something in those tones he well knew – yet it could not be. A dim figure in shrouding *serape* was crouching at the front tent pole as he threw open the flap.

“Good God! Isabel!”

“Si – Yes. Hush, señor, no one must hear, no one must know ‘twas I. Quick! Wake your men! Saddle! Ride hard till you catch the paymaster! Never leave him till you are beyond Canyon del Muerto, and then never come to the rancho again – never!”

SECOND CHAPTER

THAT off mule of the paymaster's ambulance been a quadruped of wonderful recuperative powers. She had gone nearly dead lame all the previous day, and now at 5 o'clock on this breezy morning was trotting along as though she had never known a twinge in her life. Mr. Staines was apparently nonplussed. Acting on his advice, the paymaster had decided to break camp soon after 2 o'clock, make coffee, and then start for Rawlins' camp at once. He confidently expected to have to drag along at a slow walk, and his idea was to get well through the Canyon del Muerto before the heat of the day. The unexpected recovery of Jenny, however, enabled them to go bowling ahead over the level flat, and at sunrise they were already in sight of the northern entrance to the gorge. It was odd how early Mr. Staines began to develop lively interest in the condition of that mule. First he suggested to the driver that he was going too fast, and would bring on that lameness again; but the driver replied that it was Jenny herself who was doing most of the pulling. Then Staines became fearful lest the cavalry escort should get exhausted by such steady trotting, and ventured to say to Major Sherrick that they ought to rein up on their account. Sherrick was eager to push ahead, and, like most other men not to the manner born, never for a moment thought of such a thing as a horse's getting used up by simply carrying a man-at-arms six hours at ceaseless trot or lope. However, he knew that Staines was far more experienced in such matters than he, and so could not disregard his advice.

"How is it, sergeant, are we going too fast for you?" he asked.

"Not a bit of it, sir," was the cheery answer.

"We're glad enough to go lively now and rest all day in the shade."

"You see how it is, Staines; they don't want to slack up speed. We'll get to Rawlins' in time for breakfast at this rate," and again Staines was silent. Presently the team began the ascent of a rolling wave of foothill, around which the roadway twisted as only Arizona roadways can, and at the crest the driver reined in to give his mules a "breather." Staines leaped from the ambulance for a stretch. The troopers promptly dismounted and loosened saddle girths.

"Yonder is the mouth of the Canyon, sir," said the sergeant, pointing to a rift in the range to the south, now gorgeously lighted up by the morning sunshine.

"How long is the defile, sergeant?"

"Not more than four miles, sir – that is, the Canyon itself – but it is crooked as a ram's horn, and the approach on the other side is a long, winding valley."

"When were you there last?" asked Staines.

"About six months ago, just after Dinsmore was murdered."

Staines turned quickly away and strolled back a few yards along the road.

"You knew Dinsmore, then?" asked the paymaster.

"I knew him well, sir. We had served together during the war. They said he fell in love with a pretty Mexican girl at Tucson, and she would not listen to him. Some of the men heard that she was a daughter of old Pedro who keeps that ranch, and that it was hoping to see her that he went there."

"I know. I remember hearing about it all then," said the paymaster. "Did you ever see anything of the man who was said to have killed him?"

"Sonora Bill? No, sir; and I don't know anyone who ever did. He was always spoken of as the chief of a gang of cutthroats and stage robbers down around Tucson. They used to masquerade as Apaches sometimes – that's the way they were never caught. The time they robbed Colonel Wood and killed his clerk 'I' troop was scouting not ten miles away, and blessed if some of the very gang didn't gallop to Lieutenant Breese and swear the Apaches had attacked their camp here in Canyon del Muerto, so that when the lieutenant was wanted to chase the thieves his troop couldn't be found anywhere – he was 'way up here hunting for Apaches in the Maricopa range. The queer thing

about that gang was that they always knew just when a paymaster's outfit or a Government officer with funds would be along. It was those fellows that robbed Major Rounds, the quartermaster, and jumped the stage when Lieutenant Spaulding and his wife were aboard. She had beautiful diamonds that they were after, but the lieutenant fooled them – he had them sent by express two days afterward.”

Mr. Staines came back toward the ambulance at this moment, took a field glass from its case, and retraced his steps along the road some twenty yards. Here he adjusted the glass and looked long toward the northeast.

“All ready to start, sir,” said the driver.

The major swung himself up to his seat; the troopers quietly “sinched” their saddles and mounted, and still the clerk stood there absorbed.

“Come, Staines!” shouted the paymaster, impatiently, “we’re waiting for you.” And still he did not move. The sergeant whirled his horse about and clattered back to where he stood.

“Come, sir, the major’s waiting.” Staines turned abruptly and, silent as ever, hurried to the wagon.

“What were you staring at so long?” said the paymaster, pettishly, as his assistant clambered in. “I shouted two or three times.”

Staines’ face was pale, yet there were drops of sweat upon his brow.

“I thought I saw a party of horsemen out there on the flats.”

“The devil!” said the paymaster, with sudden interest. “Where? Let me look.”

“You can’t see now, sir. Even the dust cloud is gone. They are behind that low ridge some eight or ten miles out there in the valley.”

“Go on, driver, it’s only cattle from the ranch or something of that kind. I didn’t know, by the way you looked and spoke, but that it might be some of Sonora Bill’s gang.”

“Hardly, sir; they haven’t been heard of for a year, and once away from Pedro’s we are safe enough anyhow.”

Half an hour later the four-mule team was winding slowly up a rocky path. On both sides the heights were steep, covered with a thick undergrowth of scrub oak and juniper. Here and there rocky cliffs jutted out from the hillside and stood like sentinels along the way. The sergeant, with one trooper, rode some distance ahead, their carbines “advanced” and ready for use, for Edwards was an old campaigner, and, though he thought it far from probable that any outlaws would be fools enough to attempt to “get away with” a paymaster’s bank when he and his five men were the guardians and Captain Rawlins with his whole troop was but a short distance away, he had learned the lesson of precaution. Major Sherrick, with his iron safe under his own seat, grasped a rifle in both hands. The driver was whistling softly to himself and glancing attentively ahead, for there was a continuous outcrop of boulders all along the road. The remaining troopers, four in number, rode close behind or alongside the wagon.

Presently they reached a point where, after turning a precipitous ledge of rock, glistening in the morning sunshine, they saw before them a somewhat steep incline. Here, without a word, Staines swung lightly from the vehicle and trudged for a moment alongside; then he stooped to adjust his boot lace, and when Sherrick looked back the clerk was coming jauntily after them, only a dozen paces in rear. In this order they pushed ahead perhaps a hundred yards farther, moving slowly up the defile, and Staines could easily have regained his distance, but for some reason failed to do so. Suddenly, and for no apparent cause, Jenny and her mate shied violently, swerved completely around and were tangled up with the wheel team before the driver could use the lash. Even his ready blasphemy failed to straighten things out.

“Look out for those rocks up there on the right!” he shouted. “Grab their heads, Billy!”

Even as he spoke the rocky walls of the Canyon resounded with the crash of a score of firearms. The driver, with a convulsive gasp, toppled forward out of his seat, his hand still clinching

the reins. One of the troopers clapped his hand to his forehead, his reins falling useless upon his horse's neck, and reeled in the saddle as his charger whirled about and rushed, snorting with fright, down the narrow road. At the instant of the firing the sound of a dozen "spats" told where the leaden missiles had torn through the stiff canvas cover of the ambulance; and Sherrick, with blanched face, leaped from the riddled vehicle and plunged heavily forward upon his hands and knees. Two of the troopers sprang from their saddles, and, crouching behind a boulder across the road, opened fire up the opposite hillside. The sergeant and his comrade, bending low over their horses' necks, came thundering back down the Canyon, just in time to see the mules whirl about so suddenly as to throw the ambulance on its side. The iron safe was hurled into the shallow ditch; the wagon bed dragged across the prostrate form of the paymaster, rolling him over and over half a dozen times, and then, with a wreck of canvas, splinters, chains and traces clattering at their heels, the four mules went rattling away down the gorge.

"Jump for shelter, men!" shouted Sergeant Edwards, as he dragged the senseless form of the major under the great ledge to the right. "Stand them off as long as you can! Come out of your holes, you cowardly hounds!" he roared, shaking his fist at the smoke-wreathed rocks up the heights. "Come out and fight fair! There's only five of us left!"

