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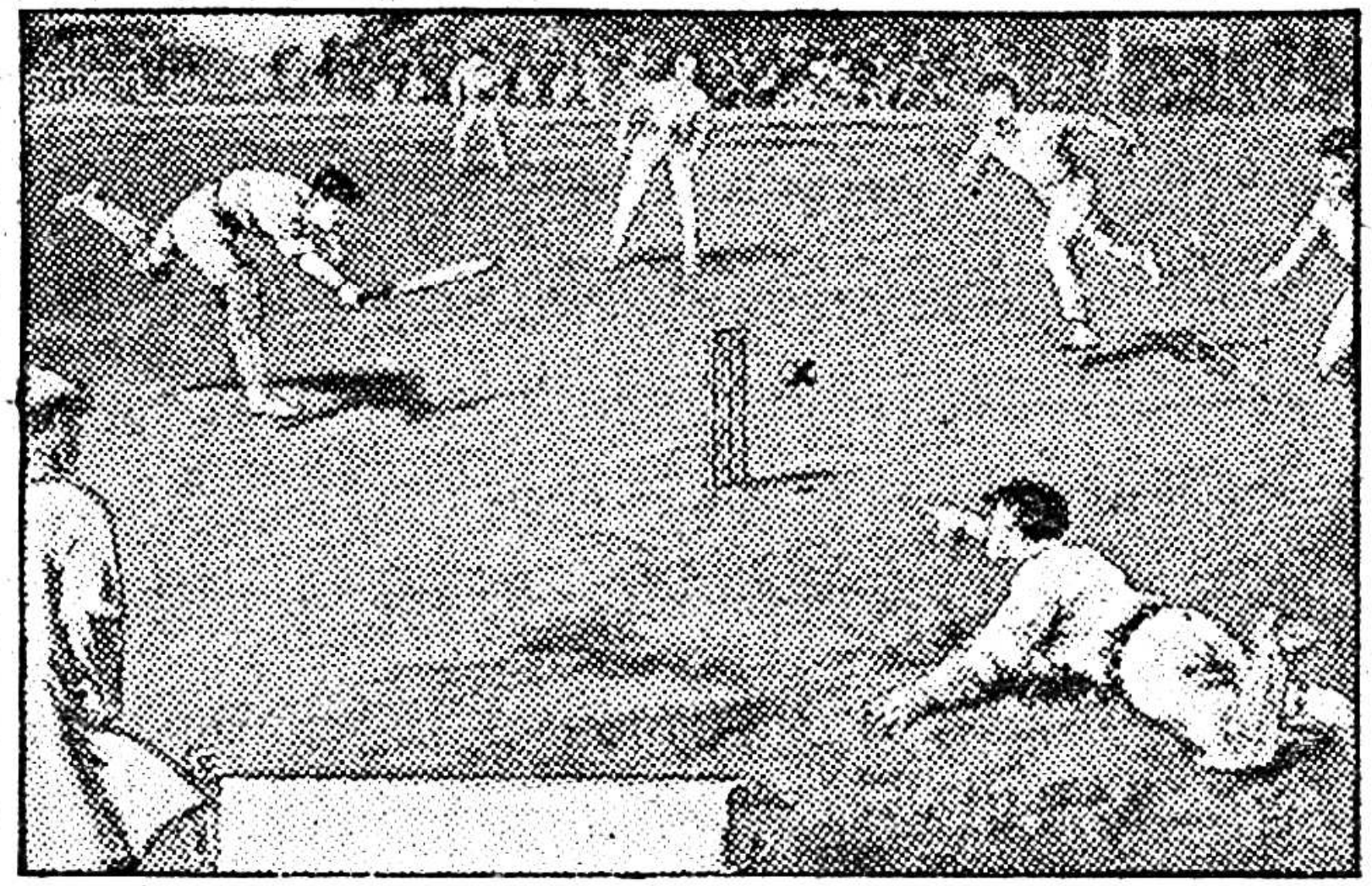

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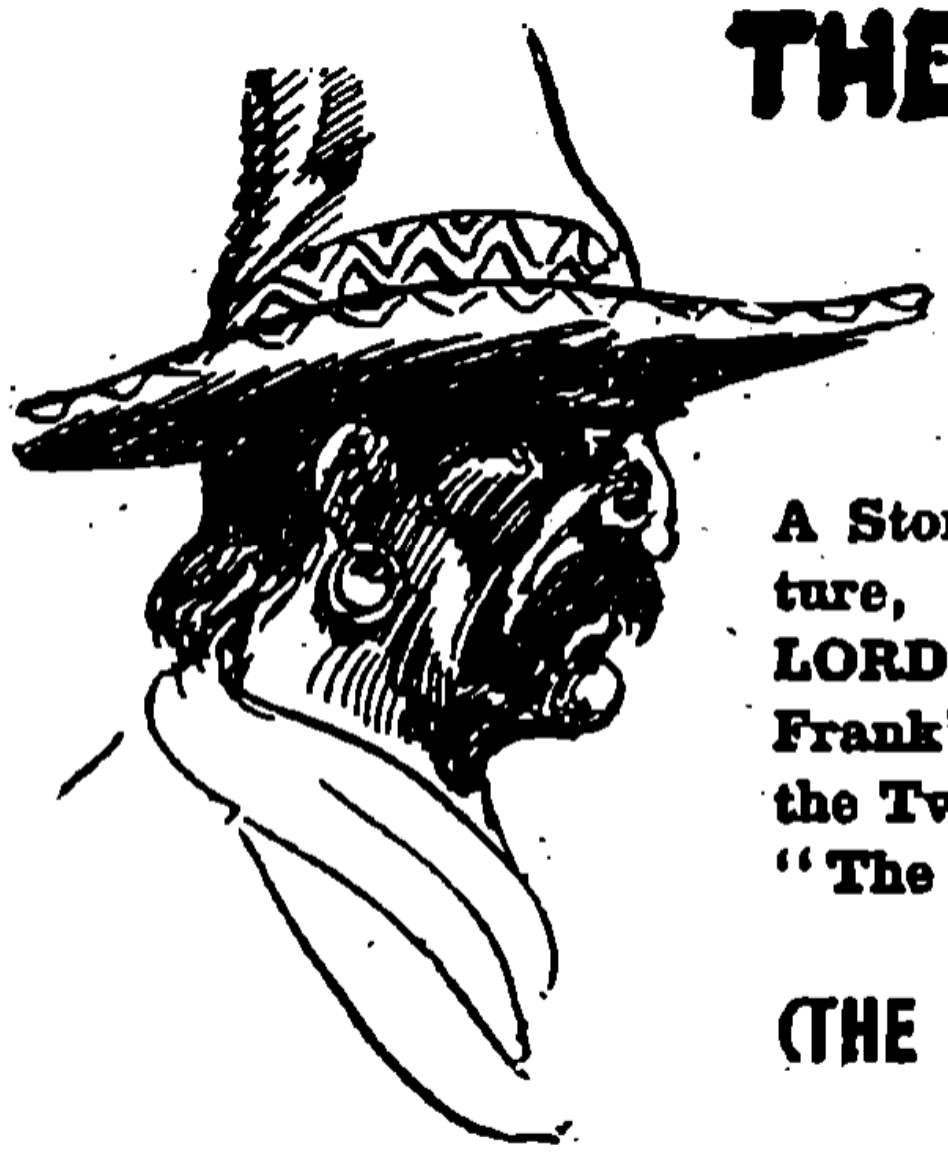

THE TERROR OF ROARING Z.

A Story of Holiday Life and Detective Adventure, introducing NELSON LEE, NIPPER, LORD DORRIMORE, and the Boys of St. Frank's. By the Author of "The Brand of the Twin Stars," "The Test Match Triumph," "The Montana Mystery," and many other Stirring Tales

(THE NARRATIVE RELATED THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER.)

CHAPTER I.

IN THE SHADOW OF THE ROCKIES!

ROARING Z Ranch was at peace.

It was evening, when the sun, low down in the Western sky, was casting long shadows round the white painted ranch house, the stables, the barns, and all the well-kept buildings. Overhead, the sky was perfectly clear—a deep, intense blue, merging to violet and orange near the horizon.

On the verandah in front of the fine building lounged several figures in deck chairs. Nelson Lee was there, and Lord Dorrimore, and Mr. James Farman—more frequently known as "Big Jim."

He was the owner of all this vast property—this great ranching enterprise in Montana. He was the father of Justin B. Farman, of the St. Frank's Remove, and, incidently, he was a multi-millionaire.

This great ranch, lying practically in the shadow of the stupendous rocky mountains, was merely a hobby of his, but it was undoubtedly a very profitable hobby. And, just now, the millionaire was spending his summer holiday on the ranch, with a number of very welcome guests.

These guests included Nelson Lee and me, Dorrie, Umlosi, and eleven juniors of St. Frank's. With Farman himself, we numbered a round dozen—twelve representatives of the St. Frank's Remove.

The other juniors were Handforth and Co., Sir Montie Tregellis-West, Tommy Watson, Bob Christine, Reginald Pitt, and one or two more. And, so far, we had enjoyed ourselves immensely.

We had only been at the ranch for a few days, and even in this short time we had met with a certain amount of excitement. For a clever gang of cattle thieves were at work, and already large numbers of Mr. Farman's animals had apparently been spirited away. They had been stolen without leaving a trace.

But, what was more to the point, the guv'nor and I had recently had an exciting experience with the cattle "rustlers" themselves. And Nelson Lee was wondering what the next move would be.

As for myself, my thoughts were running in a very different strain on this particular evening. For, in company with the other fellows, I was enjoying the amusing antics of the Happy Bunch.

The Happy Bunch, I may as well explain, consisted of six cowboys—six of the ranch employees. Of course, there were a good many other cowboys, but this particular lot were all fast friends, and they had nick-named themselves the Happy Bunch. They occupied one bunk-house, and they were always to be found together when at leisure. And they were certainly a most entertaining sextette.

"My hat! They're jolly clever, you know," said Tommy Watson admiringly.

"The way these chaps swing that rope about is simply marvellous!"

"Dear old boy, you are quite correct," agreed Sir Montie, nodding. "These cowboys are most frightfully cute, begad! I never thought that cowboys could be so fearfully intelligent, you know. They're rough an' ready, but some of the best!"

"Hear, hear!" said Reginald Pitt. "I'd always pictured cowboys as awful ruffians—blackguards, you know, who were always knocking about saloons, and gulping down rye whisky, and shooting people every minute!"

I grinned.

"They're the cowboys of the sensational 'penny dreadfuls'," I said. "These fellows here are a fine crowd of chaps, and Square-Deal Reeve is jolly clever, too. Just look at that!"

Square-Deal Reeve was giving an exhibition with a lasso—or, as Square-Deal called it, a rope. And he had been doing some exceedingly smart things with that rope, too. He was not the only one, for Twirly Sam, Two-Gun Milligan, and Slick Ed had also been performing.

When not at work, these six cowboys were as merry as a number of children, always playing jokes, and always lighthearted. And it was always a pleasure to us to listen to their conversation.

"Jolly good!" said Handforth critically. "Of course, there's not such a tremendous lot in this rope business after all. I dare say I could manage to do some of these tricks after a bit of practice."

"Rats!" declared Church. "You've got to be born to it."

They stood looking at Square-Deal Reeve as he twirled a loop of rope round and round in giddy circles, like something alive. And yet the cowboy was doing it all with what seemed to be a mere trifling effort.

Lord Dorrimore strolled down, and joined the group.

"Havin' a gay old time?" he inquired genially. "You youngsters will have to come in before long—early to bed and early to rise is the rule on this ranch. You've had all the grub you need to-day, so——"

"Grub!" exclaimed Fatty Little, pricking up his ears. "Great doughnuts! I was just thinking about something to eat!"

"Do you ever think about anything else?" asked Dorrie mildly.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Well, we finished the last meal over an hour ago, sir," said Fatty, in a plaintive voice. "I'm not grumbling at the food here—it's simply gorgeous, and there's always tons to eat. But this air gives a chap a terrific appetite. I've noticed it particularly since I've been here."

Pitt grinned.

"I've noticed it particularly wherever you've been, Fatty," he remarked. "It doesn't matter what the conditions are, what the atmosphere's like, what the weather may happen to me—you've always got a double-barrelled appetite."

Lord Dorrimore regarded Fatty thoughtfully.

"Well, you see, he's got a double-barrelled size," he explained. "That's the reason for it, my son. Just think what he's got to fill up! What a terrible worry it must be to him—he's constantly wrestling with the problem of how he can rake up enough grub to fill all the cracks and crannies!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I sure 'lows you're right ther', boss!" put in Square-Deal Reeve, strolling up with a piece of straw in the corner of his mouth. "Say, that young guy has jest about the all firedest appetite a fellow could imagine. Gee! I seen a side show once wher' a galoot was eatin' for a wager. Say, the amount of stuff that hobo put away was sure amazin'. Guess it was like a chaff-cutter takin' in hay. The more stuff that guy swallowed, the more he wanted."

"That description fits Fatty right to the ground!" I chuckled. "He'd simply love an opportunity to gorge himself for a wager. But he needn't worry. There's always plenty of food in this house."

"Well, you see, Mr. Farman knows what boys are," smiled Dorrie. "Just now, as I was comin' out, I noticed that the sideboard in the breakfast-parlour was packed with sandwiches and meat pies and cakes. Our hostess knows what to expect when you youngsters come in!"

Fatty Little's eyes gleamed.

"Sandwiches!" he muttered. "Meat pies! Cakes! Oh, by cocoanuts! The very thought makes my mouth water!"

"Say, it don't do to overfeed!" said Square-Deal Reeve, shaking his head solemnly. "All' to take aboard a cargo o' grub late in the evening is sure fatal. Yup, sir! I once knew a feller—— Gee! He's most certainly in a hurry—an' I

'lows it ain't kinder perlite to sheer off when a feller's speakin' some!"

Fatty Little, as a matter of fact, had been taking practically no notice of Square-Deal's remarks. He had heard that a supply of good things had been provided on the parlour sideboard, and his hunger suddenly became much more manifest. He went off towards the ranch house at a swift run. For, in spite of his bulk, Fatty was astonishingly active.

Square-Deal Reeve deftly swung the rope round his head, in order to get up speed, so to speak.

"Guess he needs kinder slowin' down," he observed calmly. "Say, I'll sure be most obliged ef you'll come right back!"

While speaking, the cowboy flung the rope. It seemed impossible that he could do anything with it at that distance. The long length of line swung through the air in an apparently erratic manner. We watched it go, wondering what Square-Deal was trying to do.

The loop at the end flashed down, and settled neatly over Fatty Little's shoulders as he ran. It descended just to his elbows, and then Square-Deal Reeve gave the rope a sharp tug. Fatty Little came to an abrupt halt, and sat down with considerable violence. His arms were bound to his sides.

"Great onions!" he gasped. "Leggo! What—what——"

"Oh, well done, Square-Deal!"

"Jolly smart!"

"Begad, rather—frightfully clever, dear old boys."

The leader of the Happy Bunch chuckled.

"Guess it don't signify nothin'," he said lightly. "This hyar game is baby's play to a feller who's been in it all his life. And as fer you, skeleton, I sure reckon I need you right here!"

