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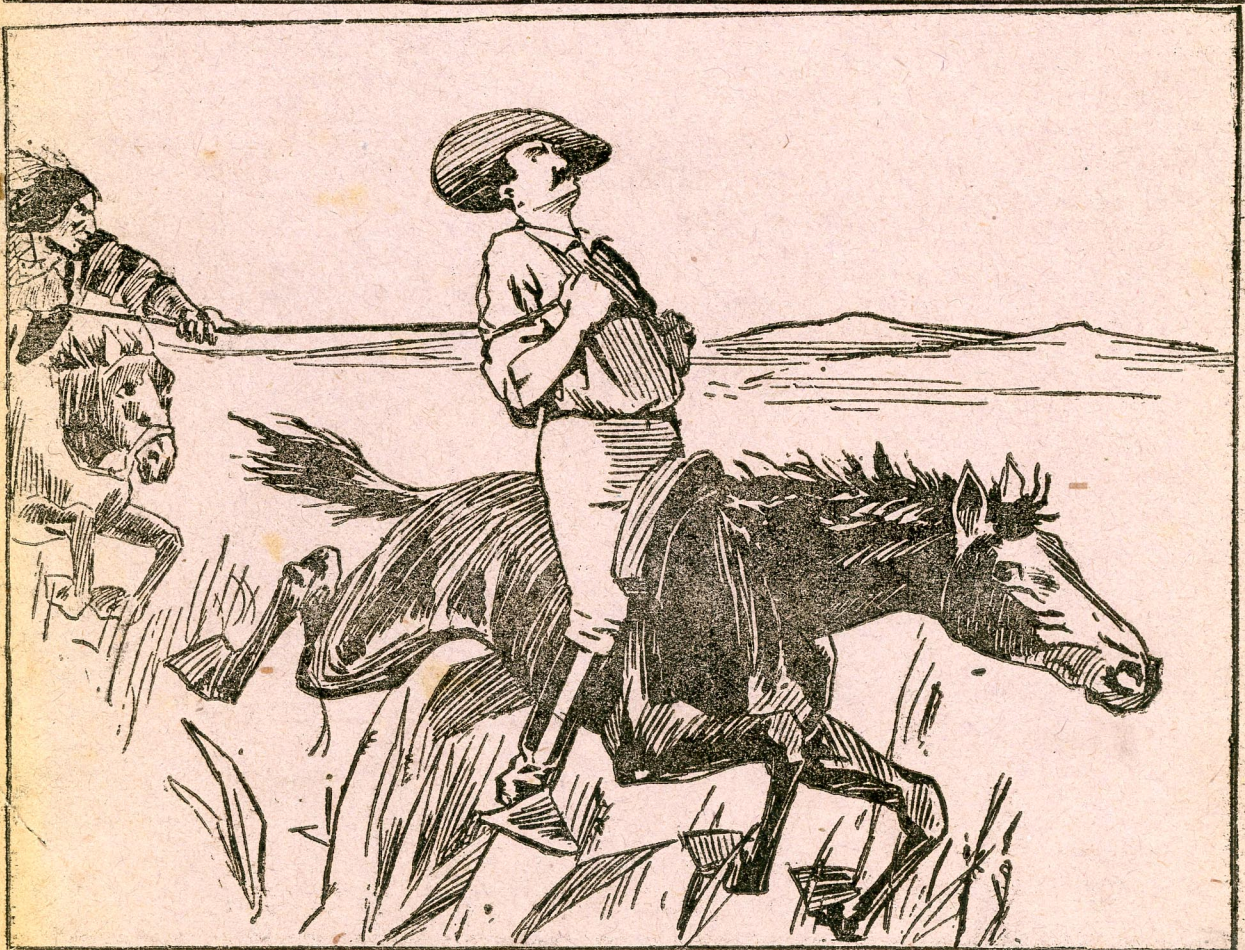
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# THE PHANTOM RIDER.

By S. CLARKE HOOK.



One of them flung his lasso. For a moment the black line hovered over Jack's head, then it coiled round his breast, as the hideous war-cri of the Indians rang out.

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# THE PHANTOM RIDER.

By S. CLARKE HOOK.

## CHAPTER 1.

### THE TRIAL—THE EXECUTION—THE PHANTOM RIDERS—THE BURIAL IN THE FOREST.

Night had fallen over the great Far West, and as the moon arose it revealed the Rocky Mountains. In the log-cabin of a large cattle-run which lay far across the plain where the vast pine forests joined it, some men were seated; in their midst lay a man of gigantic stature, bound hand and foot, his vindictive face terrible in its fierceness. His broad breast heaved, so that it seemed as though the brawny muscles would burst the bonds that held him captive. Presently he struggled into a sitting posture, and glared round at his foes; then when he saw those stern, determined faces, a look of terror came into his eyes, for he read his fate.

Presently, other men rode in, until the little room was crowded; but scarcely a word was spoken. The last to arrive were two men of somewhat different appearance to the rest, though they were dressed much in the same fashion, and were both armed with rifles and revolvers.