Here in the road lay the major, bleeding from cuts and bruises, with every breath knocked out of his battered body; yonder, his hands 'clined in the death agony, the stiffening form of the driver – plucky to the last. Twenty yards away down the road, all in a heap, lay one poor soldier shot through the head, and now past praying for. One of the others was bleeding from a gash along the cheek where a bullet had zipped its way, and Edwards shouted in vain for Staines to join them; the clerk had disappeared. For full five minutes the desperate combat was maintained; the sergeant and his little squad crouching behind the nearest rocks and firing whenever head or sombrero showed itself along the heights. Then came shots from the rear, and another poor fellow was laid low, and Edwards realized, to his despair, that the bandits were on every side, and the result only a question of time.

And then – then, there came a thunder of hoof beats, a storm of ringing cheers, a rush and whirl of panting, foaming steeds and a score of sunburnt, stalwart troopers racing in the lead of a tall young soldier, whose voice rang clear above the tumult: "Dismount! Up the rocks, men! Lively now!" And, springing from his own steed, leaping catlike from rock to rock, Phil Adriance went tearing up the heights, his soldiers at his heels. Edwards and his unwounded men seized and held the trembling horses; Sherrick feebly crawled to his precious safe and fell across it, his arms clasping about his iron charge. For five minutes more there was a clamor of shots and shouts, once in a while a wild Mexican shriek for mercy, all the tumult gradually receding in the distance, and at last – silence. Then two men came down the bluffs, half bearing between them the limp form of their young leader. The lieutenant was shot through both thighs and was faint from loss of blood.

"Has no one a little whiskey?" asked Corporal Watts.

"Here you are" was the answer. And Mr. Staines, with very white face, stepped down from behind the ledge and held out his flask.

A week later the lieutenant lay convalescing at Rawlins' camp. A vigorous constitution and the healthful, bracing, open-air life he had led for several years, either in the saddle or tramping over the mountains, had enabled him to triumph speedily over such minor ills as flesh wounds, even though the loss of blood had been very great. The young soldier was soon able to give full particulars of his chase, and to one man alone, Rawlins, the secret of its inspiration.

Most important had been the results. It was evident to everyone who examined the ground – and Rawlins had scoured the range with one platoon of his troop that very afternoon after the fight, while his lieutenant, Mr. Lane, was chasing the fugitives with another – that a band of at least twenty outlaws had been concealed among the rocks of Canyon del Muerto for two or three days, evidently for the purpose of waylaying the escort of the paymaster when he came along.

Their horses had been concealed half a mile away in a deep ravine, and it was in trying to escape to them that they had sustained their losses. Five of their number were shot down in full flight by Adriance's men, and, could they have caught the others, no quarter would have been given, for the men were infuriated by the sight of the havoc the robbers had wrought, and by the shooting of their favorite officer.

No papers had been found on the bodies; nothing, in fact, to identify them with any band. All, with one exception, were Mexicans; he was a white man whom none of the troopers could identify, though Corporal Watts, of Troop B, declared he had seen him at "Cutthroat Crossing" the last time he went through there on escort duty. The others, whoever they were, rode in a body until they got around the range to the southward, then seemed to scatter over the face of the earth. Some odd things had transpired, over which Rawlins pondered not a little. It was Corporal Watts who brought to his camp at 11 o'clock the news of the desperate attempt to murder and rob the paymaster, and as they rode back together the corporal gave the captain such information as lay in his power. Lieutenant Adriance had "routed out" the detachment just at daybreak, when it was still dark, and saddling with the utmost haste had led away across country for the canyon, leaving the pack mules and a small guard at camp. "We rode like the wind," said Watts, "after the first few miles, and every man seemed to know just what to expect when at last we struck the road and saw the trail of the ambulance and escort. We got there just in the nick of time."

When Sherrick – who though severely battered and bruised had no bones broken – was able to talk at all, he never could say enough in praise of Adriance and his men; but what he wanted to know was how they came to learn of the threatened danger. Captain Rawlins protested that it was "past finding out." The major questioned the men, but without success, and as for Staines, it was remarked that his pertinacity in cross-examination was simply wonderful. For some reason, however, the men of B troop did not like the fellow and would have little to do with him. But up to the time that Major Sherrick was able to push ahead for Tucson it is certain that he had discovered nothing as to the source of the lieutenant's information; neither had they heard of Leon Ruiz, the night messenger. Staines opined that he must have been intercepted by the bandits, perhaps killed by them, when it was found that he was the bearer of a message to Captain Rawlins. After a brief chat with the lieutenant himself, one which the doctor did not interdict, the old troop commander sent a trusty sergeant with six men to scout the neighborhood of the rancho.

Lieutenant Lane was detached to take command of Adriance's troop, which was sent on its way forthwith, leaving the gloomy rancho alone to sentinel the Gila crossing. But the moment Sherrick and his silent clerk drove on toward Tucson the old captain said a few words of farewell to the invalid, left him in the doctor's charge and rode away northward on the trail of his sergeant. That night he rapped for admission and ordered supper at Rancho Ruiz, while his men, strolling about the premises, took careful note of the three or four scowling "greasers" who infested the corral.

Adriance was sitting up and beginning to hobble around when Rawlins returned to camp during the week that followed, and was all eagerness to hear what tidings the captain had to tell. But Rawlins had little to say; he had seen Pedro and had had one glimpse of Senora Dolores, but not so much as a word with the senorita; she was kept carefully concealed. Within the month Adriance was quite well enough to travel to his station, but refused. He would remain here, he said, until able to relieve Lane of the command of his troop and continue the scouting work. He did not wish to go to the fort. Sherrick and his clerk had come back in the course of a fortnight, and Mr. Staines asked to see Lieutenant Adriance, but that gentleman refused – a matter which caused the clerk to "bite his lips and look queer," reported the soldier who took the message, but he said nothing at all.

Ten days afterward a Prescott paper mentioned the fact that Mr. Albert G. Staines, so long and favorably known in this Territory, had dropped in to look over valuable mining properties in the Big Bug and Hassayampa districts; and this Rawlins silently showed to Adriance.

“Then you may be sure he’ll come down to the rancho, and in less than no time,” said Adriance, “and I must go.” Rawlins made no reply at first, then he rose and nervously paced the floor a moment and turned upon his junior.

“Philip, I say no!”

The color mounted to the lieutenant’s

“Why not?”

“Ask yourself; ask your conscience, Adriance. You have told her that he, Staines, was a liar. You have virtually told her that you were engaged to no woman. You have inspired a sentiment, perhaps a passion, in that young girl’s heart, and you’re going there to defend her – a thing that I can do much better than you, now that you are a cripple. Then, think, my boy, I have known you six years; I have never known you to say or do a mean or unmanly thing. I’m an old foggy – an old fool perhaps – but I like to think most women pure and some men honest. You are one of them, Phil.” There was a moment’s silence.

“And yet you think I mean her harm.”

“Not yet, Philip, but would you marry that old scoundrel’s daughter?”

Adriance had no answer.

“Philip, if you look into that girl’s eyes again, unless it be to ask her to be your wife, I shall lose my faith in manly honor.”

Two days afterward Rawlins rode away on duty. A strange unrest had possessed the lieutenant since that brief talk with this old Puritan of a captain. Not another word had been said upon the subject, but every syllable that Rawlins spoke had struck home. Adriance respected and honored the grim, duty-loving troop commander whom some of the youngsters openly laughed at and referred to as “Praise the Lord Barebones” and “Captain Roundhead,” but the lieutenant well knew that no braver soldier, no “squar-er” captain drew sabre in the whole regiment than this faithful friend, who had long since singled him out for many an unusual kindness. He knew more – that in his high standard of honor and rectitude old Rawlins had said nothing which was not just and true.

Adriance knew well that he ought not to again seek that young girl’s presence, and the blood rushed hotly to his cheek as he recalled the kiss his eager lips had stolen. Marry that old scoundrel’s daughter? No, he could not; and yet how his pulses bounded at the thought of her – the sweet, shy gladness in her eyes, the soft, thrilling tones in her voice when she spoke his name, the heroism of her conduct in daring to seek his camp in the darkness of night and bring him warning of that diabolical scheme of robbery and murder; the refinement of her manner, and then, too, her knowledge of the English tongue. Where had she acquired these? What would she not be justified in thinking of him if he never came to seek and thank her?