He pulled on the rope, and Fatty was obliged to come. He resisted, but it was useless. Yard by yard he was brought nearer, until at length he stood facing Square-Deal and the other cowboys.

"You—you rotters!" said Fatty indignantly. "What's the idea of this? Take your fatheaded rope off!"

"I'd kinder hate myself ef I wuz to rile you any," said Square-Deal. "But it's this aways, son. I wuz just gettin' busy handin' out a choice selection of good advice. It ain't my habit to sling around that stuff—but when it comes to feedin'—waal, I'm sure as good as any blamed doctor. I know what's good for your innards, and what ain't. An' you can sure take it from me, sonny, that it won't do you no good to pack your hide with vittals at this time of the evening."

"Oh, come off it!" growled Fatty. "I can take a little joke, of course, and I'm not offended. But this rope is jolly tight, and it stings. How the merry pancake you caught me is a wonder!"

Square-Deal released the fat junior, and chuckled. For Fatty, without a word, rushed off again. He glanced behind him anxiously once or twice, in order to see if any further attempts were being made to rope him.

But he was allowed to go, and the cowboys had now finished their little display. They strolled towards their bunkhouse, and lounged in easy attitudes on the forms which were provided just outside. Pipes were lighted, and cigarettes rolled.

"Guess we'll need to talk some," grinned Twirly Sam, the youngest member of the Happy Bunch—a fair-haired young Westerner who wore a constant smile. "I reckon it's up to us to provide the entertainment, pards. These ——"

"Say, we don't need to do no word slingin'," interrupted Ace-High Peter. "Mebbe you've noticed that Slick Ed is jest about dyin' to hand out a hull heap of lively talk. He's sure goin' to yarn some!"

There was a roar at this, for Slick Ed was the one member of the Bunch who rarely said a word. He was the most untalkative man I have ever come across. His shoulders dropped, he had an air of utter weariness, and it almost seemed too much trouble for him to move his limbs. But, of course, this was merely his way. For Slick Ed was as capable as any of the others.

He looked up now, and removed his pipe.

"Guess you've heard the news?" he asked.

"What news?"

"Texas Jose is around," said Slick Ed briefly.

"Aw, gwan! I reckon you must o' just woke up!" said Two-Gun Milligan witheringly. "Say, boys, did you get that? Texas Jose is around! By cripes! Ed'll be sure tellin' us next that we've

got a'pile o' swell visitors on the ranch. Mebbe he thinks we're kinder blind an' deaf?"

Slick Ed blew out a puff of smoke.

"I was just—remindin' you," he said shortly.

"Say, boys, he's dead right," exclaimed Square-Deal. "I've most generally noticed that when Ed gets busy with his tongue—waal, he don't say much, but it's got a hull heap of savvee attached to it. We'll sure be wise if we remember Texas Jose. Guess that guy don't love us any."

"They was scared good'n plenty down at the Bend," said Twirly Sam. "I was over there to-day, boys, an' you might ha' thought a hull crowd o' desperadoes was gettin' busy. Say, this Texas Jose guy don't rattle me none," he added contemptuously.

Square-Deal shook his head.

"Guess you wuzn't around this ranch when Jose got took off by the Sheriff?" he asked.

"Nope, that was afore my time," replied Twirly.

"Waal, pard, you don't know nothin'," said Square-Deal. "I ain't figgerin' to be feared o' no man—an' you can take it from me that this light-fingered Mexican don't scare me a piece. But you'd best get it good'n fixed in your head that Texas Jose is bad—so bad that he'd steal a two-cent piece from a kid what wuz on it's way to the candy store."

We listened to the talk of the cowboys with interest.

"Who is this chap, Texas Jose, anyway?" asked Handforth.

"Waal, I guess he's most Mexican, although mebbe he's a bit of a breed," said Square-Deal. "Down South, in Texas, he raised blazes—but we didn't know a thing about that when he worked on this ranch. A smooth-tongued, pleasant guy—that was Jose. But, underneath, a rattlesnake—sly vicious and as treacherous as a mud patch. Say, that durned hobo possessed just about as much honour as—as—— Guess I'm kinder stuck. Texas Jose didn't have no honour of no kind."

"What did he do?" inquired Pitt.

"Mebbe you'd like to hear the yarn, young pards?"

"Rather!" chorused the juniors.

"Good enough!" said Square-Deal, leaning back more comfortably. "I guess I'll get right busy and put you wise. Waal, this galoot, Texas Jose was a cowpuncher on this same ranch. That was around five years ago. Say, did you ever know a feller who couldn't speak the truth of he tried? This guy wuz wuss than that. He blew out lies whenever he opened his all fired mouth. An' at the same time, mind you, he was kinder free an' easy and smilin', an' I guess it was some little time before we got wise to his play."

"By cripes, he was sure a sly cuss!" said Two-Gun feelingly.

"Sly!" repeated Square-Deal. "Say, I've met a few snaky guys in my time, but this durned breed was sure the limit! Gee! He'd stand in front of us, and spring out so many lies that he forgot what the truth was like. We didn't get wise to him at fust, but then——"

"When he started thievin', you mean?" asked Peter.

"Sure! Thievin'?" said Square-Deal. "Say, ef ther's such a thing as a degree for bein' expert in the thievin' line, waal, Texas Jose was jest about eligible for ha'f a dozen o' them degrees. Things was missed around the ranch—I 'lows they weren't of much account, but they kept on disappearin'. We kinder lost things in the bunkhouse, and the climax came when Buck brought over the bank roll from Rattlesnake Bend. That wuz on a Saturday."

"Gee! I remember that well, pards," said Loco Jack. "I got a notion that ——"

"Oh, say, we ain't listenin' to your fool notions now, Loco," interrupted Square-Deal. "Guess ther's a time for everything. Waal, about this hyar Texas Jose. The information had been handed out to him that this bank roll was coming along. What did that guy do?"

"Blessed if I know!" said Handforth.

"He hid hisself in Buck's office—yep, sure!" said Reeve. "It was sure a fool thing to do, I 'lows—but a Mexican don't have much savvee, anyways. Waal, when Bucks steps in with that bank roll lyin' around loose, up jumps Texas Jose with a gun in his paw, and he proceeds to pump lead into Buck's hide. Say, he perforated poor Buck in the most turrible manner."

"But he didn't kill him?" objected Church.

"Say, considerin' Buck's right around this ranch at the present moment, I'll agree that he sure wasn't killed," said

Square-Deal. "Nope, sonny. But he was some mussed up. And that blamed galoot of a breed up an' took that same bank roll. We kinder met him outside."

"My hat! That was exciting!" said McClure. "Did he fight?"

"Sure, he did," replied Square-Deal. "Say, have you ever seen a wild cat scrapin'? This feller was jest about the same—only wuss. He tried a bit of gun play, but that warn't no sorter good. Jose kinder realised that he'd resemble a sieve if he got us usin' him as a target."

"And you collared him without using your guns?" I asked.

"Yup, son!" said Square-Deal, nodding. "We kinder roped that galoot up so almighty thorough that he was all rope an' no Texas Jose. Gee! He looked most like he was in a sack!"

"Well, that was the best thing to do," said Handforth. "And what a silly ass! Fancy being mad enough to make an attempt to shoot Buck Mason and steal that bank!"

"I guess you mean bank roll, pard," said Ace-High.

"Well, bank roll," agreed Handforth. "How could he get it away, anyhow? A bank roll is a pretty big thing, isn't it?"

"I reckon you're side-tracked," grinned Square-Deal. "A bank roll is a blamed val'able piece of furniture to have lying around—but it don't take up no surplus space. Nope, sir. I guess this same bank roll as we're referin' to was located in Buck's hip pocket, an' it was Jose's idee to transfer it into his own pocket. But it didn't come off. We wus wise to the skunk's play, an' afore he could breathe any—waal, he wus handed over to the sheriff at the Bend."

"I can't understand why the fellow was fool enough to make any attempt at robbery at such a time," I remarked. "He must have known that his revolver shots would attract attention, and bring you all down about his ears."

"Say, that's just wher' you don't savvee, young gen'tl'man," said Square-Deal. "Y'see, this sneakin' coyote, Texas Jose, sure got his idees kinder mussed up. Say, he got guessin' that he had the ranch to hisself. I've made a few all-fired mistakes in my time, but I allows I never made sech a one as that! Jose kinder figgered that we wus all out in the corrals—an', instead o' that same bein' the case, we wus located right here—in this bunk-house."

"Why, in the afternoon?" asked Pitt.

"Sure," grinned Square-Deal, with a wink. "Didn't I hand out the talk that Buck wus gettin' around Rattlesnake Bend? Say, it was blamed hot that day—so hot that the cattle near got converted into roast beef as they stood. And we figgered that the bunkhouse wus more comfortable than anywhere else."

"In other words, you were taking a snooze in the bunkhouse when you ought to have been at work?" I asked.

"I guess you've sure got a heap of savvee," agreed Square-Deal. "Waal, when we heard them shots we got busy wonderin' what wus doin'. An' we investigated. Guess I've told you the rest."

"What about Buck?"

"Say, that poor guy wus perf'rated till y'couldn't tell his dog-gone carkis from a parlour cinder-sifter!" replied Reeve, shaking his head. "Sufferin' snakes! We sure thought that poor Buck had hit the one way trail good'n proper."

"It's a lucky thing he escaped," remarked Pitt.

"Waal, son, Buck ain't much of a feller t'look at," said Ace-High Peter. "You wouldn't get figgerin' that he wus a kinder mini'ture Hercules. Say, Buck is sure as strong as a grizzly, an', possessin' a constitootion o' that variety, he patched up so quick that Doc Reynolds, o' Rattlesnake Bend, got calc'latin' that he'd been sure swindled!"

"And I suppose Texas Jose was found guilty and sentenced?" asked Tommy Watson.

"Yup, he sure wus," said Square-Deal Reeve. "Guess he paid quite a long visit to the pen, an' it's a durn pity that he ever got loose."

"The pen?" repeated Handforth.

"Sure!"

"It's all right—he means the penetentiary," I explained. "They don't call it prison out here, Handy. And now Texas Jose is at liberty? You don't think he'll come to this district again, do you?"

It was Slick Ed who answered.

"That guy's got a meni'ry," he said shortly.

"Which same, translated into proper langwidge, means that Texas Jose ain't the kinder feller to fergit things in a hurry," said Square-Deal. "I 'lows the breed slung out a heap o' hot air afore he wus took to the pen—an' that hot air

wus to the effect that when he came out he'd kinder wipe this ranch off the face of the airth."

"Oh, so that's why you think he'll come back?" asked Watson.

"Mebbe he'll come, and mebbe he won't," said Square-Deal. "If he's possessed o' hoss sense he'll sure put his carkis as far away from this location as possible. But he's a vicious guy, an' mebbe he'll be hankerin' after revenge. So we sha'n't be a heap surprised if he shows up, with the intention o' distributin' liberal doses o' lead poison!"

"Poison!" repeated Handforth. "Why, I thought he'd use a revolver, or a gun! He can't do any harm with poison, because you'll be on the look-out for anything of that kind. And lead poison is easily detected——"

"Gee! Ain't you jest innercent?" grinned Twirly Sam. "Say, Squar'-Deal wusn't talkin' litteral. Lead-p'ison means shootin' up—fillin' a guy's hide wi' bullets!"

"Oh!" said Handforth, turning red. "How the dickens was I to know? I thought you meant real poison! What rot!"

"Aw, we don't blame you none," chuckled Twirly. "Guess you're sorter green, sonny—as green as spring grass! An' jest because Squar'-Deal hez bin handin' out gas to the effec' that Jose might get around this ranch, that ain't no reason fer you young guys to develop an attack o' nerves. Guess you'll be safe, anyways. This durned Mexican don't faze us none."

At the same time, the yarn which the Happy Bunch had told us caused several juniors to dream uneasy dreams of bandits and outlaws and plundering Mexicans. But, with the glorious sunlight of the following morning, these dreams vanished, and were forgotten.

However, it wasn't to be so very long before we should remember that brief, pithy warning which had been delivered by the slow-moving tongue of Slick Ed.

CHAPTER II.

THE MYSTERY OF THE STOLEN CATTLE!

NELSON LEE waved to me as I was about to enter one of the big barns. Breakfast was over, and most of the fellows were wondering what they could do with themselves during the morning.

I observed that Buck Mason was busy with two or three of the cowboys round at the stables, getting the horses saddled and ready for use. Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore were strolling together, and I went towards them as the gov'nor beckoned.

"Got any particular plans for this morning, Nipper?" asked Nelson Lee, as I came up.

"No, sir," I replied.

"In that case, you might just as well come with us, that is—if you are so inclined," said the gov'nor. "In any case, I've ordered a horse for you."

"Right you are, guv'nor," I replied. "Thanks—I'd love to come. But where are we going, anyway?"

Lord Dorrimore chuckled.

"He'd love to come, and he doesn't know what our plans are," he exclaimed. "Nipper, my son, we are setting off on a grim and dangerous expedition—an expedition from which we might never return," he added impressively.

"Good!" I said. "Couldn't be better."

"By gad!" said Dorrie. "Are you hankering after danger?"

"I don't mind what comes along if I'm with the gov'nor," I replied simply. "If he's going into danger, I'm certainly more comfortable with him. But I don't quite see——"

"My dear Nipper, you mustn't take any notice of Dorrie," interrupted Nelson Lee. "So far as I am aware there is no particular danger into which we can run this morning. And there is no mystery about the journey, either. We are, as a matter of fact, merely going on an examination trip. I have a mind to look at the far boundaries of the ranch property."

"Oh, it's about the cattle rustling?" I said, with great interest. "Good business! I was wondering when you would get on the job, gov'nor. Once you're fairly started, I'll guarantee that you'll arrive at the truth before we end our visit."

"I'm not so sure, Nipper," said Nelson Lee. "This mystery is a peculiar one, and I've never before been called upon to look into such an affair. But I can really say nothing until I have seen the whole ground—until I have examined the problem from every standpoint."

About ten minutes later we were off—Nelson Lee, Lord Dorrimore, Buck

Mason, and myself. The other juniors were somewhat jealous, and several of them wanted to come along, too. But this, of course, was impossible. For, in the first place, they were not expert riders. Without any boasting, I think I can claim to be pretty good on horseback.

Buck Mason was full of the mystery which Nelson Lee was attempting to inquire into. The loss of such a great number of cattle weighed upon his mind, and it was quite easy to see that he had little thought for any other subject.

"Gee, it kinder gets my goat!" he declared, frowning, as we proceeded at an easy trot. "Guess I'm as wild as blazes, too. Over three thousand head, Mr. Lee—and that represents a hull pile of dollars. I ain't sayin' that the Old Man cares a piece about these dollars. But it's an almighty puzzle, an' my brains are that mussed up with thinkin' I don't rightly know what I'm doin'."

"Yes, Buck, it is certainly a worrying time for you," said Nelson Lee. "But these cattle thieves cannot keep up the game indefinitely. One day they will make a slip—they will become too venturesome, and then the result will be known. In other words, their game will be at an end."

Lord Dorrimore shook his head.

"Thinking isn't particularly in my line," he observed. "But I've been doin' a bit of it these last few days. And what makes me puzzled is how the cattle can be got right out of the district without anybody knowin' the truth."