The one, who bore the name of Dr. Jakes, was middle-aged, of small, spare build. His companion, Jack Marsden, towered head and shoulders above the little doctor, while his every movement denoted a strength which few men even amongst that rough throng would have cared to contend with.

Jack's handsome bronzed face wore a troubled expression, for the deed in which he was called upon to participate appeared to him a very terrible one. Jack had come to that wild spot to seek his fortune, little dreaming that he would be compelled to take part in such scenes.

"Now, Burch, we are all here," said one.

The man addressed as Burch stood up and glanced round carelessly at his listeners. He was owner of one of the finest cattle-runs for many a hundred miles around, and no man had a wrong action to lay at his door, though it was generally known that there was a mystery concerning his past which threw a shadow over his present, but of what its nature was he never breathed a word, and no man dared to ask him.

"Boys!" he cried, in a ringing voice, "Jack Marsden has been robbed of cattle. You know what our laws are for that. There lies the thief, caught red-handed in the act. But more than this. He fired on us. One of our comrades was shot through the heart. It rests with us to avenge that crime. We all saw the shot fired, and we know that our prisoner Murdock fired it. Of his guilt there is no doubt.

"His punishment rests with us. We all knew poor Bill, as quiet a man as ever lived. I am going to say nothing to anger you against the prisoner. I only ask for justice. One by one I shall call upon you to say what his fate shall be, and I ask you to consider well your answers and the great responsibility

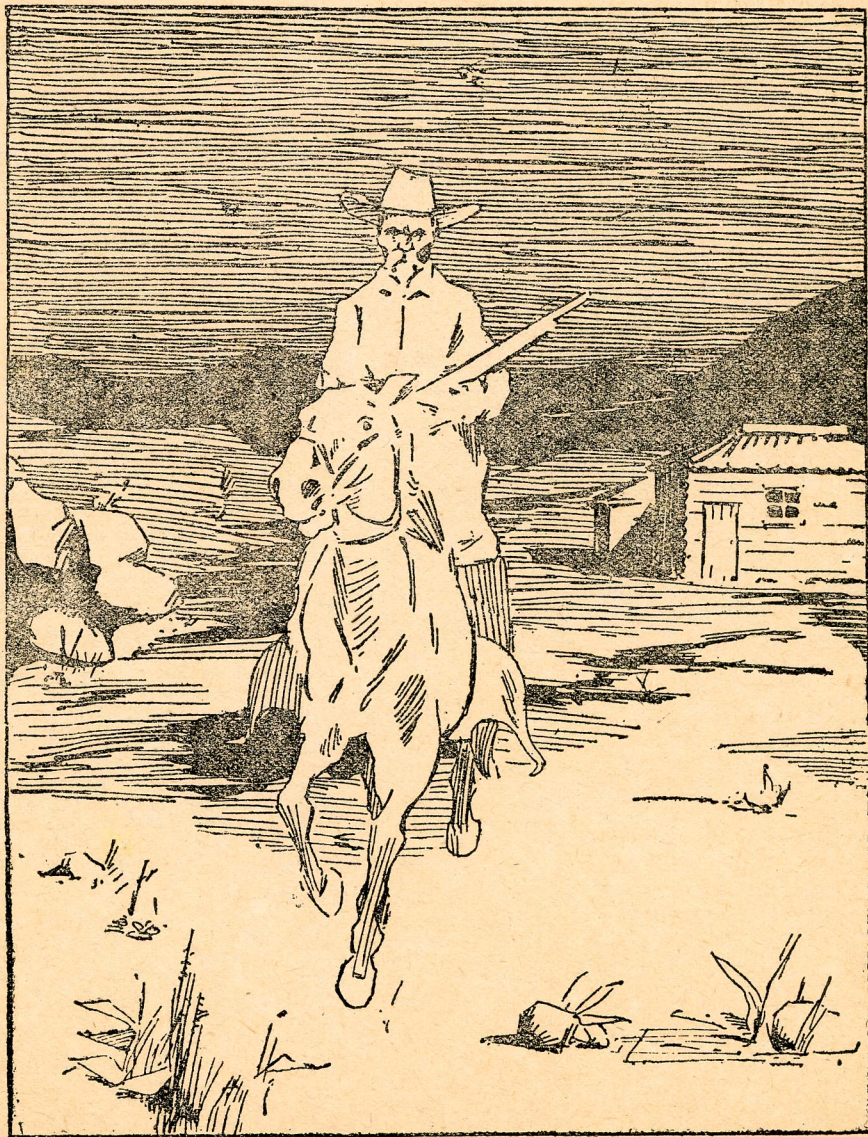
that rests upon you. Sam Hay, what does the prisoner deserve?"

There was a breathless silence in the room. The man addressed looked round at the solemn faces of his mates, and at the livid one of the wretched prisoner. For a moment it seemed as though he would take a merciful view; but the thought of his comrade buried beneath the pine forest, far away from home and friends, flashed through his brain and quickened the beating of his heart. He rose, and though his face paled, he muttered the one word:

"Death!"