“Hello! what’s that?” was the sudden cry among the men. Two or three soldiers sat up in the shade and curiously inspected the coming object; others shouted laughing challenge. Riding solemnly forward, a little Mexican boy came straight to where Adriance was lying and handed him a note which he eagerly opened and read:

They suspect me, and they send me away tomorrow. To-night I go for the last time to the summer house alone. Isabel.

Gone was every resolution at the instant; gone all hesitancy. Adriance had not even time to wonder at the fact that she had written to him in English. Leaving the note for Rawlins to read when he returned, in one hour Phil was rolling from the camp in the ambulance. Soon after dark, leaving Private Regan and another man half a mile back from the walls of the corral, Mr. Adriance, all alone, slowly made his way afoot toward the dim lights at the rancho. Making wide circuit so as not to alarm the dogs, he never sought to draw near the little summer house until, from the east, he could see the brighter lights that gleamed in the bar and card room. Then he cautiously approached, his heart beating quickly and his knees trembling a little, perhaps from weakness. Hark! Faint, soft and clear, there rose upon the evening air the liquid notes of a guitar. It was she then – it was Isabel

awaiting his coming, aye, signaling softly to call him to her. What could it mean but that she loved and longed to see him? A moment more and he was at the doorway, the very spot where he had surprised her that well-remembered night. The plaintive tinkle of the guitar continued, and there in the dark corner was the dim, white-robed form. He could almost distinguish the folds of the graceful *rebosa*.

“Isabel!” he whispered. Three more steps and he would be at her side. Suddenly two stalwart arms were thrown about him, a broad hand was on his mouth, stifling the utterance of a sound; the white-robed form in front leaped toward him, the *rebosa* falling to the ground. It was a man’s voice – a Mexican’s – that hissed the word’s: “Quick! the pistol.” Another hand was at his holster. He realized instantly that he was lured, trapped; that his life was threatened. He was struggling violently, but, weakened by his wound, even his superb physique was well nigh powerless in the grasp of two or three men. Suddenly there came a whisper: “The sponge, the sponge!” and then the subtle odor of chloroform on the night air. And now he nerved himself for one supreme effort. A quick twist of his head and the hand was dislodged, a finger slipping between his teeth. With all his strength he crushed it to the very bone, and there was a yell of pain and terror. Then his own brave young voice rang out in one startling, rallying cry.

“Help! Regan, help!” Then crash and blows, the gleam of a knife, a rolling, rough-and-tumble struggle on the ground; then a woman’s scream, a light, and Isabel had bounded into their midst, her mother at her back.

“Leon, my brother! In God’s name, what do you mean?”

Even as she spoke her startled eyes fell on Adriance, staggering to his feet, pale, bleeding, faint. Another instant and he went crashing back against the guitar that, like siren’s song, had lured him. One brave leap and she was at his side, her arms about his neck, his pallid face pillowed on her bosom.

Senora Dolores flew to her aid; then turning, holding her lantern on high, her shrill voice rang out in fury:

“Look at the monstrous work your son has wrought, Pedro Ruiz! Look! Tear off that mantle, señor!” she said, whirling upon another form now slowly rising from the earth. “Coward! murderer that you are! It is you who have ruined this boy and made him what he is!”

“Hush! You fool! there lies your daughter’s betrayer. Leon would have been coward indeed if he had not punished him.”

“Oh, you lie! She never saw him alone in her life!”

“Ask your son,” was the sneering answer. “Ask José, too.”

“She was with him – in his tent – the last night he was here; I swear it!” cried José.

“Mother,” cried the girl, “listen, it was but to warn him – I heard the plot – I heard all. I rushed to him only to tell him of the danger. Mother, believe me. And I dare not tell it even to you, for fear – for fear of him.” And she pointed to the fierce, scowling face of the old Mexican, now striding forward, knife in hand.

“No, Pedro – back! You shall not harm her! No!” and the mother hurled herself before her husband.

“Out of the way!” was the hissing answer, “or you, too, feel my knife. Ah, traitress!”

“O my God! help! There will be murder here! Pedro, husband! O, villain, she is not your child! You shall not kill!” And then a piercing shriek rang out upon the night. But at the same instant there came the rush of hoofs without – a rush of panting men; a brawny trooper sprang into the summer house and with one blow of his revolver butt sent Pedro staggering into a corner, his knife falling from his nerveless hand. A dark, agile figure leaped for the doorway, with muttered curse. And then in came old Rawlins, somewhat “blown,” but preternaturally cool, and the doctor close behind.

“Bring another light here, one of you men!” And a trooper ran to the card room. “Lie still there, Pedro! Blow his brains out if he moves! Doctor, you look to the women and Adriance. Now, where’s that man Staines?”

“Some fellow ran in through here, captain,” said a trooper. “Corporal Watts is after him with Royce.”

“Who was it, you greaser? Speak, damn you! You were here with him!”

“Sonora Bill,” said José, shaking from head to foot.

Then there came the sound of pistol shots out toward the corral, and then the louder bang of a cavalry carbine.

“What is it?” asked Rawlins of a soldier who came running back.

“Can we have the doctor, sir? It was Mr. Staines. He shot the corporal, who was chasing him, but he got a carbine bullet through the heart.”

Four days afterward, lying in a little white room, Mr. Adriance listened to the story of Leon’s confession. It was brief enough. Staines had acquired an ascendancy over him in Tucson, and it was not difficult to induce him to become a confederate in every plot. It was Staines who sent him to Manuel and Garcia to warn them that the paymaster’s ambulance would not reach Canyon del Muerto until morning. It was Staines who murdered Sergeant Dinsmore after a quarrel and then had had his throat cut and the body thrown into the Gila near the ranch. Staines had fallen in love with Isabel when she first came from Sonora, but the girl shrank from him; neither would she listen to Sergeant Dinsmore.

After it was safe for Leon to return to the ranch, he found that his mother and Isabel were practically prisoners. His father was furious at the failure of the plan, and daily accused his wife of having, in some way, given warning to Adriance, and swore that he would have the blood of the man or woman who had betrayed the scheme; and then Staines himself came back and wrung from José that he had seen Isabel scurrying from Adriance’s tent at daybreak, and so denounced her to Leon as the mistress of an accursed Gringo. Staines wrote the note that was to lure Adriance to the bower, where Leon was to take the guitar and *rebosa* and the two, with José’s help, were to overpower him. It was his life or theirs said Staines. Pedro was not in the project, for he had prohibited bloodshed about the place – “It would ruin his business” he said. But both Pedro and Leon were now in irons, and Rawlins’ troop was in camp around gloomy old Rancho Ruiz.

A day or two later he heard another story, this time from the lips of Senora Dolores herself: Isabel was not the daughter of Pedro Ruiz.

With sobs and tears the poor, broken woman told her tale. She had been married when quite a young girl to Senor Moreno, an officer of distinction in the Mexican army. Her brave husband made her life a happy one, and the birth of the little daughter strengthened the ties that bound them. Alas! Moreno, colonel of lancers, was killed before Queretaro; and in two years more the widow, with her winsome little girl, had not where to lay her head. It was in the city of Mexico that Senora Dolores then met Ruiz, a widower with an only son, prosperous and apparently respected. He promised to educate Isabel and provide for her as his own, and sought the widow as his wife. For a time all went well; then she learned his true character. He was compelled to leave the city and flee up the coast to Mazatlan, while she remained with little Isabel, who was being educated at the convent. At last they had to join him at Hermosillo, whence he was soon after driven to Tucson. Their lives were wrecked by his scoundrelism. Her papers clearly established the truth of her story.

One soft, still evening, not a week after the tragic events of that rueful night, Captain Rawlins sat by the lieutenant’s side, reading aloud some letters just received from department headquarters. Major Sherrick had been in a state of dismay ever since the news of the death of Staines had reached him, but his dismay changed to wonderment, even gratitude, as he learned the true character of the man. It was Sonora Bill himself, beyond doubt.

“What a blessing you left that note for me to see!” said Rawlins. “How came it you never saw it was a forgery, Phil? Had she never written to you before?”

