

Percy B. St. John



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The Prince of the Ranch

The Prince of the Ranch; or, Out with the Kansas cowboys.

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CHAPTER I.

STRANDED ON THE PRAIRIE.



iser! Miser!« shouted the brakeman through the smoking-car. The express over the U. P. had reached the most dreary part of Kansas, the region west of Abilene, just at nightfall, and it now pulled up at what certainly may be down as the nearest nothing of any station on the line.

Town there had once been at Miser, but even in its palmy days there was not much to it. Now there was nothing at all.

A tall, thin, gawk of a boy, poorly clad and sickly-looking, clutched a cheap, well-worn grip and peered out of the window in a half-frightened way, coughing dismally as he did so.

The word Miser had a most uncomfortable meaning for him.

»Come, you boy! Get off here!« bawled the conductor, looking in through the door the baggage compartment, for this was a combination car.

The boy staggered to his feet and walked the door.

»Are you really going to put me off, sir?« he asked.

»Sure I am,« snarled the conductor. »You have no ticket and you say you have no cash. Now you git!«

»But I explained to you that I had a through ticket for Denver, and that I must have lost it when I went into the restaurant at Abilene. I'm sick. A man back here just told me that there is no one living within five miles of this place. I shall perish in the storm.«

»That's nothing to me,« growled the conductor, whose bull neck and ugly face gave a fair indication of his hard heart: »You can't hold this train.«

He seized the boy's shoulder roughly and hurried him to the front door.

»Don't push me boss! I'm going,« said the boy.

A fearful fit of coughing seized him as he stepped upon the platform.

Merely to hear the poor fellow cough would have touched a heart of stone.

It had no effect on the conductor, however, for he was utterly heartless.

Waving his lantern, the train pulled on over the prairie, leaving the unfortunate boy standing on the platform in a whirl of snow, for, although it was already April, the great plains of Kansas were getting a parting shot from the frost king that night.

For heaven sake, what shall I do?« thought the boy, as he looked about him.

Only those who have ridden over the Kansas prairies can imagine the horrible loneliness of the scene.

Miser was not only a town from which the boom had departed, but the people had gone with it and a fire had swept away its stores and dwellings with the exception of the station, what had once been the hotel, as the sign »Prairie House« over the door still indicated, and one or two barns.

When Miser was wiped out it became merely a »siding,« so far as the railroad was concerned.

But for one prominent cattle shipper, Colonel McIntyre, who owned a range of enormous proportions lying south of the railroad, no train would have stopped there.

It was an act of simple barbarity for the conductor to put this poor consumptive boy off at such a place in the storm.

As the boy stood looking about him a horrible fear seized the poor fellow, for he knew no more of a Kansas prairie than a just from the city of New York.

Not a light was to be seen anywhere.

The snow whirled around him and the wind struck his ill-clad body with a forces which almost threatened to blow him off his feet.

He tried the station door. It was not locked, but inside was nothing but emptiness, not even a bench to sit on.

Looking across at the hotel he saw that one end had been burned away and the windows were all broken and the front door gone.

There was barely daylight enough left for him to see this much. In a few minutes the darkness of a stormy night on the prairie would settle down over the ruined town.

»I must get inside somewhere or I shall die,« muttered the boy. »There seems to be nothing here at the station, so I may as well get across the track there and see what is left of the hotel.«

Just as he was about to start he perceived a small mailbag lying in the snow close alongside the track, and he had the curiosity to pick it up.

It was a private mailbag, evidently, and the card in the slot read »McIntyre,« which name conveyed no meaning to the consumptive, who had never heard of the great Colonel McIntyre, of St. Louis, whose cattle roamed the prairie by the thousands.

»This bag will get buried in the snow if I leave it here,« thought the boy. »I may as well throw it inside the station. I suppose someone will come after it by and by.«

The thought gave him hope for the moment, but then he sighed and turned away, saying to himself:

»But if the people around here are all like that conductor even if anyone does come it won't do me much good, I'm afraid.«

He threw the bag into the deserted waiting-room and was just about to cross the track when he perceived a dark figure flying towards him mounted on a white horse.

»Here comes someone now!« he muttered; »probably it is the fellow after the mail.«

He stood waiting as a young man of about his own age, and that could not have been more than eighteen, came dashing up.

But what a contrast to this poor, thin, pigeon-breasted youth who looked as if he had not indulged in a square meal in a month!

The newcomer was a tall, broad-shouldered fellow of athletic build.

That he was no ordinary cowboy could be seen at a glance, although he wore the big white cowboy hat and long boots, for his comfortable garments were well-fitting and evidently city made.

The most cowboy-looking part of him was a mass of blonde hair, which he had allowed to grow long and which hung down over his shoulders as a rule, no doubt, but was now flying in the wind as he came galloping up to the station through the storm.

The stranded New Yorker was seized with a liking for this bright-looking youth before he had time to dismount from his horse, or even open his mouth.

It was not exactly a case of »love at first sight,« but one where a fierce cowboy studded all over with knives and revolvers, had been expected, and one of immense relief at the sight of a civilized being instead.

»Hello, young fellow!« cried the newcomer, dropping from the saddle. »What in thunder are you doing here in all this storm?«

»Well, I hardly know myself,« replied the boy in a confused way. »I suppose you may say I am waiting for something to turn up.

The newcomer laughed heartily.

»Well, you will wait a long time at Miser, then,« he said, »for here everything is-pretty thoroughly turned down.«

»I should say it was, by appearances. Were you looking for the mailbag?«

»Yes, that's what I came after, but how I am ever going to get back to the ranch -with it in all this blizzard beats me.«

»I put it in the station. I was afraid it would get all covered with snow.«

»Confound it! Then the train has been and gone and I can't mail my letters.«

»Yes, it is gone five minutes or more. The mailbag is marked McIntyre. I suppose it's yours?«

»Sure it is. There is no other. I am Don McIntyre-Colonel McIntyre's son, you know.«

»I don't know. I never heard of Colonel McIntyre.«

The boy whistled

»You must be a stranger in these parts then?«

»I am,« replied the stranded one, coughing dismally.

»Say, that's a bad cough of yours. You ought not to be here a night like this.«

»It is a bad cough. I guess I've got the consumption, all right.«

»Thunder! That's bad! Why, you are shivering all over. No overcoat, either. What brought you here to Miser? What does it mean?«

»I am on my way to Denver for my health,« replied the boy. »I belong in New York. The firm I worked for bought me a ticket, but I have no money. To-night I was unfortunate enough to lose my ticket. I must have dropped it in the station restaurant at Abilene when I was spending my last nickel for a cup of coffee. The conductor wouldn't believe me. He took me for a deadbeat and threw me off the train.«

»By Jove, that's hard lines, and you with that cough, too, Was it Miller himself or an extra?«

»I don't know, I'm sure. He was a bull-necked man with an ugly face.«

»That's Miller. Say, I'll speak to my father about this. _He'll make it hot for him. It's a blamed outrage. What's your name?«

»Albert Richards.«

»And your folks let you come away out here alone without a cent in your pocket? That ought not to be.«

»There is no one but my mother, and she had no money to give me. I—I don't know what she will do now without my salary. I—I but I'll get the mailbag, sir.«

His voice broke and he darted into the station to hide his tears.

»Blamed tough,« muttered Don McIntyre, looking after him. »I'm in a fix myself with this storm upon me, but I must try and help that boy.«

And certainly Albert, if he had but known it, had struck the only person able to render him any real assistance in all this region, for Don, as the son of his father and the manager of the great McIntyre range was known far and wide as the »Prince of the Ranch« and was sole heir to all the land and cattle for a hundred miles around.

CHAPTER II.

ALBERT GETS ACQUAINTED WITH THE PRINCE OF THE RANCH.

»Yes, that's my bag. Thank you,« said Don, as Albert came out of the station, again in control of himself. »That's what I came over from the ranch after, but I'm blest if I know how I am going to find my way back again, or what I am going to do with you.«

»How far away is your ranch, sir?« asked the boy.

»Forty miles right over the prairie; but don't call me sir. I'm Don to everybody out here.«

»And you think you can't find your way back in the storm?«

»The horse may find it, but it is more than the slickest cowboy on the range could do on a night like this. When I started out it was a beautiful spring afternoon, and I expected to ride back under the stars. Now look at it. I tell you it's tough.

Is there no one living in this place?«

»Not a soul, It has been deserted ever since the fire three years ago. There is only one thing to do, Al, and that is to tie up here till morning and sleep on the soft side of a plank. It's lucky you struck me. Only for that I don't know what you would have done, I'm sure.«

»And I am sure I don't know what I shall do now,« said Albert, coughing. »I suppose there is nothing for it but to jump a freight train, but I dare not try that tonight.«

»No; nor to-morrow, either,« replied Don. »I've been thinking about your case. You seem a clever fellow. Id like to help you. Suppose you come down to my ranch and rough it for a few days. Perhaps by that time I shall think of some way to give you a lift.«

Again the tears forced themselves into Albert's eyes and his voice choked as he replied:

»Now that's but——«

»Well, you are not too proud to accept, I hope?«

»Oh. it isn't that«

»What then?«

»I've got the consumption. Some people would be afraid of catching it.«

»Well, lost two brothers by consumption. I know all about it and how to feel for you. What's more, I'm not one bit afraid. Just you accept the gifts the gods give you and we will Meanwhile I must put up my horse in that old barn over there, for I certainly don't propose re start out in this storm.«

»Can't I help?«

»Sure. I'm going to light that lantern which hangs to sh saddle and you can hold it. When we have up the horse we will put ourseves up over in that beautiful hotel, but don't you imagine for an instant that you are going supperless to bed got plenty of grub.«

Here was glorious news for the poor starved boy who had not tasted anything but bad coffee and dried-up sandwiches since he left New York.

Better still was the hope and encouragement forced into his mind by this splendid specimen of young American manhood, for Den was indeed a splendid fellow; no better could have been found throughout the length and breadth of the state.

The barn proved to be in fairly good condition, and as Don had brought a bag of oats with him, he soon had the horse comfortable, and with his saddle-

bags slung over his broad shoulder, he followed Albert to the Prairie House, the latter going ahead with the light.

Only those who have seen a deserted Western town at short range can picture to themselves the air of gloom which over the place.

The big frame structure had been partly destroyed by fire and the wandering cowboys had about completed the work dismantling it, but still there was some furniture left in the place.

Don led the way into the deserted barroom, where there was a big stove.

»We must have a fire here, said throwing down the saddle-bags upon a settee.

Out came a short-handled hatchet and what was left of the piazza railing suffered for he ruthlessly chopped away until he had obtained as much wood as he require.

This was the beginning of it.

The end was a roaring fire in the big stove and a most bountiful repast, for there seemed to be no limit to the good things the saddle-bags contained.

»We don't start away in the month of April out here on the prairie without carrying plenty of grub along,« Don explained.

»Make the most of it, Al,« he added. »There will still be a bite left for an early breakfast and there is plenty more mae this came from, you bet.»

By the time supper was finished and Don had read the letters in the bag the storm had considerably increased and the snow was drifting badly.

It was of the soft, wet kind and threatened at any minute to turn to rain.

»I think we had better go upstairs. and look for sleeping quarters,« remarked Don, after listening to Albert's simple story. »It is decidedly damp down here.»

There were plenty of beds in the rooms upstairs and, although none had bedclothes, almost all were provided with mattresses and pillows.

I'll take this room and you take the little one opening off from it,« said Don. »Both of these are over the bar room, and as you see, there is a drum here in your room connecting with the stove downstairs, so this room has got nicely warmed up and will be the best for you.»

»My doctor is one of those who believes in consumptives sleeping out in the open air,« said Albert.

»Is that so? Well, this is a poor night to begin. You shall take my blankets and wrap yourself up. You'll get air enough. Half the window-panes are broken here.»

Albert protested against this, but Don would have it no other way, declaring t he was well used to sleeping on the ground with no cover at all.

So he saw the boy he had taken un his wing snugly wrapped up and prepared to retire himself.

»Im going to put out the light,« he said.

All being thus arranged, Don threw himself down upon the mattress in the the larger room prepared for a wakeful night.

»I thought I had troubles enough of my own,« he said to himself, »but that poor chap is worse off than I am, for I can get out of mine whenever I choose to wire ma father that I throw up the sponge and admit that I am not able to run the ranch.»

For a long time Don lay there thinking much, disturbed by Albert's dismal cough.

This, however, ceased at last, and soon afterward Don fell asleep, but only to be awakened a little later by someone shaking his shoulder.

He sprang up and would have jumped of the bed, but Albert gently pushed back.

»Hush, Don! Don't make a sound!» He whispered. »There are men down in the bar-room. They are concocting a plot against you.«

CHAPTER III.

DON'S MIDNIGHT MISSION.

»Oh it's you!« breathed Don McIntyre, rubbing his eyes. »What is that you say?«

»There are several men downstairs-they are plotting against you. I heard their talk through the stovepipe hole.

»Is that so?« said Don, broad awake now.

»Did one of them call the other Cyclone or Cyclone Sam?«

»No; but they are talking! about such a man. »It's serious, Don. They are talking about burning down your ranch and running your cattle of the range.«

»They-are, eh?« said Don. »Well, we'll see about that! Thank you for waking me, Al. How long have they been here?«

»They have just come. I only slept a few minutes, so I heard them when they came in. If I can only keep from coughing!«

»You must! Hush, I tell you what to do! Sneak down to the end of the corridor and wait for me by the window. If you get a fit of coughing there they won't hear you.«

»I think I'd better; I don't believe I can hold in much longer.«

»Go now;« said Don. »Quick, Al! Make Don't cough as you value your life and mine!«

Al hurried into the wide hall while Don crept into the little room and knelt down on the floor close to where the stovepipe came up into the drum from the room below.

The loud voices of the men could be distinctly heard and their peculiar dialect stamped them as cowboys.

»Yais,« said a gruff voice, »it's an ill wind that blows nobody any good. This storm will be just the thing for Sam's operations. He'll make the Prince of the squeal before morning. This deal will send him back to St. Louis all right, and we'll have the old times back again.

»It's blamed lucky it's turned to rain,« replied a voice in a higher key. »There would have been a fine old trail left behind if the snow had kept up.«

»That's what! If Sam and the corporal would only listen to my advice they'd do the Prince up. It cold easy be fixed so as to look like it was an accident.«

»Dunno whether that would pay or not,« was the reply. »His: father might send a manager out who would be a blamed sight wuss nor him. But, say, how long are you mean in' to stop here? If we are going to capture the Morrow gal to-night we ought to get about it. It's five miles good to old Mother Morrow's, and it's hard traveling in this slush.«

»We've got to give the hosses a rest, I reckon. They are about winded, and if we start out now it is blamed doubtful if we get there at all.«

»Well, then, we shall have to wait, but I say not more than twenty minutes at the most, for we must not fail to connect with Cyclone Sam before he has a chance to change his mind; don't you see if he gets the cash it wouldn't surprise me a blame bit if he took it into his head to make off with it and leave the gal on our hands.«

So much of this entertaining conversation Dan heard, but no more, for he had already heard enough to rouse him to action, and he fully realized that there was not a minute to be lost.

He crept out into the hall and gained the window at the end of the long corridor, where Al stood with his hand pressed to his mouth trying the best

he could to suppress his racking cough.

»Did you hear them?« the boy whispered.

»Did I! Oh, yes. The scoundrels!«

»Do you know them?«:

»I might if I could get a look at them. I could not recognize their voices, though.«

»Is it serious?«

»Serious enough to mean my own ruin. Al, and all kinds of trouble to the girl I love better than my life.«

»I was afraid so. I heard them talking about your girl. That is, they were talking about the Prince of the Ranch, and once they mentioned your name, so I suppose they meant you. What are you going to do?«

»Get out of this window first of all. Are you good to drop from the piazza roof to the ground?«

»Don, I'm good for anything to-night that will help you.«

»That's enough. Stick close to me and you won't regret it. Can you saddle a horse?«

»Sure.«

»We'll drop to the ground, you get over to that barn and get the horse ready if these wretches haven't swiped it. I'll sneak around in front and see if I can get a look at them. I tell you, Al, I shall never rest until I have seen them behind the bars.«

Don threw up the window and they crept out upon the piazza roof, which was about fifteen feet up from the ground.

Albert let himself down first and, clutching the gutter swung out clear of the rail and dropped into the slush below, Don quickly following.

It was now raining in torrents and the aspect of things about Miser was even more gloomy than before.

»Scoot!« breathed Don. »Here, you take the lantern with you. Don't light it till you get to the barn. Remember now it's the first one across the track. I'll be with you in a minute, Al.«

»For heaven sake, don't expose yourself, Don. «

»And don't you worry. I'm coming If you hear a shot you may know that I fired it, for I don't allow anyone to get ahead of me on the draw. Now go!«

A light streamed from the bar-room window and there were five horses tied to the hitching-bar outside.

»If I could only get one of those,« thought Don, »but that would never do. If they are all winded I should stand no show.«

He drew away, crossed the track and stood by the station, where he could look in through the bar-room window.

There were only four men sitting around the stove, and he could not see their faces distinctly.

»The fifth horse is best for Minnie,« he muttered, and then he hurried to the barn, where Albert had the horse saddled.

»Back him out,« said Don. »Can you ride?«

»I never rode horseback in my life.«

»That's bad, but we must make the best of it. Here, let me help you into the saddle. I shall have to ride behind, for you would be slipping off. Put your right foot in the stirrup. Now, here you go!«

Assisted by Don, Albert managed to scramble into the saddle.

»You just hold onto the pommel of the saddle and I'll do the rest, « said Don, taking his place behind.

»Can you manage the bridle with me in your way?« gasped Albert, for the horse had already started.

»Of course I can. You are nothing but a shadow. Now don't try to talk. It will only confuse me and I've got all I can do to find my way.«

He dug his heels into the horse's flanks and they went dashing off into the darkness and storm.

It was hardly necessary for Don to tell Albert not to talk, for the wretched boy had little disposition that way.

He was bouncing up and down in the saddle with the rain beating in his face.

Already his thin garments were saturated and the motion made him cough so that at times it seemed as if he would almost choke to death.

Don felt deeply concerned.

»Al,« he said at last; »I am afraid you can't stand this. It will be your 'finish, sure. I want you to know that it's a matter of life and death with me.«

»I know it!« panted Al.

»All the same I wish I'd left you behind.«

»I wouldn't have stayed. If you had gone off and left me I should have started along the track for the next station. I'm a terrible coward, Don, and the talk of those men scared me half to death.«

»Well, then, you would have fared just as bad on the track. Shall I stop and give you a chance to get your breath?«

»No, no! Don't! Is it much further?«

»It should not be more than two miles if I'm going right, but of that I am by no means sure.«

»I see a light ahead!« cried Al, presently.

»You do! Where? I see nothing.«

Al pointed.

»Upon my word, your eyes are better than mine!. I see it now! Thank heaven, we have made no miss of it! That is Minnie Morrow's house!«

And Don urged the horse on faster, although he was then making excellent speed.

Al relapsed into silence. He was getting used to the motion, and in spite of the storm, strange to say, it seemed to invigorate him.

»I was told by the doctor to get out West. and rough it,« he thought. »Upon my word, this is roughing it with a vengeance. It ought to be either kill or cure.«

It was but a few minutes before they came up with the light which burned in the window of a long, low, one-story frame house standing alone on the prairie with no other building in sight but the large barn in the rear.

Don flung himself from the saddle and rapped loudly on the door several times before getting an answer.

Then a frightened female - face was pressed against the window and a voice called out:

»Who's there?«

»Minnie! It is I—Don! Open the door!« the Prince of the Ranch shouted.

The door flew open on the instant and there stood the prettiest girl Al had ever seen holding a lighted lamp in her hand.

»Oh, Don!« she cried. »I am so thankful you have come! I am all alone here. Mother is dead!«

Evidently the Prince had turned up in the nick of time.

CHAPTER IV.

THE ATTACK ON THE MORROW RANCH.

»Dead!« gasped Don. »Minnie, it is impossible. Why, your mother was in perfect health when I was here a week ago!«

»She died the next day, Don. Fell dead of heart disease. We buried her at Abilene yesterday. I just got back this afternoon.«

»Why, you poor unfortunate child! How you must have suffered!« cried Don, taking both the girl's hands within his own. Why in the world didn't you let me know?«

»I had no one to send over to the ranch, Don. John Soper helped me out with the funeral arrangements and between us we got the body to Abilene, but right after the funeral he deserted me. One girl, Mary Ryan, was-with us, of course, and she and John must needs go and get married, and they coolly told me that they did not intend to return to the ranch, so there was nothing for it but for me to come back alone.«

»Great heaven! And you are Alone in the house to-night, Minnie?«

»All alone, Don.«

»What ingratitude after all your mother did for those two. Thank heaven I came!«

»I don't know! I don't know what to do, Don,« said Minnie, blushing. »I can't stay here and run the ranch alone, of course. But who is this young man with you? What brought you over here in all this storm?« Do you want to come in, Don?«

»Want to come in? I must come in, Minnie. This is no time to stand on ceremony. You are in the greatest danger. Cyclone Sam is on the warpath again and, and—well, they are coming after you, Minnie! Thank goodness for the 'accident which gave me the start of these wretches who.-may be here at any minute now.«

Albert, who had dismounted and was holding the horse, expected to see the girl faint or go into hysterics, or at least give a scream of terror.