"Yes, that's the biggest problem of all, Dorrie," I said. "Cattle can't very well be smuggled as though they were diamonds, or packets of opium. It seems to me that there must be a leakage at the ranch here——"

"Say, air you figgerin' that we got—traitors?" interrupted Buck sharply.

"Well, it struck me that such a thing is possible," I replied. "It's about the only way to account for the mystery. If some of the cowboys are traitors, they could easily allow the cattle to be taken away under their very noses."

The ranch manager nodded.

"I guess you're right," he agreed. "If we had traitors that kind o' game would be dead easy. But you can take it from me, bo', that we don't have them kind of animals around Roaring Z Ranch. Nope. I'll stake my existence thar' ain't a man in the hull outfit that would sell the Old Man. Guess he treats us right—an' the boys know it. Say, ther' ain't a ranch owner in the hull Western States like Big Jim Farman. He's the real goods—every time. The boys jest love him. They'd kinder go through livin' blazes for his sake. Traitors? Not on your life!"

There was a wealth of feeling in Buck's tone, and we were convinced that he was right. He was in a position to know, since he had the handling of the whole ranch, and knew every employee personally—he knew every man's character and record.

"I agree with you, Buck, in that respect," said Nelson Lee. "This cattle thieving is not done by means of inside aid. It is engineered solely and absolutely from the outside. And, moreover, it is engineered so cleverly that constant and continual watching is of no effect."

"I understand that all the boundaries are guarded?" asked Dorrie.

"Sure, sir, every one," replied Buck. "I'll allow we don't hev a man located on every yard o' territory—guess we'd need the United States Army for a job o' that calibre. But the cattle is watched, and it's darned uncanny how they're decreased in number."

"There is one boundary, I think, which is not constantly under supervision?" asked Nelson Lee.

"I ain't figgerin' to get the hang o' them high falutin' words," replied Buck. "But I guess I've got you, sir. You're referin' to the Northern boundary? That same is a natural one, an' we don't reckon to need a heap o' barbed wire, like the other boundaries. This is the biggest mystery that ever hit us, an' I'm feelin' kinder tired."

"I'm very interested in this Northern boundary," replied Nelson Lee. "By the way, Nipper, we're on our way there now. It lies twelve to fifteen miles distant from the ranch, and I understand that there is a natural barrier which cannot be passed by either man or beast."

"Unless he happens to use an aeroplane," I suggested.

"That, of course, is possible, but out of the question," said Nelson Lee. "In any case, the cattle could not be removed from the ranch by means of the air—such an idea is altogether too wild for consideration. But it strikes

inc that the only possible field for investigation is this Northern boundary."

Buck Mason nodded.

"That's the way I got thinkin'," he said. "But it didn't do a heap o' good. I reckon we've already explained to you, Mr. Lee, that this boundary is an almighty cliff. Say, you'll sure open your eyes some when you see what we're up against!"

"This cliff does not extend for a great distance?"

"Waal, I ain't sayin' that," replied Buck. "The Northern boundary is fenced in mostly, but ther' air parts wher' barbed wire ain't necessary. I guess ther's about four miles o' cliff. Get me? It kinder rises from th' level ground an' lifts itself to the next world to somethin' like three thousand feet. An' it's sheer, too—without hand or foot-hold for a blamed fly!"

"And there is no opening in this cliff?"

"Not a trace o' one."

"What lies beyond?"

"The Rocky Mountains," replied Buck grimly. "I guess I've handed out this information before. Jest over the Rockies ther's a valley with the Bar S sittin' plumb in the middle of it. Say, that's an almighty fine ranch, an' probably the next best to this one in the hull o' Montana. Old Man Travers is the owner, but he don't reckon to keep his cow-punchers for more than a season—he's kinder mean. Say, he's that mean he don't even feed hisself enough! But we don't need to go inter them details."

"No, of course not," said Nelson Lee. "Do you know Mr. Travers?"

"Sure. He gets around sometimes," replied Buck. "But it's a matter o' sixty miles from here to the Bar S Ranch. Old Man Travers and Big Jim Farman are kinder friendly, an' at times they do business together."

"Sixty miles?" repeated Nelson Lee curiously.

"That's what I said, sir, an' I reckon I didn't say a yard too much," replied Mason. "Y' see, in order t' hit Bar S you've got to go around to t' Little Creek Valley and then through the foothills on the other side."

"There's no direct way across?" asked Nelson Lee.

Buck looked astonished.

"Gee!" he ejaculated. "Ain't that enough?"

He pointed straight ahead to the rugged mountain range which arose in the distance ahead like some stupendous barrier rearing its peaks to the outermost ends of space—as, indeed, it was.

Buck Mason's gesture was eloquent. It indicated quite plainly how impossible it was for a mere human being to cross that mighty expanse of snow covered peaks and glaciers. And, as I looked at the cloud-enshrouded summits, I realised how puny and unimportant I was compared to this masterpiece of nature.

"No, sir, ther's no way through them mountains," said Buck. "Mebbe you're figgerin' that our lost cattle hes found its way to the Bar S outfit? Guess you're plumb wrong, Mr. Lee. In order to reach the Bar S Ranch the cattle would need t' pass through two villages, a township, an' the railroad. I don't figger that could be done."

"I agree, Buck, that it is quite impossible," said Nelson Lee. "But can you tell me one thing. How far is it to the Bar S outfit as the crow flies—in a direct line from the Roaring Z northern boundary?"

"Waal, I calculate it would be around twelve miles," replied Buck thoughtfully. "Y' see, the Rockies ain't very wide at this pertic'lar spot. But what they lack in width they make up fer in height."

For some time after this we progressed without much being said. There was no doubt that the problem was a difficult one. No matter which way we turned it seemed out of the question that there could be any solution.

And when we finally arrived at the Northern boundary, we were quite ready to admit the impossibility of an exit into the open country by that means. For some time we had been passing through delightful valleys, for we were now among the foothills, and growing nearer and nearer to the boundary line of the ranch.

The scenery was enchanting.

The mystery of the hills filled me with a sense of my own insignificance. We found ourselves passing along with a glorious expanse of wide valleys in view. Most of them were bounded by the great incline of wood-clad hills. And all this seemed to go on endlessly in a series of green valleys and streams.

Belts of woodland were on the

immonse hill sides, filled with deep and mysterious shadows. As I well knew, the majority of these woods were virgin forest and had never been trodden by the human foot.

And, above all, rose the alabaster peaks, dazzling the eye and bewildering the senses. They seemed so absolutely stupendous.

In the valleys the colours were delightful—every shade of green one could imagine, and quite unscorched by the glaring sun of the prairie. There were pastures in these valleys which would have filled the heart of any British farmer with sheer joy. Water abounded in plenty—rippling creeks and meandering streams. And here and there arose the woodland bluffs.

It was one great panorama of exquisite beauty, and everything artistic within me thrilled with the whole scene. Even Buck Mason, hard-headed and practical, was subdued into silence by the glories of the valleys.

And presently, after mounting a grass-covered hill, we turned round a belt of woodland which had obscured the immediate view ahead. But now it opened out before us, and we were astonished to find that, a mile further on, the ranch was absolutely barred.

The effect was most curious. We had not anticipated anything of this kind, and I stared blankly.

To the right and the left lay a valley, with dense masses of forest crowding all exits. And directly in front there arose a cliff. And it was a cliff which filled me with a sense something like fear. It seemed impossible—beyond all reason.

Sheer, it rose—straight up in jagged facets into the heavens for a distance which could not have been less than two thousand five hundred feet. It overshadowed everything, and the summit of the cliff was just as rocky and jagged as the base.

"My only hat!" I muttered.

I continued to stare. And now I understood the drift of Buck Mason's remarks. The very thought of the missing cattle being got away from the ranch by this method was ludicrous. This cliff was a portion of the Northern boundary. To the right and the left, beyond those forests, the ordinary barbed wire boundary stretched away—and this, of course, was guarded by the ranch watchers.

Why was it necessary to guard this cliff?

Nothing human could scale it, and the idea of cattle being spirited away beyond this tremendous barrier was not to be thought of. The cliff rose from the level ground, and for three or four hundred feet up it was slightly overhanging, so that nothing living—of the animal world, at least—could climb it.

Of hand-hold or foot-hold there was not the slightest sign—no opening, no crevice. It was an impassable barrier.

"We are certainly up against it," remarked Lord Dorrimore calmly. "Lee, old man, there's no need for us to go any further. Nothing living could have crossed this terrific precipice."

"You kind of—understand?" asked Buck.

"Yes, I think I do," said Nelson Lee. "And I appreciate all that you have told me, Buck. I can quite realise how impossible it is for three thousand head of cattle to have been removed from the ranch over this boundary."

"I figgered that it would be just as well for you to get busy examinin' this little chunk o' rock," said Buck Mason. "Say, Mr. Lee, ther' ain't another boundary like this hyar in the hull State of Montana. Guards? I'll allow it would be a fool game settin' guards to watch this piece of country."

We went on and drew nearer and nearer to the great cliff—until, at last, we were under its very base. Dismounting, we left our horses grazing in a rich pasture, and then walked forward.

I had never seen anything so imposing as this in all my life. It was almost more than the imagination could take in at once, and it is impossible for me to describe the tremendous grandeur of the whole scene.

Standing there we were all lost in silent wonder.

Gazing upwards, I could see into the far far distance of the sky. And still the cliff rose—sheer, rocky and all powerful. It inspired me with awe, and somehow, I felt that when I spoke I should do so in a whisper.

Away to the west lay the valley, with the great forests barring all further view. It was the same to the east. We seemed to be hemmed in—enclosed in this peaceful valley with all further progress barred.

This was all a part of the ranch

pasture land, and the herds were allowed to stray here as they wished—until, of course, the regular roundups took place. In all probability no employees of the ranch came to this section of the property once in a month. There was no reason for them to come, since it was a cul-de-sac. There was no way beyond, and all one could do was to turn back and retrace one's steps.

As for the idea of setting a watch at this section of the boundary, it struck me as being ridiculous. Looking on the ground, I could see the faint marks and traces caused by cattle, indicating that a herd or two had wandered into this valley during the recent weeks.

Nelson Lee was looking at the ground, too—intently, and with more interest than seemed to be absolutely necessary. Lord Dorrimore looked about him with casual interest—not that he had no eye for the beauty of the general scenery.

"Waal, Mr. Lee, I'm kinder figgerin' that we'd best tote along to another section of the ranch," said Buck Mason. "It ain't no sort o' use hangin' around here. You've seen all there is to see, I fancy, and we don't need to waste no time. I'm guessin' that you're satisfied with this examination?"

"In a way, yes," replied Nelson Lee slowly. "It was important that I should come, and I now have quite an excellent idea of the situation. In a few minutes we shall proceed Westwards, and I shall take great interest in looking at the other boundaries. The scenery here, Buck, is quite wonderful."

The ranch foreman grunted.

"I ain't great on scenery, sir," he observed. "Guess I'm a busy man, an' if I was to spend my time admirin' all the pretty valleys on this hyar ranch—waal, ther' wouldn't be a heap of work done. Guess a man gets kind of saturated with all these beauties. When you're seein' 'em for the first time they come forward and hit you. I'll allow that, but I've seen most everythin' in this region."

He walked away towards his horse, and Lord Dorrimore followed him. Nelson Lee, however, went nearer to the great cliff face, with me in close attendance. We were now about a hundred yards away from our companions, and Nelson Lee was still very interested in the ground, for his gaze was cast downwards.

"Can you see anything interesting, sir?" I asked.

"I am merely making a thorough examination, Nipper—nothing else," replied Lee. "Obviously, it is impossible for the cattle to have been removed across this boundary. Sometimes the obvious is not the truth."

"But it must be in this case, guv'nor."

"Yes, of course," said Nelson Lee absently. "Upon my word! What an extraordinary cliff! It seems to stretch into the very Heavens!"

We both stood there gazing upwards. We could see for hundreds of feet, for we were just beyond the overhanging portion. Jagged ledges and jutlings could be seen above that portion of the cliff which was bare and smooth. Again I felt that same sensation of awe—a sensation which could not be shaken off. The rugged wildness of this scenery positively took hold of one.

Nelson Lee looked down at the ground again, and then went down on one knee. I strolled away, expecting that he was coming after me. Finding that he did not do so, I glanced back. What made me do so, I don't know, but something prompted me to turn my gaze upwards—to that overpowering cliff. It held me—it fascinated me in an extraordinary manner.

And then my heart leapt into my mouth.

Even as I watched, I saw a piece of the solid rock detach itself from the cliff face five or six hundred feet above. It leaned forward slowly, leisurely, and then fell—down, down, accompanied by a shower of fragments.

And Nelson Lee was standing on the exact spot where the mass would fall.

I tried to shout, and I tried to move. But I was held by some unseen power. My tongue stuck, and I stood there helpless. It seemed to me that an hour must have passed, but actually, it was barely a single second.

A thousand thoughts flashed through my brain.

That piece of rock, apparently so small, weighed ten or twelve tons. Even if it missed Nelson Lee, the shattering fragments would instantly kill him—supposing that he stood ten yards off the point of contact.

But it wouldn't miss—it was coming straight down on to him, and he would be crushed to atoms. The guv'nor knew

nothing—no sound had come from that rock as one might have supposed. It had simply detached itself from the face of the cliff in a ghostly, noiseless way. It was positively uncanny.

And then, when my lungs felt like bursting, I found my voice and recovered the use of my limbs.

"Guv'nor!" I screamed, hurling myself forward.

Nelson Lee twirled round.

"Good Heavens!" he ejaculated. "What on earth is the matter?"

"Run—run!" I shrieked wildly. "The rock—above your head—— Oh, can't you see it, sir?"

I was still running forward—right into the danger zone, but I didn't care. I only knew that the guv'nor was in awful peril, and not the faintest thought of danger occurred to me. This being so, there was nothing plucky in my action.

Nelson Lee glanced upwards and started. The huge mass of rock was practically upon him. All this, of course, had occupied merely a few seconds of time. He ran forward, half-stumbled on a piece of stone, recovered his balance, and then I reached him.

Grabbing him by the arm, I simply dragged him forward. Lord Dorrimore and Buck Mason were running towards us, but they had been too far distant in the first place to take any action in this unexpected drama.

Cra-a-ash!

A deafening, ear-splitting roar sounded behind us—a crash such as I seldom heard. And, as Nelson Lee and I ran, our backs were pelted by thousands of tiny fragments—fragments which penetrated our clothing and which bit deeply into our flesh. But we hardly noticed them at the time. We went on blindly, and then, at last, turned back.

There was very little change in the appearance of the spot where Nelson Lee had just stood.

Merely a piled up heap of broken fragments of rock, and a thousand smaller fragments strewn round in a wider circle. Over all there hung a slight dusty haze. The great cliff face was as before, no change being apparent.

It had been one of the narrowest escapes imaginable.

"By gad!" shouted Lord Dorrimore, rushing up, panting. "I thought it was all up with you, Lee, that rock was coming down——"

"Yes, I know," interrupted Nelson Lee, breathing hard. "Thanks, to Nipper, I am still alive. Nipper, my boy, it was you who saved me from this ghastly death, and I don't know what to say——"

"Oh, dry up, guv'nor," I said, feeling my legs tenderly. "I didn't do anything—only yelled. I saw that piece of rock come away from the cliff. It didn't seem big up there, and it just leaned forward, hesitated for a moment, and then fell—without making a sound."

