

Ellis Edward Sylvester

The Young Ranchers: or, Fighting the Sioux



Edward Ellis

**The Young Ranchers:
or, Fighting the Sioux**

«Public Domain»

Ellis E.

The Young Ranchers: or, Fighting the Sioux / E. Ellis —
«Public Domain»,

Содержание

CHAPTER I.	5
CHAPTER II.	8
CHAPTER III.	12
CHAPTER IV.	15
CHAPTER V.	17
CHAPTER VI.	20
CHAPTER VII.	23
CHAPTER VIII.	26
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	28

Ellis Edward Sylvester The Young Ranchers; Or, Fighting the Sioux

CHAPTER I. DANGER AHEAD

There was snow in the air. Warren Starr had felt it ever since meridian, though not a flake had fallen, and the storm might be delayed for hours yet to come. There was no mistaking the dull leaden sky, the chill in the atmosphere, and that dark, increasing gloom which overspreads the heavens at such times.

Young Warren was a fine specimen of the young hunter, though he had not yet passed his nineteenth year. His home was in South Dakota, and he was now on his return from Fort Meade, at the eastern foot of the Black Hills, and had fully twenty miles to travel, though the sun was low in the horizon, as he well knew, even if it was veiled by the snow vapor.

His father's ranch lay to the north of the Big Cheyenne, and the son was familiar with every foot of the ground, having traversed it many a time, not only on his visits to the fort, but in the numerous hunting excursions of which he was so fond. He could have made the journey by night, when no moon was in the sky, had there been need of doing so, but he decided that it was better to give his pony the rest he required, and to push on at an early hour the next morning. He had eaten nothing since the noon halt, and his youth and vigor gave him a powerful appetite, but he had learned long before that one of the first requisites of the hunter is to learn to endure cold, heat, hunger, and hardship uncomplainingly.

But the youth was in so uneasy a mental state that he rode slowly for nearly an hour, debating with himself whether to draw rein or push on. The rumors of trouble among the Sioux were confirmed by his visit to Fort Meade. A spirit of unrest had prevailed for a long time, caused by the machinations of that marplot, Sitting Bull, the harangues of medicine men who proclaimed the coming Messiah, the ghost dances, the eagerness of the young bucks to take the warpath, and the universal belief that the last opportunity for the red men to turn back the advance of the Caucasian race was to be made soon or never.

The fact that our Government had its military posts scattered through the disaffected country, that the Indian reservations were comparatively well governed, that the officers were men whose valor and skill had been proven times without number, and that these authorities were keeping close watch on the growing disaffection produced a quieting effect in many quarters, though the best informed men foresaw the impending storm. That which troubled Warren Starr on his lonely ride northward was the fact that on that ranch, twenty miles away, dwelt his father, mother, and little sister, known by the pet name of Dot. His father had two assistants in the care of the ranch, Jared Plummer, a man in middle life, and Tim Brophy, a lusty young Irishman, about the same age as Warren. But the ranch was not fitted to withstand an attack from any of the bands through the country. Those turbulent bucks were the very ones to assail his home with the fury of a cyclone, and if they did, Heaven help the loved ones there, even though the three men were well provided with arms and ammunition.

The commandant of Fort Meade suggested to Warren that he urge his people to come into the fort without delay. Such a suggestion, coming from the officer, meant a good deal.

That which caused the youth to decide to wait until morning was the fatigue of his animal, and the more important fact that it was best not only to arrive at the ranch in the daytime, but to

ride through several miles of the surrounding country when the chance to use his eyes was at the best. If hostiles were in the section, he might pass within a hundred yards of them in the darkness without discovering it, but it was impossible to do so when the sun was in the sky.

He was now riding across an open plain directly toward a small branch of the Big Cheyenne, beyond which lay his home. He could already detect the fringe of timber that lined both sides of the winding stream, while to the right rose a rocky ridge several hundred feet in height, and a mile or two distant appeared a similar range on the left.

The well-marked trail which the lad was following passed between these elevations; that on the right first presenting itself and diverging so far to the east, just before the other ridge was reached, that it may be said it disappeared, leaving the other to succeed it.

Despite the long ride and the fatigue of himself as well as his animal, young Starr was on the alert. He was in a dangerous country, and a little negligence on his part was liable to prove fatal.

"If there is a lot of Sioux watching this trail for parties going either way, this is the spot," he reflected, grasping his Winchester, lying across his saddle, a little more firmly. "I have met them here more than once, and, though they claimed to be friendly, I was always uneasy, for it is hard for an Indian to resist the temptation to hurt a white man when it looks safe to do so."

Nothing could have exceeded the caution of the youth. The trail showed so plainly that his pony kept to it without any guidance on his part, and the reins lay loose on his neck. Every minute or two the rider glanced furtively behind him to make sure no treacherous enemy was stealing upon him unawares; and then, after a hasty look to the right and left, he scanned the rocky ridge on his right, peering forward the next moment at the one farther off on his left.

He was searching for that which he did not want to find – signs of red men. He knew a good deal of their system of telegraphy, and half suspected that some keen-eyed Sioux was crouching behind the rocks of the ridge, awaiting the moment to signal his approach to his confederate farther away.

It might have seemed possible to some to flank the danger by turning far to the right or left, but that would have involved a long detour and delay in arriving home. At the same time, if any warriors were on the watch, they could easily checkmate him by accommodating their movements to his, and continually heading him off, whichever direction he took. He had considered all these contingencies, and felt no hesitation in pressing straight forward, despite the apparent peril involved in doing so.

Suddenly Jack pricked his ears and raised his head, emitting at the same time a slight whiff through his nostrils.

No words could have said more plainly: "Beware, master! I have discovered something."

The rider's natural supposition was that the danger, whatever it might be, was on the crest of the ridge he was approaching; but, when he shaded his eyes and peered forward, he was unable to detect anything at all. Enough light remained in the sky for him to use his excellent eyes to the best advantage, but nothing rewarded the scrutiny.

Jack continued advancing, though his gait was now a slow walk, as if he expected his master to halt altogether; but the latter acted like the skilful railway engineer, who, seeing the danger signal ahead, continues creeping slowly toward it, ready to check his train on the instant it becomes necessary to do so. He allowed the pony to step tardily forward, while he strove to locate the point whence peril threatened.

"What the mischief do you see, Jack?" he asked, in a half-impatient tone; "if I didn't know you never joked, I would believe you were trying some trick on me to get me to camp for the night."

Once the horseman fancied he caught the faint outlines of a thin column of smoke climbing into the sky from the crest of the ridge, but closer study convinced him that he was wrong. If such a signal were kindled, it must be clear enough to be recognized from the farther elevation, which was more distant than the horseman.