He now learned that Kansas girls are not that sort, for Minnie at once rose to the occasion.

»Indeed!« she cried. »So my interesting cousin has broken loose again! He must have heard of poor mother's death, or he would not dare. Come in, Don, and bring your friend. I have the rifles ready, and Sam if he shows up here he shall learn that I have not forgotten how to shoot!«

»Good!« cried Don, admiringly. »Actually I believe you don't need my help.«

»But all the same I am thankful to have it. Introduce me to your friend, Don.«

»He is Albert Richards, of New York,« said Dong» a poor, unfortunate fellow who has had his own share of trouble. I have but just fallen in with him, Minnie. If you happen to have an old suit of John, Soper's clothes you could let him get into it might save him from getting his death.«

»I have,« replied Minnie. »All John's things are here and he shall help himself. Come right in, boy. Don, will you put your horse in the barn? Ill get you a lantern. With John gone you will have to wait on yourself.«

And this was Al's introduction to the Morrow ranch, long the property of the Widow Morrow, whose husband, dead for many years, had been one of the earliest settlers in this wild region.

While Don went off with the horse, Al was shown to a little bedroom, where dry clothes were provided for him.

By the time he was ready to make his appearance he found Don and Minnie in close conversation.

»And you are in as great danger as myself, Don,« Minnie was saying. »Do you really think they will attack McIntyre's?

»I'm sure they will try. You see, a good bunch of father's cowboys have turned sour on me, Minnie, because I have tried to put a stop to this cattle stealing which has been going on so long. They are down on me. They mean to force me to make a failure of it. If I do it will ruin me, for my father has sworn that if I can't make the ranch go. I shall have to look up @ job for myself and that he will not make any effort to help me again.«

»I don't think it is right, Don. You are only a boy, and even if you have been a little wild and unsteady—«

»There is no use in discussing it,« said Don. »My father is not an easy man to got along with. His money has made him hard and uncompromising. He seems to feel that I ought to know just as much as he does, and be just as able to manage men.«

»You should be at McIntyre's now,« said Minnie. »There is no telling what mis»chief may be on foot there.«

»But I don't go without you, Minnie, and you can't go in this storm. No, we shall have to wait until daylight and then we will all go.«

»I don't. know, Don.«

»But I do, Minnie. What are you thinking Of? It »would be madness for you to stay here alone.«

Don and Minnie were sitting side by side on the sofa and somehow the Prince's right arm found its way around the girl's waist.

Al thought it was a good time for disappearing.

He felt like a fool in John Soper's coarse garments, which were serval sizes too big for him, but as there was nowhere to disappear to unless he went back into the bedroom, he compromised matters by looking out of the window.

And it was just as well that he did, for as he pressed his face against the pane, his sharp ears caught the sound of horses outside.

»They are coming! « he cried.

Don sprang to his feet, seized the lamp and blew it out.

»Oh, Don!« gasped Minnie. »What did you. do that for? I can't see to get the rifles now!«

»You must find them in the dark, said Don. »Our only chance is in surprising these wretches. My plan is all formed.«

»I can get them, I reckon.« said Minnie, and she groped her way out of the room.

»I was a fool to leave that light to guide them,« muttered Don. »Now, Al, you listen to me. Here are two matches. I shall put the lamp in your hand. Stand ready to light it when i give the word. You are no good with a rifle, I suppose?«

»Never fired one in my life.«

»So I supposed. We will teach you if you stay around here. Now, stand ready for the word.«

Don went to the window—the doors had been carefully barred before this.

He could hear the horses splashing through the slush and in a moment a halt was made outside, where he could just discern the four men.

»Here is your rifle, Don,« said Minnie, coming up behind him. »Does the boy want one, too?«

»No. He would not know how to use it.

It is up to you and me, Minnie. First, we will parley with them—that's your job; then we will suddenly open the door and flash the light upon them. What is to follow will be mine.«

»And mine, too, Don. I have no notion of letting you run all the risk.«

»It must be a case of surprise in any event,« said Don. »I haven't the least doubt they are expecting to find you here alone.«

A loud rap on the door which opened directly into the little sitting-room interrupted the conversation here.

»Don't answer yet,« breathed Don. »let them knock two or three times, so that they will think you are in bed.«

»But the light, Don. They saw that, remember.«

»I know, but they may imagine that you just lighted it, for the time being. Ha! There they go again!«

This time the pounding was louder and the gruff voice which Don had heard at the Prairie House called out:

»Open the door, Minnie. I've got important news for you.«

»Answer!« breathed Don.

»Who's there? Who is it?« cried Minnie. »You scare me to death. Don't you know that my mother is dead and I am all alone here?«

»Good!« whispered Don.

»I know!« answered the voice. »I came from. Don McIntyre. I've got a message for you.«

»Have you!« cried Minnie. »Who are you?«

»Ned Butts!«

»Oh, the liar!« breathed Don. »Ned is as true as steel! «

»Just wait till I get on my dress, Ned!« called Minnie; and she added in a whisper:

»Now, Don!«

»Stand close to 'the door where they can't see you, Al,« whispered Don. »Be all ready to light the lamp.«

There was a little indentation in the wall of the house by the door, which had been intended as a vestibule, but no inner door had ever been put in place.

Thus by placing themselves there all were able to prevent being seen through the window.

»Now!« breathed Don, »I'm ready.'«

»Same here,« added Minnie.

»Al, light the lamp and get behind us I'll open the door,« said Don.

Then came the surprise to the renegade cowboys.

»Up hands, all of you!« shouted Don, as he threw back the door; he and Minnie instantly covering the men outside with their rifles.

The surprise was complete.

CHAPTER V.

A BAD SETBACK FOR THE PRINCE.

Instead of throwing up their hands, the two men who had dismounted and stood outside the door fell back with sharp exclamations of surprise.

»It is the Prince himself,« gasped one, raising his rifle.

Bang!

Bang!

Don and Minnie both fired on the instant, and Don kicked the door shut.

There was a cry of rage and pain and then silence.

»Somebody got hit!« panted Minnie.

»Will they renew the attack—that's the question!« breathed Don. »I think I'll give them another shot.«

»Wait!« whispered Minnie; going.«

And so it was.

They could hear the horses galloping, away.

Don threw open the door and fired after the retreating figures.

»My compliments to Cyclone Sam, and tell him that this is the sort of reception that awaits him every time he runs up against the Prince of the Ranch!« he yelled.

The answer which came back on the the wind would — look well in print.

All four cowboys had departed.

However badly the one hit had been wounded, he must still have been able to ride.

»That was done fine! exclaimed Minnie. »Oh, Don, how can I ever thank you? But for you should now be in the hands of those men!«

»Or some of them dead,« said Don, dryly.

»There should have been at least one - dead one,« replied Minnie, »and don't you forget it, but I could not have managed _ four of them, Don!«

»Do you think they will come back?« asked Al.

»It is possible,« replied Don. »Still, I don't think so. Finding me here ended all their plans.«

»Are they your cowboys?«

»The one who stood in the light formerly was. His name is Budd Hight. I bounced him a few weeks ago along with a lot of others who have been robbing me. I couldn't see the faces of the rest clearly enough to be able to tell.«

»Well, thank heaven we have a breathing spell at least,« said Minnie; »now, Don, what about your own troubles? I am greatly afraid that this is only a part of the programme.«

»And I am sure of it,« replied Don, gloomily; »but we have to get to McIntyre's to really know.«

»Hadn't we better put out the light?« asked Al. »We are liable to get a shot through the window if we don't.«

Don thought so, too, and the lamp was extinguished.

»It will be daylight at half-past five,« said Minnie. »Don, you must not stay here after that.«

»I can't leave you, Minnie, and what is more, I won't,« replied Don, earnestly.

»Don't forget your business and your duty to your father, Don.«

»I don't forget what I owe to the dearest girl in all the world.«

»That will do now, Don. This is no 'time for love-making, and anyhow I don't care for it before strangers. However, as you simply must go I shall have to go with you.«

»But the storm.«

»I don't mind it. I will wrap up well.«

»if you only would go, Minnie.«

»My mind is made up. I go, Don. We will wait a few minutes and if we don't hear from Budd Hight then I will get you some breakfast. I have no doubt there's lots of trouble in store for me, but I can do no good by staying here.«

»I'm afraid they will run your stock off the range, Minnie, but trust me to do all I can to get it back.«

»Well, there is only a hundred head now or thereabouts. I shall have to sell it anyway, providing I can find a customer.« _*»Here's one, Minnie. If Cyclone Sam and the cattle I'll take them at your own price.«

»You can write your father and tell him that the Morrow ranch is for sale now,' said Minnie, gloomily. »I think I shall go out to 'Frisco and stop with my aunt. Much as I hate to leave the old home, I never could run the ranch and make a living. My day is all over here.«

»Just begun,« said Don.

»Stop it!« cried Minnie. »I tell you I won't listen to that sort of talk now.«

But there was a lot more of it just the same, and Al grew tired of listening.

After awhile the outlaws, not returning the lamp, was lighted again and Minnie and Don got breakfast together.

Poor Al was so worn out that he dropped asleep in his chair and had to be aroused when the meal was ready.

And now as sunrise came a welcome surprise came with it, for the storm had passed and a beautiful spring day dawned upon the vast prairie. The snow was all washed away by the rain.

Don saddled a horse for Minnie and one Al—there were four in the barn—and shortly after six o'clock they started off over the prairie in a southwesterly direction, which would take them to McIntyre's, as Don's ranch was known, distant some thirty-odd miles from Morrow's.

The snow was almost gone when the sun rose and it soon vanished.

Al thought he had never seen a night so beautiful as the young grass springing up upon the prairie.

After about an hour's ride they came upon a vast herd of cattle and two cowboys with big hats and clattering spurs came dashing up to meet them.

Albert thought at first that they were booked for more trouble, but he soon perceived that Don was acquainted with the men.

They reined in with a rough »howdy, boss.« but both took off hats to Minnie, who bade them both good-morning, addressing one as Ned Butts and the other as Tom Wilson.

»Well, boys, you must have had a rough of it,« said Don.

»You kin bet your socks we had a rough night of it,« replied Ned Butts, who was evidently the man whose name the outlaws had used the night before. »Never seed the like of it in the month of April, not since I began cowpunching, and that's twenty years ago.

»I went over to Miser for the mail and got stranded there,« said Don, quietly. I haven't been home since yesterday noon. Is there any news from McIntyre's, boys?«

»None that I've heard on,« answered Ned. »Are you thinking something might be wrong?«

»These are ticklish times, Ned, know what Cyclone Sam threatened.«

»To go back to his old business and turn outlaw again.«

»Exactly.«

»It's my opinion he'll do it, too. Boss Matchett hadn't ought to hired him. I've heard tell a lot about these here reformed outlaws, but I hain't never seen one myself.«

»I'm glad there is no news, for no news is good news,« said Don, and he was start ing off when the other cowboy stopped him, saying:

»Now looker hyer, boss, now yer come to speak of it, I've got something to report which, perhaps, I might have thought more about, only it didn't occur to me that thar was anything wrong on foot. I seen smoke over towards McIntyre's yesterday afternoon 'bout five o'clock.«

»Yes,« said Don, still displaying no sign of excitement, »was there much of it?«

»Quite a good bit. I wuz down on the south range at the time. I seen it up to dark.«

»After the snow began?«

»Waal, no; of course I couldn't hate seen it after the storm set in, but up to that time.«

»All right,« replied Don. »I guess it was nothing but a bit of the prairie afire. So-long, boys. If there's anything to report about Cyclone Sam or anything else you think I ought to know, come right in with the news.«

As they rode away Albert saw Don and Minnie glance meaningly at each other.

»You fear the worst, Don,' Minnie remarked.

»I do,« replied Don. »I can't deny it.«

»Then hope for the best.«

»I'm trying to,« said Don. »We shall soon know.«

There was but little more said after that.

For nearly three hours the ride continued.

Immense herds of cattle were frequently seen in the distance, but Don seemed disposed to avoid them.

At last they struck a region where the dead level of this vast prairie was broken by cradles, as the slight rises are termed.

In no case were these little hills over twenty feet high, but they broke the view and it now became impossible to see for any great distance ahead

»We are almost there, Al,« remarked Don. »When we get to the top of the next rise you will be able to see my ranch if it still stands.«

The Prince of the Ranch spurred his horse down into the cradle and up the rise.

»Oh, Don, it's too bad!« cried Minnie.

Right ahead of them was a mass of blackened ruins, all that remained to mark the place where the famous McIntyre's ranch had once stood.

CHAPTER VI.

AT THE RUINED RANCH.

»It is too bad,« said Don, quietly, responding to Minnie's sympathizing remark, »but I fully expected it.«

»I see no one moving about there,« said Minnie. »The place is evidently deserted. I hope there has not been a massacre as well as a fire, Don. Sam is a very wicked man.«:

»Let us turn back and get into the cradle out of sight,« said Don. »I want time to think. Al, you dismount when we get to the bottom of the cradle, then crawl back up the rise, lay flat and watch that place till I return. You can do that, I suppose.«

»I'll do anything you ask me to, Don,« replied the boy, with great warmth. »Most likely I'd have been a dead one now only for you, and I'm as good as a dead one, anyway. I don't ever expect to get well, so I don't care what I do.«

»That's the way you feel, Is it?« said Don. »Well, we'll try and make you a live one. [want to talk to Minnie alone for a few minutes. You do as I say.«

Ascending the little hill which formed the southwesterly side of the cradle, Al threw himself down upon the damp ground and began to study the ruins.

The long house was a complete wreck. Nothing but a few blackened studs which at one end supported a bit of the roof remaining.

The barn had been about half burned and over the big corral the wire which formed the fence had been cut in a hundred places.

It was a scene of deliberate wanton destruction wherever the boy looked.

Soon he heard the sound of hoofs behind him and, looking down into the cradle, he saw Minnie galloping back in the direction from which they had come, while Don was slowly ascending the hill on foot.

He dropped on a hands and knees before he 'reached the top and crawled up alongside of Al.

»See anything?« he asked.

»Yes; I have made a discovery,« replied Al.

»I thought so! There are fellows hiding there waiting for me.

»There are two men hiding under the barn. I saw them look out a minute ago.«

»Just where. Don't rise up. Point.«

Al pointed to a place between the blackened ruins of an expensive windmill and the barn itself.

»That's the cyclone cellar,« said Don, »That's where we crawl in when there comes a good big blow.«

»Then that's, where they are.«

Don, who was fond of his smoke, produced a short briar pipe, filled and lit it, at the same time drawing back a little under the hill.

»Now, Al, listen to me,« he said. »I'm going to make heap talk,« as the Indians say. »This matter is more serious than you are aware. Before I came here a few months ago to undertake the running of this ranch it was in charge of a man named Matchett, who acted as superintendent for my father, and who is now dead.

»My father had absolute confidence in this Matchett, but from what I have since learned I have not the least doubt that he had been robbing the governor for years back, selling cattle to crooked traders, who ran them down on ranges in south Kansas and Oklahoma. Anyway, I caught others at this business and I bounced them all.«

»Now this is their revenge. They want to ruin me with my father. They have nick-named me the Prince of the Ranch, and I am going to show them that I am worthy of the name. It shall be put into the mouths of these rascals in some other way beside derision before I get through. Minnie has« 'gone to raise a crowd who will back me, for I've got my friends as well as my enemies among these cowboys, I want you to understand. When they come I shall start right in to do business, and you shall go along with us if you say the word.«

Im willing to try it.» replied Al. Whether I can stand the racket or not remains to be seen.«

»I think you can,« said Don. «This out-of-door life is just what you want. You are not coughing as much this morning as you were last night. But hold up now, I am not through with my story yet.

»When I left the ranch yesterday afternoon I left only three men behind me, the cook and two others. Of course, they may be the ones hiding there now, but I don't believe it. I have suspected all three this long time, and I believe they were all in the plot and have gone off with Cyclone Sam and his gang. Those men you saw I believe are spies laying for me, and I'll tell you why. I had three thousand dollars in cash sent me the first of the week to pay off the cowboys on what we call the South range, which is situated some twenty miles from here. My man at the ranch knew that I received the money, and Charley Brown, who has been acting as my assistant, saw me lock it up in the safe. I predict that we shall find that safe broken open, but if they did the job they met with disappointment, for I took the money out of the safe night before last and -buried it, and I am dead positive sure I wasn't watched, either. Now, Al, what those fellows are hiding in the cyclone cellar for is to spy on me when I return and watch me go for the money. That's my story in a nutshell. My heap big talk is all done.«

Then you don't think they have got the money?« asked Al.

»I am so sure they didn't that I would bet a hundred to one.«

»What do you propose to do?«

»There are two ways of doing it. We can wait for Minnie to come-back with my cowboys and then swoop down upon those spies, but if there are only two I believe I'm good for them, and if you are not afraid I'm ready to tackle 'em right now.«

»I'm not afraid, Don, I'll go.«

»You said last night that you were ie biggest coward that ever lived.«

»I know I did. That's when I am alone. I feel altogether different when I am with you.«

»Put it there!« cried Don, extending his hand. »You're very far from being a dead one. Take this revolver. I'll work with the rifle. Ten to one they saw us when we rode up the hill. We won't keep them waiting any longer now.«

Al shook hands heartily.

It was true that he was of a timid, retiring nature, but there was something about Don's splendid courage which inspired him, and as they rode down the hill together toward the ruined ranch, it is also true that he felt no fear.

No sign of the spies was to be discovered as they rode up to the ruins and dismounted.

»We'll fool 'em, Al,« whispered Don. »Now you talk about the fire, any old thing, as we walk about looking at the ruins; when we draw near the cyclone cellar you be guided by me.«

They skirted around the ruins of the house first and then proceeded to the barn.

Don had his eye on the entrance to the cyclone cellar, which was just a trapdoor set in a wooden frame on a level with the ground.

Once he thought he: saw it raised slightly, but still he could not be sure.

At last he walked boldly towards it passed by and entered the barn.

»Keep talking! Keep talking!« he whispered, and he chattered away himself a great rate.

In the barn they found the wreck of the safe.

The door had been pulled out and the books of the ranch lay scattered around.

»Just as I thought,« exclaimed Don, in a loud voice. »The thieves have destroyed my safe, but they didn't get my cash. We'll go and dig it up now.«

He wheeled suddenly about and looked out at the cellar lid.

There was no mistake about it this time.

The trapdoor was slightly raised, and it noiselessly dropped back into place.

Don walked out of the barn and went directly to the door, where he paused with his back turned to it;

»You see, Al,« he said. »I have been expecting something of this sort and I have taken precious good care not to keep my money in that safe. I have it buried, all right and——«

Suddenly he wheeled around and fired directly at the door, which again was slightly raised, but instantly dropped.

»Come out of that, you fellows!« he shouted. »We have you covered. Come out right now, or I'll bolt down the door and go off and leave you to starve to death! You hear me! Be quick! There's a bullet ready for the man who raises the door without first giving three knocks, which means surrender, and it will be ready even then if you try any tricks.«

They waited breathlessly for the answer.

It did not come.

There was no knocking on the door,

CHAPTER VII.

DON TURNS THE TABLES ON THE SPIES.

»Your talk don't seem to go, Don!« whispered Al, as he stood with his revolver leveled at the door.

»It's Charley Brown, surest thing!« breathed the Prince of the Ranch. »Besides myself, he alone knows the secret way out of that cellar, and that's what they are making for now.«

He bent down and shot a big fiat bolt which was upon the top of the door.

»Now we got 'em!« he said. »Run, Al! Keep close to me!«

He dashed off toward the barn, ran through it and out by the burned partition at the other end.

»Stand here!« he whispered. »Watch out for them to come up, which will be through the floor of the barn.«

He had scarcely spoken when Al, peering between the half-burned boards, saw a trapdoor thrown up and a young man climb out upon the barn floor.

»Hush!« breathed Don, and the young man was immediately followed by a villainous-looking fellow dressed as a cowboy.

»Where are they?« the newcomer asked, in a low voice. »I don't see them, Charley.«

»Now you see us and now you don't! Here we are!« shouted Don, springing to the opening.

Al jumped just as quick.

In a twinkling they had them covered, which was luck, as both men were armed with rifles.