“Never a line, nor have I seen her to thank her. By Heaven, Rawlins! why am I forbidden?”

“You are not – now, Phil,” was the smiling answer.

Perhaps an hour later, Adriance limped slowly out of the room and down the narrow passageway to the side door. Yonder stood the little summer house “in the gloaming,” and he was right – he had heard women’s voices there – Dolores and her daughter. There were tears in the maiden’s words, and he could not withstand the longing of his heart. He would have hobbled thither, but suddenly there came the sound of rustling skirt and a tiny footfall. It was she – his dark-eyed, dark-haired sweetheart, hastening toward him, her face hidden in her hands. One instant more and he had torn the hands away and had clasped her to his breast.

“Isabel! darling! I have found you at last! No, you shall not go – you shall not until you promise – promise to be my wife!

“O, senor, you cannot – you do not mean it,” she sobbed, Struggling to be free.

“Do not mean it! Why, sweet one, you do not dream how I love you – how I long for you! Not mean it? Isabel, look in my eyes. Look for yourself.” He laughed low and happily. He was brimming over with hope and gladness, for now at last without a struggle she nestled on his heart.

Despite his grizzled beard old Rawlins was best man when that strange, very quiet, yet very happy wedding came off in the Old Mission Church at Tucson early in the spring. Pedro was not there to give the bride away. With considerable escort and much reluctance he had traversed “Cutthroat Crossing” some months before. He went to Yavapai, and Yavapai – we have his own words for it – was “too damn close to ‘ell.” The rancho passed within the year to other hands. It, too, had taken on another name – a grewsome one —*Rancho del Muerto*.

A MIGHTY HUNTER BEFORE THE LORD, By Virginius Dabney

FIRST PART

THE man unacquainted with the joys of the chase would be surprised if told, as he sauntered through some city market, that there was far more pleasure in hunting those plump little brown birds hanging in bunches around the stalls than in pursuing that imposing beast whose antlers reach the pavement. Yet it would be true.

Deer hunting under its usual conditions leaves something, often much, to be desired. If a dozen men are placed on isolated “stands” the solitary hours of waiting are long and weary. And should you happen to be a tyro the knowing ones hide you away in some unlikely spot, where hardly by any possibility will the chance come to you of seeing and, in the shivers of “buck ague,” missing the game. “Still hunting,” another mode, is well named. As a rule it may be depended upon to afford no end of stillness, and little else. And to be rowed up by a hired guide on a lake to within a few feet of a poor, helpless buck, swimming for dear life, and blow out his brains is almost as bad as shooting pheasants in an English preserve or poultry in a barnyard. Under all these methods deer hunting lacks what is the conspicuous charm of partridge (quail) shooting – vivid and continuous excitement.

For, from the moment when you enter, on a sparkling autumn morning, a brown stubble field, fresh of limb and eager for the fray, till you limp back at sunset, wolfish for dinner, and broken with a delicious fatigue, you have not had one dull moment. You may not have been firing steadily; the birds may even have been a little scarce; but every instant of the day, as you have watched your dogs sweeping to and fro, you have been buoyed up by an ever lively hope that the next moment your heart will be gladdened by seeing them halt – frozen as it were – in their tracks. Ah, there they are! You hurry up, you and your friend, breathing short. Up bursts the brown covey, with startling buzz! You bang away – innocuously it may be, but no matter, you have made a prodigious noise, at any rate – that’s some comfort. And see now! The little brown balls have dropped into the weeds, one here, one there, along the ditch, and a little bunch, all together, in that clump of briars on the hillside. Better luck next time!

Still, after all, “Bob White,” for all his bustle, is but a small chap. It would take hundreds, nay, bushels of him, to outweigh one “antlered monarch.” Toothsome though he be (on toast) he tips the scales at a beggarly half pound. On the other hand, it often takes you a week or so to get one chance at a deer.

Now, it so happens that it was once my fortune to take part in a deer hunt, where the excitement was as continuous as that in a stubble field, and, naturally, far more intense. This was years ago, and in Scott County, Mississippi, two days’ journey on horseback from our plantation.

Every November, as a child, I had eagerly hailed the return from the camp hunt of the big four-mule wagon, laden with tents, cooking utensils and provisions, and upon which were piled high the noble bucks and sleek does. At last, when I had reached the age of sixteen, the longed-for permission was granted me, and one crisp, frosty morning my father and I mounted our horses and set out for Scott County, followed by Beverly and the great covered wagon. Both Beverly and Ned, his whitish-gray saddle mule, had their peculiarities, as will appear later.

As we journeyed on we were joined at successive cross roads by others of our hunting party, and when we reached the ground we numbered, with those already arrived by other routes, about

fifteen. The tents were soon pitched and a roaring fire of logs six feet long was sending up its merry sparks into the starry vault above us. Would supper never be ready?

Meanwhile the tents flashed in the fire light, the ruddy glow of which battled with the hosts of darkness that advanced upon us under cover of the primeval, mysterious forest that surrounded us far and wide. And that forest teeming with deer and wolves. Oh, how delightful! And my Latin grammar miles and miles away! And dust accumulating on my arithmetic!

“Why, where is Billy?”

“Detained by business; he will join us in a day or two.”

“Good! A hunt without Billy Blount is no hunt at all.”

At the mere mention of his name every eye brightened. Mr. Blount had more than one peculiarity, all of them pleasant. He was just one of those mortals whom mothers in their fatuity christen William. If ever there was a man born with an inalienable right to be called Billy it was he. A stranger meeting him in the road would know by intuition that that was his name. His twinkling eye suggested it. His ruddy brown dimpled cheek, his breadth of smile proclaimed it, and when he laughed every well-lined rib shouted aloud, “Our name is Billy!”

But he was not with us; so the next best thing was to tell stories of his exploits. To these I listened with wide-eyed delight. I will give one as a sample. But that it may be understood, it will be necessary to show beforehand the very unusual method of hunting that obtained in Scott County.

That portion of Mississippi was in those days almost uninhabited and was covered by a forest – it would be almost correct to call it a grove – of post oaks, beneath which grew waist high underbrush. The oaks which covered the ground almost to the exclusion of other trees stood so far apart that one had an outlook of perhaps a couple of hundred yards in every direction, so that a good rider could gallop in comfort along the open spaces. This tree bears a small but sweet nutritious acorn; hence the great store of deer that frequented these forests.

Such being the nature of the ground the chase is conducted as follows: The hunters throw themselves into a skirmish line at intervals of sixty or eighty yards. In the centre rides the leader of the hunt with a compass fixed upon the pommel of his saddle. The line advances through the woods due north, let us say, for a few hours; then wheels at right angle and moves east; then south, then west – back to camp, venison steaks and wild turkey; for, in the interests of better fare, it was permitted to knock over a gobbler if he were too hospitably saucy to get out of the way. The deer were not equally abundant year after year. Occasionally it was found that “black tongue” had worked havoc among them since the preceding hunt. But they were always numerous enough to maintain a continuous and intense glow of expectation in the breast of every hunter. As a rule you rode straight ahead, swerving neither to the right nor the left, every nerve on the alert, from sunrise till sunset. But if you saw a little out of your path an upturned tree you bent your course toward it, your heart in your mouth. I have known as many as seven deer to bound forth from the brown-leaved “lap” of one fallen oak. But at any moment during the day you were liable to be startled by a buck springing up out of the undergrowth, often from beneath the very feet of your horse.