"Yes, I know that," said Nelson Lee. "Had there been any sound I should have been warned. It is providential that you were watching me, Nipper. Upon my soul! We didn't escape scathless, after all."

"Rather not," I said. "I've got two or three nasty cuts on the back of my legs. Do you happen to have your medicine case on you, guv'nor? You've got some ripping plaster in there, and it would come in jolly handy."

Nelson Lee was carrying his medicine case—a compact little thing no bigger than an ordinary pocket-book, but filled up with a hundred and one useful articles to be used in cases of first aid.

Before long our cuts were examined and washed, and for this purpose we retired to the bank of a little brook near by. Lee had two very nasty cuts, and I suffered from several jags and grazes. But after we had been patched we felt far more comfortable.

"Guess that's almighty strange," said Buck Mason thoughtfully. "I've been thinkin' some, Mr. Lee. I've been thinkin' a heap. Say, I can't understand the thing nohow. Why did that piece of rock fall?"

"Merely a natural phenomenon," said Lord Dorrimore. "Just a peculiar coincidence, I suppose, although it was deucedly unfortunate that Lee was underneath at the time. Nature does some bally strange things, by gad!"

Nelson Lee looked up.

"Was it Nature?" he asked keenly. "I've been wondering, Dorrie. Was it Nature—or was it caused by human agency? I am well aware of the fact that my life has been threatened since I arrived on this ranch. Did that piece of rock fall by accident or design?"

Buck Mason stared.

"Design?" he repeated. "Why, say,

Mr. Lee, I guess you're sure sidetracked. Gee! Design? Are you figgerin' that some durned guys are up on that cliff face, an' that they helped that piece of rock to get busy on its fall?"

"Hardly that, Buck," replied Nelson Lee. "But there may be other ways unknown to us at the moment. I am fairly certain that the thing was an accident, but it was a most peculiar one—and I shall bear it in mind."

We soon left the spot, and as we passed out of view, I glanced back, and wondered if we had indeed had the whole place to ourselves. I wondered whether any enemies had been lurking about.

In any case, we were not likely to forget that enormous cliff.

CHAPTER III.

THREE UP A TREE!

EDWARD OSWALD HANDFORTH idly kicked at a weed as he walked.

"We're having a ripping time out here," he remarked pleasantly. "One of the best holidays I can remember, in fact. And we've got two or three weeks yet. My hat! We shall have some fine times before we have to go back."

"Rather!" agreed Church. "I understand that we shall go through to California after staying a fortnight here—to Mr. Farman's real home. This place is like a giddy palace, but Farman says it's only a rabbit hutch compared to the big Farman mansion in California."

"I'm satisfied with this, anyway," said McClure. "And what do you think of the Happy Bunch?"

"A bright lot of lads, if you like!" grinned Church. "Why, they're more full of japes than the chaps at St. Frank's. It wouldn't be a bad idea to work one or two wheezes on them—they'd take it in good part."

Handforth nodded promptly.

"Topping!" he said. "We can work off some of the old games, too—they'll be new to this crowd. By George! We can have no end of fun! Now, what we've got to do is to think out something particularly good so that we'll catch them on the jump the first time."

"That's the wheeze!" said Church. "They've spoofed us once or twice, you know, and it would only be returning the compliment. I think this idea of mine is pretty good, what do you say?"

Handforth stared.

"Idea of yours?" he repeated bluntly.

"Yes."

"Why, you silly ass, it was mine!" roared Handforth. "Just like you to go and take the credit!"

Church nearly exploded.

"Well, my only panama!" he gasped. "Your idea! Didn't I say that the Happy Bunch are full of jokes and japes. And didn't I suggest that it would be rich to work one or two wheezes on them——"

"Oh, you make me tired!" interrupted Handforth. "You know as well as I do that it's my idea. Why, I suggested that we should work some of the old wheezes, didn't I? Deny it if you can!"

"I don't deny it, but——"

"There you are—what did I say?" demanded Handforth triumphantly. "And then you have the nerve to claim the giddy credit!"

"Dash it all Handy, it was Church who first suggested it," put in McClure. "It's only fair——"

"Oh, go on—I expected it!" snapped Handforth bitterly. "You chaps always back one another up against me! Fine kind of chums, ain't you? All you can do is to conspire together and rob me of all the credit when something really decent is thought of. I suggested that we should jape the Happy Bunch——"

"You didn't!" snorted Church. "You said—— Yarooooh!"

"He didn't say that!" grinned McClure.

Church sat down quite abruptly in the long grass, Handforth's fist having been brought round in one of those unexpected lightning punches of his. The argument ceased from that moment. Church had no wish to continue, and he allowed his aggressive leader to take all the credit.

Not that Church was afraid of Handforth—far from it. But he and McClure had long since learned that the only possible way of retaining peace in the camp was to give Handforth his own way.

The three chums of Study D were out for a stroll in the Roaring Z valley. It was evening—quite early, in fact, and the evening meal would not be

ready for another hour or so. The Happy Bunch had not yet returned for the day, and so Handforth and Co. were out for a stroll.

They had proceeded some little way up the valley, and were quite out of sight of the dazzling white ranch house and its attendant barns and stables and outhouses. All living habitation was hidden from them by a belt of woodland.

Just to their left the river flowed serenely upon its course, and there were rich pastures on either side. The whole picture, under the clear blue evening sky, was singularly charming and attractive.

Nothing, indeed, could have been more alluring, but Handforth and Co. were not particularly struck. They had no eye for scenic beauty. Away in their rear a few cows were contentedly grazing in a meadow, but this was the only sign of life within sight. The faint barking of a dog came across the trees. And all around there sounded the incessant humming of insects, for the evening was warm.

"Now that you chaps have recovered your giddy sense we'll go on talking," said Handforth. "Sorry about your nose, Church—I didn't mean to hurt you. But you're such an obstinate ass, you know."

Church breathed hard

"I'm not the only one!" he muttered.

"What?"

"Oh, let's talk about the new wheeze!" said Church.

"If you're going to mumble insults ——"

"I wasn't mumbling insults, you duffer!" said Church, in exasperation. "What the dickens is the matter with you, Handy? You're as touchy as a gunpowder fuse! The best thing we can do is to talk about that wheeze—of yours!"

"Yes, perhaps it is," agreed Handforth. "Now what we've got to do is to think of a really good jape, and we'll work it this evening. By George! It'll be first-class to spoof those giddy cowboys!"

"Rather!"

"It'll need to be something pretty cute, though," went on Handforth. "They're wide awake, and it would be simply ghastly if the joke was turned against us in the end."

"I've got an idea——" began Church.

"Keep it!" interrupted Handforth politely. "Who wants your ideas? I'm running this affair, and if there's any idea to be used it'll be mine!"

"Then it'll be a frost!" snapped Church.

"Are you looking for another slosh?" asked Handforth darkly. "My ideas are terrific—everybody knows that. But just because the other chaps in the Remove are jealous, my wheezes ain't always used. Jealousy is a horrible thing. Now, don't speak to me for a bit. I want to concentrate!"

Church was inclined to ask "what with?", but he thought it wiser not to do so—his nose was somewhat painful still. And the three juniors strolled along with their gaze bent downwards, all of them thinking hard. Handforth looked as though the whole worry of the world was upon his shoulders. His brows were knitted, and there was an absent expression in his eyes.

Church and McClure did not concentrate to such an extent. Indeed, they could have suggested all sorts of japes—really good ones—but they thought it better not to do so.

They decided, on the other hand, to wait and to hear what their great leader had to say. If they approved of his scheme they would help him to put it into execution. If they thought it dotty—as in all probability it would be they would take good care to sneak off somewhere and leave Handforth to work the wheeze on his own. They didn't want to be connected with a frost.

After walking about a hundred yards, Church happened to glance up. He was in the act of speaking, but the words failed to come, and his face blanched. Involuntarily he clutched at McClure's sleeve in one hand, and at Handforth's sleeve with the other.

"Good—good Heavens!" he muttered hoarsely.

"What on earth's the matter?" asked McClure, startled.

He glanced at his chum. Church was staring straight before him, his eyes fixed, and his face pale and drawn. And McClure could see that he was shaking visibly.

"Great Scott!" said McClure. "You're trembling——"

"Look!" whispered Church hoarsely. "Oh, look—can't you see?"

McClure glanced round and jumped.

His breath came in a gasp, and his face was robbed of its colour, too. For he saw something which scared him more than he had ever been scared before. Both Church and McClure were typical English boys with any amount of grit and plenty of faults. But the object which they saw before them now made them shake and tremble, and their courage oozed completely away.

Not fifty yards distant, standing perfectly still, was a great shaggy animal—an animal which the juniors had seen in pictures and at the Zoo. It was ugly and clumsy—in point of fact, a huge grizzly bear!

Church and McClure weren't sure whether they had seen an actual grizzly in the flesh, but they had heard of such bears in the region of the Rocky Mountains. There had been talk of grizzly bears, indeed, in the drawing-room only the previous evening.

And both the juniors recognised this great brute at once.

It was the fierce, savage, terrible grizzly. And it was within a stone's throw of them, having probably appeared from behind a clump of trees, which were just in its rear.

Handforth and Co., strolling along deep in thought, had not noticed it until now. Indeed, Handforth was still ignorant of its presence. He was lost in thought, and he had not heard the ejaculations from his chums.

"Great Scott!" panted Church. "It's a grizzly!"

"Yes, I can see it!" said McClure, with chattering teeth. "They're awful things! They can kill you in half-a-tick! If it gets hold of one of us—— Handy! Oh, Handy, you ass——"

"Dry up—I'm thinking!" said Handforth curtly.

"But—but look——"

"Confound it, how can I think when you're making such a noise?" roared Handforth. "If you speak again I'll biff you!"

Church and McClure had their gaze glued upon the bear. They panted hard when they saw that the grizzly was now slowly advancing, and that it had reared itself upon its hind legs—a certain sign that it was about to attack.

"Look!" screamed Church. "It's coming, Handy!"

That yell awoke Handforth fully.

"Great pip!" he exclaimed. "What's the matter with you? What the—— How—— My goodness!"

The words trailed away, and Handforth clutched at his chums. Then, the next moment, the power of action came to them. They turned and fled—they ran as though a thousand demons were after them.

And the grizzly, uttering a peculiar growl, broke into a lumbering trot, and followed.

It was speedy, too, and Handforth, glancing back, received a shock.

"It's gaining, I believe!" he said chokingly. "Quick! I know what to do. We'll climb up a tree!"

"But it'll follow us——"

"They can't climb!" gasped Handforth. "We shall be safe there—safe until somebody comes to the rescue! This one'll do—over to the left."

Helter-skelter, they pelted over the ground. There was a big tree within easy reach—a tree which offered excellent facilities for climbing. Handforth reached it first, and it must be said in his favour that he did not leap into the branches. He waited until his chums came up.

"You first!" he said sharply.

"But——"

"Climb!" hissed Handforth fiercely.

Both Church and McClure leapt at the tree at once. The grizzly was now within a few yards, and Handforth's action was really plucky. He saw that his chums were in the tree before he attempted to climb on his own account.

With a leap he reached a branch, swung himself up, and sat astride, well out of reach.

And there, panting heavily, the three juniors remained for a time. This was the only branch they could use, for they discovered that the others were weak, many parts of the tree being rotten.

The position of Handforth and Co. was somewhat precarious, although they did not like to acknowledge it just then. The branch swayed, and gave one or two ominous creaks. But, so far, it was holding the combined weight of the trio.

And below, pawing at the trunk, was the grizzly!

It came up, and the juniors looked down into its beady eyes. The great beast looked strangely harmless as it stood there on its hind legs, gazing upwards; but Handforth and Co. knew

what it would mean if it seized one of them.

The bear opened its mouth, and a tongue came out and rolled about for a moment or two. Then it blinked at the juniors—a wicked kind of blink.

"Thank goodness we got into this tree!" said Church huskily. "Oh, my hat! We ought to have been told that there might be danger of meeting a grizzly! Just think what would have happened if it had caught——"

"Don't!" muttered Handforth. "And, after all, there's no reason why we should have been warned. I don't suppose these horrible things come down from the mountains very often—this may be the first for years. It's just a matter of chance that we are the first to see it!"

They continued to stare down, fascinated; and the bear, after a minute or two, gave a fresh growl, and then got down on its four legs. It lumbered round and round the tree. The juniors hoped fervently that it would go away, but it didn't do anything of the kind.

It sat down, and was apparently prepared to wait.

"By George!" said Handforth. "We're treed!"

It gave him a certain amount of pleasure to say this. He had read about travellers being treed by a bear, but he had never thought such an experience would befall him. And he pictured himself telling all the others about it later. And what a yarn it would be to take up to St. Frank's!

And by now the juniors were getting over their scare. They were safe; they were out of reach of the terrible beast. But there was no denying that the branch upon which they sat was rather unsafe. As Handforth shifted his position there was another significant little crack.

"Don't move, you ass!" panted Church. "We shall all be down! If this branch goes, there'll be a horrible tragedy! I—I don't think we're safe, even now!"

Handforth looked about him.

"I'd better shift," he said. "There's another branch just over there—it's strong enough to hold me, anyway. We shall all be safe then."

"Supposing you fall down?" asked McClure fearfully.

"Rats! I sha'n't fall!"

Handforth got up, and cautiously edged his way to the trunk. Then he stepped on to the opposite branch—at least, he meant to do so. But, probably because he was taking extra care, his foot slipped.

The next moment he fell headlong, clutching vainly at the air. He just managed to touch the branch, but did not gain a hold; then, uttering a startled gasp, he fell to the ground, alighting with a bump.

"Handy!" shouted Church, in horror.

McClure was unable to speak. He clung to the tree branch, gazing down in fascinated terror. Both he and Church expected to see Handforth seized by the bear without any delay—they expected to see him killed on the spot.

But Handforth leapt to his feet with amazing agility.

And, even as the grizzly was raising itself on its hind legs, Handforth fled. He simply streaked away across the stretch of grassland like a sprinter in a hundred yards handicap race.

And the bear, after a moment's surprise, started off in pursuit. Church and McClure could see nothing after the first moment or two, because their view was hidden by the thick trees. They scrambled down from their lofty perch, and gazed at one another with pale faces.

"Oh, ain't it awful!" said Church. "Poor old Handy! It'll be all up with him, Clurey! Once that bear gets him, he'll be hugged, and then——"

"Perhaps we can do something!" gasped McClure. "Let's rush away and attract attention!"

They rushed across the grassland in the direction that Handforth and the bear had taken, and as they ran they shouted at the top of their voices. Turning round a clump of thick trees, they saw something which brought them to a sudden, abrupt halt.

Handforth was running still, and making his way towards the barns and stables of the ranch, which were now within full view. And the grizzly bear was just on the point of overtaking its victim.

And then, at the crucial moment, Handforth stumbled.

His foot probably caught in a root, or on some obstruction. He fell face downwards, rolled over, and sat up.