And one by one each man in his turn uttered that fatal word. At last it came to Jack.

"Comrades!" he cried, "I would show mercy to that wretched man. That your sentence is just, I cannot dispute; but consider the awful responsibility you are taking upon your shoulders. Tom Burch, you, as a man of education, and as a



The Phantom Rider, wheeling his horse round, galloped swiftly away.

truly honourable man, which I know you to be, must admit that we have no right to make laws.

"There is no one here who deplores the loss of our comrades more than I; yet I would show mercy. I care little for the theft. That I would freely pardon. It is true a life has been sacrificed—"

"And that life shall be avenged!" cried Burch. "It is the law of God and man. Failing others, we must carry out that law. Once, when I was younger, I showed mercy. Would to Heaven I had never done so! That man shall not roam at large to commit fresh crimes! I have a duty to perform, Murdock. You are guilty of cattle-stealing. Had that been all we would have set you free. But we will not set you free for murder! You die this night!"

"Then my curse rest on your souls!" cried Murdock. "And if the dead can haunt the living and bring them ill, I'll haunt you! Demons! do your worst! But I warn you, were I free, not you, in spite of all your numbers, could capture me again. There's one more thing I'll tell you, Tom Burch. It was I who dealt you the blow that will leave its scar to the grave!"

"Free that man!" said Burch, springing to his feet. "Release him, I tell you, and let me meet him face to face. I swore to avenge that awful deed, and now the time has come!"

"Steady, Burch!" exclaimed Sam Hay. "We have given our verdict. If the prisoner has wronged you, it won't alter his fate. Get that lassos there. Bring out the prisoner."

The moon was shining brilliantly now. The wretched man was carried beneath the pine-trees. The lasso was thrown over a branch, a noose placed round his neck. Then all Murdock's fear seemed to turn to rage, and he uttered the most fearful imprecations and threats. But his fierce words were unheeded, and suddenly they ceased.

The men pulled on the strong rope, and Murdock's body swung in the moonlight.

Then the sound of picks was heard, as by the fatal tree the men dug the murderer's shallow grave. At last the terrible task was completed. The body was cut down, and Dr. Jakes, who had left Jack behind as he followed to the spot, glanced at the rigid face, placed his hand to the left side, then, with a quick motion, closed the jaws and open eyes.

"You've done your duty, boys!" he exclaimed. "The murderer has met his doom, and no man can say a word against its justice."

In silence they lowered the body into the grave; in a few moments it was filled in. Then the men strode back to Burch's cabin, but ere they reached it, Jack had mounted his horse, and ridden swiftly away across the rolling plain.

He had reached the outskirts of his cattle-run, when suddenly he reined in his panting horse, for beneath the dark shadows of the trees he saw a horseman intently watching the cattle browsing in the moonlight.

Jack unslung his rifle and cocked it, and the noise, slight though it was, caught the watcher's ears. Jack saw a dark object dart into the moonlight. His horse saw it also, and dashed across the plain. A lasso tightened round Jack's breast, and he was jerked from his seat almost before he knew what had happened. He was about to struggle to his feet, when a brawny hand gripped his throat, and he felt the cold muzzle of a revolver against his brow.

"Who are you?" demanded a voice. "Utter a sound and dis child put a bullet trough your brains!"

"It is rather difficult to tell you who I am without uttering a sound," replied Jack.

"Massa Jack!" gasped the negro, for such he was, "dis child am mortal sorry."

"Not so sorry as I am, Pete!" laughed Jack, rising. "I thought it was an earthquake."

"I tought you were dat Murdock come to rob de place," said Pete. "And when I heard de click ob your rifle-lock, dis child tink he had better be first."

"They hanged Murdock to-night, Pete," said Jack, calling to his horse, which came at the sound of his voice. "Has Dr. Jakes been in?"

"Not to-night," replied Pete. "Most like he'll ride straight home. Come in, Massa Jack. Supper am all ready—a wild turkey, which I shot dis morning."

Jack's little home showed that Pete looked well after his young master. Everything was beautifully clean and tidy, and the smell of roast turkey was very appetising to a hungry man. Pete had been a ship's cook, and he prided himself on his skill, which, to judge by the justice Jack did to the meal, was of no ordinary kind.

"Massa Jack," exclaimed Pete, so soon as they were seated round the blazing wood-fire, "do you believe in ghosts?"

"No. Why, Pete?"

"Cos dis child has seen 'em!" replied the negro, rolling his eyes fearfully round the room as though he expected to see a few more. "I was riding home wid dat bird. I reached de forest, den a strange feeling came all ober me. De moon had risen, and I didn't want to turn and look across de plain, but

dis child couldn't help it. Seemed as dough someting was creeping up to my back, and I felt as if I'd got a chunk ob snow down my neck. Noting was dere, nor was dere a sound; but de horse was as frightened as me. He was trembling all ober."