Only an inexperienced hunter would ask: “Why not shoot them where they lie?” You do not know they are there. The detective eye that can make out the form of a deer crouched down on a bed of brown leaves and veiled with a fringe of underbrush is given to few. Among these favored ones was our friend Billy. It was generally believed in camp that he shot most of his game in their beds. Billy himself was at no pains, of course, to spread this view. In his highly-illustrated accounts of his achievements the quarry was always going like the wind; he had not been sure, in fact, what he fired at; he saw a brown flash, that was all; banged away, and down came that thumping buck. Never was so surprised in his life; thought it was a hawk or something. But this is the story of Mr. Jennings, brother of the leader of the hunt: “Blount rides on my right, and I don’t know how I shall get on without him, even for a day or two. However, I may live longer if he is not there, for he sows his buckshot broadcast. Three years ago – I never knew the deer so thick as they were

that season – happening to look in his direction, I saw him dismounting with an agility that was surprising considering his 225 pounds. He halted me with an eager wave of his hand and began advancing on tiptoe; every fibre of his vast form tense, his eyes riveted upon some object in front, finger on trigger. Barely had he crept forward ten yards when up sprang a buck hardly twenty feet in front of him and darted to the rear, between Blount and me. Instantly, without once removing his eyes from the game upon which he was stealing, he whirled his gun to the right and pulled the trigger. The buck passed on, while twigs and bark rained on me from the whizzing buckshot. Would you believe it? – but you all know him – not a moment did he halt or once remove his eyes from whatever it was that had fascinated his gaze in front. He still danced forward, light as an Indian, with eyes starting from their sockets. Presently up jumps a doe. She, too, bounded to the rear, but on Blount’s left this time. Again, with his staring eyes still glued to the something in front – bang! ‘What in the – are you about?’ roared Parrish from Blount’s left; ‘you will be shooting somebody the first thing you know. Here is one of your crazy shot through my hat.’ To all which our wild man paid not the least attention. ‘Jennings! Jennings! come here! come here! come here! quick! quick! quick! For God’s sake, man, hurry!’

“I dismounted and ran up to him. ‘There! there! give it to him! Good Lord, man, can’t you see him? There, in that lap!’ I strained my eyes in vain. I could see nothing. ‘Why, don’t you see him turning his head? He is looking at us! My Lord, Jennings, gimme the gun! gimme the gun! gimme the gun!’ Just as I did so a noble buck sprang from the lap and bounded off. Blount drew down upon him. Bound after bound, and still Blount did not fire, though he seemed to be pulling away for dear life at the triggers. Presently the deer, passing behind a clump of trees, disappeared. I carried my gun at half cock. This Blount did not know or remember. He bent both my triggers. Any other man might very well have bagged all three deer with such a chance. And what do you suppose he then said? ‘At any rate, I laid out two of the rascals. Come, Jennings, help me find ‘em.’”

Dogs were not used on these hunts. Two or three trusty old hounds, it is true, hung about the heels of our leader’s horse, but they were employed only in running down badly-wounded animals. For the first day or so these dogs were hard to control, so rich was the scent that met their nostrils at every turn; but after the third day they grew too *blasé* to take any interest in any trail not sprinkled with blood. We had a number of horn signals. If a gun was heard, followed by a long blast (every man wore a horn), the line halted. A deer had been killed in its tracks. A second blast indicated that the quarry had been strapped behind the saddle of the lucky man; and once more the line moved forward. But if three or four short, excited toots, mingled with shouts, rang out upon the frosty air, a wounded deer was being pursued, and the leader of the hunt galloped up, followed by his little pack, who soon pulled down the game.

After all my boasting about the abundance of deer in these post-oak forests the reader is, I dare say, prepared to learn that with a party of fifteen the spoil of a ten-days hunt would be one thousand head at the very least. Great will be his surprise therefore to learn that at the close of our first day’s hunt we returned to camp without one solitary buck or doe to show to our disgusted cooks. Never had the game been so scarce, and yet not a man of us all had the same loads in his gun with which he had sallied gaily forth full of hope in the morning. One fine buck alone had emptied just thirty barrels for us. Flushed on the extreme right, he had bounded along in front of the whole line, a trifle out of range, perhaps, and each one of us had given him a roaring double salute. As the rolling thunder approached me I almost ceased to breathe. What were conjugations and declensions and rules of three compared with this! It was like a battle, as I have since discovered, with the notable difference that our side made all the noise, and the deer did not shoot back. But none of us had been able, in the language of Mr. Sam Weller’s Dick Turpin ditty, to “prewail upon him for to stop.” Other shots at other deer all of us had, but we supped on bacon that evening.

SECOND PART

ONE who has never tried the experiment can have no idea how easy it is to miss when firing from horseback at a buck who sends your heart up into your mouth by springing up from beneath your horse's heels, and then speeds away, twisting and turning among the boles of the trees. Men who could bring down a partridge with each barrel have been known to shoot away half a bag of shot before they began to get the hang of the thing.

The shades of evening were falling. Humiliating though it was, we had fallen, too, with a will on our gameless supper.

“S-t! Listen! What's that?”

We pricked up our ears. Presently there came softly echoing from far away in the forest a long-drawn cry, ringing, melodious, clear as a bugle call.

“Billy!”

The welkin rang with our joyous shouts. Half our party sprang to their feet and red-hot coffee splashed from tin cups. “Hurrah!”

“Marse Billy got the keenest holler I ever hear!” chuckled Beverly. “Bound he fetch luck 'long wid him! No mo' bacon for supper arter dis.”

We craned our necks to catch the first glimpse of our mascot. Obviously, from the direction of the joyous yells with which he answered our welcoming shouts, he had abandoned the road and was riding straight through the open woods. Presently we descried through the deepening twilight his portly form looming up atop a tall gray. Then two vivid flashes and two loud reports, followed by a mad rush of the gray, which came tearing down on us in wild terror, and for a minute we were treated to something like an amateur episode from one of Mr. Buffalo Bill's entertainments. Amid roars of laughing welcome the ponderous knight was at last helped down from his trembling steed, whose bridle Beverly had been able luckily to snatch as he floundered among the tent ropes.

“And where the deuce did you pick up that wild beast? Surely you can't expect to shoot from him!”

“Oh, I'll cool him down in a day or two; he'll soon get used to it.”

In point of fact a horse who dreads a gun gets more and more terror stricken as the hunt goes on, the mere sight of a deer, the cocking of a gun even, sufficing to set him off into plungings that grow day by day more violent. This none should have known better than Blount; for never, by any chance, did he ride to the hunt with an animal that would “stand fire.” The discharge of his gun, the rise of a buck even, was always the opening of a circus with him. But he managed invariably to let off both barrels – one perhaps through the tree tops, the other into the ground. In one particular alone was he provident. He brought always so immense a supply of ammunition that toward the close of the hunt his tent was a supply magazine to the less thoughtful.

“What!” exclaimed Blount, “not a single one! Ah! boys, that was because I was not with you.” The jovial soul had not a trace of conceit; he was merely sanguine – contagiously, gloriously, magnificently sanguine.

“Ah, but won't we knock 'em over tomorrow!” And straightway we lifted up our hearts and had faith in this prophet of pleasant things.

“Beverly, will that mule Ned stand fire?”

“I dunno, Marse Billy; nobody ain't nebber tried him. But I 'spec' you wouldn't ax him no odds.”

“I'll go and have a look at him.”

Shortly afterward we heard two tremendous explosions, followed by a frenzied clatter of hoofs and the sound of breaking branches, and up there came, running and laughing, a Monsieur

Wynen, a Belgian violinist, a real artist, who was one of our party (though never a trigger did he pull during the entire hunt).

“What’s the matter?”

Wynen was first violin in an opera troupe.

“It is only Blount rehearsing Ned.”

Any man in the world except Blount would have tested that demure wheel mule’s views as to firearms by firing off his gun in his neighborhood as he stood tethered. Not so Billy. Mounting the guileless and unsuspecting Ned, and casting the reins upon his bristly neck, he had let drive.

Shocked beyond expression by the dreadful roar and flash (it was now night) Ned had made a mad rush through the woods. In vain; for Blount had a good seat. Then had there come into Ned’s wily brain the reminiscence of a trick that he had never known to fail in thirty years. He stopped suddenly, still as a gate post, at the same time bracing his vertebrae into the similitude of a barrel hoop, and instantly Blount lay sprawling upon his jolly back; and there was a second roar, followed by a rush of buckshot among the leaves and around the legs of the audience that was watching the rehearsal. “Never mind, Jack,” said he to me, shortly afterward, “I’ll find something that will stand fire” and throwing his arm around my shoulder for a confidential talk of the slaughter he was to do on the morrow, his sanguine soul bubbled into my sympathetic ear:

“I say, Jack, don’t tell the boys; but I have got two bags of shot. They would laugh, of course. Now, how many ought a fellow to bring down with two bags? I mean a cool-headed chap who does not lose his head. How does one dozen to the bag strike you? Reasonable? H’m? Of course. Twenty-four, then. Well, let us say twenty-five, just to round off things. Golly! Why, nine is the highest score I ever made. Twenty-five! Why, that is a quarter of a hundred. Did you notice that? Whee-ew! The boys will stop bedeviling me after that, h’m? I should say so. Not a rascal of them all ever killed so many. Cool and steady, that’s the thing, my boy. Up he jumps! What of that? Don’t be flustered, I tell you. Count ten. Then lower your gun. There is not the least hurry in the world. Drop the muzzle on his side, just behind his shoulder. Steady! Let him think you are not after deer this morning. If it is a doe let it appear that you are loaded for buck. Bang! Over he tumbles in his tracks. You load up and are off again. Up hops another – a beauty. Same tactics – boo-doo-ee! Got him! What’s the sense of throwing away your shot? Costs money – delays the line. Cool – cool and steady – that’s the word, my boy. Get any shots to-day? Three? Hit anything?”