»Drop that gun, Nick Bente! Down with yours, Charley, or this Winchester is going to talk!« Don cried.

There was only an instant's hesitation and then the rifles went down upon the barn floor.

»Kick them out here!« cried Don. »Lively! I shall surely shoot if you hesitate, and you both know what I can do with a rifle. You can throw your revolvers and knives after them, too.«

The rifles were then kicked forward and each threw a revolver and a knife towards Don.

»Pick those things up and pitch them away, Al,« said Don and when it was done he added:

»Nick Bente, you know what you are, I suppose?«

»I don't want to do no talking,« growled the cowboy. »You've got the drop onto us. It's up to you to say what's to be did.«

»You are a dirty, ungrateful traitor,« continued Don. »I ought to shoot you dead where you stand, as you would be if I was in your place and you in mine, but 'm not going to do anything of the sort. You get! Light out right now and make tracks for Cyclone Sam. Give him my compliments and tell him that he will find that I am really the Prince of this ranch, and that the next trick in this game is coming my way.«

»Do you really mean it?« gasped the cow boy, whose face showed his surprise.

»To prove to you that I do,« said Don, »if you don't start before I count six I'll put a bullet in your heart.«

The cowboy turned and hurried out of the barn.

»Do I go, too?« asked Charley Brown, in a whining tone.

»No; you stay right wo you are,« said Don. »I'll attend to your case next. Al, watch out behind. If that fellow comes around the barn and makes a move to get those arms shoot him dead.«

Al had grave doubts about his ability to do much business with a revolver but he was not called upon to prove his skill, for he saw Nick Bente running off across the prairie at full speed.

»He's off, Don,« he cried «he's on the dead run.«

»Good!» said Don. «It's a wonder he didn't steal one of the horses. I never thought of that.«

»He has one of his own over in the cradles, Don,« whined Charley. »You made a big mistake in letting that fellow go.«

»Very likely,« replied Don, »and I'm making another in not shooting you offhand, Charley Brown.«

»There you are dead wrong, Don, for if you was to shoot me you would kill the best friend you've got in this part of the world.«

»To hear you tell it. You are-not in this deal, of course.«

»Sure not, Don. I was held up. I couldn't help myself. I'm your true friend, as you ought to know.«

Don fixed his eyes upon the fellow and looked steadily at him for fully a minute without uttering a word.

Al saw that Charley Brown had the greatest difficulty in returning his gaze and that his shift little eyes were roaming this way and that.

»You won't believe me, Don,« he whined at last. »I s'pose it's no use. I don't blame you. Appearances are against me. All the Same it's true.«

Then Don surprised them both by saying:

»All right, Charley. I'll try to believe you. Come here and tell me all about it. You know how I stand with my father. Look around at the ruin here. Don't you think I'm in rather a bad fix?«

»Of course you are, Don. It's an out --rage and a shame, but I tell you again I - had nothing at all to do-with it. Cyclone - Sam and ten men came tumbling in here about three o'clock yesterday. They - pounded the sate door open with a cold *chisel and sledge-hammer, and when they - didn't find nothing in it they set fire to the buildings. Nick Bente was standing in 'with 'em, and so was the cook. Honest: and true, Don, I had nothing at all to do with it. If I'd opened my mouth they'd ~ have shot me dead, and that's the solemn truth.«

»Yes,« said Don, »you and Nick Bente were left behind to play the spy on me and find out where I had hidden the money, of course.«

»That's right, Don, but I couldn't help it. He'd have killed me if I'd said a word.«

»You didn't say the word which showed him the secret passage from the cyclone cellar to the barn, I suppose?«

»Of course I did, Don. I had to do it. You know as well as I do that most every cyclone cellar has its secret passage in case of an attack. He asked me if there wasn't one here with his revolver at my head, and I just had to tell.«

»That will do,« said Don, abruptly. «I am satisfied now Charley. Let cut it out and be friends. Have they run any cattle off yet?«

»Not yet, Don,« replied Charley, coming forward and looking curiously at Al, »but they mean to do it to-day.«

»From where?«

»The South range.«

»As I supposed. How many of the boys are standing in with Sam and his gang?«

»Oh, can't tell you that, Don. -To hear their talk you would think all hands were in with them. The fact is, they mean your father shall call you back to

St. Louis; is there a superintendent again. - You knew this thing was coming, Don?»

»All right; that's the last question I shall ask you, Charley. Let me introduce you to my friend, Al Richards. He had the misfortune to spoil his clothes last night in the storm, so you see him in a suit of John Soper's, which I borrowed at the Morrow ranch, and that accounts for his peculiar appearance. Now tell me, is there anything saved?»

»Not a blame thing, Don. They took all the horses and the cows we kept in the corral for milking. They made a clean sweep, as you can see for yourself.«

»Show me,« said Don, and they spent the next half hour looking over the wreck of the ranch.

Everything of any value, including Don's entire stock of provisions, had been carried off by the raiders and what they could not carry away they had destroyed.

Charley talked a great deal, but it was all in a general sort of way.

At last he asked Don what he intended to do.

»That you will find out later,« was the reply.

»And the money? Hadn't you better take it with you, Don?»

»Why«

»Wouldn't it be safer?»

»It seems to be pretty safe where it is, seeing that neither Cyclone Sam nor any of the rest of you could find it. Don't you worry about the money, Charley, and when you ask me what I mean to do I say look there!«

Don pointed off towards the cradles.

There dashing over the hill, were the cowboys, led by Minnie Morrow and Ned Butts.

More and more of them came in sight, until at last Al could count thirty.

»There they are!« cried Don. »Those are my friends. So much for the persuasion of one brave girl!«

Al was looking at Charley, and he did not fail to read correctly the look of hatred and disgust which, for the moment, flitted over his face.

That fellow is a traitor, surest thing,« he thought, as Charley threw up his hat, shouting:

»Now we'll get 'em, Don. Bully for you!«

CHAPTER VIII.

OFF WITH THE COWBOYS.

The cowboys came dashing up to the ruined ranch, making the air ring with their wild shouts and the loud cheers for the Prince of the Ranch.

Arrived at the ruins nearly all dismounted and crowded about wanting to know all about everything and making it necessary for Don to go over the whole story.

And this he did, addressing these rough children of the prairie in a free and easy manner, which was just what was wanted.

He complimented them upon their faithful service. He held out promises of future reward in case they succeeded in capturing the outlaw gang and bringing them to justice. Then he appealed strongly to their sense of manhood by telling of the dastardly attack made upon the Morrow ranch and the attempt to carry Minnie off, which they had almost all heard before from the girl herself, but which lost none of its force in being told again.

»And now, boys,« Don wound up by saying, »Charley Brown, who was captured by these scoundrels, tells me that the attempt is to be made to run the herd off of the South range. As you know, we are shorthanded there, and there are only ten men in charge. I think the best thing for us to do is to make a quick run to the South range, corral the herd if it isn't too late, and be ready for the attack when it comes.«

»That's right,« said Ned Butts. »There's no other way. It's the first move, sure, but what about Minnie? We can't take her along and we can't leave her here. Someone will have to take her home or see her safe some-where else. We have been talking the matter over among ourselves, Don, and we've come to the conclusion that that's your job, and if you can trust us we will start in to make Cyclone Sam sick by ourselves, and excuse you.«

»Nonsense!« cried Don. »As though I could allow such a thing. Three of you shall escort Minnie to Abilene, or anywhere else she would like to go.«

And Don turned to Minnie, who had been standing quietly by during all this talk.

»I think, boys, it's up to me,« said Minnie, with a blush. »I want to say right now that when I rode around on the ranges and told you how it stood with Don I had no idea of leading you into danger which I was not willing to share.«

»Hold on, miss,« broke in Ned Butts. »Begging your pardon that there isn't good sense talk. You are only a gal. And when you come to talk about going into danger,« I hope you don't think that a bunch like ours is afraid of any crowd Cyclone Sam can raise against us, 'coz 'tain't so. No, not none!«

»The last thing I would do, Ned Butts, is to accuse any of you brave fellows of cowardice,« replied Minnie. »What I was going to say is this: My father was a cowboy and so was my brother, who lost his life in the service. As for Cyclone Sam, I'm ashamed to say he is my cousin, as you all know. With your permission and with Don's, I'm going with you, for I want to see that scoundrel punished as he deserves, and I am sure you will all treat me with respect and make things as comfortable for me as you can.«

It was an appeal from a cowboy's daughter, which won these cowboys' hearts.

»Hooray! Three cheers and a tiger for Jim Morrow's darter!« they shouted, and there was a great waving of big hats and a clapping of hands.

»But it must be as Don says!« cried Minnie. »I won't go against his will.«

»What else can I say but yes?« replied Don. »I believe your presence with us will bring us good luck, Minnie. I can't think anything else.«

And so it came about that when the band rode away from McIntyre's a little later, pretty Minnie Morrow rode beside: her lover in the lead.

There was some little delay in starting owing to a discussion which arose about the probable plans of Cyclone Sam.

During this time Al wandered about and when the start came it came so suddenly that he had no chance to speak to Don.

It was not until they were under way that he urged his horse up alongside that of our hero.

Al was beginning to get accustomed to managing a horse and, considering that he was an entire greenhorn, he was really doing very well.

»Don, I found something in the barn I want to show you,« he said.

»Hello! What's up?« demanded Don.

It's this,« replied Al, taking a dirty letter from his pocket. »I picked it up on the barn floor near the safe.«

Don took the letter and, drawing it from the envelope with his teeth, shook the paper out and read aloud as follows:

»Dear Sam—Everything is arranged. If you get the herd, and I've no doubt you will, run 'em to the Salt Licks, near Braggtown. Meet me at Maxwell's and I'll have something to tell you about your Prince of the Ranch which will open your eyes. By 'the way, things has changed. We want him now, so capture his royal highness if you can and bring him along with you. It will pay. Yours,

»CORPORAL.«

»Well, what's all that about?« cried Minnie. »More plots against the Prince of the Ranch?«

»Looks mighty like it,« replied Don. »Al, I'm awfully glad you found this. It must have been dropped by Cyclone Sam while he was working over the safe.«

»That's what I thought,« said Al. Do you know who the writer is?«

»Oh, of course! He was one of my cowboys who got the bounce same time as the rest of the thieves.«

»I reckon we all know Corporal Flynn,« said Minnie. »He is what you might call a cowboy lawyer. He worked for my mother for awhile. He was always plotting and scheming, Don.«

»I wonder how he expects to make anything out of capturing me?« mused Don, and he added somewhat bitterly:

»As far as holding me for ransom is concerned, I really don't think my father is sufficiently interested in me to put up more than a hundred dollars or so. He kindly informed me when I left home that he would never put up another cent, and that if I got into trouble out here I might get out of it myself the best way I could.«

»Probably Charley Brown might throw some light on the mystery if he would,« suggested Minnie, looking back at Don's former assistant, who was riding just behind Ned Butts. »I hope you aren't trusting that fellow, Don?«

»And I hope you don't consider me quite so new, Minnie. Of course, I'm not trusting him. <All I want is to get some actual proof that he betrayed me and I'll make him sick; but come, we must cut out this talk and make a dash ahead.«

It was about time for many of the cowboys had now ridden past him and Don felt that his place was in the lead.

Nor was there much trouble in holding the lead with such horses as they rode.

The widow Morrow had always prided herself upon her fine horses, and Don's was a splendid animal of pure Arabian breed which he had brought on

from St. Louis with him while the cowboys were mounted on just the ordinary bronchos of the plains.

On they flew, soon distancing all others, covering mile after mile, the dead level never changing as they advanced.

They were now rapidly nearing Colonel McIntyre's famous »South Range,« as fine a bit of grazing land as there was in the state of Kansas.

»I see nothing of the herd,« cried Don, his sharp eyes sweeping the horizon.

»Have we reached the South range?« inquired Minnie. »Really, I can't tell.«

»We have been on it for the last ten minutes,« replied Don, 'reining in. »They should be in right now.«

»How many head, Don?«

»Between three hundred and fifty and four hundred, I believe.«

»Who is in charge?«

»Pete Muller.«

»Dutch Pete, eh? He worked for mother one spell.«

»What do you think of him?«

»Mother had no use for him. She had him down for crooked clean through.

«

»And your mother was a very shrewd woman, Minnie. I should be willing to trust to her judgment any time. I wish now I had bounced Pete along with the rest; but here comes Ned; let's hear what he has to say.«.

The cowboys were now rapidly approaching and Ned Butts, who had disturbed his 'fellows, reined his broncho in at Don's side.

»I don't see nothing of the herd, boss!« he exclaimed. »I reckon we are too late, all right. Looks like as though Cyclone Sam had run them off the range.«

CHAPTER IX.

THE ATTACK AT THE CREEK.

»They should be right about here, don't you think, Ned?« inquired Don, in response to Ned Butts' remark.

»That's what they should,« answered Ned. »Still, there hain't no telling. It was a rough night, and Dutch may have corraled 'em. Don't you think we had better strike down to the corral and see?«

»I think we had. Still, even if he did corral them they ought to have been turned loose long before this.«

»Sure, Don; all the same they mightn't have worked their way up this far. Cheer up! We may tumble in upon them yet.«

»Forward!« cried Don. »We won't give it up till we have covered the whole range.«

It was five miles to the corral and the run was rapidly made.

As they came in sight of the big wire enclosure Don saw that it was empty, just as he had expected, and at the same time he perceived a solitary horseman coming towards them over the plain.

»Halt!« he cried. »There's someone coming now, whoever it is.«

»It's Fred Fox!« exclaimed Ned. He's got his head all tied up, too.«

As the man drew nearer it became quite evident that he was badly wounded, for he swayed in the saddle, and it could be seen that the cloth about his head was covered with blood.

»Trouble, boss!« he called out, as he approached. »Cyclone Sam and his gang have rounded up the herd. They are running them off the range.«

»When did it happen?« demanded Ned.

»But an hour ago,« was the reply. »They came upon us suddenly down by Black creek. You see what I got—a bullet's ploughed up my scalp, all right.«

»Was there much of a fight?« demanded Don.

»Yes, boss, the boys put up a good one for awhile, but Sam stampeded the herd and most of the fellers went along with the rush. I got knocked out, and when I came to myself everybody was gone.«

»How about Pete Muller?«

»I hain't seen Pete to-day, boss. We corraled the herd last night on account of the storm and Pete he was in the hut when I went to bed, but I didn't see nothing of him when I got up this morning. None of the boys seemed to know where he had gone up to McIntyre's. Didn't you see nothing of him there, boss?«

»There is no McIntyre's,« replied Don, grimly. »Cyclone Sam has attended to that, too. The ranch was burned yesterday afternoon.«

Naturally, Fred Fox was a good deal surprised, for no intelligence of the disaster had reached the South range.

Don cut the conversation short; however; the loss of four hundred head of cattle is a serious matter and he was resolved not to tamely submit to it.

»If they only have an hour's start we ought to be able to easily come up with them, boys,« he called out. »Forward, now, and Fred shall put us right on the trail.«

Then followed a quick dash to Black creek, a distance of some three miles.

Here the trail was plainly visible, for the moist ground was all cut up with the imprints of cattle hoofs.

»Due southwest!« cried Ned Butts, »Looks like Sam meant to run them down to the Salt Licks, boss.«

»And that's what he does, I've no doubt,« replied Don. »Forward! We must make a quick move for it. I'm bound to business with Cyclone Sam before this day is done.«

Off they flew-again, and as this time they had something to guide them, there was a good show of success.

And yet by noon they had seen nothing of the missing cattle.

A halt for dinner was made by the bank of a broad creek.

»How are you standing it, Al?« inquired Don, as with Minnie they sat drinking coffee together on the grass.

»It's wonderful how well I do stand it,« was the reply. »I'm tired, of course, but in some respects I don't feel nearly as bad as I did yesterday on the train.«

»It's the worry cut out,« remarked Minnie. »Worry makes most all the trouble in this world.«

»Is this all your property, Don?« inquired Al.

»Not a foot of it,« laughed Don. It's all my father's, though, and he swears it never shall be mine unless I am able to prove that I can take care of it. We haven't been off the McIntyre range since we struck it this morning. We could ride until dark and still we would be on it. It takes time to run a herd of cattle off my father's range, boy.«

»And just think,« said Minnie, »nearly all this land belonged to my father at one time.«

»And how did he come to lose it?« asked Al.

»Oh, it's a long story,« replied Minnie.

»And needn't be gone into here,« broke in Don, »but, Minnie, there may be chance for the property to come back into the family again some of these days.«

Before Minnie could reply Ned Butts came hurrying up.

»The man we sent: ahead has returned, boss,« he said. »He has located the herd.«

»Hello! Whereabouts?« cried Don, springing up.

»Two miles and a half »southwest of here.

»We have struck it just right!« cried Don. »Did he report Pete. Muller with them?«

»Oh; yes; Dutch is there, all right, and Sam, too. Shall I order saddles, boss?«

»Yes, and you can't be too quick. Now, Ned, we want to split this band and come at 'em from both sides.«

»So I say,« assented Ned, »and it: shall be done.«

Within three minutes all were on the »move again, and within a very short time on was in sight of his herd.

And their approach was seen by the enemy almost at the same instant.

Don counted eighteen of them, and it was an immense relief to him to find that his was the superior force.

The outlaws had made a rush for their bronchos.

There was no move made to start the herd, however.

Evidently Cyclone Sam meant to make a stand against Don, who, with fifteen men, went dashing on toward the herd, while Ned Betts, with as many more, came charging down on the other side.

»Tf I could only capture that scoundrell!« thought Don, laying his hand on his lariat, -- which he had thrown over the pommel of he saddle ready for

business. »To shoot him would be letting him off too easy. What I want is to put him behind the bars for ten or fifteen years.'

Crack! Crack! Crack!

A quick firing had begun on the left. Ned was evidently getting in his: fine work there.

Don saw the outlaws make a stand and return fire.

»Forward, boys! Forward!« he shout: »We must take 'em in the rear.'

Hemmed in on two sides, with the creek in front of them, the outlaws scarcely knew Which way to turn.

So they turned both ways and it was Cyclone Sam himself who opened fire on Don's little band.

It was hot stuff for a few minutes, for the bullets flew thick and fast.

Minnie: brought down one cowboy and shot the horse from under another, and Don did good work for a minute.

Then suddenly he spurred his horse forward dashing strait for Cylone Sam.

»He's crazy!« bawled Tom Wilson. »Sam will do him, sure!«

But the outlaw, although he fired, was seen to aim over Don's head.

Down went his rifle and he caught up his lariat and swung it about his head.

It was a case of both wanting to capture and neither to kill.

Don was already swinging his lariat and his and Sam's flew out together.

With Cyclone Sam it was a misthrow, but Don lariat dropped over the outlaw's neck.

Throwing himself back in a saddle, Don pulled for all he was worth.



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CHAPTER X.

AFTER THE FIGHT.

Don McIntyre was far stronger of arm than most of the cowboys on his range.

Like lightning the lariat tightened about the neck of Cyclone Sam, and in a twinkling Don had jerked him from the saddle and sent him sprawling on the grass.

Shouts of approval went up from the cowboys, for Cyclone Sam was a big man and, considering that Don was only a boy, the job was very cleverly done.

Just the same, it came near being his finish.

A big cowboy separating himself from the enemy's force rode rapidly forward-until coming in range, he sent two shots in quick succession flying at Don, who was directing his men to tie up the prisoner and did not observe what was going on.

The first shot was a miss, but the second bored a hole through Don's hat, and the mystery was how it ever managed to miss his head.

Wheeling around, the cowboy made a quick dash back again.

But Ned Butts, Tom Wilson and Minnie Morrow were just as quick.

Before Don had time to realize what was going on, three answering shots flew after the fellow, who, throwing up his hands, fell back dead, the riderless horse galloping off over the plain.

»Forward!« shouted Ned. »Wipe 'em out now, boys, while we have the chance!« »Look after Sam, three or four of you!« cried Don, throwing his end of the lariat to the nearest dismounted cowboy and joining in the charge.

A short, sharp fight followed, which ended in the hurried retreat of the enemy.

Their leader had been captured, his right bower killed and two or three more wounded.

In a moment those remaining of the band were vanishing over the plain.

The hot skirmish by the creek had gone Don's way and the herd was saved.

Ned Butts was for giving chase to the outlaws, but Don called a halt.

»We have done what we set out to do,« he declared. »We have saved the herd and captured the fellow who made all this trouble. If those fellows will let me alone now I'll let them alone, that's all.«

Ned looked grave at this decision.

»Of course, Don, you are boss of this ranch,« he said, »and I haven't no sort of notion of interfering with you, but if it was me I would never rest until I'd run them mean skunks off the range. They have made you trouble before, and they'll make it for you again, surest thing, unless you can break up the band altogether, that's all I've got to say.«

»We'll take a rest,« said Don, decidedly.