"Suddenly I saw a fearful ting, Massa Jack! Riding across dat plain as men hab neber ridden yet, was a band ob sabages. Golly! Dey were not living men. Dey passed along the hill-side which runs across de plain. Dey were close to me, but dey mfade no sound, and as suddenly as dey had appeared dey vanished."

"Massa Jack, you hab heard ob de Phantom Riders: but I hab seen 'em dis bery night. Den de old horse started galloping, and dis child neber stopped him till we reached home. Dat's de honest truf, Massa Jack, as I'm a libing man!"

"It is very strange, Pete," said Jack, somewhat uneasily. "Of course I have heard of that weird band of horsemen; indeed, that is the reason I got this run for an old song. The rumour that it was haunted, and the fact that its last owner was cruelly murdered, frightened people away. But I take it, Pete, you and I are not the men to be easily scared?"

"Dis child will stick by you, sah," replied Pete. "I don't forget dat once you sated my life. But I don't like ghosts. Hark! What am dat?"

"The wind, Pete. It is rising to a storm."

"Massa Jack! dat's no wind. Hark! Dere it is again."

Pete sprang to the window and threw the shutter open, then he uttered a cry that brought Jack to his side.

"Look! Look! Do you see dat awful ting? Massa Jack, come back! Come back, I say! You are going to your deaf! I tell you, dese are no mortal foes!"

But, seizing his rifle, Jack sprang from the hut, and Pete, in spite of his superstitious dread, closely followed his brave young master.

## CHAPTER 2.

### THE INDIANS' VENGEANCE—ON THE TRAIL—THE MYSTERY—AN APPARITION CAPTURED—IN FIERCE FOES' HANDS.

A fierce red glow shone upon Jack's face. Two of his ricks were on fire, and the wind swept the flames towards his out-buildings. By the red glow and the pale moonlight, he saw two hundred head of cattle, all he had left in the world, dashing madly across the plain; and, circling round the terrified beasts, and urging them onwards, was a band of horsemen, who looked like black shadows on the moonlit ground. And above the roar of the fire rose the thunder of the hoofs of the stampeding beasts as they leapt across the plain.

Jack knew that the raid meant ruin to him; and when he saw the raging flames he also knew that soon his home would be a heap of ruins unless the fire was stopped.

Springing into the little building he brought forth a couple of axes.

"Down with the barn, Pete!" he cried. "When that catches our home must go."

Then above the roar the crash of the axes rose, and splinters flew in all directions. Pete seized a huge beam, and using this as a lever, wrenched the timbers asunder. At last the breach was made, and the flames licked idly round it.

Jack entered his hut, and, seating himself upon a stool, sat gazing into the log-fire, for his loss was very heavy. Presently Pete entered. His eyes were gleaming, his lips drawn so that they revealed his white, even teeth.

"Massa Jack, de horses am ready. Dis is no time to sit still!"

"Right, Pete! Only I'm ruined, and it comes rather hard on a fellow at first. Let us mount, Pete, although I fear we can do little against that band of savages."

"Golly! Dis child will do someting against one or two ob dem, if he comes across deir track."

The trail was quite distinct when the moon shone forth; but now the wind was driving thick clouds across the heavens, and at times the light was obscured. The two horsemen had reached the spot where Pete had seen those weird riders, when they were compelled to rein in as the trail was completely hidden in the darkness. For several moments they remained listening for some sound to guide them, but they only heard the moan of the wind through the pine-trees on the hill.

Suddenly a terrible cry rang out. It seemed as though no earthly throats could have uttered it. Ere its echoes died away the moon burst forth.

"Look! look!" gasped Pete. "The Phantom Riders!"

Jack turned, and a thrill of indescribable awe passed through him. For darting along the hill side he saw an unearthly-looking band of riders. Their pace was terrific; the horses' hoofs appeared not to touch the ground, nor could he hear their beat.

On the fearful-looking riders passed in their wild career. Once more the terrible cry echoed round the hills, and like a flash the black forms of the savage horsemen vanished amongst the shadows of the trees.

Jack urged his horse to the spot, and the animal was so terrified that it was as much as he could do to get it to obey him. Springing from his saddle he carefully examined the ground. He was at the exact spot where the band of riders had swept past. The moon was shining brilliantly. But there was not the slightest sign of a trail.

In utter amazement Jack rode back to the spot where he had lost the other trail; but now banks of clouds obscured the moonlight, and rain began to descend.

"It's no good, Pete," he said. "We can follow no farther to-night. Suppose we ride to Dr. Jakes's place? It is nearer than ours from here, and he will put us up. We will take up the trail at break of day.

Pete was only too willing, and half an hour's gallop brought them to the little doctor's hut.

"My dear Jack," exclaimed Jakes, "delighted to see you! Try some of that whisky. Made it myself. But what's up. Out with it, man."

Jack told his story in a few words; he also told about those Phantom Riders.

"It's a bad job!" exclaimed Dr. Jakes. "Seen some ups and downs myself, and the downs have it. Seen some queer things, too. Sights to make a man's hair stand on end, if that weren't an impossibility. Listen, Jack! Have you ever seen the dead walk this earth?"