"I shall observe the vapor as soon as they," he thought, "for my eyes are as sharp – helloa! that beats the mischief!"

At last Warren Starr learned what it was that had alarmed his pony.

CHAPTER II. THE VOICELESS FRIEND

The keen eyes, instead of looking at the crest of the rocky ridge on his right, were now centred on the ground, where they detected a small dark speck swiftly approaching the horseman. At the first glance, the object suggested a cannon-ball rolling with great speed toward the pony, that was now standing still, with head erect, ears thrown forward, and the appearance of perplexed interest in the thing, whatever it might be.

For a minute Warren Starr was unable to guess the meaning of the singular sight. Whatever its nature, it was evident that it was aiming to reach the rider with the least possible delay. The latter drew his Winchester around in front, so as to be ready to receive it, his first thought being that it was some Sioux stratagem designed to do him ill.

But while he gazed, he discovered its identity; it was a dog, running as if its very life were at stake. The next instant young Starr perceived something protruding from the front part of its body, resembling the ornamental feather in an Indian's head-dress.

"It is an arrow!" he exclaimed. "The poor creature is badly wounded, and is striving to reach me before he dies. By gracious, it's Bruno!" he added, as a closer approach enabled him to identify the creature. "He brings me some message."

Bruno was his favorite hound, that had accompanied him on many a hunting excursion, and whom he loved scarcely less than Jack, his pony.

It was indeed a race with death on the part of the faithful animal. While yet a number of rods distant, he staggered, faltered, then gathering his energies pressed on with the last strength he could summon, and with a low moan rolled languidly on his side, and looking upward with a human expression to his young master, said by his action: "I have done the best I could for you, and I am content."

Young Starr was out of the saddle like a flash, and ran forward to him. Stooping down, he placed one arm under the head of the noble dog, and, leaning over, touched his lips to the velvety forehead.

"My poor Bruno, they have killed you!" he murmured, with tears in his eyes. "I would give an arm to save you, but it is too late."

He saw that the head of the arrow was sunken deep into the neck, and the dark coat was splashed with crimson. To attempt to withdraw the missile was useless. It could only deepen the agony of the animal without relieving him in the least. He was doomed and dying before he sank to the ground.

Bruno turned his beautiful eyes upward to his master, emitted a low moan, gave a slight quiver and gasp, and was dead. No martyr ever did his duty more heroically.

For a few moments Warren Starr yielded to his grief. He remained with the exquisitely formed head resting on his arm, while the tears fell from his eyes on the form that could never respond again to his caresses. Then he gently withdrew his arm and suffered the head to rest on the ground.

"Your last act was for those you love," he murmured; "you gave your life for us, and no man could do more. No one shall take from me the faith that we shall be happy together beyond the grave. Good-by, my true and faithful friend."

Young Starr was too experienced a scout, despite his youth, to forget in his grief the full significance of the sad incident. The hound had travelled the long distance from the ranch to this point for the purpose of bringing him a message. He had been discovered while on the road, and fired upon by the Indians, who were so near that they used bows and arrows to prevent the young

master taking the alarm. Many missiles were doubtless sent after the animal, and one was fated to bring him down, though not until he had accomplished his errand.

Warren knew where to look for the message. He unstrapped the collar, with its silver plate – which he would have done under any circumstance to keep as a remembrance of his voiceless friend – and there, carefully folded and secure under the band, was a piece of paper, containing considerable writing in lead-pencil:

Dear Warren:

Don't come to the ranch. It is sure death to undertake it. A party of twenty and more bucks are near us. They have killed or stampeded our cattle, and will attack us this evening if we remain, which we shall not do. Tim discovered them this afternoon, and learned enough to make sure of their intention. We shall mount our horses and start for Fort Meade. We dare not use the regular trail, along which I suppose you are making your way, but must be guided by circumstances. I think we shall move to the westward, taking the most direct route to the post, but are likely to be forced into a long detour, which renders it impossible for me to give you any direction by which we can meet each other.

I know that your impulse will be to try to join us before we reach the fort, but it is my earnest wish that you shall not attempt it. Turn about at once, while you have time, and retrace your steps. If a day or two shall pass without our coming in, perhaps it may be well to ask the colonel to send out a squad of cavalry to help us, for it is idle to fancy we are not in great peril. It is my prayer that Bruno shall intercept you in time to prevent any mishap. I have instructed him precisely what he is expected to do, and he not only fully understands, but, as you well know, will do it if it be possible.

Your Father.

"You were right," said the youth gently, looking down once more on the inanimate form. "Bruno did his duty, and he deserves a monument for having done it so well."

All this time the pony stood some feet away, motionless, and apparently a deeply interested witness of the singular scene.

He was too well trained to leave his master, who never resorted to the precaution of securing him by his halter.

Meanwhile night was closing in. The gloom was overspreading the prairie so that the ridge, which had been such a cause for solicitude to the youth, was now dimly discernible. In a few minutes it would be swallowed up in the coming darkness.

Resolutely forcing his sadness aside, Warren knelt down and pressed his ear to the ground. If horsemen were approaching he could detect it through the sense of hearing.

Then he climbed once more into the saddle and faced the ridge, debating with himself what was the right course to pursue. His father had said in unmistakable language that he wished him to return to Fort Meade. Warren was a dutiful son, but he could not persuade himself that that was the best thing to do. To follow his parent's wishes would require him to look after his own safety, and to forget those whose lives were dearer to him than his own. To return to the fort, and secure the aid that he knew would be cheerfully given, would take a day or two, during which the crisis must come and pass with his people. Two days at the most would settle the question whether they were to escape or fall victims to the ferocity of the Sioux.

"I can't do it," he said, compressing his lips and shaking his head. "I have never played the coward, and I'm not going to begin when my folks are concerned. My first duty is to find out where father, mother, and Dot are, and then do all I can for their safety."

It was not difficult to reach this conclusion, for which no one will deny him credit; but it was altogether a difficult and formidable task for him to decide what next to do.

Had his friends been following the regular trail to the fort his course would have been simple, since he had only to continue on until he met them; but his father had notified him that not only would he not take that route, but he could not say which one he would adopt. He inclined to think he would turn to the westward, leaving the path on his left, but the question, as he said, must be settled by circumstances.

Something cold touched his hand. It was a snowflake, and he knew that in a short time the ground would be wrapped in a mantle of white. Once more he glanced in the direction of the elevation, now invisible in the gathering darkness. On the utmost height a point of light appeared, shining for a moment with the steady radiance of a fixed star.