And then, before he had time to draw a breath, the grizzly was upon him. It struck him with one paw, knocked him flat, and then Handforth was at the mercy of the terrible creature!

CHAPTER IV.

THE ARRIVAL OF TEXAS JOSE!

HANDFORTH fully expected that his last minute had come.

The bear stood over him; but, strangely enough, had not caused him any pain or injury, so far. It seemed to be playing with its victim before beginning its terrible work. Handforth attempted to rise, his breath coming and going in heavy gasps; but the bear raised a paw, and forced him back.

"Help!" screamed Handforth wildly. "Oh, help!"

As though by one accord, six heads suddenly appeared. They rose up from behind a grassy bank, about a hundred yards away. Handforth did not see them, since his back was towards that direction—and Handforth, moreover, was fully occupied with the bear.

But Church and McClure, who were some little distance away, plainly saw those six heads, and their relief was tremendous.

"The Happy Bunch!" shouted Church. "Oh, rippin! They must have been stalking the bear, and—and perhaps they'll be in time to save Handy from death—although he's bound to be seriously injured!"

The Happy Bunch rose, and charged to the rescue. They all flourished huge revolvers, and their expressions were grim and grave. They simply descended upon Handforth and the bear like an avalanche.

"Gee whizz!" shouted Square-Deal Reeve. "Guess it's a doggone b'ar!"

"A durned grizzly!" roared Ace-High Peter. "Say, boys, this is wher' we get real busy. I'm figgerin'! Sufferin' rattlesnakes! Guess this hyar stunt sure ought to be took for the all-fired pictures!"

"Hands up!" yelled Twirly Sam. "Say, you yaller dawg of a b'ar—up with them doggasted paws o' yourn!"

And then an amazing thing happened.

The bear, in strict obedience to Twirly's order, rose on its hind legs and raised its paws meekly in the air. Handforth sat up, dazed and bewildered. He was astounded to find himself unhurt—he did not even have a bruise or a scratch. The grizzly, in spite of its size, had treated him gently.

"Guess you're feelin' pretty gay, ain't you?" demanded Square-Deal, addressing the bear severely. "Say, what's the blamed idea o' comin' out hyar an' scarin' them young gents? Ain't you almighty ashamed of yourself, you yaller coyote? I'm guessin' that you feel kinder mean!"

The bear dropped his ears, and hung his head.

"Yup, that there stuff don't affect me none!" went on Square-Deal grimly. "I'm jest handin' out the talk to you that you're a grizzly—a cuss of a b'ar, an' you ain't got no rights to tote around scarin' visitors. Get me? Say, I'm advisin' you right now to vamoose an' the sooner you get a move on the better."

The grizzly bear raised his head again, blinked once or twice, and then lumbered away at a quick jog-trot. The Happy Bunch watched him go, stowing their "guns" away in leisurely fashion.

"Gee! The all-fired ass!" remarked Loco Jack. "Say, I've got a notion walkin' around in my head that——"

"By cripes!" interrupted Two-Gun Milligan. "We don't want to hear none o' your fool notions, Loco. Guess we've got to attend to this young guy what's settin' right hyar at our feet. I'll allow he's kinder mussed up some!"

Handforth rose to his feet, swaying slightly.

"Oh, my goodness!" he said faintly. "I—I thought I was going to be killed, you know! I believe two of my ribs are broken, and I'm probably frightfully injured inside. A bear always causes a lot of damage when he hugs a chap——"

"Say, we're almighty sorry, bo', that you wuz hurt any!" said Square-Deal Reeve. "But I don't reckon you need be afeered any more. No, sir! That b'ar kinder knows what's good fer its health."

"But—but it's amazing!" said Handforth. "I—I didn't know that bears would obey you like that! I thought you were going to shoot it. It'll be dangerous if you let that awful thing roam about the ranch!"

Nelson Lee glanced upwards and started. The huge mass of rock was practically upon him.

"Jumpin' coyotes!" yelled Twirly Sam. "Guess we forgot that, pards! Say, we oughter plug that b'ar good'n proper; it wuz sure up to us to fill its durned hide wi' lead!"

"Aw, gwan!" said Square-Deal witheringly. "Guess you're sure qualified for the Montana State bughouse ——"

"Bughouse?" gasped Handforth.

"Guess that means the lunatic asylum!" grinned Twirly Sam.

"Yup, an' that's whar' you ought to be!" went on Square-Deal. "Fill the b'ar's hide wi' lead! Gee! Ain't you a bright boy? A b'ar's hide is val'able, I'm figgerin', an' it don't do it no sorter good to plug holes through it. No, sir, not on your life!"

Church and McClure had come up by this time, and they were overjoyed to find that Handforth was still whole, and apparently safe and sound. The Happy Bunch scanned the juniors severely.

"Huh! I calc'late you're feelin' pretty good, ain't you?" asked Ace-High Peter. "Mebbe you'll jest explain how you come to be onticin' that durned grizzly on to this ranch? Say, b'ars ain't no sort o' use——"

"We didn't entice it here!" said Church.

"It chased us!" added McClure. "It gave us an awful scare. We—we had to get up a tree, you know, and the bear came and waited for us. Then Handforth fell out, and ran for his life!"

The Happy Bunch made some very peculiar sounds, almost as though they were in danger of choking.

"Say, that was sure excitin'," remarked Square-Deal. "Howsum, no harm ain't been done, so I ain't worryin' none."

"But—but I can't understand it!" said Handforth, feeling himself all over. "The bear did just as you told it!"

"Sure!"

"But—but they don't always do that!"

"Waal, ain't he a real innercent?" said Square-Deal, in surprise. "B'ars are jest the most fool things over! Guess you only gotta be good an' firm, an' they'll eat out o' your hand!"

"Well, I'm blessed!" said Handforth. "If I'd have known that, I should have acted quite differently! But I always thought that bears were fierce things, and that they'd kill you in two ticks if you didn't escape."

"I figger that ther's b'ars an' b'ars," observed Square-Deal. "Now, this hyar b'ar ain't what you'd call a savage brute. No, sirree! Say, he's that tame an' meek he'd sure suck milk out of a babby's bottle! I'm tellin' you right now that we had a hull heap of trouble—trainin' him!"

Handforth gave a violent start.

"Training him?" he echoed

"Yup, bo'!" grinned Twirly. "Gee! It was some job, believe me!"

"But—but——"

"Say, we got guessin' that you young guys needed a sorter nerve test," grinned Square-Deal. "We had a hull heap o' talk, an' we figgered that old Grumpy would fit in real dandy. Say, he's sure an elegant b'ar."

Church found his voice.

"Do—do you mean to say that he's tame?" he gasped.

"Jest about as tame as a day old kitten!" chuckled Two-Gun. "By cripes! I'm allowin' you wus kind o' tested. Get me? An' I'm also allowin' that for tenderfeet you sure gave a slap-up show!"

The Happy Bunch fairly yelled with laughter, and Handforth and Co., looking very red and indignant, stood by. They had just realised that the Happy Bunch had anticipated their own designs. Instead of Handforth and Co. japing the cowboys, the cowboys had japed them.

"You—you awful rotters!" roared Handforth. "Then—then I wasn't in danger at all?"

"Danger?" repeated Square-Deal. "Say, that b'ar wouldn't hurt a baby in it's cradle, an' as fer huggin'—waal, he ain't got no more strength than one o' you guys. Say, he's kind o' got one foot in the grave, bein' as old as a b'ar can be. Teeth? His last tooth dropped out when I wus bein' nussed!"

The other members of the Happy Bunch roared afresh.

"Jumpin' coyotes!" gurgled Twirly. "Say, pards, we'd best vamoose! I've kind o' hunch that there's a wild grizzly b'ar knockin' around!"

"Haw, haw, haw!"

The cowpunchers fairly doubled themselves up, and Handforth and Co. felt as though they would like the earth to open up and swallow them. They had absolutely nothing to say, for the Happy

Bunch had the laugh on them every time.

The bear, of course, was old and harmless—otherwise Square-Deal would never have allowed it to chase the three juniors. As Handforth and Co. afterwards learned, Grumpy was one of the pets of the ranch and it had never been known to harm a soul, having been in captivity all its life. The cowboys had trained it to do all sorts of simple tricks, and this was by no means the first joke they had played with the aid of their ferocious looking pet.

There was only one consolation for Handforth. With perfect truth he would be able to say that he had been face to face with a grizzly bear, and that the bear had actually knocked him down. In recounting the story at St. Frank's Handforth would probably omit to mention that the bear had been tame.

At the moment, however, Handforth was boiling hot with indignation. Exactly what he would have done nobody can say, for at that crucial moment something occurred which made him forget all about the bear and the joke.

The Happy Bunch, laughing uproariously, were also brought back to earth with a jerk. For something approaching a tragedy followed this comedy. Nobody had been expecting the startling occurrence which took place.

Twirly Sam, wondering what Handforth was about to do, was waiting with grinning face for the junior to speak. Then his attention became diverted, and he stared out across the grassland towards the big open space in front of the outbuildings.

And the smile gradually disappeared from Twirly's face, a rather puzzled expression superseded it. He could see the big yard clearly, with the big corrals stretching away beyond.

A horseman was coming up at a gallop, leaving behind him a trail of dust. The fellow on the horse's back was attired in sheepskin chapps, a red shirt, and a wide-brimmed Mexican hat—a rather picturesque individual. And he was tearing up at a break-neck speed.

"Gee! Who's this bunch o' lightnin'?" muttered Twirly.

He noticed, sub-consciously, that Buck Mason was crossing the yard at that moment. The ranch-manager was on foot, and he paused as he heard the approaching horseman. And he realised that something out of the common was taking place. But they were certainly not prepared for what actually did occur.

The horseman pulled up his animal abruptly while he was still about twenty yards distant from Buck. The beast reared as the cruel bit was jerked in his mouth, and then pranced about on the dusty ground.

Deliberately, and with a certain grimness, the horseman drew a huge revolver from his belt. He dropped the muzzle, and fired.

Crack! Crack!

Two shots rang out in rapid succession.

Buck Mason took a step forward, staggered, and then fell, clutching at his own revolver.

Crack! Crack!

Before Buck could even draw his own weapon two further shots rang out. The manager fell to the ground in a limp heap, and lay perfectly still. The horseman whirled round instantly, stowing his own revolver away as he did so.

And then Handforth and Co. were startled by a perfect fusilade of shots. With one accord the Happy Bunch had drawn their guns, and they practically emptied their chambers—but in vain.

The range was too great.

And by now the stranger had disappeared in a cloud of dust. The whole thing was so deliberate that it took the breath away from the juniors. Buck, of course, had not suspected treachery as he waited for the horseman to approach. Those shots had taken him completely by surprise.

"The dog-gone coyote!" roared Square-Deal Reeve fiercely. "He's sure got Buck, boys! Gee! We'll trail that skunk down if we have to ride till we drop!"

"Sure!" shouted the others.

"Guess I wa'an't far wrong!" said Slick Ed gloomily.

"Say, you're liggerin'——"

"Sure—Texas Jose!" said Slick Ed.

The language which the Happy Bunch made use of as they rushed down towards the yard was not precisely of a drawing-room character. They ran as though possessed, and simply threw themselves upon the prostrate form of Buck Mason. Handforth and Co. came up behind, panting, and somewhat scared.

Other juniors were appearing, too, having been attracted by the shots. Mr. Farman and Nelson Lee and Dorrie hurried down from the ranch-house verandah.

Square-Deal's examination was brief.

"Waal?" demanded the others sharply, as he looked up.

"You ain't needin' to buy no wreaths!" said Square-Deal briefly.

"By cripes!" muttered Milligan. "He's—he's alive, I reckon?"

"Sure—an' as jumpy as a puppy, too!" said Reeve. "Guess he only needs a duckin' in the water trough to put him to rights. Say, boys, them breeds never wus no good with a gun," he added disgustedly. He filled a bucket with water, and then dashed the contents into Buck Mason's face.

The result was rapid.

The manager gasped, sat up, and looked about him. His left ear was bleeding rather badly, and a trail of blood was trickling down his right cuff. On his forehead, too, there was a livid, ugly graze.

Buck took in the situation at a glance.

"Thanks, boys," he said shakily. "I needed that real bad. Say, did you take a look at the guy who handed out this cargo of lead?"

"I've got a notion he was Texas Jose," said Loco Jack.

"The murderin' coyote!" rapped out Buck. "You're sure right, Loco. I wasn't figgerin' on that play of his until he hauled out his gun. Guess it was too late for me to draw then. The guy had plugged me!"

"Air you hurt bad?" asked Twirly Sam.

"Aw, hurt nothin'!" replied Buck, struggling to his feet. "I'll allow I've got a hole drilled through my ear, an' another through my arm—but they ain't o' much account. That skunk hadn't got no sort of aim!"

It was a great relief to find that Buck Mason's injuries were merely superficial. They were probably very painful, but he made light of them, and scouted the idea that he should be patched up.

But Mr. Farman, who was on the scene by this time, insisted.

"We can't afford to take any risks with you, Buck," said the millionaire. "I'm thinkin' you're the most valuable man on the ranch, and we need you mighty badly. Guess you'd better let Mr. Lee doctor you!"

Buck Mason went off towards the house, and very shortly afterwards he was made comfortable by Nelson Lee, who bound up his injured arm, patched his ear; and placed plaster over the nasty furrow on his forehead. Buck was feeling much better afterwards, but there was a grim light in his eye.

"I'll—I'll get that blamed cuss before I've done!" he declared fiercely. "Say, what do you make of it? Comin' right along here an' lettin' loose a shower o' lead! If he shows up again—wal, I'm reckonin' that Texas Jose will be needin' jest one thing."

"What's that?" smiled Nelson Lee.

"A durned big hole in the ground!" replied Buck Mason. "We ain't got no sort o' use for reptiles of his sort!"

"It's all very well to talk like that, Buck, but I'm not hankering after a shooting on this ranch," said Mr. Farman, shaking his head. "If you are compelled to plug him—well, that's a different thing. And we've got to understand that this Texas Jose is a menace."

"Gee! He don't scare me none, chief!" growled Buck.

"I've often wondered what would scare you," returned the rancher. "But I don't figure that's the point. This fellow, Jose, threatened to get around the ranch and raise blazes. Well, he's sure started on that stuff. And it seems likely that he'll keep up the game."

"I ain't guessin' he'll keep it up for long!" said the manager. "The boys are out on the trail now, an' it wouldn't surprise me a piece if they came back with the breed on the end of a line."

As events turned out, however, this much to be desired event did not materialise. Square-Deal Reeve and his companions returned when darkness had practically enveloped the ranch. They were gloomy and impatient, for their long ride had been futile. Texas Jose had eluded them.

But it was not to be long before the half-breed again appeared!

CHAPTER V.

THE TERROR OF ROARING Z.

"BEGAD! I'm feelin' frightfully depressed this mornin', dear old boys," observed Sir Montie Tregellis-West. "That affair last night has made everybody feel shockin'ly off colour—it has, really."

"Particularly Square-Deal Reeve and his pals," said Tommy Watson. "They can't very well be called the Happy Bunch now. They're all miserable."

"But why?" asked Bob Christine.

"Buck Mason wasn't badly hurt. I saw him ten minutes ago, and he was looking quite himself."