"No!"

"I have," said Dr. Jakes solemnly. "You remember Murdock's curse, and how he swore to haunt us. I saw that man haunted. I saw him buried."

"Well?"

"Jack Marsden!" cried Jakes, looking fearfully round the room, "I have seen that man or his spectre since. I have seen his face appear quite close to me. It is a face never to be forgotten. The black, fierce eyes were fixed upon me, and seemed to burn into my very soul. I saw that fearful face as plainly as I see yours now. I saw the scar which you know he bore upon his cheek. I saw his vindictive look of fury. And then that dreadful face vanished into the darkness."

"Imagination!" exclaimed Jack, sipping the doctor's whisky. "Never had it," answered the doctor, lighting his pipe. "Had measles and yellow fever, also toothache; but never had imagination. What I saw, lad, was stern reality. Well, drink up! Throw another log on that fire, Jack. You'll have to sleep on those furs. Pete and I will sleep in the other apartment. I've looked after your horses. Good-night."

Jack lay down in front of the fire, and for upwards of an hour he watched its flickering glow, and listened to the moaning wind. At last his eyes closed in sleep.

Suddenly he was awakened by a rumbling sound, then a dazzling light flashed across his eyes. The storm was rolling up. The thunder had awakened him; but he could not account for the mysterious feeling of awe that he experienced. It seemed to him as though some fearful thing were about to happen. Raising himself on his elbow he looked round the black cabin, for the fire had now died out.

And as he remained listening between the peals of thunder he heard a stealthy movement quite close to him. A cold blast of air swept upon his face. He turned, and gazed into the blackness.

Once more the lightning flashed, and, to his horror, Jack saw Murdock's fierce face quite close to him; then the blackness hid the fearful sight from his view.

A few moments of terrible suspense passed by, and when the lightning played again, Jack saw that the folding shutter which served as a window was open. Springing to the door, he went out into the stormy night.

The blackness was dispelled by another flash, and by that blue flickering light Jack saw a gigantic form pass swiftly across the ground towards an outbuilding. Determined to fathom the mystery, however great the risk might be, he ran towards the barn. The door was unfastened, and he entered; then he knew he was alone in the black building with that terrible form.

He heard the door slam, and the only sounds that reached him now were the howling of the wind, and the crashing of the thunder, which shook the very earth.

"Speak! Who are you?" Jack cried at last.

But no answer came. He took a few steps forward, and with extended arms groped about in the intense darkness.

Once more the lightning played, then he saw that awful face, and the fierce eyes were fixed upon him. It was a face he could never forget or mistake, and even when the lightning ceased and intense darkness reigned, he felt those gleaming eyes were fixed upon him still.

What happened next Jack never rightly knew. A blinding light filled his eyes, a roar more terrible than anything he had

ever heard numbed his brain. He was lifted from his feet, to be hurled senseless to the ground.

When he recovered consciousness, he found Dr. Jakes and Pete bending over him.

"You have had a narrow escape, Jack," exclaimed the doctor. "The barn has been struck by lightning. You will be all right in a few minutes, though. What ever induced you to come out on such a fearful night as this?"

"I have seen Murdock!" answered Jack. "He was in here when the place was struck. Are you certain that they took his life, Jakes?"

"I saw his lifeless form," replied the doctor. "But, more than that, I saw him buried. Let's get away from this place. The whole affair is too mysterious—too awful. You have seen no human form this night."

Jack slept but little during the remainder of the night; each time he closed his eyes he imagined that fierce, terrible face was glaring at him, and he felt considerable relief when day broke.

Having made a hasty breakfast, he and Pete bade the doctor farewell; then having struck the trail, which in spite of the heavy rain was still pretty distinct, they followed along it at a rapid trot.

At last they reached a broad, shallow river where the trail ceased. The cattle had evidently been driven in the water so as to conceal the trail; but whether they had gone up or down stream it was impossible to discover. Jack decided to take the upward course, while he told Pete to ride in the opposite direction, and to examine the banks carefully on either side as he went, then meet him in about an hour's time at that spot.

Although Jack traversed many a mile he could see no sign of the missing cattle; and he was about to return, when peering through the bushes on the bank he saw the fierce face of a savage.

In an instant it disappeared; so suddenly indeed that Jack was doubtful whether he had not been mistaken. Drawing his revolver, he turned his horse so as to face his foe. Then from the bushes on the opposite side of the river at the rider's back a dozen or more savages rose.

One of them flung his lasso. For a moment the black line hovered over Jack's head, then it coiled round his breast, as the hideous war-cry of the Indians rang out. His horse plunged madly forward, and he was jerked from its back, and dragged through the water to the bank, where the fierce warriors leapt upon him and quickly secured his weapons.