"The bucks are there," concluded Warren; "they saw me from a long way, and must wonder why I am delayed – ah, sure enough!"

All at once the gleaming light began circling about, faster and faster, until it looked like a wheel of fire. Then it reversed, whirling as swiftly in the opposite direction, then up and down, then from side to side, and finally, whiff! it vanished.

A grim smile lit the face of the youth, who turned his gaze toward the more distant ridge on his left for the answer, but if it was made, the state of the atmosphere prevented his seeing it. Once he fancied he caught the glimpse of something resembling a fire-fly, but it was only for an instant, and was not observed again.

It was easy to read the meaning of that which first showed itself. A party of Indians that had evidently been watching his coming, while yet a long way off, now telegraphed his arrival to their confederates on the more distant elevation, together with the fact that the white man had ceased his approach and might not come any nearer.

It was reasonable to believe that these same red men would not remain idle while the object of their wrath turned quietly about and retraced his steps.

Only a few minutes were used in considering the question, but the time had not yet expired, when, to Warren's astonishment, he heard the sound of firing ahead. Probably eight or ten shots were discharged at quick but irregular intervals, and then all once more became still.

A pang of apprehension passed through him at the fear that his friends, after all, might have attempted to reach the fort by the trail, and had become involved in a fight with the Sioux. Be that as it may, the fact was impressed on him that he was doing an imprudent thing by remaining in the path along which the warriors were liable to burst at any moment. He turned Jack to the left and rode fully a hundred yards before again drawing rein. It was not necessary to go this far to place himself beyond sight of the path, but he wished to take no unnecessary chances.

By this time the snowflakes were falling fast, and it was impossible to see objects more than twenty feet distant. Warren checked his pony, holding him with his nose toward the trail, and listened.

Again the intelligent animal elevated his head, pricked his ears, and emitted an almost noiseless neigh, as was his habit when he discovered the approach of strangers. His rider could discern nothing through the gloom, and resorted to the resource tried before, which is a common one among hunters and warriors. Descending from the saddle, he brushed aside the snow from a small spot on the ground and pressed his ear against the earth.

This time he *did* hear something. A horse was approaching over the trail on a swift gallop, and it took but a brief while for the youth to learn that he was coming from the direction of the ridge. Furthermore, there was but the single horseman; or, if there were others, they were so far off that no thought need be given to them.

Remounting his pony, Warren held him facing the path, and prepared for any emergency likely to arise. He was well aware that if the stranger kept to the trail he would be invisible in the

gloom, but he was now so near that from his seat young Starr plainly caught the sound of his horse's hoofs, growing more distinct every moment.

Whoever it was that was advancing, it was evident he was doing so at what might be called a leisurely pace, though it was quite rapid. The horse was on an easy canter, such as his species can maintain for hours without fatigue.

The youth was sitting in this posture, with never a thought of what was coming, when to his amazement he caught the outlines of the man and his steed passing at right angles to the course he had been following himself.

"He is off the trail!" was the alarming fact which caused Warren to make ready to fire, for the truth was apparent that if he saw the stranger, the latter had the same opportunity of seeing him.

To his surprise Jack uttered a neigh at the critical moment when the other was directly opposite. A collision now seemed certain, but the other kept straight on, and quickly passed from sight.

Not until he had been several minutes beyond hearing did the startling thought come to Warren Starr:

"That was a white man, and not an Indian."

CHAPTER III. COMPANIONS IN PERIL

Warren Starr was impatient with himself that he had not thought of the stranger being a white man until it was too late to make use of the important fact. The sounds of firing ahead ought to have raised the suspicion in his mind, and the act of his pony should have confirmed it, for he never would have betrayed himself to one of his own species had he not known that he belonged to a friend.

But it was a waste of time to bewail what could not be helped, and nothing was to be gained by staying where he was. There was no longer any call to push onward toward the ranch, for that was not his destination. He was seeking his folks.

Once more the nose of Jack was turned about, and this time he was headed toward the northwest, his course being such that it would take him considerably to the west of the second rocky ridge to which allusion has been made. In short, Warren had now set out to do that which he would not have attempted but for the receipt of the message from his father. He was about to flank both elevations by swerving far from the direct course to his home.

The small tributary of the Big Cheyenne, which it was necessary to ford in order to reach the ranch, made a sweeping curve southward, so that the marked change in the course he was following would take him to it, though at a point far removed from the regular ford.

The youth was not riding blindly forward. It has been stated that he was familiar with the country for many miles around his home, and he was making for a definite point. It was on the bank of the small stream, and was not only deeply wooded, but abounded with rocks, bowlders, depressions, ravines, and wild, dangerous places, where it was certain death for a person to try to make his way in the darkness, unless he knew every foot of the locality.

This was the locality for which young Starr was aiming. Here he was confident of finding security against the Sioux, though they might be near at hand. He knew just where to go, for he had hunted through it many times with his friend Tim Brophy, for whose company he longed more than ever before.

Jack wanted food, but it could not be had. He did not need it, however, to the extent of suffering. At the noon halt, when his master sat on the ground by a spring of cold water to eat his lunch, the pony had cropped the succulent grass that grew around, and he could stand it quite well until the morrow. The animal needed rest and shelter more than anything else, and it was that which his young master meant he should have.

As if he understood it all, the horse of his own accord struck into a brisk gallop, which rendered unnecessary any other protection from the cold. The snow was still falling, but the temperature was not low, and there was not enough on the ground to interfere with the travelling of the animal, who maintained his pace until the abrupt appearance of the rocky section, with its trees and bowlders, compelled him to drop to a slow walk, with his nose thrust forward, as if to scent every step of the way, like an elephant crossing a doubtful bridge.

"Here we are, my boy!" called out Warren, "and you couldn't have come more truly if the sun had been shining."

It certainly was a marvellous piece of woodcraft, if such it may be called, on the part of the pony, that he should have struck the spot so accurately, and yet it is scarcely less marvellous that, had he needed direction, his master was competent to give it, despite the darkness and the snow.

Warren left the saddle for the last time. With no stars or moon in the sky, and with the snow falling faster than ever, it would seem that one's eyes were of little use, but they served their purpose well in the present instance. Paying no heed to the animal, he bent over, groping his way among the

rocks, which began abruptly on the edge of the prairie, and had not spent five minutes thus when he came upon that for which he was looking – an opening between a mass of bowlders, along which a person or animal could make his way with little difficulty.

"Here we are, Jack, my boy! Come on; we'll soon reach our house."

With more thrusting forward of the head, and sniffing of the air, the pony obeyed, though it is hardly to be supposed that he understood all that was said to him.