I nodded.

"Perhaps so," I agreed. "But that's not the reason for the Happy Bunch's black looks. They're upset because they've failed to capture that murderous Mexican chap. After all, we're having quite a lot of excitement on this ranch."

"Rather!" agreed Tommy. "You've had more than us. What about that whacking great stone falling, and nearly killing you and Mr. Lee? By the look of things we shall have some more adventures, too."

We were all sitting on the verandah, awaiting breakfast. The morning was so hot and sunny that we had come down early, and were now having a chat about things in general. Nothing fresh, so far as we could learn, had occurred during the night.

Umlosi was lying back in a big deck chair, dreamily gazing out across the corrals. Probably he was thinking about his own country in far away Africa. So far there had been very little need for Umlosi's peculiar attainments, and he was leading a life of laziness and luxury—which didn't exactly suit him. He would have much preferred to be hard at work of some kind—on a difficult trail, for example, with some dangerous adventure at the end of it.

But on the whole, he was content.

"What do you think of everything, Umlosi?" I inquired.

"It is difficult for me to express my thoughts, O my son," replied Umlosi gravely. "I am like a fish that is out of water. These vast plains which thou art pleased to call prairies, are strange and wondrous. It is difficult for me to understand all these strange doings. Even so, I am enjoying myself. Wau! Could it be otherwise while I am surrounded by N'Kose, my father, Umtagati, the great wizard, and thyself? I am with friends, O Manzie, and I am happy."

"Don't you feel that you'd like to be doing something?"

The Kutana Chief smiled.

"Thou hast touched me upon what thou wouldst call a spot that is raw!" he replied. "Ay, Manzie, I am even as the scythe which has been laid aside—I am growing rusty with disuse, my son, and my muscles are flabby."

"Rats!" I grinned. "You can't pull that stuff on me, as one of these Western chaps would say."

"Thy words are strange and wonderful, my son," said Umlosi. "It is new to me that I am pulling anything. I would welcome the chance of setting forth on a travel—no matter where to. Wau! My blood is even the same as thine—it is always surging through my veins, and urging me onwards. I would be on the trail, Manzie, but such cannot be. Mayhap a chance may come ere long. One never knows, and my thoughts are my own."

I looked at Umlosi keenly.

"That means something, you old bounder," I said. "And I'm not going to accept that, either. Your thoughts are your own, eh? What's the idea of that? Have you got an idea that we shall soon be on the move?"

Umlosi shook his head.

"My tongue is even as the running brook," he said gruffly. "I have allowed words to pass that should not have been spoken. But since that is the case, O, my son, I will go further. I have dreamed, and the mists have come before mine eyes."

"The red mists?" I asked, with a chuckle. "When you get a red mist, Umlosi, it's generally an indication that gore is to flow pretty freely, and that excitement is to abound in the land. Out with it!"

"Thou art persistent," said Umlosi. "I will tell thee this, Manzie. I have seen strange things in my dreams. Thou and I and Umtagati and N'Kose—ay, and others also—are on a long trail. We are walking forward in wondrous valleys, and through dense woods. We travel down great rivers. And we are on a mission of grim import. We travel thousands of miles, Manzie. But this is not yet—many days will pass ere these events come to pass. Thou art impressed, O my son," added Umlosi, with a smile. "Wau! Thou must heed me not. My dreams are even as the wind. Perchance they mean nothing."

"And perchance they mean a whole lot," I said. "Anyhow, Umlosi, I am going to bear what you said in mind. It's my opinion that there'll be something doing before long. I've had a notion that way for a day or two, and this talk with you has only strengthened it. Anyhow, we'll be on the lookout."

Umlosi smiled, shook his head, and lay back.

I returned to the other fellows, who were just getting out of their seats. And together we left the verandah and strolled down towards the yards. We were all rather anxious to see Square-Deal Reeve, or one of his friends. We wanted to know if any fresh news had come to hand regarding Texas Jose.

While some little distance off we could see Square-Deal Reeve and Twirly Sam and Two-Gun Milligan chatting together outside the door of the bunkhouse. But before we could hail them our attention was distracted.

A man on a horse was coming down the trail from the prairie, and there was something peculiar about his attitude—something which caused me to pause and look closely. The three members of the Happy Bunch were also paying full attention.

"What's wrong with that chap?" I asked, frowning. "It's Loco Jack, I believe, and he doesn't ride like that as a rule."

"Feeling tired, perhaps," suggested Watson.

But this was not the solution, as I well knew. Loco Jack was bending forward in his saddle, holding tightly on to the "horn" with one hand. His other arm was hanging limply by his side. And in his whole appearance there was something which suggested physical weakness and exhaustion.

As he approached the yard, Square-Deal and the others ran forward. Loco Jack's horse came to a halt, and as it did so the rider slipped sideways out of the saddle, and fell backwards to the ground, where he lay nearly still.

"Jumpin' coyotes!" shouted Square-Deal Reeve. "Say, what in blazes——"

"Guess he's hurt some!" muttered Twirly Sam.

They ran to their friend and bent over him. The cowboy had his eyes open, and he looked up with a twisted kind of smile. And the others, with startled glances, saw that Loco's shirt front was ominously stained.

"Gee! Guess I'm kinder pufferated, boys!" whispered Loco Jack faintly.

"Holy Mackinaw!" exclaimed Square-Deal, between his teeth. "What's this mean, pard?"

"I'm plugged, I guess!"

"Yup, but——"

"He got me, boys—got me proper!" whispered Loco. "The durned wall-eyed son of a yaller dawg! Reckon I'm fadin' right out. Howsum, I've had a tidy run. Say, I'm figgerin' that you'll write to my ma, way back in Nevada ——"

"Aw, don't be a doggone mutt!" snapped Square-Deal. "You ain't hittin' the long trail yet, Loco. Gee! We'd be sorter mussed up real bad without you an' yer notions! I'm guessin' that you met Texas Jose?"

A spasm passed across Loco's pained face.

"You're wrong, pard," he muttered. "Nope, I didn't meet him—the cussed skunk plugged me from behind. Hidin' in a tree, he wuz, and I knowed nothin' until I heard his gun, and I felt my vitals stingin' some. Say, I—I——"

His voice trailed away. While he was speaking he had been lifted up, and the cowboys carried him swiftly but carefully into the bunkhouse. I looked at the juniors, who were all pale-faced and scared. We had heard everything.

"What—what does it mean?" asked Pitt huskily.

"That rotter of a half-breed shot Loco Jack in the back," I replied. "Didn't you hear? I expect Texas Jose was waiting in ambush and dropped on Loco in that way. He's miles away by this time."

"Oh, my goodness!" exclaimed Fatty Little. "I—I believe the poor chap's dead. I—I sha'n't be able to eat any breakfast——"

"Dry up about your beastly grub!" snorted Handforth. "Even when a chap's been shot, you're still thinking of your giddy inside. This is awful, you chaps. There's no telling what'll happen after this."

We were all feeling very grave and upset. But things were not quite so bad as we had feared. For, a little later on, after we had returned to the house, Buck Mason came up and reported that Loco Jack was still unconscious, but in no actual danger.

Hearing that he had been killed, this news came as a great relief.

The cowboy had been shot through the shoulder, and the wound was a nasty one, but would not lead to fatal results unless unexpected complications set in. There was every reason to believe, in fact, that Loco Jack, with his strong

constitution, would make a rapid recovery.

Round the breakfast-table nothing else was discussed except the murderous visit of Texas Jose to the ranch. We were all angry and indignant, and more than one of us suggested that parties should be sent out to round up the half-breed.

Mr. Farman was gravely concerned.

"This has worried me a heap, Mr. Lee." he declared. "I didn't reckon on any play of this kind. I intended to drive into Rattlesnake Bend this afternoon, and I'll make it my business to call on the sheriff. It's up to him to get his posse together and scour the country until this white-livered outlaw is captured."

"Oh, dad, you must be careful," exclaimed Connie anxiously. "Texas Jose would rather kill you than anybody else, and he might be lying in wait on the trail——"

"Say, little gal, don't you worry that pretty little head of yours," interrupted Big Jim. "I guess I can look after myself—and, say, I don't reckon to hide myself from this tarnation Mexican."

"The best thing we can do is to get a party up of our own," suggested Lord Dorrimore. "By gad! It would be rather excitin', and it would give us somethin' to do, too! I'm infernally keen on trying conclusions with this outlaw fellow. And Umlosi would give half his bally kingdom for a man hunt!"

"Wau! Thy words are words of wisdom," said Umlosi gravely.

However, nothing was done that morning. The Happy Bunch were out—five of them—scouring the entire ranch. It would be better to wait for them to return, and make their report, before taking any further action.

There was a certain amount of indignation among the juniors. For they had been strictly forbidden to venture out. They were to keep within sight of the ranch house all the time, and under no circumstances were they to embark upon any expedition up the valley.

"It's all rot!" said Handforth warmly. "What harm would come to us? This Texas Jose fellow wouldn't shoot one of us, I suppose."

"I don't suppose he would," agreed Pitt. "But Mr. Farman wants us to be on the safe side."

I shook my head.

"I'm not so sure about Texas Jose," I said grimly. "He's evidently a reckless, murderous ruffian. He came right up here and shot Buck Mason, and then he ambushed Loco Jack. He's got a spite against the ranch and everybody on it. If he saw us—if he suddenly came up—he'd haul out his gun and shoot at us promiscuously. And we're helpless and defenceless. Mr. Farman was quite right, Handy, and it would be simply ridiculous for us to take any chances."

"Dear old boy, I entirely agree with you," said Sir Montie, nodding. "I have never met one of these bally outlaw fellows, but I've read about them, begad! They're frightfully bloodthirsty, they are, really."

"Of course, things of this kind don't happen often now-a-days," I continued. "For a man like Jose to come shooting people on a modern ranch—well, it's reminiscent of the old days."

Before another hour had elapsed we heard further news which filled us with horror, and which made all the fellows fully realise how wise it had been for Mr. Farman to keep them all near the house.

Texas Jose was terrorising the district, it seemed—not only the ranch itself, but other places. Originally it had been his intention to exact revenge on the Roaring Z Ranch. But having started on his grim game, he probably lost all sense of proportion and went the whole hog.

At all events, shortly before noon several horsemen came galloping swiftly along the Rattlesnake Bend trail. We saw them coming from some little distance, and were at the gate by the time they pulled up. Nelson Lee and Dorrie and Big Jim were there, too, and our host uttered an exclamation of satisfaction as he saw who the leader of our party was.

"Say sheriff, I guess you're the very man I wanted to see!" he exclaimed heartily. "I was planning to call on you this afternoon——"

"Consarnin' this hyar Texas Jose guy, I figger?" asked the sheriff.

"Yes, I want to tell you——"

"Say, Mr. Farman, mebbe you'll let me hand out the talk," interrupted the sheriff grimly. "I guess we've brought news—an' that same news ain't exackly pretty. Say, I'm kinder yearnin' to

convert Jose's carkis into a cinder sieve!"

"Well, my own feelings are very similar," declared Big Jim. "See here, sheriff, that coyote has made two attempts to murder my employees. He plugged Buck Mason last night, although the wounds are only slight. But this morning he shot Loco Jack—one of the best boys on the ranch. Jack is hurt real badly."

The sheriff, a big man with a grizzly moustache, nodded and looked grave. Dave Haskell was his name, and he had been sheriff at Rattlesnake Bend for a good many years. It was not often that he had any serious affairs to look into. He felt rather important now, and he fingered his badge as he glanced at us all. His companions were citizens of Rattlesnake Bend—probably deputy-sheriffs.

"Guess I'm real sorry to hyar this talk," said Dave Haskell slowly. "I got around now, seein' as I've a hull heap of information to sling loose. I'll sure allow this Texas Jose guy is some speed merchant! He ain't wasted a dog-gone minit since he located around this hyar outfit. Nope, sir! He's sure stirred you up some on this ranch but say, it ain't wuth a consid'ration compared to his play around Rattlesnake Bend."

"Has something happened this morning?" asked the millionaire.

"Waal, I figgerin' ther's prep'rations bein' made right now this minit fer three funerals!" replied the sheriff pointedly.

"By gad!" said Dorrie. "Texas Jose has killed three men?"

"'Tain't ezackly that aways," went on the sheriff. "You'd be more kreet if you guessed two men an' a gal. Yep, sir! I'm telling you right hyar that that wall-eyed son of a skunk hes plugged a gal!"

"Good Heavens!" ejaculated Mr. Farman.

"How did it happen?" asked Nelson Lee gravely.

"Guess Texas Jose sorter shot up the township this mornin'!" answered the sheriff. "Say, it wus quick work! The folk was settin' around in the shade, the sun bein' kinder warm. Get me? They wus settin' easy on the store verandah, an' in other places. Waal, a hossman come ridin' down Main Street like he wus in an a'mighty hurry. Gee! He jest streaked through the durned township pumpin' his gun promiscuous-like. Hen Sanders wus shot clean dead as he sat on his doorstep. Ted Wallis, the bar-tender at the Bonanza, got busy lookin' through the winder. Say, he ain't got no further use fer winders now! Then there wus lil' Sally Hoskin, the gal what does the chores at the passon's place. Guess she got guessin' she'd stop a bullet—an' guessed right, pore kid! Gee! That cuss of a breed! The hull township is cleanin' its guns now, an' ther'll sure be a lynchin' if Texas Jose ain't vamoosed across the border!"

From this speech it was clear that the outlaw Mexican had been committing serious work. Not content with menacing the Roaring Z Ranch, he had descended upon the peaceful township near the railroad.

"This is terrible news, Haskell," said Mr. Farman. "I'm thinking that breed must be insane. Did he do all this just for the sake of murdering——"

"Guess you don't get me, sir," interrupted the sheriff. "Texas Jose ain't lackin' in brain power. He's jest a bad man, an' if these wusn't civilized times he'd sure create blazes in this county from one border line to the other. But he won't last long—guess it'll be forty-eight hours at the most before he's in the hands of the law. I ain't handed out the information yet that Jose helped himself to a consid'rable wad o' dollars from the till in Bob Wilson's dry goods store. Then he lit out on to th' prairie."

"And you've been in chase since then?" asked Lee.

"We're kind o' helpless, I guess," said the sheriff. "Y' see, this all-fired outlaw has hit the trail for the hills, an' I allows it ain't much good goin' in chase. It's up to us to wait until he shows up again."

"I can't say that I quite agree with that opinion," said Nelson Lee, shaking his head. "I think it would be far better to organise parties at once and hound this murderer to earth."

"Rather!" I agreed promptly.

"I ain't saying that it ain't a good suggestion," said the sheriff. "But I'm figgerin' you don't know the difficulties, stranger. We might hev twenty parties searchin' around fer twenty months—an' that murderin'

skunk would probably elude us all the time."

"The fellow is terrorizing the whole district." said Nelson Loe. "It is absolutely necessary to do something—and do it quickly. I have been wondering if Texas Jose is connected in any way with the cattle-rustling——"

"Mebbe so, stranger—ther' ain't any sayin'," put in the sheriff. "Guess I've been kinder busy on the wires this mornin', an' I'm authorised to state that ther'll be a reward of two thousand dollars fer the guy who brings in Texas Jose—dead or alive. I 'lows, Dick Small, the printer, is sure sweatin' crool gettin' a pile o' bills ready to be posted up."