At command of the chief the captive was placed on a horse's back, the remainder of the band mounted, and rode at a gallop towards the forest, while Jack was held on by one of the savages, who mounted behind him. His arms were so tightly pinioned by the lasso that he was unable to offer resistance, and his fierce captor held a knife at his breast as a menace of what would happen should he attempt to escape.

Threading in between the pine-trees, the horsemen continued their journey till the day was far advanced; then a halt was made in a little glade, where the remains of a fire showed Jack that the Indians had recently camped there.

He was lifted from the horse, and dragged towards a tree to which the lasso was fastened. The cord was only passed once round his breast, but although he exerted his utmost strength to burst the lasso, his efforts were in vain.

Presently the chief approached, and addressed him in English.

"The white man has followed on the Indians' trail, and he has followed to his death. I, Sura, chief of the Moluches, will deal the blow. Many times the white men's rifles have laid my warriors low. Now the time for my vengeance on one of the accursed race has arrived!"

"My death will be avenged!" cried Jack. "My comrades will follow on my trail."

"The white men will follow on your horse's trail!" retorted Sura. "This will only lead them back to your home. When they find you, they will not know you, and you will never see them, because you will be blind as well as maimed. You shall live, but it will only be to hope for death. That will show the white men what to expect for having robbed my warriors of their hunting-ground."

Jack shuddered at this awful threat. He knew that more than one poor fellow who had fallen into Sura's clutches had been fearfully maimed by the brutal warrior, and left to wander sightless through the forest until death put an end to his misery.

The savages took up their position in front of their victim, and stepping to a mark hurled knives and tomahawks at the tree; some of the weapons came so close that they almost grazed his flesh, but by the precision with which they threw Jack felt confident that his enemies' object was to terrify him and not to take his life at present.

So great was his horror at the fearful fate in store for him that he almost hoped a false aim would save him from it.

Presently Sura stepped farther back, and, muttering some words to his warriors, drew his tomahawk. From the distance that he now stood, it seemed impossible that his aim could be sure.

His fierce black eyes were fixed upon his captive. The muscles in his arm swelled as he grasped the gleaming tomahawk more tightly. He raised the deadly weapon, then with all his strength hurled it at his foe.

### CHAPTER 3.

#### AT THE STAKE—A HORRIBLE ORDER—A DEADLY COMBAT—A MAIDEN TO THE RESCUE—THE FLIGHT.

Like a flash the keen weapon whizzed through the air; the next moment its blade was buried in the tree, and Jack felt it graze his left arm. The lasso round his breast flew asunder. The blade had severed round, and he was free. Seizing the weapon, he wrenched it from its hold; then, whirling it round his head, he sprang at his cruel foes.

So sudden and unexpected was his charge, that he was in their midst before a weapon was hurled at him. Then the gleaming axe swung round, and he swept a pathway through the savages. In an instant he was past, and, dashing towards the horses, he sprang upon the back of the nearest; then a shower of spears whizzed round him.

One of them wounded the horse, which plunged violently, then dashed through the pine forest, at a pace Jack never could have checked, even had he so desired.



He quickly drew his knife, but Jack was upon him, and seizing his upraised wrist with one hand, he gripped him round the body with the other.

Now the furious yells of his pursuers reached him. Each moment he expected the horse would stumble and hurl him to the ground; but, notwithstanding its great pace, it avoided the trees, while Jack lay flat upon its back to escape the overhanging branches.

Many a spear was hurled, but the fugitive was somewhat protected by the denseness of the forest, and he knew by the sound of the voices that he was gaining on his pursuers, who did not dare to ride amongst the trees at such a pace as the terrified horse was going.

Jack knew that he was being carried in the opposite direction to that in which he wished to go, but he had no means of guiding the furious animal, for the reins were broken, and in any event he would have been unable to turn.

That race for life lasted for many a mile. It soon became too dark for the pursuers to distinguish the fugitive, but they were able to follow by the noise the horse made tearing its way through the bushes.

Presently Jack saw a red glow in the forest. The terrified animal was bounding straight towards it. A few moments later a deep ravine appeared. Jack caught a glimpse of an enormous camp fire, round which a number of Indian huts were scattered.

He struck the horse on the side of the head with his fist, in the hope of escaping what seemed certain destruction; but although the animal swerved, it still dashed madly on. The side of the ravine was fearfully steep, but the horse leapt down it, tearing through some of the bushes, and leaping others in its wild career.

It was still some distance from the bottom when it stumbled, and horse and rider were hurled down the height.

Jack was partially stunned by the fall, and, before he could regain his feet he was seized and bound by a number of the savage warriors who had been attracted to the spot by the noise.

He was dragged towards the great camp fire, and in a few minutes Sura, at the head of his warriors, came riding down a narrow defile, which was the only safe entry to the ravine.

"So the white man wishes to meet his death here?" said Sura, approaching. "See, Ura. I have brought you a captive. You shall deal him death!"

The warrior addressed as Ura stepped up to the captive and eyed him keenly. He was a young man of very powerful build, and second in power to Sura, the chief of the Moluches. Save for its fierceness, his face was not bad-looking.