On the previous winter, when Warren Starr and Tim Brophy were hunting in this section, they found game so abundant that they decided to spend two or three days in the neighborhood. Accordingly they put up a shelter which afforded good protection at night, and would do the same against any storm not too violent. A rock a dozen feet in length formed a half-circle, the upper edge projecting over to the extent of a yard or more. All that was required was to lean a number of branches against this, the upper parts supported by the ledge, while the lower rested on the ground, some eight or ten feet away from the base.

These branches being numerous and thickly placed, constituted what might be considered a tepee, with only the broad opening in front.

It was in this rude shelter that Warren Starr and Tim Brophy had spent a couple of nights in comparative comfort. The second one was bitterly cold, and they kindled a fire near the entrance. The smoke caused some trouble, but wrapped in their thick blankets, and stretched out back to back, they slept as soundly as if in their beds at home.

This was the structure which the youth had in mind when he turned his back on the regular trail and made for the wild solitude through which he now began threading his way, and it was a striking tribute to his woodcraft and knowledge that within fifteen minutes he reached the very spot, with his pony at his heels.

"This is the place," he remarked to his animal, "but there don't seem to be any lamps lighted, and it's best to look around a little before retiring for the night."

Drawing a rubber match-safe from his pocket, he ignited one of the tiny bits of wood, shading the twist of flame from the snowflakes, though there was no wind stirring.

It was months since he had visited the place, and the elements were likely to have played havoc with the structure during that period, for in that part of our Union the blizzard and tempest raise the mischief at certain seasons.

He was gratified, however, to note the slight change effected. One or two of the long branches had fallen to the ground and several others were askew. He was obliged to fling aside the match while he devoted some minutes to straightening them. This was effected so well that when he stepped inside and struck another match he saw not a flake of snow filtering through the crevices, though there was likely to be considerable before morning.

"Come in!" was the astonishing command the youth gave to his pony, who stood looking at him, as if wondering what the next move was to be. The situation was amusing, and not without its ludicrous side, with Warren holding a match in one hand, his rifle in the other, and his heavy blanket wrapped about his shoulders, beckoning and addressing the pony, which hesitated for a minute at this unexpected invitation to share the couch of his master.

But he was an obedient animal, and with some more sniffing and poking forward of his nose, he stepped slowly forward until he was entirely within the rude structure.

"Now lie down," added Warren, lighting another match, and Jack obeyed with more promptness than before. Then the youth flung the broad, heavy blanket over the pony so as to envelop as much of him as possible, lay down close to the front of his body, adjusting the hoofs as best he could, drew the rest of the covering over himself, and was excusable for chuckling:

"Now, Jack, old fellow, what's to prevent us from sleeping as snug as a bug in a rug! Hey, my boy?"

Everything promised well, but before either could fall asleep, they were startled beyond measure by hearing someone moving outside. Whispering to the horse to keep still, Warren slipped out from under the blanket and moved softly to the opening, revolver in hand. As he did so, he ran squarely against another person who was in the act of entering the place of shelter.

CHAPTER IV. TIM BROPHY'S DISCOVERY

The letter which was delivered to Warren Starr by his mortally wounded hound not only gave that young man definite news of the alarming events in the neighborhood of his home, but has conveyed to the reader the cause of the abrupt change in his plans and of the stirring incidents which led to the hasty flight of the Starr family from their ranch on the north of the Big Cheyenne River.

As stated in the note, it was Tim Brophy, the young Irishman, who made the discovery in time to prevent the family being overwhelmed and massacred. While Jared Plummer, the lank New Englander, rode to the westward to look after some strays, Tim galloped north to attend to the main herd, which was supposed to be cropping the abundant grass in the neighborhood of several small streams and tributaries of the main river.

Tim had been in the employ of Mr. Starr for three years, and had spent most of his life in the West, so that he had fully learned the lesson which such an experience should teach everyone. He knew of the impending trouble among the Indian tribes, and was always on the alert. It was not long, therefore, before he came upon signs which told him something was amiss.

In the corner of a natural clearing, near one of the small streams, he discovered a dozen of the cattle lying dead. It was not necessary for him to dismount and examine the ground to learn the cause of such slaughter. The footprints of ponies near by, the bullet wounds, and other indications answered the question that came to his lips at the first glimpse of the cruel butchery.

"The spalpeens!" he exclaimed wrath-fully. "They niver had a better friend than Mr. Starr, and that's the shtyle in which they pays him for the same. Worrah, worrah, but it's too bad!"

Riding cautiously to the top of the next elevation, the young rancher saw other sights which filled him with greater indignation and resentment. A half mile to the northward the entire herd of cattle, numbering several hundreds, were scurrying over the plain in a wild panic. The figures of several Sioux bucks galloping at their heels, swinging their arms and shouting, so as to keep up and add to the affright, left no doubt that Mr. Starr's fine drove of cattle was gone beyond recovery. The result of months of toil, expense, and trouble were vanishing as they sometimes do before the resistless sweep of the cyclone.

The blue eyes of the Celt flashed, as he sat in the saddle and contemplated the exasperating raid. Nothing would have pleased him better than to dash with several companions after the marauders and force them to a reckoning for the outrage. But eager as he was for such an affray, he was too wise to try it alone. There were five or six of the horsemen, and he was no match for them.

Besides this, a more alarming discovery broke upon him within a minute after observing the stampede. From the clump of wood on his right, along the edge of the stream, only a few hundred yards away, he detected the faint smoke of a camp-fire. The Sioux were there.

The sight so startled Tim that he wheeled his pony short around and withdrew behind the elevation he had just ascended, fearing he had already been observed by the red men.

Such undoubtedly would have been the fact had any of the turbulent Sioux been on guard, but the occasion was one of those rare ones in which the warriors acted upon the theory that no such precaution was needed, since no possible danger could threaten them.

Suspecting the truth, Tim dropped hastily from his pony and stole along the edge of the stream, until he reached a point which gave him a sight of the miscreants, and at the same time afforded him tolerably fair protection.

The scene was calculated to inspire anything but pleasant feelings in a spectator. Fully a score of young warriors were squatted in a circle, listening to the harangue of one of their number, who had wrought himself into a furious passion. He was swinging his arms, shouting and leaping about

like a lunatic, and rising to a pitch which not only threatened to throw him into a paroxysm, but was imparting itself to his listeners. Some of them were smoking, but showing at the same time an excitement which is generally believed to be foreign to the American race. They were all bucks, and eager to be led upon the warpath. There was not an old or middle-aged man among them.