"Two thousand dollars, dead or alive!" muttered Reginald Pitt. "My only hat! All this reminds me of the Western cinema yarns! It all seems too melodramatic to be real life!"

But it was real life, unfortunately.

The half-breed outlaw had been spreading terror throughout the whole countryside. Even as we stood there, just outside the drive of the ranch-house, two cowboys came riding up in a cloud of dust.

They were Twirly Sam and Two-Gun Milligan.

"Say, sheriff!" yelled Twirly, as he flung off his horse. "You'll need to be gettin' right along to Bluff Creek Valley! Texas Jose hit the creek not more'n two hours ago!"

"Gosh-darn my hide!" ejaculated Dave Haskell.

"You'd best ride like blazes!" advised Milligan breathlessly. "Say, that black-skinned hobo plugged old-man MacAndrew good 'n proper! By cripes! We found the pore old feller mussed up plenty!"

"MacAndrew!" exclaimed Mr. Farman. "Say, this is getting worse every minute! MacAndrew has been in charge of the Bluff Creek outpost for twelve years, and he's one of the most trustworthy men on the whole ranch! Is he badly hurt, boys?"

Twirly's young face was ablaze with fury.

"Hurt?" he repeated. "Guess he's hit the long trail by now, boss!"

"He was dying when you left him?" asked Big Jim, with clenched teeth.

"I'm figgerin' so," replied Twirly.

"By glory! This half-breed has something to answer for!" shouted Mr. Farman hoarsely. "Do you hear, sheriff? At any cost, Jose must be captured! Hangin' is too almighty good for the devil!"

The sheriff nodded.

"You're dead right, sir," he said grimly. "Hangin'? Say, that dawg oughter be carved up like he wus smoked hog! I reckon ther's one thing I ain't handed out. Jose hes stolen the fastest hoss in the hull of this hyar county!"

"That gives him an advantage," said Mr. Farman. "In a close chase he would probably be able to out-ride his pursuers. But the infernal hound seems to evade all the search parties. But I'm thinking this flare-up on his part is too big to last. He'll fall for some of us soon."

But there was no denying that Texas Jose was giving everybody a rare twisting just now. How long would it be before the rascal was captured?

CHAPTER VI.

THE HOLD-UP!

DURING the rest of that day there was an air of subdued excitement on the ranch, and the juniors were in constant expectation of dramatic news concerning the doings of the Mexican outlaw.

But night came, and there was no change in the situation.

Texas Jose had already created terrible havoc, and he had succeeded in raising a scare, not only in Rattlesnake Bend, but in other prairie villages in the district. The inhabitants in every direction were on the alert, and guns and revolvers which had lain idle for years, were brought out, cleaned and loaded. Scarcely a household existed that was not prepared to welcome Texas Jose with a shower of lead.

But, during the following day, we heard nothing.

Or, to be more exact, we heard all sorts of stories concerning preparations, but no word of Texas Jose himself. After that big outburst at Rattlesnake Bend, when he had robbed the dry-good store, he had apparently made his way across country to the Bluff Creak Valley, shooting old McAndrews, and passing on to the foothills beyond. Since then, he had not been seen, and no trace of him had been found.

The sheriff and his posse had been scouring the prairie in every direction. Other parties had been organised, too. But it was fairly obvious that Texas Jose was lying low.

He knew that he had stirred up a hornet's nest.

"I expect he's cleared right out of the district," said Handforth, during the evening. "In all probability we sha'n't hear anything more of him. He knows jolly well that he'll be killed if he shows up."

"That's about the truth," agreed McClure. "Not only out of the district, Handy, but out of the border into another State—perhaps into Canada. Thank goodness he's cleared out, anyway."

"Rot!" said Handforth.

"Why, you don't want him knocking about, I suppose?"

"I'd like to see him captured!" said Handforth. "There's no satisfaction in knowing that he's escaped, is there? What's the good of that? He might swoop down in a month's time, when everything is quiet, and repeat the whole giddy performance! Besides, while he's still at large we're treated like a lot of kids—we can't go out for rides down the valley, or anything."

Handforth was quite right. The disappearance of Texas Jose was very unsatisfactory. The scare he had created was dying down somewhat, but there was always an uncomfortable feeling that the outlaw might return.

And it was so exasperating, too. To know that this one man, single-handed, had terrorised the district, was by no means pleasant. All the inhabitants would dearly have loved to learn that Jose had fallen into the hands of the sheriff. It didn't much matter whether he was dead or alive.

The next day was a Saturday, and still there was no further news. The excitement at the ranch was dying down, and things were becoming normal. Everybody was glad to learn that Loco Jack was doing well, and that there was no danger of serious complications.

During the morning the juniors spent a lot of time with the injured man, cheering him up, and listening to his yarns—for he was quite capable of speaking, without doing himself any harm.

At luncheon Mr. Farman announced his intention of riding over to Rattlesnake Bend, and he ordered the buggy and team for this purpose, preferring this mode of travel to the motor-car.

Miss Connie was rather worried.

"I sha'n't let you go to-day," she declared anxiously. "Supposing that dreadful Jose appears? Say, you'd be in awful danger——"

"I'm not reckoning to be afraid of any confounded outlaw!" broke in her father. "You'd better quit worrying, little girl. In any case, Texas Jose isn't around now. He's probably calculating that this neighbourhood isn't exactly a healthy one. I'm going to the Bend this afternoon."

"But you'll have somebody with you, dad?"

"Well, I suppose so," smiled Mr. Farman. "Say, I'll have an escort, if it'll please you. I'll take two of the boys, and some of these youngsters might care for the trip, too. I reckon that satisfies you I'm not fearing danger, doesn't it?"

"Maybe I can come?" asked the girl.

"Sure!" said her father. "Why not? If we remain indoors because of this Jose, we might as well admit that he's got us scared stiff. And I'm reckoning that he hasn't got anything of the sort."

Accordingly, about an hour later, the buggy started out on the way to Rattlesnake Bend. It was a spidery-looking vehicle—which is the nature of buggies—but very comfortable to ride in. And it contained Mr. Farman and his daughter, and Sir Montie Fregellis-West and Pitt.

I was on horseback with Twirly Sam and Ace-High Peter—these latter two forming the escort which Mr. Farman had promised. There was very little danger of any harm coming to us, for we were all well armed.

Of course, the other juniors had wanted to come, too, but this was impossible. So after a deal of argument, the fellows had collected together and drawn lots—with the result that Fregellis-West and Pitt and I had won.

We reached the township without any suspicion of an adventure, and found it sweltering in the afternoon sunshine, and looking more than ever like a collection of gigantic soap boxes.

In Rattlesnake Bend, we gained no information. The sheriff had heard nothing whatever concerning Texas Jose. The rascal had completely effaced himself from the map, by all that we could learn. And the little prairie township

was settling down once more to its ordinary humdrum existence.

Our host made several calls—at the post-office and at the bank, for instance. From the latter establishment he obtained a big roll of dollars, the majority of these being required for paying the ranch staff.

We started on the way back to Roaring Z feeling quite satisfied that there was no possibility of any danger. And, consequently, something happened. If we had been fully expecting trouble, probably nothing would have occurred.

It was just in a little dip where a stream ran between high banks of trees. We had gone down into one of the strange prairie valleys, which are invisible until you are practically upon them.

Twirly Sam was riding on in advance, whilst Peter and I brought up the rear. And, without the slightest warning, a sharp series of cracking revolver shots rent the air. A man on horseback appeared from behind a thick clump of willows. In his hands he held two enormous revolvers.

We knew, instinctively, that this man was Texas Jose.

He was a swarthy looking scoundrel, roughly attired in dark sheepskin chapps, a filthy shirt, and an old wide-brimmed hat. His face was disfigured by an ugly scar across his left cheek, and he had a long straggling black moustache, and coarse, matted hair.

The happenings of the next few moments were tense.

"Hands up—every dog-gone son!" shouted the outlaw roughly. "The fust man to draw will drop as he stands!"

"Oh, dad!" murmured Connie, clinging to her father.

"Guess we're all right, little girl," muttered Mr. Farman. "Keep calm!"

Twirly Sam, in advance, made a grab for his revolver.

Crack!

Twirly uttered a hoarse cry, for a bullet had seared across the skin of his wrist. A trail of smoke swept away from the muzzle of one of the outlaw's weapons.

"Hands up, you cussed coyote!" he snarled. "Say, take a holt o' this! I guess I've drawn a bead on this hyar pretty little girl. Get me? My trigger finger's sure shakin' some. The fust move, an' she——"

"Steady, boys!" shouted Mr. Farman hoarsely, leaping up in the buggy with his hands held above his head. "We can't take any risks. Let this infernal rogue have his own way—I'm not endangering my daughter's life."

Texas Jose laughed harshly.

"You've sure got savvee!" he said. "Now, you'll all throw your guns in a heap. Get me? After that you'll hand out your dollars!"

I never felt quite so helpless before. But, in spite of our numbers, we could do nothing whatever to frustrate this rogue's designs. For both his revolvers were pointed at the girl, and the thought of endangering her life was not to be considered for a second.

The anxiety on Mr. Farman's face was acute, and he told himself fiercely that he had been a fool to bring his daughter. But he never believed for a moment that there would be any danger.

Texas Jose wasted no time.

He made every one of us empty our pockets, and then Sir Montie was ordered to carry all the valuables to Jose, and hand them over. Tregellis-West went through the ordeal calmly, and with his usual sang-froid. But he received a great scare when the outlaw fired four rapid shots at his feet. The dust and grit spurted up, but Montie was not hurt.

Texas Jose burst into a laugh, and swung his horse round.

"Say, folks, I'm real obliged!" he said tauntingly. "I'll bid you good afternoon—an' you can take this hyar as a present!"

Crack! Crack!

The effect of those shots was startling. One bullet struck the near-side horse, causing only a slight injury, but frightening the animal enormously. The second bullet was probably intended for the horses, too.

But the outlaw was swinging away, and he was not particular about his aim. Mr. Farman fell back with a slight groan, toppled against the side of the buggy, and fell out on to the road.

The horses, still scared, rushed away down the trail, Pitt and Connie pulling at the reins for all they were worth.

Texas Jose was riding off like the wind—but we paid no attention to him at this terrible moment.

Twirly Sam spurred his horse on, and raced alongside the buggy. He succeeded in pulling the maddened horses to a standstill within a hundred yards. The buggy had hardly come to a stop before Connie threw herself out, and ran back with a despairing cry to her father, who was lying huddled up on the trail.

By this time Ace-High Peter and I had dismounted, and were at Mr. Farman's side. We were filled with terror to see that blood was streaming down the millionaire's face. Ace-High Peter held Connie back as she panted up.

"Say, missie, you'd best not look——" he began.

"Oh, but I will, I will!" she exclaimed hysterically. "Oh, dad, dad!"

She threw herself on her knees, and lifted her father's head from the road. Then, a second later, she showed us a pale face which expressed infinite relief.

"Oh, quick, some water!" she said. "He's still alive, and I don't think it's very serious! Please—please bring some water!"

Three of us dashed like mad to the stream. And after Mr. Farman's head had been bathed, we found, to our intense joy, that the bullet had torn a deep wound on his scalp, stunning him, but not penetrating the skull. Mr. Farman was still unconscious, but breathing evenly.

His head was bound, he was placed in the buggy, and then we drove recklessly to the ranch.

By the time we arrived, however, Big Jim had found his senses once more, although he was in great pain. The news that we brought created a fresh sensation, and the Happy Bunch swore lurid vows that they would "get" Texas Jose if they waited until they were a hundred.

The outlaw had nearly killed the "Old Man," and every cowpuncher on Roaring Z Ranch swore that he would shoot Texas Jose on sight. Fortunately, Mr. Farman was nearly himself before the evening was out. Although in pain, he made light of his injuries, and denounced himself as a reckless idiot for having taken Connie on the journey to Rattlesnake Bend.

Texas Jose had made another coup.

He had held up the master of Roaring Z Ranch, and had got away with thousands of dollars, to say nothing of many valuable articles of jewellery. But it was impossible that the bandit could keep up his whirlwind career.

Nelson Lee grimly wondered if Jose was in the pay of the mysterious cattle rustlers, and the guv'nor quietly told me that from this minute onwards he would put forth every effort to gain the truth, and bring the murderous scoundrel to justice.

We had had so much excitement during the last few days that we thought it impossible that any coming event could equal them. If we had only known the truth we should have been somewhat astonished.

For, to be quite frank, there were to be very stirring adventures on Roaring Z Ranch in the very near future.

THE END.

TO MY READERS.

In next week's story, "THE RUSTLERS' SECRET!" you will read of the fate of the Mexican outlaw, Texas Jose, and how it led up to the discovery of the mysterious disappearance of Mr. Farman's cattle. If any of you, my chums, have a theory of your own as to how the rustlers managed to get away with thousands of head of cattle without being detected, just drop me a postcard before next week's story appears, as I should like to know how many budding Nelson Lees there are among my readers.

In the forthcoming story, a further development in the adventures of the Holiday Party is foreshadowed by the news of a big gold strike up north. The news, which is secret and intended for Mr. Farman, is intercepted by the rustlers. But the trail up north into the heart of the Rockies will be a separate story, and as it will mean negotiating long, winding rivers, lakes, and rapids, I am preparing a map, indicating the route with arrows, and marking the places where the chief adventures take place.

THE EDITOR.

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The Ghosts of Marsh Manor

BEGIN TO-DAY THIS THRILLING NARRATIVE OF

THE GREAT DETECTIVE OF GRAY'S INN ROAD.

INTRODUCTION.

Mr. Herbert Drake, B.A., otherwise Mr. Nelson Lee, is travelling to Marsh Manor School ostensibly to seek an engagement as games master. His real purpose is to investigate the alleged appearance of a ghost at the school. In the train he makes the acquaintance of Mr. Adolfe Malines, a resident in the locality of Marsh Manor.

(Now read on.)

CHAPTER I. (*Continued.*)

The Strange Advertisement in "The Times."

ALWAYS on the alert to store his marvellous memory with any facts that might be ultimately useful, Nelson Lee pulled thoughtfully at his pipe for a moment or so, and proceeded to cross-question his travelling acquaintance.

"And how do you like Peterborough and the surrounding country?" he asked.

"Ah, we do not live at Peterborough. The hostel is in a little village of which few peoples have heard," replied the Belgian. "It is called Marsh Manor, on the edge of your Fens."

"Really? That is rather odd!" said Lee, smiling. "I am going to Marsh Manor myself. Do you know Mr. Octavius Chard?"

"How?" And the man's thin, pale face, which wore a scrubby black beard, grew animated. "He is our nearest neighbour, just a little ways down the road. It is he who keeps the pension for young gentlemens at the old Manor House. We know him very well. He also is one of our kind friends. How is monsieur proposing to reach Marsh Manor? Possibly a car will meet him?"

"No; I have made no arrangements."

"Ma foi! Then what could be better? There will be room in the little trap that meets me at the station."

"I seem destined to be under obligation to you to-day, monsieur," said Nelson Lee. "I shall be very happy to accept a lift. Is it far?"