It was too dark for him to see how pale I went at this question. “Mr. Blount,” said I, with a choking in my throat (nobody could help telling the big-hearted fellow everything), “you won’t tell my father, will you?”

“Tell him what?”

“Well, you see, he cautioned me over and over again never, under any circumstances, to fire at a deer that ran toward a neighboring huntsman.”

“Of course not – never!” echoed Blount with conviction.

“And to-day – and to-day, when I was not thinking of such a thing, a big buck jumped up from right under my horse’s belly, and did you notice that gray-headed old gentleman by the fire? Well, the buck rushed straight toward him – and I forgot all about what my father had said and banged away.”

“Did you pepper him?” put in Billy eagerly.

“Pepper him!”

“I mean the buck.”

“I don’t know, he went on.”

“They will do it, occasionally, somehow.”

“When I saw the leaves raining down on the old gentleman, my heart stopped beating. You will not tell my father?”

“Pshaw! There was no harm done. We must trust to Providence in these matters. What did the old gentleman say?”

“Not a word; it was his first campaign, too. His eyes were nearly popping out of his head. He let off both barrels. The shot whistled around me!”

“The old fool! He ought to know better. To-morrow your father must put you next to me.”

Blount brought us hilarity and hope, but no luck, at any rate at first. When we rode slowly into camp on the following day, just as the sun went down, we had one solitary doe to show. Blount – Blount of all men – had killed it. The servants hung it up on one of the poles that remained from year to year stretched against the neighboring trees.

Owing to Blount’s weight his game was always strapped behind some less lucky huntsman; so we had had no opportunity of examining his riddled quarry.

“Why, how is this?” exclaimed he. “Oh, I remember; the other side was toward me.”

We went around to the other side. Had the doe died of fright? After much searching we found one bullet hole just behind the shoulder. Blount always put four extra bullets into his load. So he had showered down forty buckshot upon a doe lying in her bed at a distance of twenty feet and struck her with one.

“I say, Jack, for the Lord’s sake don’t tell the boys!”

After these two days our luck improved, and at the end of the hunt our score reached seventy-eight; the smallest number, by the way, that the club had ever killed. It would hardly be interesting to go into the details of each day’s sport, but our hero’s adventures one night seem worth recording. To this joyous and indefatigable spirit the day was all too short. No sooner had he eaten his supper each day than he began to importune the younger men of the party to join him in a “fire hunt;” but, as they were not Blounts, they felt that a long day in the saddle was enough. In his despair Blount turned to Beverly. That amiable creature, not knowing how to refuse the request of a white gentman, assented, but with a quaking heart, for were not the surrounding forests swarming with ravenous wolves? He had often lain awake and listened complacently enough to their howling, but to trust, to thrust, himself wantonly among them at dead of night!

“Wid nobody along but Marse Billy Blount, an’ he couldn’t hit nothin’, even by daylight, unless dey asleep. He hear ‘em say wolf ‘fraid o’ fire. Maybe he is. But lights draws dem wild varmints, an’ ‘sposin’ arter a whole congregation un ‘em done come up starin’ at de light; ‘sposin’ somehow or nuther de torch got out – whar Beverly den? Marse Billy got de gun; but whar Beverly? Ain’t I hear people say wolf more ambitiouser for nig-gar dan for sheep meat? Howsomever, ef my own mahster willin’ to resk losin’ of me, I can stand it, I reckon. But Tom, ef you should wake up, and hear something coming through de bresh like a drove o’ steers, you needn’t ax what dat; it’s me and de wolves a-makin’ for camp; an’ me in the lead, wid de help o’ de Laud.” Sitting in front of the blazing logs and chatting with his fellow cooks, Beverly could see the humor of his quite real fears.

Behold, then, the burly knight and his dusky and not over-valiant squire setting forth in quest of adventure – the one mounted on his tall gray, the other astraddle of Ned. It appears incredible that any man in his senses would take two such ani-malson such an expedition, but there never was but one Blount. Beverly carried the gun, his chief the torch, consisting of “lightwood” knots blazing in the bowl of a long-handled frying pan. The handle, resting on the right shoulder, was held somewhat depressed, so that the light should shine above the head of the huntsman, illumining the woods in his front. The sportsman, slowly waving the handle to and fro, peers intently into the darkness in quest of the gleaming eyes of some staring buck.

Presently a dismal howl from far away to the right came stealing through the silence. And presently an answering cry from the left, and much nearer. And another, and another! *Ugh! what was that?* A rabbit had darted under Ned, across the rattling leaves. Beverly, shivering, dug his heels into Ned’s ribs. Ned pressed forward till his nose touched the ticklish flank of the gray. The

gray let fly with whizzing hoof. Ned shut his eyes, unwilling to witness the enormity of an aged mule being kicked at by torchlight.

“Beverly! Beverly!” breathed the knight eagerly, “gimme the gun! gimme the gun! I see a pair of eyes as big as saucers!”

“M – M – Marse B – B – Billy – ”

“Quick! gimme the gun! What the devil is the matter with you?”

“De wolves, Marse Billy! ‘Sposin’ arter de gun done empty dey splunge in upon us? I bound a whole nation un ‘em watchin’ us dis minute!”

Blount wrested the gun from the reluctant Beverly, whose knee now trembled against his. Pressing down the pan handle so as to throw the light well in front, he cocked the gun, adjusted it to his shoulder, took aim, and pulled the trigger.

Blount, in reply to the warning of his friends, had urged that it might very well be that a horse that shied by day at a gun would act differently at night. And he was right. By daylight the gray was in the habit of making one or two violent plunges when his rider fired. But tonight, when that terrible roar broke the stillness and that fierce blaze flashed into his eyes —

Immediately after the sound of the gun reached us we heard the anxious, jolting bray of a trotting mule. The disjointed, semi-asinine song came nearer, and presently Ned hurried past the fire to his place by his tethered mate, with a low equine chuckle of satisfaction. In his wake rushed Beverly, panting, wide eyed. It was a full minute before he could speak.

“Lord, mahsters, don’t ax me nothin’; I don’t know nothin’ ‘bout it. I ‘most don’t know whether I here or no arter de way dem revengious varmints whoop me through dem woods, a-yelpin’ an’ a-gnash-in’ o’ deir teeth. B’fo’ Gaud, I thought every minute was gwine to be my next! When Marse Billy shoot, though I beg him not to, seein’ dat de whole woods was a-bilin’ wid wolves, dat fool of a horse o’ hisn jess riz on his hind legs an’ splunge right over me an’ Ned, jess like we warn’t nothin’t all. Dem lightwood knots flew right up, same as one o’ dem blaze o’ glories I see when I got religion. I lit on my head. Ned he went oneway; Marse Billy horse anudder. But seein’ as I done knowed Ned de longest, I followed him – an’ he fotch me home. Run? No, twarnt runnin’, twas flyin’; an’ every jump de varmints was a-reachin’ for me. I hear deir teeth, jess as plain, clashin’ like sheep shears. Umgh-umgh! Beverly hump heself he did. Jess look at my clothes! I left de rest of ‘em on de bushes. Whar Marse Billy? Lord a-mussy, I dunno! I mighty ‘fraid de wolves done got him, leastwise ef he didn’t set hard on dat dere fool gray.

“Mahster, couldn’t you gimme jess a leetle tetch o’ dat whiskey? I’se powerful downhearted. Thank you, mahster. But mahster, don’t lemme go no mo’ a spotin’ along o’ Marse Billy; seem like I ain’t dat kind. Lemme drive my mules, lemme cook, don’t lemme go projickin’ about wid Marse Billy Blount no mo’. You laughin’, is you, Tom? Nemmind – you go next time!”