»First of all, I want to find out what Cyclone Sam has got to say for himself. If those fellows want to come up against me again, why let them do it. They'll find that I am good for them every time.«

This conversation took place about a mile from the scene of Don's lassoing adventure, he having chased the fleeing outlaws that far.

»Shall we go back?« inquired Ned, letting the discussion drop.

»Right now with a guard of five,« replied Don. »Tom Wilson, you take the rest and push on to the South ranch. If you find everything right there sheer off and come back; you will meet us coming your way and we can then decide

what to do.«

»All right, boss,« replied Tom, respectfully, and then Don's band separated, riding off in opposite directions.

Minnie and Al now fell in beside Don and they all followed Ned Butts back towards the place where they had left the prisoner.

»Well, Don, you seem to have won out,« said Minnie. »That was a clever bit of work of yours. I don't want to throw bouquets at you, but we may as well give honor to whom honor is due.«

»Thank you,« replied Don. »As I happen to know that you are a pretty good hand at the lariat yourself, you will allow me to consider that a bouquet thrown. Anyhow, I've captured that scoundrel, and the question is now what to do with him.«

»That's just the point, Don,« said Minnie, bringing her horse up closer and dropping her voice. »Will you allow me to give you a piece of advice?«

»Why, certainly, Minnie. I am ready to take your advice at any time.«

»Then don't you stop at the South ranch a moment longer than is necessary. Send the boys back to their work again; pick out a strong guard and run Cyclone Sam straight up to Abilene and jail him. It is the only way.«

»And as it happens to be the very way I had in mind, your advice is accepted,« replied Don, lightly. »Of course, I know they will attempt a rescue. We lose nothing by going to the South ranch, by striking straight across the prairie and fording the creeks it is practically on our way.«

They soon reached the little group which stood around the prisoner.

Cyclone Sam had been tied to the saddle and had his arms tied behind him.

He was a giant of a fellow and looked more the savage than many an Indian as Don approached him.

»Well, Sam, so we meet again, it seems,« said Don, riding in among the cowboys and drawing rein.

»So it seems,« growled the outlaw, with his eyes fixed on Minnie, who did not speak.

»You have done me a lot of damage, all right,« added Don, »and I hope you are satisfied. You begin to understand that I am prince of this ranch in something more than name.«

»You've got the game as well as the name this time, that's sure,« was the gruff reply; »but I'm not talking; what are you going to do with me?«

»That you will find-out in due time,« replied Don, fixing his eyes steadily upon the outlaw. »You and your friend, Corporal Flynn.«

Cyclone Sam gave a start.

»What do you mean by that?« he demanded. »What about Corporal Flynn?«

»Just this much, I'm onto your game,« laughed Don.

»What game? I don't know what you mean.«

»You will find out when I get ready to tell you,« replied Don, turning away

»What does he mean, Min?« asked Sam.

»Don't you dare to address me, Sam Morrow!« flashed Minnie. »I know all!«

»The deuce you do! Then you don't.«

»Not another word, sir! You ought to be proud of the name you bear. I know I'm ashamed for myself to think you bear it. You are a disgrace to the family, that's what you are.«

»All right, Min. That'll do for you. Just wait, my time may come yet,« growled the outlaw, end. the conversation ended there.

Meanwhile, Don was busy.

The dead man had to be attended to, and as he proved to be a Stranger to all, he was buried without ceremony, and soon Don and his prisoner were on the way to the South ranch. an

They met nobody on the way, so Don knew that this building—an old worn-out affair which was but seldom occupied—could not have been interfered with.

They reached: it shortly after three o'clock, and Don, having seen the prisoner carefully secured in one of the rooms, proceeded to make his arrangements for taking him to Abilene.

Tom Wilson and several of his men were sent back to the North range, where they belonged.

A new foreman was chosen for the South range in place of Pete Muller, and sent to join the men who had been left in charge of the herd.

Ned Butts Don determined to keep with him, and he retained three other men besides Charley Brown, whom he determined not to lose sight of until they reached Abilene, when it was his intention to discharge him.

»We'll have supper at half-past five and start at six,« said Don to Al, »and in the meantime you had better go into that room and take a sleep, which you certainly need.«

This was true enough. The fact was, Al had done about all the riding he was capable of, and his cough had returned full force.

When supper-time came Don found the boy in a fever and quite unable to leave the bed.

»Now what's to be done, « he said to Minnie. »He can't go with us and I hate to leave him alone here with the cowboys. He is not used to their rough ways.«

»That means you would like to have me remain with him, Don,« replied Minnie.

»Well, it does; but at the same time -«

»Oh, I am- not afraid to stay. Now that you have captured my beautiful cousin, there is no one who will interfere with me.

You go right ahead with your prisoner Don, and I'll stay here and keep house till you 'return. «

»You're a brave girl, Minnie. Just wait till I get all this trouble settled and then —«

»There, there, Don! None of that. Now let us have supper, for this is business that admits of no delay.«

So they all sat down to antelope steaks and cornbread prepared by the cowboy who acted as cook at the South range, and shortly after six the Prince of the Ranch started away with his prisoner, leaving the girl he loved behind him.

It was lonely work for Minnie, but then the brave girl was a true child of the prairie, and scarcely knew the meaning of fear.

»Don will be back by to-morrow night,« she said to herself, »and then we must have something to tell him about this plot against him if it is to be learned.«

And by this remark it looked as if Minnie had some plan of her own towards helping her lover out of his difficulties, which she had so far kept to herself.

This was a fact.

What the plan was and how Minnie came to form it must now be told.

CHAPTER XI.

MINNIE'S MIDNIGHT MISSION.

Besides the unfortunate Al there was no one at the South ranch except Dick Rudd, the cook, for the cowboys were shorthanded on account of the men drawn off by Cyclone Sam, and it would be necessary for all hands to remain through the night out on the range, although there was one party of three whose station was so near that a rifle-shot as a signal could bring them in within a few minutes' time. a

As for Minnie herself, she did not propose to sleep at the ranch.

If Don had known this, chances are he would never have consented to leave her.

But Don knew nothing about Minnie's plan and having given Dick Rudd particular instructions to look out for the girl, he rode off, little dreaming of the bold scheme which was running through her head.

When the cowboys came-in to supper Minnie spoke to each one, calling him by name.

There was scarcely a man on the whole McIntyre ranch who did not know and respect the girl, nor was there one who would have dared to treat her otherwise than with respect.

Minnie helped Dick Rudd with the meal and then took food in to Al.

She found the boy in a deep sleep, and concluded not to disturb him, so she set the food down on the table, pushed it up to the bedside and withdrew.

The cowboys had now all gone out on the range, and Dick Rudd was preparing to wash up his dishes.

»Shan't I help, Dick?« asked Minnie.

»Not at all, miss,« replied Dick. »You have done enough as it is. You are all tired out. If you don't mind my saying it, best thing you can do is to go to bed. And, listen to me, Miss Minnie, you may sleep just as sound and just as secure as though you were in your own mother's house, for you've got me to do the watching for you, and whoever harms you has got to walk over Dick Rudd's dead body first.«

»Thank you, Dick,« replied Minnie. I know you mean every word of it. My poor mother always thought a great deal of you. «

»No more nor I thought of the Widder Morrer,« returned Dick, warmly. »She was as fine a lady as ever lived. I worked for her and for your father both. Many a time I carried you on my saddle when you were a little toddler, Minnie. Oh, I don't forget them days—no.«

»Nor I, either, Dick,« replied Minnie, »but everything has changed now, and here I am all alone in the world.«

»It's blamed tough,« replied the old cowpuncher, biting off a huge chew of tobacco. I don't know the rights of it all, but they do say as how Boss McIntyre robbed your mother enough.«

»Oh, that isn't so, Dick. We had trouble; we sold to Colonel McIntyre. He paid for all he bought.«

»Not half what the land was wuth, if what the boys say is true,' persisted Dick: »but say, if you'll allow old Dick Rudd to make a suggestion he kin tell you a way out of your troubles, Minnie.«

»Why, of course ru listen to whatever you have to say, Dick,« replied Minnie, blushing, for she felt that she knew just what was coming.

»Well, then,« said Dick, laying his finger against-his nose, »you get married and let the Prince of the Ranch be the happy. man.«

Then without waiting to see how his advice was to be taken, Dick went out into the lean-to and began his dish-washing, feeling that the wisdom of Solomon was as nothing to the wise suggestion he had made sleep, with her mind made up to awake at midnight, and Minnie was one of the kind who could awake whenever she pleased.

And twelve o'clock saw her stirring.

Putting on her hat and taking her rifle, Minnie cautiously raised the window and Climbed out.

She did not dare to go around in front of the ranch, for she felt certain that Dick Rudd was on the watch.

Running over the prairie under the starlight. she soon gained the creek, where there was a belt of cottonwood trees, and she then crept along the bank until she came almost opposite the ranch and distant from it perhaps five hundred yards.

Peering through the trees now, she could see the old cowboy sitting on the bench outside the door just as she had expected.

His rifle lay across his lap and his head was leaning back against the building.

»His: asleep! Just what I want,« thought Minnie. »Now the coast is clear and heaven grant that something may come of it all, for I certainly am running a terrible risk.«

There was a boat here tied to a tree, not a bad affair, either, for Don had purchased it in St. Louis, and it had seen but little use.

»Now for the oars,« thought Minnie. They should be around here somewhere. If they are not I shall have to give it up and go back.«

She found them in the boat, to her great relief.

Untying, she pushed off, and with as little noise as possible, pulled away down the creek, expecting every minute to hear Dick's hoarse voice calling her to return.

But no call came. Dick was sleeping soundly at his post. Any sound near him would doubtless have aroused the cowboy, but he did not hear what was going on down by the creek.

Four miles below the South ranch the prairie came to an end and a rolling country began.

A mile beyond that the creek emptied into the Smoky river, which here flowed through a deep bed with high bluffs on either side.

This point was Minnie's destination, and she reached it by dint of hard pulling a little after one o'clock.

The brave girl was now about to try as bold a plan as was ever conceived by anyone.

As she turned the boat in between the towering bluffs her heart almost failed her.

»It's going to be a case of bluffing at the bluffs,« she said to herself; »have I the courage to carry it out or will my heart fail me at the last minute? If he tries any funny business he's a dead one, though, for I will shoot him just as sure as I'm sitting in this boat.«

She pulled slowly on down the Smoky.

The water was-not by any means at its highest. If it had been she would have found difficulty in managing her boat.

Every instant she was expecting a challenge, for, without being absolutely certain as to its exact location, Minnie knew that she could not be far from the camp of the outlaws, who long before Don discharged the rascally cowboy, did business under the direction of Cyclone Sam.

It did not come.

Minnie covered a distance of a little less than half a mile when she saw a boat drawn up on a narrow shelf which ran along, under the bluff marking the rise of the water at its highest point.

»That must be the place,« she said to herself. »Probably they have not returned here. Yes, it is surely the place. There's a trail through that barranca by which 'horses could come down. I wonder what I had better do?«

She turned in towards the bank.

Here a post had been driven into the sand with a ring attached, yet there was no sign of human habitation to be seen. Lying back on her oars for a few minutes and still hearing no sound, Minnie made the boat fast and, taking her rifle, stepped ashore.

»Corporal!« she shouted. »Oh, corporal! I want to see Corporal Flynn! Is he here?«

Then all in an instant she saw a man holding a rifle standing close to the base of the bluff.

Instantly he leveled his gun at Minnie.

»Give me the password, quick, or I fire!« he shouted. »Without it no one is allowed to land here and live!«

CHAPTER XII.

»TRAPPED AT INJUN JIM'S.«

»How much of a run do you propose to make, Don?« asked Charley Brown, after Don's party had ridden about two miles, with Don and Charley in the lead and Ned and the prisoner behind, while the cowboys flanked them on the sides, keeping a sharp lookout.

»Straight to Abilene jail,« replied Don, grimly. »There will be no rest for me until I have put that wretch behind the bars.«

»It was the first time Charley had ventured speak since they started out from the South ranch. But not at all abashed by Don's gruff answer, he tried it again.

»Oh, I know, Don. That's all right, of course,« he said, »and I don't blame you a bit for feeling the way you do; but, of course, we can't put it through to Abilene without a halt. Horseflesh won't stand it if human flesh will, see?«

»What are you driving at, Brown?« asked Don, coldly.. »What new scheme have you got into your head now?«

»There you go, Don. You are bound to have it that I am scheming against you,« persisted Charley. »But it isn't so at all. What I was thinking was that you might be intending to go around by Injun Jim's, and there's something I want to tell you if you do—tell you anyway, for that matter. Budd Hight told me while he held I've just been watching my chance to give it to you, but then you have been so blamed cold that I didn't dare.«

»Out with it,« replied Don. »If it is anything that concerns me I'm ready to listen, of course.«

»It's about that missing mailbag,« said Charley.

»Hello! The one Budd claimed to have lost off the saddle two weeks ago and couldn't find when he went back to look for it?«

»Exactly. He found it all right, or rather he didn't lose it, Don. He took it to Injun Jim's and delivered it to Corporal Flynn there.«

»The deuce! Charley, are you giving me this straight?«

»Sure I am, Don. Honest and true. There were letters in that bag which deeply concerned you, so Budd said. Now, I don't want to scare you, but I do think I ought to tell you, Don, an' I'd have told you before only coming on me the way you did put me in a false position, don't you see? There was one letter in that bag what was very, very ee to you, Don.«

»Charley Brown, if you don't come right out with what you've got to say, upon my word I shall do something desperate!« cried Don. »Out with it! Out with it right now!«

»Then here it is, Don. Your father is dead! «

Don almost dropped from the saddle.

The shock was a terrible one.

Although as a matter of fact, Don felt as little love for his father as Colonel McIntyre had apparently felt for him, to have his death thus suddenly announced was startling enough.

And especially so was this seeing that Colonel McIntyre, if dead, must have left several millions.

Besides which there was Don's recollection of his father's threats-to disinherit him; of their many quarrels, and, above all, the knowledge that he was the only heir.

The meaning of Corporal Flynn's letter was now apparent. Clearly there was something in the wind.

»Charley, are you giving it to me straight?« demanded Don again.

»Honest and true I am, Don. That's what Budd told me.«

»When—when did he die?«

»About a week ago. He was found dead in his bed. Heart disease, the doctors said.«

»Who was the letter from?«

»Some lawyer. It called you home to the funeral.«

»And I never went! body have thought?«

»It's hard lines, and that's a fact,« said Charley. »Well, I thought you might as well know. The bag was taken to Injun Jim's as I told you. Budd expected to meet Sam there, but he didn't; so he gave it to Corporal Flynn instead. It occurred to me that we might stop there on our way to Abilene, Don. Of course, we mightn't find Injun Jim there, but if we did a few horns of whisky would soon get all he knows about the business out of him. It might be worth your while, Don; but, of course, you know best.«

»Was that all Budd Hight told you?« demanded Don. -«

»Yes, about all. The letter didn't say nothing about your father's will, Don. I suppose that's what's worrying you.«

»You can cut that out,« retorted Don. »We won't talk about it any more. I'm much obliged to you for telling me. I'll see what Ned says about stopping at the ranch.«

»Now you do believe that I'm your friend, don't you, Don?« demanded Charley, in his whining way.

»We'll see about that later,« replied Don, and he rode off to join Ned.

»This is very serious business, Don, « said Ned, when Don told him what Charley Brown had said.

»Serious enough for me,« replied Don. »There's no telling where it will land us all. Just to think that these rascals should keep such news from me!«

»Somebody's putting up for it, surest thing, « said Ned, dryly. »If your father's will is read you might be able to understand the case better. As it is, you're likely to be kept guessing. I don't know but what Brown's suggestion is a good one. It wouldn't take an hour ene to call round at Injun Jim's.«

»If we don't run into the gang there.«

»That's it. Of course, after what has happened you can't trust that fellow. It's taking big chances, Don, and it is up to you to say whether or not it shall be done.«

»Then I say yes. Let's go.«

»Settled,« replied Ned. »Do you want me to try and pump Sam? Of course he won't talk to you.«

»You might try it,« replied Don, »but I have little hope that he will give anything away.«

Ned did try it, and the result was just as Don anticipated. Cyclone Sam admitted that he knew of the death of Colonel McIntyre, but further than that he positively refused to talk.

Meanwhile, Ned had given orders to alter their course, and they pushed on toward the easterly boundary of the McIntyre range, just beyond which lay the wretched shack of Indian Jim, a full-blooded Creek, from the Indian Territory, who years before had preempted one hundred and sixty acres and then raised horses on a small scale.

As they rode on Don questioned Charley further about the matter, especially asking him if he had heard anything about other letters found in the bag, but Charley declared that nothing had Ween said about any other than the one he had mentioned.

It was nearly three o'clock before they drew near the shack.

»Jim's got a light burning and I don't understand it,« remarked Ned Butts,

as they came in sight of the place.

»What do you think? That he may have company?«

»Don, I don't know. I think we had better halt and let me ride on ahead. Of course, even if any of Sam's gang is there it is simply impossible that they can know we are coming; all the same, I think I had better look up the lay of the land.«

»Go,« replied Don.

Ned halted his men and away into the darkness.

It almost seemed as if Injun Jim, or whoever was in his hut, must have known that he was coming, for on the instant the light disappeared.

Charley Brown was watching all this in silence.

»Strange that Jim should be up this time of night, Don,« he remarked.

»Well, it is. What do you think about it?« Don replied.

»Of course, I don't know a thing. I'm wondering what you are thinking about it, though.«

»Then Pl tell you; I'm thinking that it will be a bad job for you if you have been leading us into any trap.«

»Which I haven't, Don, believe me.«

»I'd like to believe you, Charley.«

»But you don't. Just you wait, though. I'll prove to you yet that I am your true friend.«

»I don't like a fellow who keeps telling me every five minutes that he is my true friend,« replied Don, turning away his horse.

After a short wait Ned came back again.

»I can't find no one around the shack at all,« he announced. »The light is burning in the window and the door is locked. I think Jim's rode off somewhere and left the light to guide him back.«

»We can't lose time here,« said Don, promptly. »We must push ahead.«

»The man may be dead or drunk inside,« added Ned. »Suppose we go on up there and kick in the door!«

»All right, let's try it,« replied Don.

The signal was given and all rode on.

Just as they came dashing up to the hut the light in the window was suddenly extinguished.

»Look out!« cried Ned. »Sheer off, boys!«

But before there was time to make a move the rifles were cracking and shots flying from behind the hut and the barn.

»Sheer off! Sheer off!« yelled Ned. »We are trapped!«

CHAPTER XIII.

MINNIE INTERVIEWS CORPORAL FLYNN.

A night attack on the prairie is always a serious affair.

Long experience watching cattle during the hours of darkness seems to give Kansas cowboys eyes like cats, and there lies the danger for the tenderfoot.

Don could see nobody, and yet the hot fire was coming his way just the same.

Ned Butts was too old a hand to try to put up a fight against an ambushed enemy in the dark.

There was simply nothing to fire at, and the only thing was to sheer off, as the shrewd cowboy promptly ordered.

But before this could be accomplished the mischief was done.

Don's horse was shot from under him before he had gone a dozen yards, and Charley Brown's met with a similar fate.

So did the horse ridden by the prisoner and one of the cowboys fell from the saddle badly wounded, while the rest scattered.

It would a been sla death to remain.

As for Don, 'he was caught nythe falling horse and pinned to the prairie.

A moment later a dozen armed cowboys were crowding around him, and to their tender mercies we must leave the Prince of the Ranch while we ascertain what happened to Minnie at the Smoky river bluffs.

If Minnie had shown the least sign of fear there is little doubt that it would have gone hard with her when that startling challenge came.

But the brave girl was quite prepared for something of this sort, and being blest with the best of sight, she thought she recognized in her challenger the very man she had summoned.

»You are Corporal Flynn, and I am Minnie Morrow!« she called out. »I've got no password to give you. I wag sent here by my cousin, Sam Morrow, otherwise known as Cyclone Sam.«

The rifle was still held in position as the man called back:

»Oh, it's you, is it, Minnie? Are you alone?«

»As you see. Put down that rifle, Flynn, and don't make a fool of yourself. Sam sent me here with a message for you.«

The man lowered his rifle and came forward.

It was indeed the bold corporal himself, thus nicknamed from the rank he had once held in the regular army.

He had long been a cowboy in this region, and, like many others among Don's men, had at one time worked for the Widow Morrow. Thus Minnie knew him perfectly well.