"About seven miles," was the reply. "Would monsieur consider it an impertinence if I made a guess? It is possible, perhaps, monsieur is a schoolmaster?"

Lee nodded, and the Belgian laughed so heartily that it produced a fit of coughing.

"You wonder that I laugh?" he resumed. "I will tell you why. Always zee masters leave that school. Nodings wrong—oh, no! Monsieur Chard very kind, nice boys, the 'ouse—we should call it the château in Belgium—magnificent. But they cannot stand the ghosts! Ha, ha! The ghosts!" And a look of supreme contempt wreathed the speaker's face as he shrugged his shoulders again and spread out those dirty hands. "All the village believes in them, but we—no! It is nonsense!"

"Just my opinion," assented Nelson Lee. "And now you have guessed what I am, may I guess what you are?"

"Why, yes, if you can."

"You are a chemist."

"Ah, yes—right and wrong! You look at my hands—voila! I and my compatriots experiment with a photographic process that will revolutionise the art. Wonderful! Photography in colour, also by moonlight! Some day, possibly, I will show you some of our results."

The train stopped at Hitchin, and when it went on again the conversation was resumed. But before they reached their destination it had ceased to interest the detective any longer, and he classified his companion as a loquacious, well-meaning stranger in a foreign land, who felt it necessary to dilate with rapture on the scenery through which they passed, obviously out of compliment to the Britisher.

At Huntingdon they alighted, and, crossing the bridge, found a governess-cart awaiting Mr. Adolfe Malines, and, stopping in the town only to replace his missing mixture by the best substitute procurable, Nelson Lee enjoyed the drive, with its peeps of the winding River Ouse, until the road turned away and struck out for the rather dreary upland, where endless fields of stubble, from which the corn had been gathered, formed the principal feature of the landscape.

"Voila!" cried Adolfe Malines, pointing to a cluster of thatched roofs amid a clump of trees that seemed to lean towards them, showing that the prevailing wind was the

strong, keen blast that blew in from the North Sea, across the Lincolnshire flats. "Yonder is Marsh Manor—one shop, zee church there, zee Red Lion, zee school-'ouse, and zee hostel—that is all! There is nodings more—only peace, and the right to live in peace. Monsieur understands?"

Lee took in all the simple details of the place as his obliging acquaintance enumerated them, and when they had put him down at the gate of the old Manor House he bade adieu to Mr. Malines, with a promise that, should he become resident there, that he would look him up and be shown some results of the new colour-photography.

"Why shouldn't I get him to photograph the ghost?" said Nelson Lee to himself, with a smile. "If there is one!"

And he turned into a short avenue of well-grown willows that led him to the Hall.

It was one of those ancient Tudor mansions that make one cry involuntarily at first sight: "What a lovely place!" And closer acquaintance deepened his first impression. But he did not linger to examine the outside, with its mullioned windows and stone transoms, but mounted the steps to the fine old porch and pulled a hammered iron handle, which produced a response from a clanging bell.

An elderly manservant appeared, took the visiting-card, which had been specially struck off the day before, in anticipation of success, and vanished through a very solid doorway at one side of the entrance-hall, from which there promptly came out a grey-headed gentleman in clerical garb, with a dinner napkin in his hand.

"Mr. Drake, I am delighted to see you! I am the Rev. Octavius Chard," said the gentleman, shaking hands. "You are just in time for lunch, if you do not mind having it with the boys. It is very good of you to have responded so quickly. Afterwards we will talk matters over. Would you like a wash? Yes? Boyle, get this gentleman some hot water and a clean towel. You will excuse me if——"

"Certainly!" smiled "Mr. Herbert Drake, B.A.," conscious that his own appearance had created a very favourable impression on the perpetrator of that extraordinary advertisement.

There was something also that had appealed to himself in the frank, square face of the Principal, and in a few minutes Boyle ushered him into a magnificent room, lined with linenfold panelling to the moulded ceiling.

Down the centre of the room, at a long oak refectory table, which, without doubt, had been the property of the monks of the adjoining abbey, sat forty boys, their knives and forks very busy, but not too much so to prevent their all turning their eyes on the newcomer, for whom a place had already been laid at another table, set across the end of the dining-hall, beside Mr. Chard.

A black-bearded man and a middle-aged gentleman sat at the same table, and these, like the boys, looked at the visitor with some curiosity.

"Monsieur Vilotte, our French instructor; Mr. Jackson, who takes the mathematical side," said Mr. Chard, by way of introduction. "This is Mr. Herbert Drake, whom I hope we shall have among us for a permanency," and they all bowed.

He did not think it necessary to include the two other masters, who sat some little distance off, one at either end of the long table, but Nelson Lee was conscious that the sound of his own name had been caught, and was passing round from mouth to mouth.

He wondered which of the three among those forty-odd faces belonged to his mysterious correspondents.

"The food is very good, and the house a perfect gem," was his mental comment. "Everything depends on my interview with the reverend gentleman."

CHAPTER II.

The New Games Master.

DINNER over, Mr. Octavius Chard, M.A., late Fellow of Trinity, led the way to his study, and closed the heavy door behind him.

"Now, Mr. Drake, we will come to business," he said. "Do you smoke?"

"I do, sir."

"So do I. You will find these cigars quite passable."

And he produced a box from a side-table.

When Nelson Lee declined the proffered weed and drew out his pipe, he felt that he had scored another point in Mr. Chard's eyes, as he lit his own briar.

"A grand old place this!" said that gentleman, taking his stand in front of one of the most magnificent carved mantelpieces his visitor had ever seen. "I love every stone of it, which is why I put up with certain inconveniences which my advertisement partially indicated. Do you suffer from nerves at all?"

"I can give you a very decided negative to your question, sir."

"No creepy feeling up and down your spine when you go along a dark passage after nightfall?"

"I have never experienced such a thing," said his visitor quietly.

"And now a third question, Mr. Drake. Do you believe in ghosts?"

"No, Mr. Chard; most emphatically I do not!"

And Nelson Lee's laugh was so infectious that the Head joined in it, and rubbed his hands with evident satisfaction.

"Well, it seems to me you are the very man I want," said the Rev. Octavius Chard, pursing up his lips. "I am sick to death of this utter nonsense—apparently sane, strong men coming to me with a cock-and-bull story of a monk in a white cowl, vanishing through this wall, crossing the end of that corridor, being met on the stairs, disappearing as if by magic! The thing is beginning to per-

meate the school—a sort of nervous dry rot, if I may so term it, will be setting in if it is allowed to continue—and I want someone to stiffen the place, a man of your physique and bearing, who will nip this thing in the bud. Do you follow me?"

"Precisely. And, if I might venture to add anything on my own behalf, Mr. Chard, it is that all my life I have been anxious to meet one of these so-called ghosts face to face, and lay him by the heels."

"Bravo! Capital! My dear sir, it only rests with you to say whether my terms are good enough. Two hundred a year and all found. I take it you are a single man, Mr. Drake?"

"I am single, and your terms will suit me admirably, Mr. Chard."

The Headmaster stretched out his arm.

"I am delighted to have found a man at last!" he exclaimed, shaking hands warmly. "When can you come in?"

"I could come in now, sir," said the new master, smiling; "but it might be more satisfactory if you would take up my references first of all. I should prefer it."

"Well, yes, I suppose so, as a matter of form. What is this?" And he took the address Lee passed to him. "'Mr. Roderick Miles, Solicitor, Bedford Row.' I will see to it. But, in the meantime, consider yourself installed, and I will take you round the house."

In spite of his intimate acquaintance with the world and its show places, Nelson Lee looked back on that ramble through the old Manor House as one of the most interesting experiences of a lifetime. He could not have had a better guide than Mr. Chard, who, in addition to being an enthusiastic antiquary, had not had time to let the place pall upon him.

"As a matter of fact," he said, "I only took the house eighteen months ago, took it with the full knowledge that four previous tenants had cleared out lock, stock, and barrel on account of this supposed ghost. You know how these things come about—the despoiling of the monasteries to begin with; a favourite of Henry VIII has the land given to him, and sets to work to build a house after his own heart—and mine, too.

He pointed through a window as he spoke, and beyond the walled-in kitchen-garden the new master saw heaps and mounds, seaming the surface of a large field, with a broken arch here and there, and a few detached blocks of masonry, showing where the abbey had once reared its stately head. Beyond the field the sunlight glistened on the reedy swamp from which the place had taken its name.

"You can see with half an eye how completely the abbey was dismantled," continued the Head, "and in the process of time most of the land passed out of the hands of Sir Richard Varnay's descendants. The only portion remaining in the family is the house itself, which still belongs to an old maiden lady living at Brighton, who derives a considerable portion of her income, I should imagine, from the rent of it. She is the last of the Varnay line, and obstinately declines to sell."

"What is that building over yonder among the walnut-trees?" said Nelson Lee. "It looks old."

"That is a house constructed out of the original gateway of the abbey, bought some years ago by a very good fellow who lives at Peterborough, a Mr. Ingleby Charteris, who has turned it into a hostel for distressed Belgians. You will probably get to know them—quite nice people."

"I made the acquaintance of one of their number on my journey down," said the great detective. "Mr. Adolfe Malines."

"Oh, yes, Malines—very clever man! I will show you a marvellous production of his when we get to the drawing-room."

And Mr. Chard led the way up and down innumerable staircases and along endless corridors, finally passing, through a green baize door into his own private domain.

Nelson Lee realised that it would take him a day or two to get the lay of the house thoroughly into his head, and, after being introduced to Mrs. Chard, a pleasant little lady, wearing glasses, he went to the village post-office, to telegraph for his bag.

"I will present you, in due form, to the school, at preparation this evening," said the Head, as they parted at the hall door. "You and I between us will surely find out the perpetrator of this outrageous folly, who shall be expelled with ignominy. Meanwhile, I always take tea in the bosom of my own family, and shall be delighted if you will join us, at five o'clock."

At the gate of the grounds Nelson Lee encountered the French master, walking rapidly, for afternoon school was close at hand.

"Well, are you stopping with us?" said Monsieur Vilotte, whose black, pointed beard grew high up on his cheek bones. "Yes? I am glad. Monsieur speaks French, of course?"

And he turned the conversation into his own language.

Nelson Lee had French, German, Italian, and Spanish at his tongue's end, but, as usual, he was giving nothing away.

"Unfortunately, you have the advantage of me, sir," he said.

"Ah, what a pity!" And he knew he had lost caste in the Frenchman's eyes. "Well, now, let me warn you. This affair of the ghosts is all monkey tricks. Keep a sharp eye on Gurling, Seymour, and Tulk. They are at the bottom of it all. I know. They

(Continued on page iii of Cover.)

are always together in corners. They are not nice boys. You understand?"

Nelson Lee nodded. He had already wondered in his own mind whether that letter had not been a conspiracy, and Monsieur Vilotte's words went a long way to confirm his suspicions, and he laughed to himself as he went into the village.

The post-office was at one end of the general shop, and a young person with beady eyes subjected him to a searching examination as he tore off a telegraph-form, pluming herself the while that she would know the stranger's business from A to Z in a few minutes.

She had the surprise of her life, however, when he handed in the paper.

"I don't understand this!" she snapped tartly.

"Possibly I do not intend that you should," said the sender, his eyes twinkling. "Can you read the words?"

"Yes; but they don't make sense. 'Three acres huggermugger pongo Constantinople now now.' What's that?"

"That is a code message which I shall be obliged if you will despatch at once."

And the young person counted it savagely, and pushed the stamps across to him to lick.

"Have you a public telephone here?" he inquired.

"No, we haven't."

"Then oblige me with a packet of post-cards, and I would like to mention that any letters for 'Mr. Herbert Drake' are to be delivered at the old Manor House. Also, I should be glad to have them intact, without any tampering. I am well acquainted with the insatiable curiosity of the country post-office, and I warn you that I should know at once if my letters had been opened. Good-afternoon!"

And he went out, leaving the young person staring after him with her face the colour of a peony.

"You beast, Mr. Huggermugger pongo, or whatever your name is! You know too much for my liking!" she muttered.

He strolled round the old church and on to the mill, admired the inn, with its yellow gables and tall chimney stacks, talked fishing with the miller's man, acquired much useful information about the lives and habits of the simple villagers, and found that Mr. Octavius Chard was popular among his neighbours, who were all sorry for him.

"A very nice gentleman," said the miller; "but he'll have to go like the rest. The Manor House is haunted, that's a fact, and no one can't live in it."

"He tells me he has done so for eighteen months," said Nelson Lee.

"That may be, sir, and I tell you he won't be there another six. Now, if you'll excuse me, I must pull up my sluices."

And Nelson Lee, looking at his watch, saw that tea-time was approaching.

(To be continued.)

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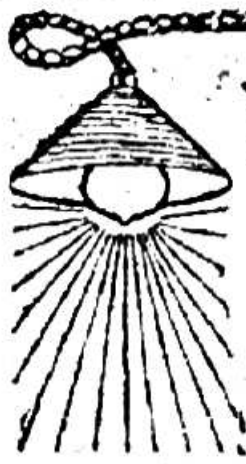

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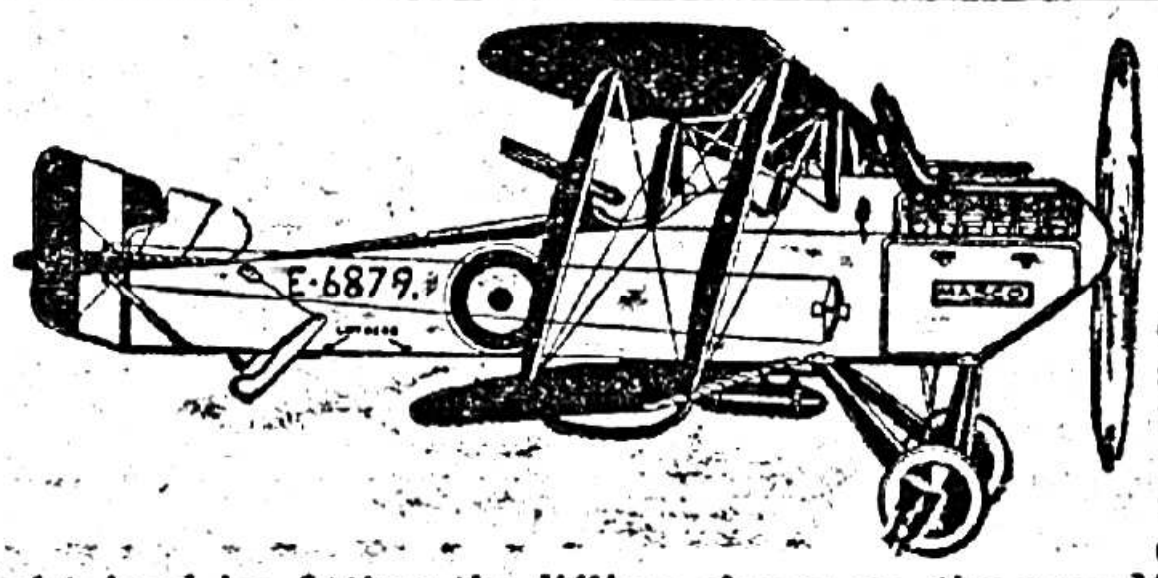

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