"The fire burns brightly," said Ura, in English. "That death is as good as another. He has seen our Indian home. Henceforth he will never see again."

As the cruel wretch spoke he thrust his spear into the glowing embers, and the warriors crowded round, eager to witness the awful deed that the ferocious chief was about to perpetrate.

Twice he drew the spear from the fire, but thrust it back again, for it was not yet red-hot. At last he brought forth the glowing steel, and approached his helpless victim.

"Ura!" cried a voice—and the fierce warriors drew aside, to allow a young girl to enter the ring—"what would you do?"

"I would blind the hated white man!" replied the young chief. "Then I would torture him until he shrieks in his agony for the death that shall be days in coming to him!"

"He is young and brave!" retorted the girl. "Otherwise

he would plead for mercy now. It is not my wish that he should suffer death!"

"Ura's wish cannot be changed," replied the young chief sullenly, "even by the wish of his promised bride. Go, Lea! A woman's place is with the squaws and children."

"Not when a woman's act of mercy shall prevail over man's cruelty!" cried Lea, stepping in front of Ura. "Hear me, Ura! That vile deed shall not be done!"

"I swear it shall!" cried Ura fiercely.

"Do you forget that I am the daughter of the chief of the Moluches?" demanded Lea.

"Your father has given his order," said Ura. "It shall be obeyed!"

"It never shall!" said Lea, stamping her little foot on the ground. "Tell him it shall not, father!"

"The white dog shall die!" replied Ura. "It is for Ura to choose the manner of his death!"

"And I have chosen!" said the young chief.

"Ura is a coward!" cried Lea passionately. "When the chief's daughter weds, it shall be with a brave man, not with one who fears to meet his foe face to face!"

"Would you wish that Ura should fight the white man?" demanded Ura, in much surprise.

"Better that than he should blind him!" replied Lea, shuddering. "But I would have the white man set at liberty!"

"Never!" replied Ura. "He shall die! But, for your sake, he shall die a warrior's death!" Then, raising his voice, he addressed the Indians in their native tongue.

A circle was formed; more wood heaped on the fire; Jack's bonds were freed; and he stood in the centre of the circle, confronting his formidable foe.

"Lea," he said in a low voice, "I thank you from my heart for having saved me from that fearful fate!"

She did not answer, but, as she turned her dark eyes to his, he could not help being struck with the young girl's beauty, and he marvelled at the fairness of her complexion, compared with the swarthy skin of the chief. It is true it was tanned by the sun, but even by the uncertain light of the fire Jack could see that she did not belong to the Indian race.

She lowered her brilliant eyes before the look of admiration she met, and Ura's face was distorted with passion. Striding up to Lea, he gazed at her for a few moments in silence, then, muttering some words that Jack could not understand, he drew his tomahawk, and a similar weapon was placed in the prisoner's hand.

The combatants were much of a size. Both were splendidly proportioned, and, in spite of Lea's taunting words, both seemed devoid of fear. With such weapons, of course, Jack was under a terrible disadvantage. Besides this, he had no intention of taking Ura's life. He could only rely on his strength and agility to escape the fearful blows his adversary would deal him.

In breathless silence the combatants faced each other. Suddenly, and as swiftly as the tiger springs, Ura darted at his foe; the gleaming axe flashed in the firelight; Lea uttered a cry of terror. Jack escaped the blow, but that cry so enraged Ura that he forgot all caution.

Turning, he rushed once more at his foe. Again Jack sprang aside, and, clenching his left fist, he dealt the young chief a blow at the back of the head that sent him to the ground.

Jack might have ended the combat now, but, turning to Lea, he said:

"For your sake, I will not take his life!"

The murmur of wonder at the chief's fall only added to his fury. He was on his feet in an instant. The weapons met with a loud clash. A blow grazed Jack's temple. Ura raised his tomahawk again; then Jack struck upwards at the chief's elbow. The weapon was hurled from his grasp, to fall among the savage spectators.

He quickly drew his knife, but Jack was upon him, and, seizing his upraised wrist with one hand, he gripped him round the body with the other, and to and fro they swayed as they struggled furiously.

But now Jack had the skill in his favour. With a sudden turn, he got the chief across his hip; then Ura was flung headlong to the ground, and Jack placed his knee upon the brawny savage's breast, while he wrenched the knife from his grasp and held it at his heart.

"The white man has conquered!" exclaimed Lea, glancing with much admiration at Jack. "You will free him now?"

"Never!" cried Ura fiercely. "He shall die! Seize him warriors! Bind him hand and foot! Once more he shall see the sun shine on yonder mountains, and then his arm shall deal him death unless he slays me! Go! The chief of the Moluches has spoken! And listen, Ura! Dare not to lay a

hand upon him! At break of day he meets me in mortal combat, and I am not—Ura!"

The fallen chief seemed to shrink beneath the withering gaze that Ura cast upon him. Without a word, Ura sprang to his feet, and strode quickly through the throng of warriors.