»Why, Minnie, this is a surprise!« he said, with a chuckle. »To be sure, we expected you here, but -«

»But you expected to see me brought here a prisoner,« broke in Minnie. »You did not look to see me come this way.«

»That's right. You-are as sharp as ever, I see. Say, I was blamed sorry to hear your mother was dead.«

»Yes, she's dead and gone, Flynn, and I've got to look out for myself now,« replied Minnie. »Sam and I have made it up, you see.«

»Glad to hear it. That's the way it should be. But where is Sam? How came he to send you here? It's dead against the rules he made himself. Nobody isn't supposed to be onto this here place.«

»Sam's in trouble,« said Minnie. »He has been captured by the Prince of the Ranch.

»You don't mean it.«

»Unfortunately I do mean it. There was a fight on the South range, and that conceited jackass won out. It's a bad job for Sam, Flynn.«

»Well, well, well!« exclaimed the corporal, »and were you with Sam at the time?«

»Sure I was. They captured me, too. I was locked in a room at the South ranch and left with Dick Rudd to guard me, but I managed to get out by the window and make my escape. They have taken Sam to Abilene, and I want to get up there as quick as ever I can and see about engaging a lawyer to defend him, but he made me promise to come here first and have a talk with you.«

»Well, well, well!« repeated the corporal. »Here I am to be talked to, Minnie. What is it you have to say?«

»Sam told me to say that he had your letter, and he wants to know what it means.«

It was a hold stroke in Don's interest.

Of course, Minnie had no means of knowing whether or no Cyclone Sam and the corporal had met since the letter was written, and she waited breathlessly for the reply.

Corporal Flynn's first words showed her that she was safe.

»So he got the letter, did he? been wondering. You see, I've been tied here, and I hain't seen Sam in three days. What's he been about all this time?«

»Why, then, you don't know that he burned McIntyre's!«

»Burned it! Oh, the fool! If I could only have seen him and headed him off.«

»Yes, it's burned, all right. Everything destroyed. That's why Don was gunning for him. But about that letter, corporal. I don't want to lose time here.«

»Waal, I dunno as I care to explain about that letter to anyone but Sam.,« drawled the corporal, »and if he is in trouble I dunno as it will even pay me to tell him.«

»You will have to suit yourself about that. If you have nothing to tell me, then I had better be going.«

»Hold on, Minnie. I dunno as I ought to let you go.' The fact is, to have you suddenly pop in-on me here has been a dead surprise. I dunno just what I ought to do.«

»If you attempt to interfere with me you will have to answer for it to Sam and the rest of the boys, that's all,« replied Minnie, with calm assurance, while at the same time her fears were rapidly getting the upperhand.

»Waal, that's so, I s'pose,« rejoined the corporal. »Have you any hope of getting Sam turned loose? f 9' pose you have good a fiends in Abilene?«

»Why, of course I have, Flynn. There isn't any doubt but what I shall be able to get him free. Don has no proof.«

»Waal, I s'pose I may as well send him a message,« drawled the corporal; »but say, Minnie, I heard that Don McIntyre was paying attention to you.«

»Nonsense, Flynn! What would he be doing with a poor girl like me? Don't you know he is heir to millions?«

»I don't know whether he is or not,« growled the corporal.

»Come, you are wasting a hale lot of time. Are you going to give me that message for Sam or not?«

»Waal,« said the corporal, »you-kin tell him that Colonel McIntyre croaked a week ago. Tell him that Don is now a prize worth working, and that I propose to work him for all he is worth. Tell him that since he hag failed to capture the young prince, I shall have to do it for him, and you can tell him

that the first thing I'LL do will be to get Don to set him free and then we will squeeze the prince together till we have squeeze a round hundred thousand out of him, so that's my message to Sam.«

»And is that all?« demanded Minnie, as cool as ever.

»That's all.«

»Then I'll be going.«

»Hold on a minute.«

»What for?«

»Who is with Sam besides the prince?«

»Ned Butts, Charley Brown and a few of the prince's men.«

»And after the fight which way did Sam's men go?«

»Can't say. I don't know. Come, corporal. I must be going. It's a long way to Abilene, and there's no time to lose.«

»But how do you propose to go?«

»I shall get back on the South range, capture a horse and ride bareback, as I have done many a time.«

»If it was anybody but you, Minnie, I should laugh, but you are not like other gals. Hang me, if I don't believe you will make a success of it. Waal, I s'pose I shall have to let you go. Kinder hate to, though.«

»The best of friends must part, corporal. Goodnight.«

»Goodnight,« replied the corporal, good luck to you.«

Minnie turned and walked to the boat.

»You want to be a little bit careful about telling anybody you met me here!« called the corporal. »There's going to be a bag of trouble coming your way #f you do.«

»I know my business,« replied Minnie.

She untied the boat, stepped into it and pushed off, pulling a strong oar upstream.

The last she saw of Corporal Flynn he was still standing there under the bluff watching her.

But no sooner had she passed out of sight than he turned and hurried back to the bluff, where he vanished.

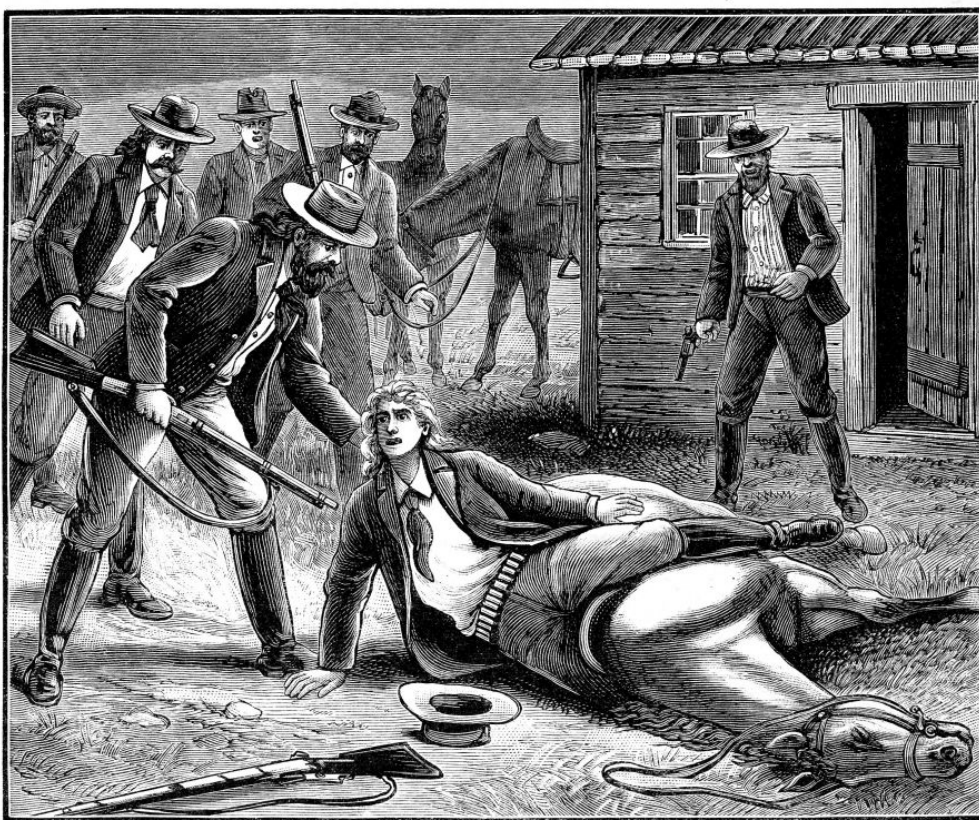
A moment later he reappeared leading a horse.

Mounting at a point where the narrow bank grew wider, he rode on until he came to the barranca, or break in the bluff.

Guiding the horse into the opening, he disappeared.

CHAPTER XIV.

DON GOES INTO PARTNERSHIP WITH CYCLONE SAM.



»Come! Stand on your feet, Don McIntyre. I've got you now!« Cyclone Sam was the speaker. The outlaw leader was among those who had gathered around Don, pulling the dead horse off from his leg. Sam seized his hand and helped him to rise.

Don was in despair.

Still there was nothing to be done but to put on a bold front and take matters as he found them.

»You seem to have won this hand, Sam Morrow,« he calmly said; »but the game isn't over yet by any means.«

»That's right,« chuckled. Sam. »Of course it isn't over. It has only just begun. Pull him into the hut, boys, and leave me alone with him a few minutes. The prince and me have got a little talk to make.«

As Don was led away he saw Charley Brown standing with some of the men talking with them familiarly.

»I'll bet it is all a lie!« thought Don. »I don't believe my father is dead at all. It was just a trick of Charley Brown's to draw me into this trap.«

Alone in the hut with Sam, the lamp lighted, and Don disarmed, the situation seemed gloomy enough.

Cyclone Sam's first act was to light a pipe and stretch his long legs out before the stove, in which some smoky lumps of Kansas soft coal were smouldering.

A rifle obtained from some of his followers lay across his lap and a revolver was stuck in his belt. Evidently he had been supplied with at least one drink of whisky by his friends and probably more. Cyclone Sam was himself again.

»Now, Don McIntyre,« he began, »you and me have got to come to terms, do you realize that?«

»I realize that you have got the best of me for the time being,« replied Don; »so state your terms at once.«

»I dunno whether I will or not. You have been told that your father is dead. Dunno whether you believe it or not.«

»I tell you right now, I don't believe it.

»So I supposed. All the same it's true.

»We won't discuss that.«

»Begging your pardon, young feller, that's the very thing we are going to discuss. Oh, come, now, you may just as well understand first as last that you can't put on any lugs with me.«

»You are simply wasting your time, Morrow,« said Don, coldly. »Get to the point.«

»Who's your father's heir with you out of the way?«

»That depends upon who he names in his will.«

»Don't you know?«

»I don't don't.«

»What if I did? What if I had been hired by said heir to clear the way for him?«

»That would mean that you intend to murder me, I suppose.«

»You are beginning to open your eyes. How much will it be worth to you if I come over on your side and let you live?«

Don was amazed.

Strange as it may seem, so far as he knew, he had no relatives on his father's side, and none, save a few distant cousins, on his mother's; and yet Sam's strange talk did not seem wholly without reason, for, as we have mentioned before, his father on several occasions during their quarrels had said that Don, if he didn't look sharp, might wake up some fine morning and find that there was nothing coming to him.

»I shall have to think about all this,« Don said. »I'm in the dark as it is.«

»Very good,« replied the outlaw, »and while you are thinking about it you had better make up your mind to part with a couple of hundred thousand of your father's wealth. I'll take it out in land and cattle. This is no joke, Don McIntyre, as you are soon to learn.«

Don was silent.

The proposition seemed so preposterous that he did not know what to say.

»Now, I see you don't feel like talking and making offhand promises,« continued Sam, »so I shan't force your hand. The thing has been sprung onto you sudden-like. I appreciate that, so we'll shift off to other business. You think I burned your ranch a-purpose, I s'pose?«

»I had that idea, yes.«

»Of course you had. Well, you can just put it out of your head, for you are mistaken. It was an accident. I was looking for the money you have got hid and I dropped a piece of lighted candle under the floor, which I pulled up in my search. Thought the blame thing was out, so I tackled the barn, but it must have blazed up afterward and it did the business as you saw.

»Which makes it none the better for me.

»Exactly; I didn't get the money, Don.«

»I am aware of that.«

»And I want it.«

»You'll have to want then.«

»Don't say that, because it means lots of trouble for you. To carry out this business of yours I shall need ready cash, for I shall probably have to go to St. Louis before I'm through. The money you've got hid at McIntyre's will just fill the bill, so I want it, Don.«

»Upon my word, you're a cool one!« cried Don. »You talk about robbing me of two hundred thousand dollars and you calmly ask me to supply the funds to carry out your schemes.«

»It's all for your own good, young feller. The other plan won't leave you nothing, not even your life; say, you don't seem to catch on to that.«

Don arose and paced the floor.

He was groping in the dark and terribly puzzled to know what he ought to do.

»You'll have to give me time to think of all this,« he said.

»And you shall have it,« replied Sam. »And while you are doing your thinking we will ride back to McIntyre's, for you've just got to get that money for me, Don.«

Don, following his policy of silence, made no reply.

»If I can only fool him I may find a chance to escape,« he thought. »He doesn't know very much, anyhow, and I think I can.«

Apparently, Sam had also made up his mind to quit talking, for he said no more.

Opening the door, he shouted for someone to come, and a cowboy, whom Don did not know, appeared.

»Stand by and guard this boy!« ordered Sam, handing the man his rifle. »Look sharp, now. He must not be allowed to escape.«

»He'll never escape me, Sam,« replied the cowboy, with a grin. »I propose to shoot him if he turns a hair.«

»There's to be no shooting,« said Sam, decidedly. »That's my business. Knock him silly with the butt of your rifle if he makes trouble. Leave the rest to me.«

But Don was not posed, to make trouble just then.

He quietly waited, listening to the sounds outside, which told him that the horses were being made ready.

Inside of ten minutes Sam reappeared and Don was led out tied to the saddle on his own horse, and the run over the prairie began.

There were fifteen cowboys in the party without including Sam and Charley Brown, who was not held as a prisoner.

Morning found them almost at the burned ranch, where they arrived at half-past six o'clock.

The place was deserted, and as the corral had been destroyed, it was necessary to hobble the horses.

Don was now set free, two cowboys standing guard over them, Cyclone Sam coming up just as his bonds were cut.

»Well, McIntyre, have you made up your mind?« he demanded.

»Yes, I have,« replied Don. »Do you want me to speak right out, or will you walk with me over towards the barn? I shan't try to escape.«

»Come on,« replied Sam. »Mind, now, if you do try I shall shoot you. When I told that feller not to do it up at Injun Jim's it was because I wanted to reserve that pleasure for myself.«

»You won't do it just yet, Morrow,« said Don, with a smile. »At least not until you have made up your mind whether I'm worth more to you dead than alive.«

As they walked together toward the barn Don continued:

»Now about that business. Until you tell me the whole story I don't see how I can make any promises.«

»But you'll have to,« broke in Sam.

»Hold on a minute. Hear me out. What I propose is this. Of course, I'm out for my father's property first, last and all the time. If you know that there is danger of my not getting it, and if you can do away with that danger, why, of course, it's up to me-to stand in with you, and I'll agree to pay you most liberally, but is it necessary to dwell with your gang?«

»I don't know exactly what you mean,« replied Sam.

»Just this,« said Don, »Cut loose from these fellows. Let's you and I stand in together. I'll begin by turning the three thousand-and-odd dollars which I have hidden here into your hands, but there's no use in whacking up with the rest.«

»I don't know but what I'll agree to that,« said Sam. »I'm not anxious to do much dividing, but how can it be worked?«

»Who knows about the money?«

»All hands.«

»Charley Brown is in with the rest?«

»Why, sure he is,« chuckled Sam. »It was he that told us you had the money hid.«

Then you and I must fix up to shake the gang. I'm willing to give you money, Sam. Are you ready to quit these fellows and go off alone with me?«

»I don't know but what I will,« Sam, after a little thought. »In order to carry out my plan I've got to go to St. Louis, and I ought to have you along.«

»Come over on my side and stay there,« urged Don. »I'm my father's son, and my chance to win is the best, for if the governor has made a freak will I stand at least a fair chance of being able to break it. Come, is it a go?«

»But what's your scheme? It won't be so easy to give these fellows the shake.«

»It will if you do as I say.

»Well say it.«

»You know the hollow just beyond the barn?«

»Sure.«

»Order the horses there. After we get the money we can reach that spot without being seen.«

»But how?«

»That's my secret. Come, shake hands on it, Sam. Let's be partners and friends.«

»Well, all right,« replied Sam, extending his hand, which Don grasped with well assumed warmth. »It's a go, Don MciIntyre. Now when do I get the cash?«

»We'll get it while they are eating breakfast,« said Don. »Then we will make for the horses and be off.«

It was a bold bluff which Don was trying.

Question was, would it succeed?

CHAPTER XV.

HOW MINNIE FOOLED CORPORAL FLYNN.

Minnie Morrow, as has already been seen, was a very decided character in her way and equal to any emergency.

And this she was soon to have an opportunity to prove.

Corporal Flynn was also a character in his way.

In spite of the rough life he had led, he came of a family which held some position in St. Louis, and the corporal had received a fair education in his youth. He was a born schemer and a thorough scoundrel into the bargain.

Minnie had not done with him yet by any means, and this also the plucky girl was soon to learn.

Under the bluff in a rude cave hollowed out in the clayey soil was the holdout of Cyclone Sam's gang, as Minnie had once been told by her cousin himself.

In Don's interest she had taken big chances in going there alone; as it happened the corporal was the only occupant that night, having but just come in.

But for the fact that he did not care to divulge the secret of the cave, Minnie would not have got off so easily. As it was, the corporal was now on her trail prepared to make trouble, and Minnie had no more than turned the boat into the creek than he came dashing up along the bank.

»You want to hold on there a minute, Minnie!« he called out. »I've got some thing more to say!«

His hand was on his rifle as he spoke, and his tone was threatening.

There is no denying that Minnie was terribly frightened.

She pulled in her oars and answered:

»Why, what do you want, corporal? I thought that you and I had got to the end of our talk.«

»Not much,« was the 'reply. »We've only just begun. You needn't take that boat any further, Min. You may come ashore.«

»Since when were you my master?« cried Minnie, proudly. »I don't know why I should take orders from you.«

»But I do,« retorted the outlaw.

»Why?«

»Because it will pay you best.«

»I don't see how.«

»Then I'll tell you. I've no more notion of letting you marry Sam than I have of flying. You are going to marry me, and I'm going to make you a lady. I'm not a rich man just at the present moment, Min, but I'm going to be, and I want you to share my wealth with me. Come, Min, what do you say?«

It was a case which demanded rapid thinking, and Minnie thought fast.

»Suppose I say no,« she asked, »what will happen then?«

»Then I'm sorry to say. I shall have to shoot you,« returned the corporal, raising his rifle.

»You would do that?«

»I would, Min. Now, hear me. I'm dead in love with you, and though I never got the chance to tell it, I've been so for the last two years. When you came to me tonight and told me that Sam had been jailed you told me the sweetest thing I ever heard. Do you suppose I'm going to let you help him out of his fix? Not on your life. Sam thinks he knows a secret about Don McIntyre which he can trade for money—well, I know it, too, and all that I told you to

tell him I've told him already. It amounts to nothing. I alone know the whole secret and how to trade on it, and you shall share it with me, Minnie, if you will consent to become my wife. I shall never ask you twice. It must be yes or no right now. If it's yes, we can as easy make two hundred thousand dollars out of the Prince of the Ranch as we can make one, and then we'll quit this beastly country and go and live in St. Louis. If it's no, I'm going to kill you right now.«

There was no doubt that Corporal Flynn was in dead earnest.

Even in the moonlight Minnie could see both love and jealousy shining from his wicked little eyes.

She was in the greatest peril, and she knew it, and her action spoke as well for her good judgment as for her courage.

»And is that all you've got to Flynn?« she calmly replied.

»That's all. Come, I'm waiting, Min.«

»Well, then, my answer is yes. If you had asked me before you would have got the same.«

»What! Then you have loved me all along, Min?«

»Haven't I said enough? A girl don't like to be pressed too hard.«

»Good!« cried the corporal. »This is great,. I might have known that you were the right sort. Come ashore, Minnie; you can get on the horse with me. We'll ride up to your ranch, get another horse and make straight for Abilene. And now I'll tell you a secret. If we work our cards right there may be even more money in this business than I said.«

»But why not let me pull back to the ranch on the South range, Fred?« said Minnie. »I don't care much for this riding double. We can capture a horse there.«

»I s'pose we could.«

»Sure we could. The boys are all out on the range. There's nobody there but Dick Rudd. You ride right along with me, Fred.«

Minnie threw as much sweetness as possible into her tone.

Corporal Flynn was completely deceived.

And then Minnie's real trial began, for as she pulled along up the creek she had to listen to words of love from this man whom she abhorred and despised.

They soon reached the landing, and the corporal, hitching his horse to a cottonwood tree, helped Minnie pull up the boat.

»We won't waste a minute, Fred,« said Minnie. »The horses are in the corral behind the ranch, 'Let's get right up there. Have you a pair of nippers? Can you cut the wire?«

»Sure, sure!« said the corporal.

We had better keep clear of the front. Dick Rudd may be on the watch.«

»You think of everything.«

»Better leave your horse as he is, Fred. We can lead the other back here.«

»Of course. Come on!«

He threw his arm around Minnie and kissed her.

It was all the girl could do to keep from scratching his face, but she turned it off with a laugh and they proceeded to the corral.

The fence was a high one and the wires were close set.

»I'll hold the rifle, Fred, while you do the cutting,« said Minnie.

Any suspicion Corporal Flynn might have had at the start had vanished long ago, and he handed over the rifle without a word.

Instantly Minnie leveled it at his head.