Presently there came to us from far away a doleful yell, with nothing of the bugle blast in it. “There he is!” and we made response with laughter-choked shouts.

About fifteen minutes afterward the sound of hoofs was heard, and presently our mighty hunter appeared, but *quantum mutatus ab illo!* No hat, no gun, one skirt of his coat and half of the buttons gone; shirt bosom torn out, trousers hanging in ribbons! But though his face was scratched beyond recognition he remained the one, only true Blount in the world; though his eyes were bloodshot they beamed with conscious victory.

“Boys,” said he, “which of you will go and help me bring him in?”

“Bring what in?”

“Why, the buck – I blew his infernal head off, sure!”

Next morning Blount and Beverly rode to the scene of their exploit, and Blount secured his gun and Beverly his frying pan. ‘The buck had either walked off without his head or been swallowed by one of the varmints.

A CAHUTTA VALLEY SHOOTING MATCH, By Will N. Harben

THERE was a sound of merriment on Farmer Bagley's place. It was "corn shucking" night, and the young people from all sides had met to partake of mirth and hospitality. After all had taken seats in the large sitting room and parlor, the men were invited with a mysterious wink and grin from the countenance of jovial Bagley to taste the contents of a large brown jug which smiled on a shelf beside the water bucket out in the entry. Its saturated corn-cob stopper, lying whiskey colored in the moonlight by the side of the jug, gave a most tempting aroma to the crisp, invigorating November air and rendered Bagley's signs and hints all the more comprehensible.

They were mostly young men who, with clattering boots, filed out to the shelf and turned, with smacking lips wiped on their hands, back to the clusters of shy, tittering maidens round the blazing log fires. They wore new jean trousers neatly folded round muscular calves and stowed away, without a visible wrinkle, into high, colored-topped boots with sharp, brightly-polished heels, upon which were strapped clanking spurs. Their sack coats, worn without vests over low-necked woolen shirts, fitted their strong bodies admirably.

Dick Martin, a tall, well-built young man with marked timidity in his voice, considerably augmented by the brightness of Melissa Bagley's eyes, drew near that young lady and said:

"Yore pap has certainly got some o' the best corn licker in this county, Melissa; it liter'ly sets a feller on fire."

"Be ashamed, Dick Martin!" she answered, with a cautious glance around her as if she feared that someone would observe the flush that had risen into her pretty face as he approached. "Be ashamed o' yorese'f fur techin' licker; last log-rollin' you 'lowed you'd tuk yore last dram. Paw ort to be churched fur settin' temptation 'fore so many young men. Ef I had my way the' wouldn't be a still, wild cat nur licensed, in the Co-hutta Mountains nowhar."

"Shucks, Melissa!" exclaimed Dick. "Don't git yore dander up 'bout nothin'. I'm that anxious to git yore pap on my side I'd drink slop, mighty high, ef he 'uz to ax me. He don't like me, an' blame me ef I know why, nuther. I ain't been here in the last three Sunday nights 'thout him a-callin' you to bed most 'fore dark. He didn't raise no objections to Bill Miller a-stayin' tell 'leven o'clock last Tuesday night. Oh, I ain't blind to hurt! Bill owns his own land and I havn't a shovelful; thar's the difference. He's a-comin' now, but mind you I'm agwine to set by you at shuckin'."

The bright flush which had added such beauty to the girl's face vanished as Bill Miller swaggered up and said with a loud voice, as he roughly shook her hand:

"Meliss', kin I wait on you at shuckin'?"

"Dick's jest this minute axed me," she stammered, beginning to blush anew.

"Well, he ain't axed to set on both sides uv you, I reckon. You'd be a uncommon quar pusson ef the' wuz jest one side to you. What's to keep me frum settin' on tother side frum Dick?"

To this the farmer's daughter made no reply, and as the guests were now starting to the barnyard she was escorted between the two rivals to the great coneshaped heap of unhusked corn gleaming in the pale moonlight.

"All keep yore feet an' form a ring round the pile!" called out Bagley, so as to be overheard above the sound of their voices. "The' ain't no r'al fun 'thout everything is conducted fa'r and squar'. Now" (as all the merrymakers stood hand in hand round the corn heap, Dick with one of Melissa's hands in his tight clasp and his rival with the other) – "now, all march round an' somebody start 'King William Wuz King James' Son,' an' when I tell you to halt set down right whar' you are. I'm a-doin' this 'kase at Wade's last week some fellers hid red yeers o' corn nigh the'r places an' wuz etarnally a-kissin' o' the gals, which ain't fa'r nur decent. The rule on this occasion shall

be as common, in regard to the fust feller that finds a red yeer o'corn bein' 'lowed to kiss any gal he likes, but atter that one time – understand everybody – atter that no bussin' kin take place, red yeer ur no red yeer. I advocate moderation in all things, especially whar' a man an' woman's mouth is con-sarned.”

While the musical tones of the familiar song were rising, and the straw beneath the feet of the human chain was rustling, Bagley called aloud the word: “Halt!” and all sat down immediately and went to work with a will. Song after song was sung. The hard, pearly silk-tipped ears of corn flew through the air and rained into the crib near at hand, and billows of husks rolled up behind the eager workers and were raked away by negroes who were not permitted to take part in the sport.

“Here's a red un, by hunky!” yelled out a sunburnt, downy-faced youth, standing up and holding aloft a small ear of blood-red corn.

“Hold on thar!” shouted Bagley in commanding tones. “The rules must be enforced to the letter. Jim Lash, ef yore yeer measures full six inches ye're the lucky man, but ef it falls short o' that size its a nubbin an' don't count.”

An eager group encircled the young man, but soon a loud laugh rose and they all fell back into their places, for the ear had proved to be only five inches in length.

“Not yit, Jimmy Lash; not yit,” grunted Dick Martin, as he raked an armful of unhusked corn into his and Melissa's laps. Then to Melissa in an undertone: “Ef wishin' 'u'd do any good, I'd be the fust to run acrost one, fur, by jingo! the' ain't a livin' man, Melissa, that could want it as bad as I do with you a-settin' so handy. By glory! [aloud] here she is, as red as sumac an' as long as a rollin' pin. The Lord be praised!” He had risen to his feet and stood holding up the trophy for Bagley's inspection, fairly aglow with triumph and exercise.

The rustling in the corn husks ceased. All eyes were directed upon the erect forms of Dick Martin and Farmer Bagley. The clear moonlight revealed an unpleasant expression on the older man's face in vivid contrast to the cast of the younger's. Bagley seemed rather slow to form a decision; all present suspected the cause of his hesitation.

“Fair's fair, Bagley!” called out an old farmer outside of the circle. “Don't belittle yorese'f by 'lowin' anything o' a personal natur' to come in an' influence you ag'in right. Dick Martin's the fust an' is entitled to the prize.”

“Yore right, Wilson,” admitted Bagley, with his eyes downcast. “Dick Martin is the winner an' kin proceed; howsomever, thar's some things that – ”

Salute yore bride an' kiss her sweet,
Now you may rise upon yore feet!

sang the leader of the singers, completely drowning the remainder of Bagley's sentence. As quick as a flash of lightning Dick had thrown his arm round struggling Melissa and imprinted a warm kiss on her lips. Then the workers applauded vociferously, and Melissa sat, suffused with crimson, between sullen Bill Miller and beaming Dick Martin. Bagley showed plainly that Dick's action and the applause of all had roused his dislike for Dick even deeper than ever.

“I'm knowed to be a man o' my word,” he fumed, white in the face and glancing round the ring of upturned faces. “I'm firm as firm kin be, I mought say as the rock o' Bralty, when I take a notion. I've heerd a leetle o' the talk in this settlement 'mongst some o' the meddlin' sort, an' fur fear this leetle accident mought add to the'r tattle I'd jest like to remark that ef thar's a man on the top side o' the earth that knows what's to be done with his own flesh an' blood it ort to be me. What's been the talk ain't so, not a speck of it. I've got somethin' to say to – ”

“Paw!” expostulated Melissa, almost crying.