The eavesdropper was not able to understand their words, but the gestures left no doubt of their fearful meaning. The speaker pointed in the direction of the home of the Starrs so often, and indulged in so much action to which the others signified full assent, that it was beyond dispute that they meant to attack the house and slay the inmates. Knowing all about these, and the resistance they were likely to meet, they would wait until night before bursting upon them.

Tim Brophy was sagacious enough to grasp almost on the instant the full nature of the awful peril. He saw that accident, or rather Providence, had given to him the secret which revealed that only by prompt action could the lives of his friends be saved. There was no saying how long the council, if such it may be called, would last, and he did not care to know.

Nothing could show the intense absorption of the fierce Sioux in the outrage they had determined to commit more than the fact that a white man rose up in full view only a few hundred yards away, without his presence being detected. Such being the case, it was easy for Tim to withdraw from the immediate vicinity of the gathering, steal round to where his pony was cropping the grass, and mount again.

He rode carefully forward, keeping the elevation between him and the camp of the hostiles, until convinced it was safe, when he struck his horse into a run and sped away as if for life.

A few minutes sufficed to take him to the house, where the unsuspecting folk looked up in wonder at his haste and agitation. Mr. Starr was sitting near the window reading a newspaper, his little girl Dot was playing with her doll on the floor, and the wife was busy with her household duties.

It took but a few minutes for Tim to tell the news. Jared Plummer had not yet come in, and there could be no guessing as to what additional facts he would give them.

Like his employé, the rancher was quick to grasp the situation. The only possible safety was in flight, and no time was to be lost.

The building, with its broad, flat roof, its many windows and insecure portions, was in no condition for successful defence, where the small garrison could not guard one-half the weak points. The assailants could readily fire it, and it would burn like so much touchwood. Flight, therefore, was the one and only thing to be thought of.

It was yet comparatively early in the afternoon, and those on the ranch had noted the signs of the approaching snowstorm. The husband directed his wife to make her preparations few and simple, and to waste no time. It was idle to bewail the necessity which compelled them to leave so many precious articles behind. Life was dearer than all, and the courageous helpmate proved herself equal to the occasion. She gathered the articles of clothing they were likely to need, filled several bags with the provisions in the house, and announced that she was ready.

There was a horse each for the father, mother, and Tim Brophy, while a fourth, a small, tough pony, was laden with the bag of provisions, extra clothing, and a few articles deemed indispensable. These were brought round to the front, and in much less time than would be supposed the little cavalcade was ready to move.

Despite the belief of Brophy that no attack would be made until after darkness had closed, – a belief shared by Mr. Starr, – the rancher was fearful that his home would be placed under surveillance while daylight lasted, and that the intended flight would be discovered before it began. In such an event, the family could only fight it out to the desperate end, and that they would do so admits of no doubt.

CHAPTER V. LEAVING THE RANCH

Now that everything was ready, Mr. Starr felt anxious about the absent Jared Plummer. He ought to have learned of the danger before this, and should have been almost, if not quite, as prompt as Tim Brophy in hastening to the house. His continued absence gave ground for fear that harm had befallen him, but his friends were powerless to give him help.

"It won't do to wait," remarked the rancher gravely, "and he will be as able to do without as with us."

"Why not lave a missage for him?" asked Tim.

"The idea is a good one," replied Mr. Starr, who, sitting down, hurriedly penned the following upon a slip of paper, and pinned it on the front door of the dwelling, where it was sure to catch the eye of the absent one in the event of his return:

To Jared Plummer:

The presence of the Sioux, and the certainty that they will attack the ranch before long, leave no choice for us but to flee at once. I have waited as long as I dare. We shall take a south-west course and will aim to reach Fort Meade. Follow as soon as you can, and we will look out for each other; but give your thoughts and energies to taking care of yourself. More than likely we shall not see each other until we meet at the post, if it be God's will that we shall safely arrive there.

George Starr.

Little Dot watched her father with great interest while he was fastening this piece of paper to the door of their home.

"What's that for, papa?" she asked.

"It is something for Mr. Plummer to read when he comes back."

"Don't you want anyone else to read it?"

"Of course not," replied the parent with a smile, lovingly patting the chubby cheek.

"But if the bad Indians you and mamma have been talking about come here, they will read it too."

The father started. He had not thought of that. The next moment, however, he laughed.

"The Indians don't know how to read writing or print, so it won't do them any good."

"But Starcus can read as well as anybody."

"He has been to school and learned, and then he is a good Indian, too, and I wouldn't care if he did read it."

"But maybe he will become bad like the other Indians," persisted the child.

The husband looked significantly at his wife, who was also watching his actions and listening to the conversation. She replied with a motion of the head, which said there might be something in the words of the little one.

Starcus was a young Indian that had been attending the Carlisle school for a couple of years, and had acquired a fair English education, being able to read, write, and talk intelligently. He had called at the house several times, and interested the family by his pleasing ways and kind words.

He remarked on his last visit, some weeks before, that he was likely to remain some time with his people, and possibly would not return again to the East. Many things were more unlikely than that he would be carried away by the craze that was affecting his tribe, and become one of the most ferocious foes of the Caucasian race.

"Tim," said Mr. Starr, turning to the Irishman, "did you notice whether he was among the group you saw?"

"I didn't observe him, but they were fixed out in war-paint and toggery so that I wouldn't have knowed the gentleman onless I was inthrodooed to the same. Thin, too, he might have been one of the spalpeens who were stampeding the cattle."

"Well, there's no use in thinking of that; we must take the chances; the Sioux will find out what course we follow without asking anyone to translate this message for them."

Mrs. Starr caught the arm of her husband, and as he turned he noticed that her face was pale with emotion.

"What is it, wife?" he asked in alarm.

"Warren," she replied in a whisper.

"What about him?"

"This is the day he said he would leave the fort for home; he must be on the way now; unless he is warned he will ride to his death without suspecting it."

The father forgot their own danger for the moment in his alarm for his son. It took but a few minutes to act upon the plan of which the reader has learned long since. Another letter was pencilled and secured to the collar of Bruno, whose instructions were so minute that they would have been ludicrous, but for their warrant in the wonderful intelligence of the animal. The hound sped away like an arrow from the bow, and the faithfulness with which he did his work need not be retold.

There was no call for further delay. Mr. Starr mounted his fine animal, armed with Winchester and revolver, after he had assisted his wife upon another horse and placed Dot in front of her. The mother was a superior horsewoman, and this arrangement was intended to leave the husband free to act without hinderance, in the event of an emergency. Tim Brophy was equally at liberty, and with the pack animal well laden the party left the home, each oppressed by a great fear that they would not only never look upon it again, but would probably be struck down before reaching the nearest point of safety, many miles away, at the base of the Black Hills.