»Now, sir!« she cried, »the tables are turned! Forward march! Straight for the ranch, or I'll blow your brains out! Oh, don't say a word! I'd as soon shoot you as I would a sick coyote, and a good sight sooner than I would a respectable dog! «

It would be useless to record the sayings of Corporal Flynn.

Enough to state that they were exceedingly lurid and picturesque.

But Minnie had him dead to rights, for, as it happened, the man did not own a revolver.

So the bold corporal did the quickstep sound to the front of the ranch.

»Dick! Dick Rudd!« shouted Minnie. »I've captured the meanest skunk on the ranch! Come out and help me land him!«

Then, instead of Dick, out rushed Ned Butts and several men!

»Corporal Flynn!« cried Ned. »Thank heaven, you have got one of those scoundrels! We have lost our game, Minnie! Sam's men stole a march on us and have captured the Prince of the Ranch!«

CHAPTER XVI.

DON'S LUCKY ESCAPE.

While Minnie was standing up against other dubs and fooling Corporal Flynn, Don was beginning to have strong hopes that he should be able to fool Cyclone Sam and make his escape, for Sam was anything but a brilliant proposition, and Don had touched him in the weakest spot—his greed for money, for which the crooked cowboy would have cheerfully sold his soul.

They returned to the gang, who had built a fire and Sam ordered the horses moved, as Don had suggested.

Breakfast was then prepared, and the cowboys all sat down to eat, except Sam himself.

Charley Brown kept clear of Don.

He seemed to have grown weary of the true friend's racket, and Don did not fail to observe that he was thick enough with some of the worst members of the gang.

»You fellers go on and eat,« Sam called out when all was ready. »I've got a little more talking to do with the prince of this nere ranch, and I propose to do it now.«

Of course, no one offered any objection, and they walked off together.

Now then, Don, it's up to you,« said Sam as soon as they were out of hearing.

»And I'm ready,« replied Don. »The money is buried in the cyclone cellar.«

»Good! Ill go to the barn and get a shovel so we can dig it up.«

»There's no need. It's only down six or eight inches. I can serape the dirt away with my foot.«

He led the way to the cellar and raised the lid.

»Slide down before they catch on to us,« he said.

Sam slipped down the ladder, and Don instantly followed; as he did so he managed to drop the lid, and there they were in the dark.

»Confound it!« he cried. »The blamed thing was a little too heavy for me.«

»Push her up!« said Sam. »We have got to have light to see what we are doing.«

»Just what I'm trying to do, but I can't seem to make it.«

»Why not?«

»I'll never tell you. It seems to be stuck some way.«

»Come down here and let me try it.«

»All right. You've got more muscle than I have.«

Don had gained his point, but the risk was all to come.

The instant Sam put his foot on the ladder Don backed up against the wall of the cellar, which was boarded up on all sides.

Don was on the side toward the barn.

Here lay the secret passage, of course, and Don knew that he had only to press a hidden spring to cause the door to fly open noiselessly behind him.

He did the vanishing act beautifully, and without a sound.

»If he knows the secret of that door I'm a goner!« he thought as he ran along the nderground way.

Meanwhile Sam had opened the trap dor without the least difficulty.

»There's nothing the matter here?« he called out.

No answer.

»Don?«

Still no answer.

The came the discovery.

»What the deuce! Where in thunder has the fellow gone to?«

Don had won out for the moment.

Sam Knew nothing of the secret passage.

He stood looking down into the cyclone cellar, his dull brain completely mystified.

»He's doubled on me—gosh blame him! There some secret way out!« he roared.

He wasted no time looking for it, but bounded up the ladder.

There was no Don to be seen anywhere.

Charley Brown!« yelled Sam.

By this time Don had climbed up into the the barn, making his escape at the other end, where the boards had been burned away.

Talk of running for one's life! Don fairly flew!

The wreck of the barn shielded him from observation, and in a minute he had gained the hollow where the horses were hobbled.

Fortunately his pocket-knife had not been taken from him, and he cut the cords on his own horse, springing into the saddle as quick as a flash.

»Hold on there! Stop, or you're a dead one!«

Don was discovered, but he was als. out of the hollow, and dashing off over the prairie at full speed.

He looked back and saw Sam and the gang making for the hollow.

Up went the rifles then, and three shots came flying his way.

All fell short—Den was already out of range.

On he flew!

»Go it, Barney! Good horse!« he cried. »Show them your heels and I'll never forget you!«

Barney knew his business.

He was no broncho like the others in the hollow, but, as we have mentioned before, a horse of pure Arabian blood, which Don had purchased in St. Louis, and brought out with him to the ranch.

»I don't believe there's a horse in the whole bunch that can touch us!« thought Don. »If I can only gain the river I am safe.«

He referred to the Smoky, which is a stream of many windings, and Jay but three miles away.

All along its bank are many barrancas or deep gullies made by the rush of water to the river basin after the 'melting of the winter's snow.

This part of the Smoky flows through a deep channel far below the level of the prairie, the bluffs in some places being as much as forty feet high, with quite a broad stretch of bottom land at their foot.

At no other point for miles and miles could Don hope to put himself out of sight of his pursuers until the distance became too great for them to see.

On he dashed, occasionally throwing a glance behind him.

The gang were in full pursuit, but steadily losing ground, Don thought.

Being far out of range now he felt safe, for it was impossible for them to head him off at the river, as he himself was striking for the nearest point.

»Tf I can once get to the south ranch and join Minnie I believe I'll strike for Abilene and stop there till I find out how the case stands with my father,« Don »said to himself. »What I shall ever do with that unfortunate boy if he is not able to ride I'm sure I don't know.«

Don had now reached the beginning of one of the barrancas, and turning his horse into it he rode rapidly down between the crumbling earth walls to the bottom lands.

The Smoky was rather high at the time, and the water went rushing along at pretty good speed.

Don hesitated for a moment, and then turned to the left.

»It's six of one and half a dozen of the other,« he thought. »Of course they will know that I'm not coming out where I went in. They'll strike either up \or down to head me off. I can only take chances. If it's down they are going my capture is sure.«

Don was thinking fast.

He allowed Cyclone Sam and his gang ten minutes to gain the next barranca, which he was sure he could make in five.

He listened intently as he passed the mouth of the barranca, but the rush of the water drowned all other sounds.

»I'll strike up the next or the next but one if I don't see anything of them,« he thought.

It was eleven minutes when he reached the next barranca.

Looking back, he could see nothing of his pursuers.

Six minutes more would bring him to the next, and he determined to risk it.

Hope was now rising, for he knew that the distance to the next barranca to the one through which he had descended on the north was much greater than to the next on the south, and he had strong hopes that the enemy had gone that way.

Reaching the third barranca Don turned his horse into it and rode up the prairie.

Here the plain was broken by cradles which prevented him from looking back very far, but to his great joy none of the enemy was to be seen.

»They went the other way, thank heaven,« thought Don. »For the present, at all events, I am safe.«

He now slackened speed, giving his horse a chance to get his wind.

It was not more than ten miles to the south ranch, and Don knew that there were at least twenty cowboys on the range who were faithful to him.

Up over the little hill he rode, and down into the next cradle.

As he ascended the next hill he was suddenly startled by seeing a man mounted upon a broncho riding up on the other side.

The man instantly drew rein, yelling:

»Hold on! Don't shoot! I surrender! You won't get nothing out of me!«

Probably. his jerk on the rein had been a little too sudden to suit the broncho, for the perverse creature bucked, sending his rider flying over his head.

CHAPTER XVII.

MINNIE TAKES A FRESH START.

Minnie was saved, and saved by her own shrewdness, the brave girl was not done yet, by any means.

Out on the Kansas prairies the ranch owners are to a certain extent a law unto themselves, and the honest cowboys make short work of those who interfere with women.

»All this Corporal Flynn knew well enough, and he realized that Minnie had only to say the word to bring death his way.

Naturally a coward, the fellow was so overcome with fear that his condition was apparent to all.

»What's the row, Minnie? What has he been up to?« demanded Ned Butts, while two stern cowboys stood guarding the bold corporal. »Out with it, girl. This mean skunk is one of the gang. If you say the word -we'll shoot him where he stands.«

»And perhaps I will say the word, Ned,« replied Minnie. »He threatened to shoot me if I refused to marry him, and then he popped the question. Of course, I said yes to save my life, but it is a woman's privilege to change her mind, and now I say no.«

And well you may, Minnie. There's no meaner skunk in the State of Kansas than Corporal Flynn.«

»That's all right for you, Ned Butts,« growled the prisoner. »Of course everything she says goes, and what I say don't, but—«

»Don't you dare to say that Minnie lies, because if you do I'll shoot you anyhow,« broke in Ned, surveying the prisoner with an air of disgust.

»He's the biggest liar in all creation himself,« put in Dick Rudd, who had now joined the rest.

»How is that boy, Dick?« asked Minnie, forgetting her own troubles in her anxiety for poor Al.

»He's sound asleep, and has been for hours,« replied Dick. »Say, Minnie, you scared me to death when I found you was gone. Did he sneak in and carry you off? 'Cause if he did -«

»But he didn't, Dick. I went to him myself.«

»There you are,« sneered the corporal.

»Shut your head!« roared Ned Butts. »Don't you dare!«

And he emphasized his command by giving the corporal a rap alongside the head with the barrel of his rifle.

»Ned, we want to get through with this as quick as we can,« said Minnie. »You and Dick Rudd come into the house with me and I'll tell you all about it. We have serious business on hand if we are to look out for Don's interests, and I know that's what you both want to do.«

»You bet we do,« replied Ned, »and we haven't no time to lose either. I knowed blamed well. that Cyclone Sam wouldn't stop long at Injun Jim's, so I thought after we got licked in that fight that the best thing we could do was to come straight down here and pick up a force big enough to do business. We have got to go right on the hunt for him, Minnie. I wouldn't have any serious harm come to the boss for all the world. Mebbe you don't know that the report is his father is dead.«

»I know,« said Minnie, »and that man there knows more than I do. Come, boys! We will talk inside.«

»All right,« replied Ned, »and you fellers look sharp that he don't give you the slip. Flynn is right foxy. Don't you give him no show.«

Once inside the ranch there was a general comparison of notes.

Minnie learned all about the capture, and Ned and Dick heard all she had to tell.

»The scoundrel! To think of him stealing Don's letters,« cried Ned. »Minnie, you're a plucky one, I vow. Now, then, what is it you propose to do?«

»Make him confess the whole business,« replied Minnie, promptly. »Then we shall know how to act, but as it is now we are working in the dark.«

»She's right,« added Dick. »He'll tell, too. Corporal Flynn is a rank coward-always was.«

»I'll fix him,« said Ned. »Just you keep your mouth shut, Minnie, and don't you say if we let him think that we are after his confession he won't give us half of it. I'll fix him so he'll give it all to us of his own accord.«

»I leave it to you,« said Minnie. »Just open that door, Dick, and look in on that poor boy again. Don took such an interest in him. He must not be neglected now.«

Dick did so, and reported Al still in the same deep sleep.

»He had a terrible shaking up,« he said. »It's no joke for a feller like that to take the ride he did, but all the same it may do him lots of good.«

They went outside then, and Ned Butts proceeded to tackle Corporal Flynn.

»Fred Flynn, we have made up our minds to rid the McIntyre ranch of you once and for all,« he said grimly. »Shooting is too easy a death for such carrion, and so we are going to hang you. If you have got any prayers to say you had better say them now, for we are going to take you right down to the creek and hang you off a cottonwood limb.«

Corporal Flynn's face turned as white as a corpse.

»You wouldn't do that, Ned Piet he said, in a hollow voice.

»Wouldn't we?« replied Ned. »Well, we just would then. All this stuff you have been giving Minnie about Colonel McIntyre being dead is mere guff. What you don't know would fill a book, and what you do know don't amount to a hill of beans.«

»There's. where you are mistaken, Ned. Say, spare my life and I'll put you wise on this business.«

»Rats!« said Ned, contemptuously. »Away with him, boys! Fetch a rope, Dick. We want to make a quick job of it; for we have got other work to do.«

»Stop!« cried Flynn. »I'll prove that I know something if you will promise to let up on me.«

»You can't prove it.«

»Yes, I can.«

»What do you say, Minnie?« demanded Ned.

»Well, if he really does know anything of any value,« said Minnie doubtfully.

»Produce your proof, and we'll see,« added Ned.

With trembling hands Corporal Flynn took a bunch of letters from the inside pocket of his coat, and selecting one, handed it to Ned.

»We want all!« cried Ned, snatching the package of letters away.

»Give them to me, Ned. I'll look them he and see how the case stands,« Minnie said.

She walked back inside the ranch and Was gone ten minutes.

»You can let him live,« she then said. »He must be held a close prisoner, ready for the sheriff when we can get him out here. We have no time to muss with him now.«

It was with a huge sigh of relief that Corporal Flynn was led away by the cowboys, and turned over to the tender mercies of Dick Rudd, whose boast was that no prisoner had ever escaped from his hands.

»Are those papers important to Don, Minnie?« Ned Butts asked.

»Very much so,« replied Minnie. »They are of such importance that we must find him at once if he is to be found. How many men can we raise?«:

»Well, by skinning the south range nearly dry we can get thirty.«

»Good! Then we had better be off at once.«

»But what about them papers?« demanded Ned curiously.

»Now, really, Ned, they don't concern anybody but Don McIntyre, and I don't know as I ought to say a word about them,« replied Minnie. »No doubt he will tell you all there is to be told.«

»You're right, Minnie, you're right,« assented Ned, with his usual cheerfulness. »Now we'll hustle and see what can be done for Don.«

And Ned pushed matters so rapidly that in less than an hour he had his thirty men collected, and he and Minnie, with a strongly armed band at their back, started out in: search of Don.

»And now,« said Ned, »the question is where to look for him. It's almost like looking for q needle in a haystack. Pm blest if I know what to do.«

»Then let's head straight for McIntyre' Se replied Minnie. »I have a stray idea that we shall find him there.«

Minnie was thinking of the buried money.

»They will take him to the ranch to make him look for it,« he said to himself, »and Don will never tell where it is, so they might hang around there for a couple of days trying to make him.«

It was a happy thought on Minnie's part, for their shortest route to McIntyre's would take them past the barrancas of the Smoky river, where we left the prince of the ranch.

CHAPTER XVIII.

DON MAKES THE ACQUAINTANCE OF MR. JED JUDD.

The bucking broncho, having sent his rider sprawling on the prairie, instead of running away began quietly cropping the grass, while Don hastily dismounting, went to the stranger's relief.

»Are you hurt, sir?« he inquired. »You needn't be afraid of me. I'm no hold-up man, as you seemed to think I was.«

»Oh! Ah! Is that so? Well, really, I'm very glad to hear it! I think my neck is broken; if it isn't my neck it must be my leg or my arm. I'm sure something must be broken!« sputtered the man.

He appeared to be a nervous little proposition, and strictly of the »tenderfoot« order.

That his home was not within many hundred miles of McIntyre's it was easy to see.

»Where—where are my glasses?« he gasped, as he peered about the grass. »Really I can see nothing without them. If I don't find them I don't know what I shall do,«

»They lie right there at your feet. If you don't look out you will step on them,« said Don, anxious to be through with the fellow and get on his way.

»Oh! Ah! Yes! Just so! Now I have them. Dear me! That horse is terrible! This makes the third time he has thrown me over his head since I left Baggtown. Really, I don't know what I shall do.«

»He's bucker«; said Don.

»Beg pardon! A bucket? I don't know what you mean?«

»I said a bucker.«

»Oh ah, yes! daresay! He is a wretched fraud of a horse, at all events. I suppose I shall have to mount him again.

»Don't pull him in so short next time. Now, look here, mister, when you take hold of a horse's bridle take hold with a strong hand, as though you mean business. When you act as though you were afraid of him there is going to be trouble every time. «

»I—I—really! I'm not used to this sort of thing,« groaned the stranger, making desperate efforts to mount.

He succeeded in getting his leg over the saddle, and just as he did so the broncho started on the run.

»Help! Save me! Stop him!« bawled the little man, clinging desperately to bridle and mane.

Don fell to laughing so that he could scarcely stop.

Away went the broncho with what no doubt seemed to his rider the speed of the wind, but Don easily overtook him, for the horse had taken the direction of the south ranch.

By the time he came up the little man had him under control, and had managed to gain a proper position in the saddle.

»Oh, ah, I say! This is really very uncomfortable! « he panted, »and the worst of it is, young man, I haven't the most remote idea where I am going; but perhaps you can put me right.«

»Perhaps I can if you will tell me who you are and what you are after,« replied Don.

»Yes, certainly! My name is Judd-Jedediah Judd. I'm a lawyer. I belong in St. Louis. I have just ridden over from Baggtown to find—that is, to see—I-er-say, I beg your pardon. You don't look like an outlaw, but are you one, now?«

Don laughed.

»If being an outlaw is to have your hand against every man, and every man's hand against you, that's about what I am at the present time,« he replied.

It was a lucky answer, as it turned out, although why Don should have said it he hardly knew.

»Oh, indeed!« cried Mr. Judd. »Then perhaps you are the very man I am looking for. Can it be that you are Samuel Morrow, otherwise known as Cyclone Sam?«

»This man is half a fool,« thought Don, »but what in the world. does he want of Sam? I'd like to bet it's something about this crooked business of my father's.«

»Why, I have just left Cyclone Sam,« he replied. »If you have any business with him you will have to do it through me. He's very shy of strangers.«

»Then you are one of his band?«

»I am his right-hand man.'

»You will take me to him?«

»Perhaps. That depends. You must tell me your business before I can make any promises.«

»Oh, ah, yes! Just so! know 'whether I can or not.«

»Then you will never see Sam Morrow.«

»Oh, but I must see him. I have ridden all the way from Baggtown. I -«

»Cut it short, Mr. Judd. You'll have to do any business you may have with Sam through me. I think I can guess what it is. About Don McIntyre, is it not?«

»It-is. Ah, I see you must be in his confidence. Well, I think I shall have to tell you, for the fact is, 'm lost, and I have got to do the best I can or I shall perish on this horrible prairie. Mr. Ringler is at Baggtown. He is waiting for Morrow, and he sent me out to say that he is prepared to do business right now.«

»Oh, he's dead??« replied Don, coolly. »Sam was very doubtful whether he really meant business. He wasn't sure that Colonel McIntyre is really dead.«

»Oh, he's dead!« cried Judd. »How could he doubt that when Mr. Ringler's letter was so explicit? He was found dead in his bed three weeks ago.«

»If you say so that is enough,« said Don controlling himself the best he could. »Has Mr. Ringler a copy of his will?«

»Well, he has. What has been done about the McIntyre boy? Morrow was to capture him and hold him a prisoner.«

»He has done go.«

»Good! Then we ought to be able to do business. I suppose Sam is aware that another party has been trying to get in ahead of him.-One Flynn.«

»Ah! Corporal Flynn.«

»Yes. He wrote to Mr. Ringler and offered to capture Don McIntyre. He seems to have got hold of the facts of the case, somehow.«

»Indeed! Of course, Mr. Ringler did not answer him?«

»Oh, he answered his letter, but he did not commit himself. He prefers to do business with Morrow, who has-been recommended to him. as the right man. Dear me! I hope I'm not making any mistake in talking with you, young man?«

»You certainly are not, and you shall see Cyclone Sam soon, and he will tell you so himself,« replied Don.

Excited at first, Don had now become perfectly cool.

»What rascality is this?« he asked him self. »If I could make this fellow talk out. I'll run him to the south ranch, take one of the boys into my confidence, and introduce him as Cyclone Sam.«

»You will follow me,« he said aloud. »I will take you to Sam.«

»Oh, ah! Thank you«, was the reply. »Really, I shall be delighted. I am almost dead with this horrible ride, but I shall have to go directly back to Baggtown. Do you suppose Morrow will be ready to go with me?«

»Certainly. We will all go together. But while we are talking about this business I would like to ask you just how Colonel McIntyre's will reads?«

»Ah,- that t cannot tell you,« Judd, warily. »That is Mr. Ringler's business. I am only his clerk.«

Don said no more.

He saw that the man's clothing was old and shabby. He looked the half-starved lawyer's clerk right down to the ground.

They rode on, Don turning the conversation to other matters.

Again and again he looked behind him, but could see nothing of the outlaw band.

But he soon saw something ahead which told him that if he intended to carry out his plan he would have to act quick.

It was Minnie and Ned Butts at the head of their band of cowboys, riding toward them over the prairie.

»There they come!« cried Don.

»Cyclone Sam!« exclaimed Mr. Judd.

»Yes. I'll ride ahead and let him know who you are. It will be the best way.«

Clapping his heels to his horse's flanks, Don dashed forward.

Minnie saw him coming all set up a shout.