“Mr. Bagley – I say, Abrum Bagley, don't make a born fool o' yorese'f,” broke in Mrs. Bagley, as she waddled into the circle and laid her hand heavily upon her husband's arm. “Now,

folks, it's about time you wuz gittin' somethin' warm into you. You kin finish the pile atter you've eat. Come on, all hands, to the house!"

A shadow of mortification fell athwart Dick's honest face as soon as Bagley had spoken. His sensitive being was wounded to the core. As he and Melissa walked back to the farm house together, Bill Miller having dropped behind to gossip with someone over Bagley's remarks, he was silent, and timid Melissa was too shy to break the silence, although it was very painful to her.

Reaching the entrance to the farm house, Dick held back and refused to enter with the others. "Ain't you gwine to come in an' have some supper?" Melissa asked, pleadingly.

"I ain't a-goin' narry nuther step. Anything cooked in this house would stick in my throat atter what's been said. He struck me a underhanded lick. I won't force myse'f on 'im nur to his table."

"I think you mought, bein' as I axed you," said she tremblingly, as she shrank into the honeysuckle vines that clung to the latticework of the entry.

"No, blame me ef I do!" he answered firmly. "I'm of as good stock as anybody in this county; nobody cayn't run no bull yearlin' dry shod over me."

All Melissa could do could not induce him to join the others in the dining room, and when he walked angrily away she ran into her own room, and sitting down in the darkness alone she burst into a flood of tears. After supper the guests repaired again to the corn heap, but Melissa was not among them, and the spirits of all seemed somewhat dampened.

After that night Dick Martin and Melissa Bagley did not meet each other for several days. However, on the Sunday following the corn shucking, as Melissa was returning from meeting through the woods alone, the very one who was uppermost in her troubled mind joined her. He emerged from the thick-growing bushes which skirted her path, with a very pale face and unhappy mien.

"I jest couldn't wait another minute, Melissa," he said, standing awkwardly before her, "not ef I had to be shot fur it."

"Paw's mighty stubborn an' contrary when he takes a notion," she said, with hanging head and an embarrassed kick of her foot at a tuft of grass. "I think he mought let me alone. You ain't the only one he hates. Thar's ol' man Lawson; law, he hates him wuss'n canker! I heerd 'im say tother day ef somebody 'u'd jest beat Lawson shootin' next match he'd be his friend till death. He ain't never got over his lawsuit with Lawson over the sheep our dog killed. Paw fit it in court through three terms, an' then had to give in an' settle the claim an' all the costs besides. It mighty nigh broke im. Fur the last five years Lawson has driv home the prize beef from the fall match, an' every time paw jest fairly shakes with madness over it."

When Dick left Melissa at the bars in sight of her house and turned toward his home a warm idea was tingling in his brain, and by the time he had reached his father's cottage he was fairly afire with it. The shooting match was to take place in a month – what was to prevent him from taking part in it? He had an excellent rifle, and had done some good shooting at squirrels. Perhaps if he would practice a good deal he might win. Lawson was deemed the best marksman in all the Cohutta valleys, and frequently it had been hard to get anyone to enter a match against him. Dick at last decided to enter the forthcoming match at all events. He went into his cottage and took down his rifle from its deer-horn rack over the door. While he was eyeing the long, rusty barrel critically his old mother entered.

"Fixin' fur a hunt, Dick? Thar's a power o' pa'tridges in the sage field down the hollar. A rifle ain't as good fur that sort o' game as a shotgun; suppose you step over an' ax Hanson to loan you his'n?"

"I jest 'lowed I'd shine this un up a bit bein' as it's Sunday an' I hate to be idle," he answered, evasively, as he seated himself at the wide fireplace with a pan of grease and a piece of cloth and rubbed his gun barrel until it fairly shone in the firelight. The next morning he threw it over his shoulder and, taking an axe in his hand, he started toward the woods.

“Didn’t know but I mought find a bee tree somers,” he said sheepishly, as he saw his mother looking wonderingly at the axe. “Not likely, but I mought, thar’s no tellin’, though the darn little varmints do keep powerful close hid this time o’ year.”

He went over the hills and through the tangled woods until he came to a secluded old field. He singled out a walnut tree near its centre, and going to it he cut a square white spot in the bark with his axe. It is needless to detail all that took place there that day, or on other days following it. For the first week the earnest fellow would return from this spot each afternoon with a very despondent look upon him. As time passed, however, and his visits to the riddled tree grew more frequent his face began to grow brighter.

Once his mother came suddenly upon him as he stood in the cottage before the open door with his rifle placed in position for firing. He lowered his gun with a deep blush.

“I ‘us jest a tryin’ to see how long I could keep the sight on that shiny spot out thar in the field without flinchin’. Blame me, ef you hadn’t come in I believe I could a helt her thar tell it thundered.”

“Dick,” said the old woman, with a deep breath, “what on earth has got in you here lately? Are you gwine plump stark crazy ‘bout that old gun? You never tuk on that way before.”

“I’ve jest found out I’m purty good on a shot, that’s all,” he replied, evasively.

“Well,” said she, “as fur as that’s concerned, in old times our stock was reckoned to be the best marksmen in our section. You ort to be; yore narrer ‘twixt the eyes, an’ that’s a shore sign.”

Dick caught a glimpse of Melissa now and then, and managed to exchange a few words with her occasionally, the nature of which we will not disclose. It may be said, however, that she was always in good spirits, which puzzled her father considerably, for he was at a loss to see why she should be so when Dick had not visited her since the night of the corn shucking. Moreover, she continually roused her father’s anger by speaking frequently of the great honor that belonged to Farmer Lawson for so often Winning the prizes in the shooting matches.

“Dang it, Melissa, dry up!” he exclaimed, boiling with anger, “you know I hate that daddrated man. I’d fling my hat as high as the moon ef some o’ these young bucks ‘u’d beat him this fall; he’s as full o’ brag as a lazy calf is with fleas.”

“No use a hopin’ fur anything o’ that sort, paw; Lawson’s too old a han’. He ain’t got his equal at shootin’ ur lawin.’ The whole country couldn’t rake up a better one.” After speaking in this manner she would stifle a giggle by holding her hand over her mouth until she was livid in the face, and escape from her mystified parent, leaving him to vent his spleen on the empty air.

The day of the annual shooting match drew near. It was not known who were to be the participants aside from Lawson, for the others usually waited till the time arrived to announce their intentions. No better day could have been chosen. The sky was blue and sprinkled with frothy clouds, and the weather was not unpleasantly cold. Women and men, boys, girls and children from all directions were assembled to witness the sport and were seated in chairs and wagons all over the wide, open space.

Melissa was there in a cluster of girls, and her father was near by in a group of men, all of whom – like himself – disliked the blustering, boasting Lawson and fondly hoped that someone would beat him on this occasion. Lawson stood by himself, with a confident smile on his face. His rifle butt rested on the grass and his hands were folded across each other on the end of his gun barrel.

“Wilks,” said he to the clerk of the county court, who had been chosen as referee for the occasion, “git up yore list o’ fellers that are bold enough to shoot agin the champion. I reckon my nerves are ‘bout as they wuz six yeer ago when I fust took my stan’ here to larn this settlement how to shoot.”

Just before the list of aspirants was read aloud Dick managed to reach Melissa’s side unobserved by her father.

“Did you keep yore promise ‘bout cut-tin’ my patchin’ fur me?” he asked in a whisper.

With trembling fingers she drew from her pocket several little pieces of white cotton cloth about the size of a silver quarter of a dollar and gave them to him.

“They’re jest right to a gnat’s heel,” he said, warmly. “A ball packed in one o’ them’ll go straight ur I’m no judge.”

“Dick,” whispered she, looking him directly in the eyes, “you ain’t a bit flustered. I believe you’ll win.”

With a smile Dick turned away and joined the crowd round the referee’s chair, and when his name was called a moment later among the names of four others he brought his rifle from a wagon and stood in view of the crowd. The first applause given that day was accorded him, for in addition to its being his first appearance in a shooting match he was universally popular.

“Bully fur you, Dick; here’s my han’ wishing you luck!” said a cheery-voiced farmer, shaking Dick’s hand.

“It’s the way with all these young strips,” said Lawson in a loud, boastful tone. “Gwine to conquer the whole round world. He’ll grin on tother side o’ his mouth when Bettie, the lead queen, barks and spits in the very centre o’ that spot out yander.”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.