More than one eye anxiously turned toward the elevation, beyond which Tim Brophy had seen the bucks listening to the impassioned harangue of their leader, and the relief was not great when they rode over another swell in the plain, which shut them out from the sight of any of the serpent-eyed Sioux concealed there; for there could be no certainty that the fugitives had not been observed by them. It was not the custom of their people to attack openly; more likely they would set some ambush into which the whites might ride with no thought of danger.

But in one sense the Rubicon was crossed. They had turned their backs on the ranch, and it was to be dismissed from their thoughts until they should reach some place of safety.

There was little said by any member of the party, for the occasion was not one to induce conversation. Even little Dot was oppressed by the general gloom, and nestled close to her mother, whose arm lovingly encircled and held her close to her breast, which would gladly receive any blow intended for that precious one.

Tim Brophy remained a brief distance at the rear, with the pack animal, on the alert for the first sign of danger, while Mr. Starr gave his attention to the front, selecting the course, and doing all in his power to avoid leading his companions into danger.

When, however, a half mile had been passed, during which several ridges were crossed, a feeling of hope arose that after all they might elude their vengeful enemies. With the coming of night, it would be impossible for the Sioux to trail them. They must wait until the following morning, and before that time the fugitives ought to be so near Fort Meade that the pursuit would be in vain.

It was a striking proof of parental affection that now, when the cloud was partly lifted from the father and mother, their anxiety should be transferred to the absent son on his way to join them. He was in the minds of both, and despite his exceptional skill in woodcraft, the conviction grew upon the parents that he was in greater peril than they. Finally, the mother uttered the thoughts in her mind.

"I agree with you, Molly," the husband replied. "Bruno will do his best, but I believe the chances are a hundred to one that he will fail, and Warren will ride straight to his death."

"Can't we do something, George?"

The husband turned his head, and beckoned to his employé to ride up between them.

"Tim, you know the regular trail to the fort as well as the way to your own bedroom. I want you to set out to meet Warren, and prevent his running into the hands of the Sioux."

"Whin would ye like me to start?"

"Now."

"I'm riddy and waiting to ride to me death for the boy, if nade be."

CHAPTER VI.

"TIMOTHY BROPHY, ESQ., AT YOUR SERVICE."

At first thought, the abrupt departure of Tim Brophy may seem an imprudent thing, since it left only one man to look after the safety of Mrs. Starr and their little one; but it will be remembered that the hope of safety lay not in fighting, but in flight; and the presence or absence of the young Irishman could not affect that one way or the other.

Accordingly, with a pause only long enough to draw a substantial lunch from the provision bag and to bid his friends good-by, Tim wheeled his horse and was off like a shot. He took good care to avoid the neighborhood of the bucks, and soon left the ranch far behind, speeding along the trail over which Warren Starr was at that moment galloping toward him.

The youth drove his task through with all the impetuosity of his nature. He was devotedly attached to the son of his employer, and was ready at any time, as he had always been, to risk his life for him. Believing as he did that he was in more imminent peril than anyone else, he bent every energy toward reaching and turning him aside before it was too late.

In this essay, Tim committed a mistake which Warren Starr narrowly avoided. He acted on the theory that the only real danger was in the immediate neighborhood of the ranch, and that none existed near the ridges between which the trail led. The consequence was that, when he was not dreaming of any such thing, he suddenly became the target for a fusillade from Sioux rifles that were waiting to receive young Starr, and therefore were not fully prepared for him. By desperate work and good fortune he and his pony ran the gauntlet unscathed, and continued their flight southward. The whinny of his friend's pony, he supposed, came from one of the horses of his enemies, and therefore he galloped on without paying any heed to it.

Meanwhile, as will be remembered, young Starr had pushed through the falling snow and gathering darkness until he and his horse reached the primitive shelter among the rocks, bowlders, and trees which he had used when on previous hunting expeditions. After he and Jack had disposed themselves for the night they were disturbed by the approach of someone. Rising to his feet, Warren hurried stealthily to the door, where he ran directly against the intruder, whom he was unable to recognize in the gloom.

"Who are you?" he asked, holding his revolver ready for instant use, but unwilling to fire until sure he was facing an enemy.

"Timothy Brophy, Esq., at your service," replied his friend, identifying the other by his voice.

"Why, Tim, I can't tell you how glad I am to see you," exclaimed the delighted Warren: "I have thought a score of times, when on the way, how pleasant it would be to meet you. What brought you here?"

"My horse, and I presume that yours did the same for yersilf."

"Where is he?"

"Outside, near by, wid the bist shelter I could give him: I didn't saa your own."

"He's inside, sharing my couch with me, or, rather, was doing so when you disturbed us."

Tim broke into laughter.

"That's a good idaa; I niver heerd of anything like it before. Is there room for Billy, too?"

"I'm afraid we would be crowded; but come inside till I strike a match and show you how things are fixed."

The two entered, and Warren ignited another lucifer. Jack was evidently puzzled, raising his head and looking at them in a way which suggested that he would like to come to his feet.

"Lie down, old fellow!" commanded his master; "there's nothing to be disturbed about; you couldn't have better quarters, and you will be wise to stay where you are; you're better off than Billy."

Now that Tim had arrived with his blanket, it was decided that the pony should be left where he was, while the youths lay down on the other covering, which was wrapped about them.

Then they curled up and made themselves as comfortable as on their previous stay in the rude shelter.

Lying thus, they naturally talked over what had taken place since their last meeting. Warren's voice trembled when he told the story of Bruno, who gave his life for him and his friends, and Tim related what had befallen the others during the day.

Young Starr was filled with alarm for his parents and little sister, but Tim was hopeful that everything would come out right, and that, by the time the sun rose, they would be so far advanced on their way to Fort Meade that the danger would be virtually over.

"Ye knows," he continued, "that yer fayther is acquainted wid the way as well as yerself; the horses are frish and strong, and he'll not spare thim; the road, too, is not as long as by the rig'lar route that we've follyed so often."

"That is true, but it must be all of thirty miles, and is really much greater because of the ridges, hills, streams, and difficult places in the path, which will compel many detours."

"And the same will have to be observed by the spalpeens that may be thrying to overtake thim."

"But they understand the business better."

"I'm not so sartin of that," sturdily replied Tim; "yer fayther is no green hand."

"That isn't what I mean; I'm thinking of mother and Dot; he will have to accommodate himself to them, and in case the Indians do come up with them –"

"Arrah, now, what are ye thinking of?" demanded Tim impatiently; "if ye want to go to specylatin' and 'ifing,' ye may refer to oursilves and say that if the spalpeens come down here wid Sitting Bull laading the same, and they sit fire to this ilegant residence, what will become of us?"