»Why, Don! This is a surprise!« cried Minnie, as he came-dashing up. »Where on earth did you drop from? We were just starting out to look you up.«

»Well, I'm all here,« laughed Don. »I suppose Ned reported my capture.«

»Yes, and I hope you don't blame me for deserting you, boss,« said Ned.

»Not at all. You couldn't stand up against such a fire as that. But listen, Ned, I've got something for you to do right now.«

»Anything that I can do, boss.«

»Who's your friend, Don?« broke in Minnie. »Oh, aon got so much to tell you.

»And so have I to tell you, Minnie. Just a minute! You mustn't call me by my name. Pass the word to the boys, please. Ned, I shall introduce you to that man as Cyclone- Sam, and I want you to try your best to act the part.«

»The deuce you do!« cried Ned. »I'd rather take a blame good licking. It don't set well on-my stomach to personate such a mean skunk as Sam Morrow, and that's what.«

»But what does it mean, Don?« demanded Minnie. »Who is that man?«

»A lawyer's clerk from St. Louis, Minnie. My father is dead. There seems to be some plot hatched up against me to prevent me from coming into my own, and I want your help to find out just what it's all about.«

»There! « cried Ned, admiringly. »Blame me if Don don't get in ahead of everybody. Our news is stale news, Minnie, I reckon.«

»Never mind about it now,« said Don. »You can tell me all as we ride along. Is it a go, Ned? Will you play Cyclone Sam?«

»Why, sure, I will, boss,« replied Ned. »I'm no play actor, but I'll do my best.«

By this time Mr. Jed Judd was close upon them.

»Here you are, Mr. Judd!« Don called out. »Let me introduce you to Cyclone Sam!«

CHAPTER XIX.

ON THE ROAD TO BAGGTOWN.

»Oh, ah! Really, now!« said Mr. Jed Judd, adjusting his eye-glasses as Ned Butts rode up to him, looking very fierce. »So this is the notorious—I beg pardon, I mean celebrated—Cyclone Sam! Pleased to meet you, I'm sure!«

»That's me, by gaul!« cried Ned. »So you were looking for me; were you? Waal, there's some as don't care about seeing me when I come around.«

»Oh, oh, say! Now—er—er—don't be too fierce 'with me, Mr. Cyclone—I mean Mr. Sam!« stammered Judd. »I—I am what you call a tenderfoot—I believe that's what you call us. I am a very nervous man, very.. Don't fire your revolver suddenly or anything like that, or I—I—well, it would make me still more nervous, don't you see.«

Don and Minnie straight faces. Many of the cowboys hawed outright.

»I'll promise you that Sam won't do anything to shock your nerves, Mr. Judd,« said Don. »But now you want to explain your business in full, for we have other matters on hand to attend to besides yours.«

»Yes,« added Ned. »You want to spit it right out.«

»Well, well, you. will understand when I tell you that Mr. Ringer wants to see You at Baggettown as soon as you can get there, replied Judd. »That's all I have to say now. You don't want me to talk the whole business out before all this crowd.«

»That will do,« replied Ned, acting upon a sign from Don.

»Can, can you go there at once?«

»I reckon: we can.

»I'm glad of it. I'm thoroughly sick of this business. I want to be through with it as soon as I can.«

»There is nothing to hinder us from going, I think, Sam. It is only about a ten-mile run.«

»Nothing, « replied Ned. »We wikk start at once.«

Don made a sign for Ned to fall ane and then said to him:

»You want to pump him all you can. Find out as much as possible, so that I can be prepared. Of course, we shall have to take the boys along with us, although I wish it was otherwise.«

»It must be did, boss. We are liable to run right into Sam and his gang. Of course, we have to be prepared.«

»Oh, I never intended to do anything else,« said Don. »But now let us be on the move.«

But Mr. Jed Judd hed more to say before he settled down to his return trip.

When he found that the whole company of cowboys were on the move, he reined in, exclaiming:

»Oh, I say, Mr. Sam, you don't intend to take your gang—I mean to say your band-with you, I hope.«

»Why, sure, I do!« retorted Sam. »The boys won't mind the run to Baggtown. What's the matter with you, man?«

»Well, I—er—yes. That is—er—it seems rather absurd to do it—looks like a raid on the town, don't you know.«

»I don't care what it looks like,« chuckled the supposed Sam, »and if you knew this here country as well as I do you would be only too glad to have us all go.«

»Wha-what do you mean?« cried Mr. Jed Judd, in some alarm.

»Just that Blond Bill, the King of the Prairie, happens to be hanging about these yere parts. He has a particular liking for tenderfoot gents like you. And say, if they don't pan out as high as a hundred cold cash he usually ties them to a stake and roasts 'em alive. That's Bill's way of doing business, old man.«

»Bless me!« gasped Judd. »Then be all means let us stick together. I—er—I hope there is no chance of meeting him. Do er—do you really think there is?«

»Can't say, I'm sure,« replied Ned, as grave as a deacon. »But I think we had better all stick together, as you say.«

»Certainly. Oh, by all means,« assented Judd, and after that he and Ned fell back to the rear of the line, while Don and Minnie took the lead.

»Don, this is a queer world,« remarked Minnie. »Do you know, it seems to me as if the events of years had been crowded into the last few days. So much has happened since poor mother's death.«

»And things will just keep on happening,« replied Don. »Of course, now that I seem to be up against real trouble it is a poor time for me to press my suit, Minnie, but if the events of the last few days have any lesson at all in them for you, Minnie, that lesson is that. you need a protector, and need one' badly. I only wish I knew how my father's will reads, should know just what to say.«

Minnie's color heightened, and for a few minutes she rode on in silence.

»I'll tell you this much, Don,« she said at last, »the time that you find yourself up against real trouble is not the worst time in the world for pressing your suit by any means.«

»Minnie!«

»Oh, I mean it, Don. You have proposed to me many times. In fact, your interviews with me might well be termed one perpetual proposal.«

»That is putting it strong, Minnie. I hope I haven't made myself a nuisance in that way.«

»I didn't say so, Don, and I didn't mean so. What I do say and mean is that the time that you are in trouble is just the one time when I might be willing to listen to you. I am no fortune-hunter, and I don't want to be mistaken for one. I might be willing to listen to the proposal of plain Don McIntyre when I should consider it my duty to say no to the young prince of the ranch.«

Don's eyes sparkled. He reached over and would have caught Minnie's hand, but she drew away.

»Come,« he cried. »You have made me the happiest man in Kansas, »and now, look here; I can't help how my father has disposed of his property. If you will take me on the chance of being poor, why, all there is about it, you will have to accept me if I happen to turn out to be rich.«

»Don!« cried Minnie, turning and facing him, »I'll accept you if you are poor, but if you turn out to be rich I shall have to think twice about it. There,—don't make any demonstration before all these cowboys, and don't say another word.«

»Only this, that I am the fe happiest fellow on earth!« cried Don. »And if you are determined to refuse me if I am rich U shall be obliged to throw my father's fortune over my shoulder if it comes my way.

Then the conversation drifted to other matters, and the subject was not renewed up to the time when Ned Butts joined them.

»Say, boss, I can't get a blame thing out of that jumping jackass!« growled Ned. »He does nothing but bounce up and down in the saddle and kick at the country. It hain't no sort of use to try and make him talk.«

»I see he's cagey, Ned,« was the reply. »Don't waste any more time trying. Just give it up. When we strike this man Ringler we shall know all, providing you are able to keep on playing 'the part of Cyclone Sam.«

»Which I will be, all right, I reckon answered Ned. »I tell you there's sure a plot on foot against you, and I'm willing to do my part to help bust the game. Say Minnie, have you told him all about ore doings with Corporal Flynn?»

»Not yet,« replied Minnie. »Don has insisted upon talking on another subject.«

»Which had to be settled before anything else,« added Don, gravely. »But now I'm ready for any other business which may be on hand. Out with it, Ned.«

»Oh, it isn't mine,« said Ned. »Minnie has been having a run-in with the corporal. She captured him, and we've got him a prisoner down at the south ranch.«

»Is it possible!« cried Don. »Well, that's risky work for a girl, Minnie. Corporal Flynn is one of the worst scoundrels in this region.«

»Oh, I know Fred Flynn as well as anyone can. know him,« replied Minnie. »I'm good for him every time.«

»Yes, and she done it all on your account, Don«, said Ned. »Oh, I tell you Minnie is great when she gets a-going, so she is.«

»Out with it!« cried Don. »Tell me all about it. There is no need of any haste. We can ride on slowly. There can be no better time to talk than now, only we want to keep an eye on that fellow Judd, and see that he don't escape. He may not be such a fool as he looks, and he may take notion to give us the slip.«

»Which he won't,« said Ned, »for I put two of the boys on to him. If he makes a break he'll get the lariat in short order.«

»Then out with it, Minnie,« added Don »Let's hear all about Corporal Flynn.«

CHAPTER XX.

NED MAKES A STARTLING ANNOUNCEMENT.

Minnie's revelations of the corporal's plottings served to open Don's eyes still further.

There was evidently some strong reason existing for making it profitable for someone to put him out of the way.

»And that probably means that my father's will is in my favor,« he said to Minnie, after Ned had fallen back. »At least, it must mean that I am named as first heir, and that some other person is to inherit case of my death.«

»And who do you suppose the other person can be, Don?« Minnie asked.

»I haven't the least idea,« was the reply »for as I have told you before, so far as I know I haven't a relative in the world. But here we are coming up to McIntyre's, and no sign of Cyclone Sam's gang yet. That suits me, for I have work to do here.«

»What a shame! « cried Minnie, looking around. »Ruin everywhere! Don, I should think it would drive you wild.«

»Oh, I am getting used to it,« laughed Don. »I don't care now. The location of the ranch never suited me, anyhow. If it comes to me to build again I shall surely build somewhere else.«

»And where?«

»I'll let you know later,« laughed Don. »I think a lot of the location of the Morrow ranch. What would you say to a fine house there?«

»You are trying to force my hand, Don.«

»No, I am not: I am only asking for an expression of opinion.«

»What is your business may I ask?«

»That's the way you change the subject. It is to dig up that money. I shall take it to Baggtown, and put it in the bank. But I don't want to do it before anyone. You keep on, and I'll join you in a few minutes.«

Ned was reluctant to leave him, but Don insisted, and as soon as the cowboys were well out of the way Don went behind the ruined house, and crawling into the cellar through a low window he pulled over some old barrels which were stored there, and took from beneath one of them a cigar box which was buried a foot or so in the ground.

Throwing away the box he stowed the money in his pocket, and hurried on, rejoining the cowboys before they had proceeded more than a mile.

The run to Baggtown was accomplished without mishap.

»You fellows can amuse yourselves about town until we decide what to do,« Don said to the cowboys. »Only thing is look out you keep straight.«

He then went to the Eureka House with Minnie and ordered dinner.

Ned and Jed Judd had preceded them.

Don wisely let Mr. Judd alone, and had not spoken a word to him since the start was made.

»I should like to get a sight of this fellow Ringler,« Don remarked to Minnie, »but I suppose there's no use butting in. Best thing is to let him manage it his own way.

But Don was treated to a sight of the St. Louis lawyer within ten minutes, for while they sat at dinner, who should walk into the dining-room but Ned, following a stout, red-faced man whom Don remembered often having seen in his father's office.

»Is that Ringler now?« asked Minnie.

»I presume it is,« replied Don. »I have seen the man before, but I never knew his name.«

»He looks ad oue enough to be up to any tricks,« remarked Minnie, as the lawyer and Ned Butts seated themselves -at a distant table. »Does he know you, do you think, Don?«

»I've no idea that he does, and still he may. He used tobe always hanging about my father's office. You must remember, Minnie, that father was a very mysterious man. He may have pointed me out to this fellow a dozen times. The fact is, I never was acquainted with my father, strange as it may seem, and there is no telling what he may have done. But we shall soon know all about it. Ah, there comes my friend Judd. He is going to join Ned and the stout man, so that must be Ringler, of course.«

Ned Butts certainly showed himself a clever actor. It was evident from the way in which the two lawyers carried themselves toward him that they had no suspicions that they were being fooled.

Don and Minnie left them at the table, and retreated to the ladies' parlor.

»And, now, Minnie, I must leave you for a while,« said Don. »I promised Ned to meet him at the Wild West saloon. He'll be sure to look in there soon.«

First of all Don went to the bank and de»posited his money.

»Oh, say, Don, there was someone here looking for you about half an hour ago,« Said the cashier, who knew our hero well. »I told him you were in town, for I saw you ride by with Minnie Morrow. Did he come up to the hotel?«

»Nobody came to see me,« replied Don, somewhat concerned. »Who was he? - Did you know him?«

»Oh, yes, I know him, but I can't call his name. It's that young fellow your father had keeping books for him down on the ranch.«

»Oh, Charley Brown.«

»Yes.«

»That's all right. He'll find me when he gets ready,« said Don, and he hurriedly left the bank, going at once to the Wild West saloon.

Don went into the saloon then, feeling somewhat uneasy.

»I don't want to be the means of bringing a raid down on this town,« he said to himself. »All the same if I have got to come up against Sam again I had sooner do it here than anywhere else.«

The Wild West was a typical Kansas saloon, and as these are rather peculiar it must be described.

In Kansas, for the last ten years, a prohibition law has been in full effect, as is pretty generally known, but in spite of this many saloons do business just the same.

The Wild West had its bar and the usual display of bottles behind it, but they were all empty except such as contained soda water, sarsaparilla, and ginger ale.

There were a number of men standing the bar talking, and one group was made up of Don's cowboys, but no drinking was - done there nor in the larger room behind, - Where there were billiard and pool tables, - nor in the still larger room behind that, where there was a little stage on which a variety show was given every evening.

While Don stopped to speak to his men a moment a party of four cowboys: from a neighboring ranch came in, all more or less uncer the influence of liquor.

The bartender nodded, tossed one of them a key; and they passed on into the billiard room.

But the billiard room was vacant a minute later.

Don knew very well that if he had asked he would have received a key, too, which would have admitted him to a secret room in the cellar, where he could have got anything he wanted to drink.

But Don had no use for the stuff, and he went into the billiard-room and began to knock the balls about while waiting for Ned, who soon came.

»Well,« exclaimed: Don. »Out with it. I'm all impatience to hear what you have to say.«

»Wall, boss,« said Ned, throwing himself into a chair, I think I may say that I completely fooled him. And say, he's a bad one. He means murder, and nothing else.«

CHAPTER XXI.

THE PLOT EXPOSED.

Don heard Ned's startling announcement without any show of excitement, for he was not at all surprised.

»I suspected as much,« he said. »did you get next to him? Did you succeed in making him believe that you were Cyclone Sam?«

»Fooled him completely,« replied Ned, He's a sick man—got the heart disease. That's why he brought that jumping jackass of a Judd along with him, for he dassent ride a horse, he says, and was afraid to risk it to go down the country to look up Sam himself. Oh, I tell you that feller hain't got no more conscience than a coyote, and that's what.«

»Yes, yes. Go on.«

»And that there will reads that half the property goes to you and half to your cousin—see?«

»Why, Ned, I haven't any cousin—I haven't a relation in the world.«

»He says you have, Don, at least he thinks it may be so. It appears that this here cousin is the son of your father's only sister.«

»Who died years ago.«

»No, but she didn't die. Your father gave it out that way, but he didn't give it out straight. Your aunt was alive last accounts. It seems that she married a man your father didn't like, and he never spoke to her afterward, nor had nothing to do with her. He didn't even know where she was living at the time of his death, so he makes this here will passing over his sister, and leaving half to the boy outright, and making him residuum something or other in case of your death before you get spliced —see?«

»Residuary legatee, you mean.«

»Yes, something like that. The ee and short of it is the boy gets half, anyhow, and he gets the hull in case you croak, but that blamed murdering coyote don't mean that neither one of you shall get nothing. He wants it all himself.«

»How is that? How can he get my father's fortune.«

»Why, easy enough, Don—dead easy, in case he can do you. You see, he's named sole executor of your father's will. His orders are to find this here' cousin of yourn, and he doesn't know where he lives, nor nothing about him; nor did your father. The will gives him ten years time to look the boy up in, and after that—in case you croak, Don—the hull estate goes to hospitals in St. Louis. Mighty little they'll ever get of it if that snoozer has the handling of the property for ten years. Why, he don't intend to look the boy up at all. He offered me five thousand dollars to put you out of the way in Some fashion what will look like an accident. He's counting on running the ranch, and swears he'll make me superintendent if I'll help him out.«

»What rascality!« cried Don. »Whatever could have possessed my father to make this man his executor? He couldn't have known what sort of a person he was.«

»Can't say, I'm sure,« replied Ned, biting off a huge chew of tobacco. »He's a big rascal, all right. There hain't no doubt about that.«

»How much did my father leave?« asked Don, after a few moments' silence.

»He says over five millions, but that's a lot of money, Don.«

»Did he mention the name of my cousin?«

»No, he didn't. Don't you know it, Don?«

»I don't. I never knew I had a cousin until now, as I told you before. But suppose this young man proves to be dead. Who gets his half of the estate?«

»Waal, I didn't ask him that, Don. I don't know.«

»You consented to his proposition?«

»Did I? Why, of course. And look here, Don.«

Ned thrust his hand into his pocket, and pulled out a huge roll of bills.

»There's a thousand dollars in that wad,« he said, »and it's the advance payment on the price of your life. He offered it to me, and I took it. You don't blame me, I hope.«

»No. You did quite right.«

»Well, here it is, Don. You take it. I don't want no blood money in mine.«

But Don waved the money away.

»Keep it yourself,« he said. »It is worth a thousand dollars even to pretend to bring yourself down to the level of that rascal. The money is fairly earned.«

Ned lost no time in pocketing the cash.

»It's a haul and no mistake,« he said. »Now I can buy a ranch of my own. But what do you mean to do, Don?«

»Oh, the case is very simple,« replied Don. »The laws of both Missouri and Kansas must give full protection to the orphan. I shall go at once to St. Louis and consult a lawyer. He will lay the matter before the probate court, and have this scoundrel Ringler removed as executor of my father's will. I shall want you to go along with me as a witness, for I intend to jail him if I can.«

Ned's story was now fully told, and Don determined to see Minnie at once.

»There is no good reason why we should not be married right here-in Baggtown to day and she go to St. Louis with me,« he said to himself. I'll try it on, anyhow. We may be able to pull out before Charley Brown gets in his fine work.«

So, asking Ned to excuse him, Don hurried back to the hotel and told Minnie all he had heard.

»Oh, I never could consent to any. such sudden arrangement,« declared Minnie, after she had duly-commented upon the Plot against Don's life.

»But where will you go, and what will you do after I am gone?« demanded Don. »Be sensible, Minnie, and say yes. I am sure you love me as much as I love you.«

»I love you dearly, Don,« replied the girl, raising no objection now when Don threw his arm around her, »but how could I ever be married in these clothes?«

»If it is down to a matter of clothes, then the thing is settled, and nothing re mains but to look up the parson and let him tie the knot,« laughed Don. »Come, Minnie, say yes and be done with it, there's a dear girl.«

Minnie wouldn't say yes, but as she didn't say no Don hurried out to find a clergyman and buy the wedding ring.

There were two ministers in Baggtown, a Methodist and a Baptist. Don chose the latter. He found the Rev. Mr. Furguson at home, and quite willing to accompany him to the hotel and tie the nuptial knot.

The ring proved to be a more difficult affair.

There was no jewelry store in Bagetown, so Ned had to content himself with buying a brass ring at old Pop Pardee's general supply store.

»Minnie shall think it's gold until we get on the train,« he said to himself. »Then I'll tell her, and promise her the best ring to be had in St. Louis as soon as we arrive.«

Having completed these arrangements, Ned dropped in at the Wild West saloon, not to get a bracer to give him Dutch courage, but to look up a best man, and Ned Butts was his choice, of course.

It was rather startling to find Ned leaning against the bar talking with no less a person than Don's would-be murderer, Lawyer Ringler.

But Ned handled the situation very coolly.

»Oh, hello, Al!« he called out. »How are things down on the ranch?«

»They are all right,« answered Don. »But there's a man up at the hotel who wants to see you for a minute. Can you come?«

»Sure,« said Ned. I'll go right now. Excuse me, please, Mr. Ringler. I'll see you later.«

»Do you imagine he recognized me?« Don asked Ned as they left the saloon together.

»I'm dead sure he didn't,« replied Ned. »You have changed a lot since you first came among us, Don—more than you have any idea. No, I don't think he recognized you, but I didn't dare to give you an introduction just the same. But what's in the wind now?«

»There's a wedding in the wind, Ned, and I want you to be the best man,« replied Don. »What do you say?«

»A wedding! What in thunder! Who's going to get married?«

»I am, Ned.«

»You! For gracious sake! And to Minnie, of course. Well, that's the way it should be. Minnie's a right good gal, and now that her mother is dead she needs someone to protect her. I wish you joy, Don.«

They shook hands heartily, and the next thing was the wedding, for they found the Rev. Mr. Furguson waiting for them at the hotel.