"That is very well, Tim, and you mean right, but I shall not rest a minute until I know they have reached the fort. It's strange, too, about Plummer."

"It's my opinion," remarked the Irishman, lowering his voice, as though afraid of being overheard, "that he's in throuble."

"Why do you think so?"

"Because he did not show up before we lift; he hadn't any farther to go than mesilf, and it was nearly an hour after I got back before we come away, but there was no sign of him."

"Did you hear no firing?"

"Not that I remimber; which reminds me that it was also quaar that the Sioux could have shot down the cattle as they did, so near the house, widout any of us noting the noise of their guns."

"It was singular, but perhaps you were all inside at the time, busy at something. At any rate, instead of our hurrying back to the fort, we will do our best to find father and mother, and stick by them to the end."

"I'm wid ye there," was the hearty response of Tim; "I'd like to give Plummer a helping hand, but see no way to do the same, and it is likely that he can get along better widout us than wid us."

The two talked a long time, for their hearts were full. It was not until midnight that a feeling of drowsiness began creeping over them. Tim's remarks began to grow slower and more disconnected, until finally he failed to answer at all. Finding that he was asleep, Warren composed himself as comfortably as he could, and soon joined him in the land of dreams.

The snow continued sifting softly downward, and rattled against the branches and leaves which composed a portion of their house. The temperature sank as the night progressed, and the situation of the couple, no less than that of their friends, became anything but hopeful.

They were still a long way from the post, where they could feel secure, and the Indians were certain to press them hard. They were so much more numerous than the little band of fugitives that the advantage lay wholly with them.

But the night passed without disturbance. Then the pony and the two youths awoke simultaneously, for they were aroused by one of the most startling causes that can be conceived: It was the screaming whinny of Tim Brophy's horse – a cry rarely heard from the animal, and only when in the very extremity of mortal terror.

CHAPTER VII. STIRRING TIMES

Warren Starr and Tim Brophy sprang up at the same instant. The gray light of the early wintry morning was stealing through the rocky solitude, the snow had ceased falling, and the weather was colder than on the preceding evening. The pony also began struggling to his feet, but the youths in their excitement paid no heed to him.

"It's Billy," whispered Tim.

"Yes; let's see what is the matter."

The young Irishman had formed the decision a moment before, for he was as ready to defend his horse as a friend. He bounded out from the rude shelter, with his companion at his heels.

It was but a short distance to the spot where he had left the animal to spend the night. The boys dropped their blankets, but each grasped his Winchester, confident that there was call for its use.

It was on a small natural clearing, where, after grazing a few minutes in the dark, the pony had lain down to sleep, his instinct leading him to select the side of a towering rock, where he was well protected from the falling snow. This bare place was less than a quarter of an acre in extent, and narrowed to what might be called a point, where the horse had found refuge from the storm. Surrounded by bowlders, varying in height from eight or more feet to twice that extent, his only means of entering or leaving was through the opening at the extreme end, which was not less than a rod in width.

The pony had probably risen to his feet with the first coming of daylight, when he was confronted by the most terrifying sight conceivable; a colossal grizzly bear stood in the middle of the "door," calmly surveying him, and evidently of the belief that he had come upon the most palatable kind of breakfast, which was already secured to him beyond possibility of loss.

When it is borne in mind that the pony was caught in a trap as secure as an iron cage, it will be understood why the intelligent animal, in the agony of helplessness, emitted that astounding cry which rang like the wail of doom through the snowy solitude. Thousands of his species live for years and die without giving expression to that horrible outcry, for it requires the agony of fear to call it forth.

The horse has five times the intelligence of the bear, but the latter was not stupid enough to fail to see his advantage, or to allow it to slip from him. The enormous trail which he had made in the snow was noticed by Tim Brophy before seeing the brute, and he identified it at a glance, his only fear being that he might arrive too late to save his pony.

The latter cowered against the rock, his fright so pitiable that, in the stirring moments, both youths were touched with sympathy for him.

"Begorra, but isn't he a bouncer?" whispered Tim, coming to a halt. "I niver looked upon as big a one."

"Has he hurt Billy?" asked Warren, who, as will be remembered, was a few paces behind him while making the brief run.

"He has scared him out of ten years' growth, and it's mesilf that's going to pay the same compliment to the spalpeen."

"Be careful, Tim! You know how hard it is to kill one of those creatures, and when they are roused –"

Further utterance was cut short by the report of Tim's gun. The young Irishman's failing was his impetuosity. When he saw his services needed, he was so eager to give them that he frequently threw caution to the winds, and plunged into the fray like a diver going off the rocks.

Halting less than fifty feet away, he brought his rifle to a level and let fly. It was as impossible for him to miss as it was to inflict a mortal wound, and the ball meant for the skull of the brute found lodgment elsewhere.

The bear appeared to be in the act of rising partly on his haunches, when the report, and probably a sharp twinge in his shoulder, apprised him of what was going on at the rear. The contemplated feast was not to be without its unpleasant interruption.

He uttered a low growl and came straight for the two youths. Their rifles being of the magazine kind, they were prepared to open a bombardment, which they did without delay; but after a number of shots had been fired, and the mountainous animal continued to sweep down upon them, Warren called out:

"Let's run, Tim! we need a cannon to stop him; we must find some place to shelter us."

Not doubting that his comrade would instantly follow, Warren wheeled about and dashed off without paying heed to the direction; he had no time to make any calculations.

Despite the fall of snow, there were only two or three inches on the ground, just enough to interfere with rapid travelling. Young Starr had not taken a dozen steps, when his foot turned on a smooth stone and he pitched headlong, with his gun flying from his grasp. He was not hurt, and he bounded up again as if made of rubber. He supposed the animal, which can lumber along at a speedy gait despite its awkwardness, was on his heels, but the furtive glance over his shoulder showed nothing of him, and the youth plunged forward and caught up his weapon as may be said on the fly.

With its recovery came something like confidence again, and he turned about to learn how Tim Brophy was making out.

It was just like the plucky fellow not to dash after his comrade, but to stand his ground, when the most experienced and the bravest hunter in the world would have lost no time in increasing the distance between him and the brute. The latter had scared Billy half to death, and his master meant to punish him therefor, so he held his ground, and managed to send in another shot while the grizzly was approaching, but which did no more to check his charge than a wad from a pop-gun.

This reckless daring on the part of Tim would have brought disaster, but for an unexpected interference.