Minnie had impressed one of the chambermaids into her service—a pretty girl with black hair and flashing eyes—and she stood up with her, Ned performing the same service for Don.

Scarce had the clergyman pronounced the last words of the marriage ceremony when the loud clatter of hoofs was heard outside, mingled with the crack of rifles and wild shouts.

»Thunder and guns!« cried Ned, rushing to the window. »What are we up against now?«

»Cyclone Sam, of course,« said Don coolly.

»And you're dead right,« replied Ned. »It's Sam and his gang. They are hot after you, Don! They are going to raid the town!«

CHAPTER XXII.

AFTER THE RAID.

»Quick!« cried Don. »We must prepare for business at once!«

»Oh, Don! Don't go down,« said Minnie. »What should I ever do if you were to be killed?«

»Nonsense, Minnie!« cried Don, »was there ever a Kansas rancher who did not have to take chances on his life? You stay here, my dear little wife, and I'll soon clear Baggtown of this scum. Ned!«

»Ready boss!« cried Ned.

»Slip down stairs and out by the back door. Slide along the alley and get the boys together. You know where to find them as well as I can tell you. Lively now! I'll be with you in two shakes. Parson, you had better stop where you are; it is not likely that Cyclone Sam will disturb the guests of the hotel.«

Ned Butts had vanished even before Don finished speaking, and the prince of the ranch would have gone with him if Minnie had not held him back.

»Let me go, Minnie!« cried Don. »What has come over you all of a sudden? You who had the courage to tackle Corporal Flynn alone!«

»But I don't want to lose my husband, Don! It is different now! If you go I go too.«

Meanwhile the uproar in the street had increased, and a number of shots were fired.

»You stay wie you are!« said Don gently, but firmly, and disengaging himself from his wife's embrace, he darted out of the room and down the stairs.

As he ran through the office of the hotel, he found the clerk in the act of locking the safe.

»Skip, Don!« he cried. »They are after you. Here's Cyclone Sam coming now.«

Don was just in time. He vanished out through the back door just as Sam came in at the front.

Running down the alley, he found that Ned had collected most of his men behind Mike Maxwell's saloon.

»Here comes the Prince!« he cried. »Now we shall know what to do. We are outnumbered two to one, Don, and we can't get at our horses without getting up to the hotel barn, which is on the other side of the way. What in thunder are we to do?«

»The best we can,« replied Don: »Have you looked out in the street? Do you know how the case stands?«

»They have lined up before the hotel. The Baggtown folks have all taken to cover. They won't show fight. We've got to do the job ourselves.«

»Right,« said Don. »Then we must act now, for my wife is in the hotel, and if Sam gets onto what Minnie and I have been doing he'll make trouble for me sure. Follow me, boys! Aim for their horses first fire. If we can knock over five or six of them, we may succeed in stampeding the rest.«

It was a bold plan, but considering how they were outnumbered, it looked like a forlorn hope; still Don was desperate, and was taking all kinds of chances just then.

Placing himself at the head of his men, Don led the way from the alley between Maxwell's saloon and the store beyond, out upon the main street.

»Now, then, rush 'em, boys!« he shouted. »Fire as you go!«

The cowboys threw their little line across the main street and opened fire upon the outlaws, taking them all unawares, for they supposed then that they had captured the town.

As the rifles cracked, three horses went down before Sam's men had time to turn the outlaw leader himself was still in the hotel.

»Halt! Hit 'em again!« shouted Don.

Crack! Crack! Crack!

A second round went flying, and two more men were unhorsed.

The remainder of the band wheeled around and opened fire, and then the real battle began.

It was short and sharp while it lasted.

Cyclone Sam, running out of the hotel, leaped into the saddle, and with loud shouts urged his cowboys onto the charge.

Three of Don's men fell wounded, and the line wavered.

Then all at once Don felt a stinging sensation in his left shoulder.

Everything seemed to swim around him, and down he went in the dusty road.

The last he remembered was hearing Sam's voice yell:

»Let no man touch the Prince of the Ranch! If he is not dead already, he must be taken alive!«

Minnie, watching the fight from the upper window of the hotel, gave a shriek and fell fainting in the minister's arms.

It was just as Don had said:

While she had been ready enough to brave all danger for her lover, when her lover turned into a husband her anxiety for him was so great that her courage seemed to disappear for the moment.

But this was only nervous excitement.

Actually Minnie was as brave a girl as ever stepped, and when she revived, which she did a few minutes later, under the kindly ministrations of the clergyman, all her old-time courage returned.

They had not been disturbed, fortunately.

»What about Don?« was Minnie's first question.

»He was not killed. He was only wounded. They took him prisoner, and he rode away with them, tied to the saddle,« was the clergyman's reply.

Minnie seemed to pull herself together.

»Which way did they go?« she asked, setting her lips firmly.

»They rode off in the direction of the McIntyre ranch,« replied the clergyman.

»Were any of my husband's men taken prisoners?«

»I saw none. After Mr. McIntyre fell, all went off on the run.«

»The cowards!« cried Minnie. »They are all right when they have a leader though. What became of Ned Butts?«

»I didn't see him after the fight. I think he must have run with the rest.«

»Very well,« said Minnie. »Then it is up to me to take charge of this affair. I'm going now.«

»Just one minute, Mrs. McIntyre,« said the clergyman. »There were two gentlemen who have been stopping here at this hotel. One is a large, red-faced man, the other —«

»Yes, yes! I know what you mean«, interrupted Minnie. »Did they go off with the gang?«

»They did, and they did not seem to be prisoners either. On the contrary, they appeared to be on very even terms with Cyclone Sam.«

»That's enough!« cried Minnie. »I'm right onto the whole situation now.«

She hurriedly put on her hat and went down stairs,

»Don has been captured, Miss Minnie«, said the hotel clerk. »Oh, those scoundrels! They made me open the safe at the point of the revolver and got all my cash, more than two hundred dollars. It is a shame! Something ought to be done to rid this part of the country of those pests.«

»And something is going to be done,« said Minnie. I thought he wouldn't desert me so!«

Ned came dashing up on his own horse,« He sprang from the saddle and met Minnie in front of the hotel.

»You needn't stop to tell me about the fight, for I know all!« cried Minnie. »Was Don badly hurt?«

»I can't tell. There was no show to help him. You see, the boys were all half full and could not stand up against those fellows. When I saw how the case stood, I sneaked around to the hotel barn, got on my horse and laid out on the prairie so as to trail them. They took that scoundrel, Ringler with them, and little Judd, too. There hain't no doubt that they are heading for the South range, Minnie. I say there is only one thing to be did.«

»And I say that thing is for us to strike There the boys know nothing of all these troubles, and we may get help. How do they stand—favorable for Don?«

»With a few exceptions, yes.«

»Then that's the proper course. How many cowboys are there on the range?«

»At least fifty.«

»We can make a strike for forty. How many men did Sam have?«

»Twenty-five or thirty. Of course didn't have a chance to count them.«

»Were any killed?«

»Not that I saw; we winged a few, but they all got away. «

»One question more, Ned; how about our horses?«

»They were not disturbed; for some reason or other, they did not go near the hotel barn.«

»Settled. Then you and I are off for the ms West range.«

»And our boys? They must be lounging Sam did not follow them up.«

»We don't want one of them, Ned. My husband's life is in danger, and no half-drunken cowboys can help save him. We will pick up our men on the West range! I'm off for the barn. Follow me.«

A number of people had gathered around during this talk, and there were some offers of help.

But Minnie rejected them all, and contenting herself with borrowing a rifle and a belt of cartridges from the hotel clerk, she hurried to the barn.

Here she found three of Don's cowboys saddling the horses.

As they seemed fairly sober and very anxious to help, Minnie did not reject their services.

In a few minutes all were mounted, and the brave girl at the head of her little band of four went dashing away over the prairie.

She was the same old Minnie now.

»And she'll git thar,« Ned remarked to one of the cowboys. »She's just the gal to do it. Mark my words, fellers, she'll put Sam Morrow out of business, just as sure as my name is Ned Butts.«

And such were the happenings at Baggtown after the raid.

CHAPTER XXIII.

DON A PRISONER AGAIN.

Don was in a bad fix, and that he fully realized from the moment when, staggering to his feet, he found himself deserted by his own men and in the clutches of Cyclone Sam.

»Tie him on a horse! Run him out of town a little way and wait for me,« were the outlaw's orders, and they were carried out.

»Tie up his wound!« shouted Sam, as they rode away. »If it's serious, let him lie down on the grass until I come!«

But Don's wound was not serious by any means. The bullet had ploughed up a furrow in his shoulder, but, fortunately, had not lodged.

After the halt, two of the cowboys dressed it for him in silence, and he was again tied to the saddle.

It was no surprise to Don to see Cyclone Sam come riding up a little later, accompanied by the portly Ringler and the stumpy little Judd.

An advance was immediately ordered. The two lawyers kept in the rear, but Don rode in front, and in a few moments Cyclone Sam came up alongside of him and began to talk.

»So we meet again, Don McIntyre,« he said, sneeringly. »This seems to be my day. Now is the time I get square with you for the shabby trick you played me. You might have known how it would all end.«

»The end hasn't come yet, Sam Morrow,« replied Don, who was so relieved to find that Minnie had not been captured that he was prepared to submit to anything else.

»No; but it is in sight,« was the reply. »Say, do you. know, I admire you?«

»I'm not looking for admiration. Least of all, do I want yours.«

»No, but I do. You pulled the wool over that fellow Judd's eyes in great shape, you and Min. Who was it you passed off for, me?«

»I shall not tell you. It is of no use to ask.«

»But I can guess all right that it was Ned Butts. Just you wait till I've settled your hash, and I'll get square with him, too. And say, of course I know Min went to the hotel with you. If she wasn't my cousin and I didn't. mean to marry her when I get through with this business, I'd have lugged her off, too. Never mind. She'll keep. My time will come.«

»Sam Morrow,« said Don; firmly, »mark what. I say, it's my time which will come, I now understand all about this rascally business. »It can never succeed. It is too dirty a job. Take my advice and drop it there is time.«

Cyclone Sam laughed coarsely.

»Never succeed!« he cried. » Why, it has succeeded already. If that fat lawyer don't die on the road, success is already assured, and I'll be the boss of this ranch for all time to come.«

»Right,« Said Don, »Go your own road and leave me alone.«

»I'll go my own road when I get good and ready,« growled Sam. »Now, about that money. We'll stop around at McIntyre's and get it, Don.«

»You will just waste your time then, for the money is no longer there.«

»Not there? Where is it?«

»In the bank Baggertown.«

»Blame it all! I wish I'd known. I'd have held up the bank if I had. Never mind, though. That will keep. I'll give them a call first of the week. There's more money there than yours.«

»You seem to think the whole world is your field,« said Don. »You will run to the end of your lariat same as the rest of your sort. Then wait and see the strong arm of the law throw you—that's all.«

»I don't fear the strong arm of the law or any other arm!« retorted Sam, »and he dropped behind, leaving Don to the care of the two cowboys who acted as his guard.

And this was the last time Don was annoyed with him until they came in sight of the South ranch, when he rode up again.

»How many men are there at the South ranch just now, Don McIntyre?« he asked.

»Find out,« retorted Don. »I can't tell you if I would, and I wouldn't if I could.

»Well blame soon know,« continued Sam, »I intend to make my headquarters there.«

Just then Lawyer Ringler and Judd came riding up.

The fat lawyer's face was terribly flushed, but he rode well, while little Judd was at his old tricks, bouncing up and down in the saddle like a cork on a rushing stream.

»Mr. Morrow! I say, Mr. Morrow!« panted Ringler, »if you don't call a halt on this I'm a dead man.«

»We are almost there now, 'Squire,« replied Sam, »brace up.«

»I can't brace up. My heart troubles me, as I told you. I ought never to have undertaken this ride; it is going to be the death of me.«

»Oh you are standing it all right,« said Sam. »We haven't much further to go, only to that white house down there. Come on.«

Again they advanced. As they drew nearer the ranch, Don could see that it was Albert Richards who was sitting outside the door.

The young consumptive sprang to his feet and stared: then, suddenly taking to his heels, he disappeared around the corner of the house.

»Who is that fellow? I don't remember ever seeing him before,« Cyclone Sam asked Don.

»Can't say, I sure,« replied Don. »Some friend of Dick Rudd's probably.«

»I don't see Dick. He is always here?«

»He ought to be here. I can't tell you anything about it,« said Don.

There was no further talk.

The outlaws dashed up to the ranch, unopposed.

Shots for Dick Rudd did not bring him.

One of the cowboys dismounted, and, rifle in hand, ventured into the building.

He came out again, reporting no one there.

»All right. That's my size. We will take possession, so!« cried Sam. »Here, two of you fellers, take the Prince and lock him in one of the rooms. Mr. Ringler, this is the end of our journey. How are you feeling now?«

»Almost dead,« replied the lawyer. »I must lie down at once.«

»I'll fix you off,« said Sam. »Brace up, and never say die. A good drink will fix you all right.

Don, after dismounting, was led into the room Albert Richards had occupied.

Here he was tumbled on the bed, the cowboys refusing to loosen his bonds.

An hour passed, and no one came near him.

Don was never out with all he had gone through, and in spite of the discomfort of his bonds, he sank off to sleep with the drone of voices from the next room still sounding in his ear, for there Sam and Lawyer Ringler,

who was stretched out upon Dick Rudd's bed, had been talking for a long time.

When he awoke, the room was dark, and there was no sound to be heard.

Suddenly voices were heard in the adjoining room.

I don't like his looks at all. There is no use waiting for Cyclone Sam to return.«

»Very well. Suit yourself. I obey orders,« was the reply, and Don recognized the voice as that of one of the cowboys who had acted as his guard, while the other voice was Jed Judd's, beyond a doubt.

»I'll wake him then,« added Judd, and Don heard his footsteps advancing across the floor.

»It is coming now!« he thought, for he had not the least doubt that it was himself they were talking about.

Then suddenly there came a startled cry from Judd.

»Oh, say! Look here! Great heavens! He is dead!«

»Dead!« cried the cowboy. »The deuce you say! What in the thunder killed him? He was all right when Sam Morrow went away.«

»It was the ride. He said from the first that he could never stand it. Here, hold the light. I must secure his papers. I shall have to take his place in this business now.«

Don's interest was growing intense, for the dead one could be none other than Lawyer Ringler, of course.

Then suddenly Judd roared out:

»Hey! Say! Oh! Ah, look here! He's been robbed! His pockets are empty! all his papers are gone.«

»More of Sam's crooked work!« thought Don. »He has done up the lawyer and skipped.«

At the same instant a noise behind him attracted his attention.

Turning on the bed as well as he could, he saw a dark form in the act of crawling through the window.

It was too dark to distinguish who it was, but Don caught the gleam of a knife which the intruder held in his hand.

»This is my finish!« he thought, a terrible fear seizing him. »Sam Morrow has done up Ringler, and now he is going to do me,«

CHAPTER XXIV.

CONCLUSION.

»Hist! Don!«

It was the voice of Albert Richards, and it was instantly recognized by Don.

»Hush!« he whispered. »They are in the next room—they are liable to come in here any instant. You have come to set me free?«

»I know! Don't say a word«, was the low reply.

Then, with a few moves of the knife, Don's bonds were severed.

»Get up,« breathed Albert. »Follow me, Don.«

Don obeyed, and crawling through the window which opened but a few feet above the ground was quickly followed by Albert.

»Now run for your life toward the corral!« Albert whispered. »I know I could do it, but I have been waiting so long for my chance.«

They ran together, Don's limbs limbering up as they advanced.

Following the corral for a few hundred yards, Albert paused under the shadow of a huge cottonwood tree for an arm of the creek came in here.

»Oh, Don. I am so glad I was able to do it!« he said. »I tried again and again to get near that window, but one of those cowboys always came in sight. Still, I got there before, and I knew I should again.«

»Before, Albert?«

»Yes when you were first brought in. I hid in one of those old empty barrels under the window of the next room when I saw that they were bringing you in a prisoner, and it, was a lucky thing I did. I heard all, Don.«

»All! What do you mean? Where is Dick Rudd? I understood Corporal Flynn was a prisoner here, and —«

»Flynn managed to give Dick Rudd the slip, and he went chasing after him,« said Albert hurriedly. »I was left here alone. There's a plot against you, Don, and —«

»Oh, I know. Where is Cyclone Sam?«

»Wait! While I was under that window I heard Sam and that fat lawyer talking. I overheard all that they said, and now I know just what the plot is. The lawyer is dead —«

Sam killed him?«

»No, no! He must have died of heart disease. He complained of terrible pain. Sam went away and left him sleeping.

»Well, Don, I saw my chance, so I climbed in at the window and went through the dead man's pockets and got the papers.«

As Albert spoke he placed a large leather wallet stuffed with legal documents in Don's hand.

»Good for you! « cried Don. »Now all we have to do is to take to our heels, With the proofs of that fellow's rascality in my possession, the game is in my hands.«

»One moment, Don, and I am with you. Let me tell you not to worry over your father's will. You won't be deprived of the other half of the property long.«

»Why, what do you mean?« demanded Don. »Did you overhear the name of this mysterious cousin of mine? Out with it if you did, for that is something which I have failed to learn.«

»Hold on, Don! The name of this boy is Albert Richards, and I am the boy. My mother was your father's sister. They quarreled and parted years ago. I knew that you were my cousin just as soon as ever I knew who you were.«

»Is it possible? Why, Al! Well, well! But take back what you just said. You are going to live. I'll make you live! If you are really my cousin and father chose to leave half his estate to you I don't begrudge it to you. I can get along first-rate with the other half!«

»You can, hey! Well, you'll get none of it!« cried a gruff voice out of the darkness, and Cyclone Sam, followed by three cowboys armed with rifles sprang into view from behind the cottonwood trees.

The wallet was snatched from Don's hand by Sam Morrow, who ordered his men to take the boys around in front of the ranch.

Here they found the cowboys sitting around on the grass, but they sprang to their feet at the sight of Sam and his prisoners.

»Here's a pretty state of affairs!« roared the outlaw. »This is the way you guard your prisoner. Here, you Judd! Speak up! Is Ringler really dead?«

»That's what he is, and all his papers have been stolen!« growled Judd.

»Hold up!« exclaimed Budd Hight. »Hark! There's a gang coming.«

»Surest thing, and they are right upon us!« gasped Sam. »Dogone that there prairie grass! It deadens hoof falls so. Here, lock these fellows up and see that the window is secure. To horse, all of you! If there's to be a fight we'll fight to a finish, that's all.«

The words were scarcely spoken when a large body of cowboys appeared among the cottonwoods, dashing madly toward the ranch. In the lead was a woman. That it must be Minnie Don knew full well.

With a sudden wrench he jerked himself from the grasp of the cowboy who held him, and sending him a blow between the eyes, felled him to the ground.

In the confusion. Albert's captor let go his hold and sprang at Don, who darted off into the darkness.

»Run, Al! Run! Run for your life!« he shouted.

They ran and shots followed them, but none were well aimed, and in a moment they were out of range.

There was no time to chase them.

The cowboys flew to their horses, and had scarce time to unhobble and spring to the saddle when Minnie and Ned Butts, followed by thirty cowboys from the west ranch came swooping down upon them.

A few moments saw the end, for Cyclone Sam went down at the first fire, pierced through the heart by a bullet, though at whose hand was never known.

Seeing their leader fall the outlaws scattered to the four winds, and a moment later. Don and his wife were clasped in each other's arms.

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Now, as to all that was said and done after the battle we might, if we chose, have a great deal to say, but it would be to little purpose, for with the death of Cyclone Sam and Lawyer Ringler Don McIntyre's troubles came to an end; and our story may as well end, too.

Enough it is to record that Don, accompanied by Minnie and his cousin Albert, went to St. Louis, where a competent lawyer was engaged to look after their affairs.

Among Lawyer Ringler's papers taken from Cyclone Sam abundant proof of his rascality was found, and the probate court promptly appointed a new executor to Colonel McIntyre's will.

Mrs. Richards was sent for, and soon joined them.

On account of Albert's health they immediately returned to the south ranch, and took up their abode there.

In due time Don came into his property, but poor Albert breathed his last before the legal formalities were closed.

And so Don got it all except for a liberal provision which he made for his aunt, who remained with him.

To-day they all live in a fine house built on the site of Cold Spring Ranch, the former Morrow homestead, and there is a little Don to keep them busy.

Our Don is now a veritable king among his cowboys, for they all love him, while baby Don carries his father's former title, »The Prince of the Ranch.«

[The End]