Billy, the pony, no sooner saw the terrible brute turn his back upon him and lumber off, than he understood that the way of escape for him had opened. His panic departed like a flash, and he plunged through the opening with a snort of triumph; but his line of flight took him of necessity along that followed by the grizzly himself, who was advancing to the assault of the brave young Irishman.

There may have been a feeling of wrathful resentment thrilling the nerves of the gallant pony, or it is not beyond belief that he understood the danger of his master. Be that as it may, he was no sooner beside the huge brute, who slightly turned his head on hearing the clatter of the hoofs, than he let drive with both hind feet, landing them with such terrific force against the iron ribs of the monster that he fell half upon his side, after being driven several feet beyond the path.

"Good for you!" called the delighted Tim, "let him have another broadside, Billy, and we'll finish him –"

The assault of the pony diverted the attention of the grizzly for a moment from the youth to the assailant. He was thoroughly roused, and made for the horse, who showed more sense than his master by dashing off at full speed. This being beyond the attainment of the bear, it may be said that Billy's escape was absolute.

The sudden check in Tim's words was caused by bruin, who had passed but a few paces beyond the youth, when, seeing how useless it was to pursue the pony, he wheeled and once more charged upon the master.

The moment had arrived for the young rancher to call his legs into service. He was willing to run when the necessity was apparent, and none could excel him as a sprinter – that is, none of his kind.

He assuredly would have been overtaken before he could climb any of the bowlders or rocks, or get out of the path, had not a bullet bored its way directly through the brain of the grizzly, and brought him to earth at the moment when the life of the fugitive hung on a thread.

CHAPTER VIII. STARCUS

Warren Starr was terrified for the moment by the peril of his companion. While running toward him he saw the grizzly rise partly on his haunches to seize Tim, who was within his grasp, but at that instant the brute toppled over, and with one or two struggles was dead.

It was an exciting moment, but a singular discovery came to young Starr – the shot that slew the bear was fired neither by himself nor Tim!

Without waiting to investigate, he dashed to where his panting friend was looking down at the fallen monster, as if uncertain what to do.

"Gracious, Tim!" called Warren, as he came up, "that was the closest call you ever had."

"It's qu'ar," replied the other, "that after we had pumped about a ton of lead into him without hurting the spalpeen, he should dhrop down from a single shot."

"That's because it was aimed right."

"But ye had no bitter chance than meself, nor what ye also was given a few minutes ago."

"But it was not I, Tim, who fired the last shot."

"What are ye talking about?" demanded the other. "I had no chance to shoot me rifle, and who ilse could have done the same?"

"But I tell you I did not fire; I was about to do so, when someone else saved me the trouble; I am sure I couldn't have done any better than I did before."

"Thin who was the mon?"

The question naturally caused the couple to look around in quest of the unknown friend.

They saw him at the first glance.

"There he is! Look at him!" whispered Tim Brophy.

Less than a hundred yards away stood an Indian warrior, calmly watching them. He had mounted a bowlder, so that his figure was brought out in clear relief. He was in Indian costume, most of it being hidden by a heavy blanket gathered around the shoulders, but the leggings and moccasins showed beneath, and the head was ornamented with stained eagle-feathers. The noticeable fact about him, however, was that his black hair was short, and the feathers were fixed in a sort of band, which clasped the forehead. The rather pleasing face was fantastically daubed with paint, and he held a fine rifle in his right hand, the other being concealed under his blanket.

His action, or rather want of action, was striking. The bowlder which supported him was no more stationary than he. He gazed fixedly at the youths, but made no signs and uttered no word.

"Begorra, but he's a shtrange gintleman," muttered Tim. "I wonder if he's posin' for his picter."

"His firing of the gun proves that he is a friend," said Warren; "so we have nothing to fear from him."

"If that's the case why doesn't he come forward and interdooce himself? whisht now!"

What did the Irishman do but pucker up his mouth, whistle, and beckon to the Indian to approach. The latter, however, did not move a muscle.

"Helloa!" called Warren; "we thank you for your kindness; won't you come forward and join us?"

This appeal was as fruitless as the other.

"If the copper gintleman won't come to us I'm going to him."

It was just like Tim to start forward to carry out his intention, though a sense of delicacy restrained his companion from joining him. The Indian, however, nipped the little scheme in the bud.

The Irishman had taken only two or three steps, when the Sioux, as he evidently was, turned about, leaped lightly down from the bowlder, and vanished.

"Well, I'll be hanged!" exclaimed the disappointed Tim, stopping short; "ye may be a good rifle shot, but be the same token ye are not fond of selict company," and with a laugh he walked back to his friend, whose face was so grave as to attract the notice of the Irishman.

"What's the matter, Warren?"

"Do you know who that Indian is?"

"I niver have saan him before."

"Yes, you have, many a time; he's been at our house within the past few weeks."

"Who is he?"

"Starcus."

"Git out!"

"I'm not mistaken," insisted young Starr, compressing his lips and shaking his head. "He's painted and dressed like his people, but his short hair made me suspicious, and when he turned to jump down from the bowlder, he made a movement that fixed his identity beyond all doubt."

"Wal, ye're so sartin about it that I can't help belaving ye; but if it was Starcus, why did he act that way? Why didn't he spake, and why didn't he coom forward and shake hands wid us?"

"That's what troubles me; it wasn't like him. It makes me believe he has joined the hostiles."

"But if that is the case why did he interfere whin the grizzly was about to chaw me up?"

"His whole action was strange, but I explain it this way: He was prowling through this place, probably to help the bucks that are now on the warpath, when he heard our guns, made his way forward, and seeing the bear about to pounce upon you, he fired with the wish to save you. Your danger caused him to feel friendly toward us; for otherwise, instead of killing the bear he would have shot you and me."

"Maybe he fired at me instead of the bear," suggested Tim, "and it was a chance shot that saved meself."

"That cannot be, for he is too good a marksman to make such a miss. I have fired at a target with him and never saw a better shot than he. Then, too, when he found he missed, he could have turned his Winchester on us in turn and brought us both down."

"And ye think after his doing us that kindness, he became an inimy agin?"

"He has caught the craze that is setting his people wild, and though you didn't recognize him yesterday among that party of bucks near the house, I believe he was either there or was one of the horsemen that stampeded the cattle. He is with them body and soul. His last shot was given through impulse. Of course he knew us both, and acted from a generous motive. He may have stood there debating with himself whether to continue that friendship, when your advance scattered all his good resolutions to the winds. He has gone off to join the others, and when we meet again he will be our bitter foe, eager to serve us both as he served the grizzly. Let us not deceive ourselves about that."

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.