Meantime Jack was seized and once more bound. He offered no resistance, as it would have been in vain; but as he was being borne to one of the huts, he saw Lea's beautiful eyes fixed upon him, and by that look he knew that Ura had not won the young girl's love.

The time dragged on, and as Jack lay on the floor of the hut, gradually the voices of the warriors died away until the silence was complete. To and fro, like some black shadow, and as noiselessly, the sentry paced, stopping from time to time to glance in at his prisoner. Presently Jack heard a musical voice. The words were uttered in the Indian dialect.

A few moments later Lea entered the hut, bringing the prisoner some food and water, both of which he stood in great need.

"You have been very good to me, my beautiful Lea!" Jack exclaimed. "I can never repay you for such goodness. But tell me of yourself. Surely you belong to my race?"

"I do not know!" she answered. "My skin is white, like yours, yet I have always lived with the Moluche people, and I am the chief's daughter; at least, they tell me so!"

"Is he kind to you, Lea?" inquired Jack.

"In his way—yes. But he is very fierce, and sometimes I am terrified at him. He swears I shall marry Ura, who is cruel and wicked; but I never will. Listen! You must escape. I will sever your bonds. There! You are free. There is a knife. The rest is in your hands. You are brave and strong. You will have to clamber up the side of the dell, then go westward towards the mountains. Amongst those rugged passes you may escape, but in the forest you never would. And now, farewell for ever!"

"No!" replied Jack. "That shall not be. If I live, we shall meet again, Lea. I shall never forget what you have done for me!"

"Hush! Here comes the sentry!" whispered Lea. "Lie still, as though you were yet bound, until you see your opportunity of escaping. Farewell!"

Before Jack could reply, Lea had gone, and he wondered how on earth he was to escape from those savages.

A few minutes elapsed. The sentry had passed the entrance of the hut. Jack rose noiselessly. Then parting from the hut, he ran swiftly across the plain, and gained the side of the dell. In an instant the cry was raised; the Indian war-whoop rang out; from the many huts the warriors swarmed.

They had seen the fugitive, and the air was black with spears and arrows. Still Jack sped on, until he gained the steep side of the ravine; then he climbed.

Fortunately for him the night was intensely dark, but soon the savages brought torches on the scene; then hurled their spears at random. As he climbed still higher, Jack could hear the weapons dash into bushes at his side, and many came so close that death seemed certain.

Still, up he went, and the howling voices of his foes came after him. He reached the top, then on he sprang into the darkness of the night, while the war-cry of the savages followed him.

And on into that darkness he fled until the voices of his pursuers grew faint in the distance. He was free, but well he knew that at break of day his fierce enemies would take up his trail and track him down.

In the distance he saw the mighty range of the Rocky Mountains rising against the black heavens, and, bearing in mind Lea's advice, towards these he ran at his utmost speed. By the time he had gained the foot of the mountain range the shouts of his pursuers were no longer audible.

Groping his way in the darkness, he ascended the rugged heights in the hope of hiding his trail. As he got to a greater altitude the night air grew colder, until against the blackness of the skyline he could see the white mass of perpetual snow.

At last, amongst the rugged boulders, he found a little crevice. It was formed by two rocks, whose summits were so close together that they made almost a complete arch. Here Jack determined to pass the night, for the danger of proceeding amongst those yawning crevasses was very great.

Notwithstanding the cold, which was intense at the height to which he had ascended, Jack soon fell asleep, nor did he awake until the first light of the rising sun shone upon that vast expanse of glittering snow.

Leaving the little cave, he anxiously scanned the mountain-side. He had scarcely made his appearance in the open, when a cry rang out, and from craig to craig it echoed. From all parts he saw dark forms bounding over the rocks, until a vast mass of yelling savages were darting towards him at almost incredible speed.

## CHAPTER 4.

## A TERRIBLE PERIL—THE PHANTOM RIDER—A PAST TROUBLE—THE FOREST FIRE.

Jack darted away at the greatest pace he could command. Several times he fell, and the jagged rocks cut his flesh; but on he went, well knowing the awful death that awaited him should he be captured. But swift though his pace was, that of his agile pursuers eclipsed it. Their furious yells drew nearer, and before the chase had lasted long, he heard spears and arrows strike the rocks around him. And now in front he saw a yawning chasm, which ran down the mountain-side, and barred his further progress.

Jack stopped on the brink, and gazed into the fearful depths, whose bottom was hidden from his sight in a blue haze. The width was very great, so great, indeed, that to take the terrible leap seemed certain death. Yet it was Jack's last chance of life, and his determination was quickly formed.

Stepping back, he waited some few moments to regain his breath; then, with arrows whizzing round him, he ran forward. His foot was on the brink, and into the air he sprang. A thrill of horror ran through him. He knew in that awful moment that he had leapt short; the next instant his chest struck against the opposite brink, and, digging his hands into the snow, he clung to the rugged rocks with all his strength.

He did not heed the whizzing weapons now, nor the vengeful yells of his pursuers. The dreadful knowledge that inch by inch he was slipping into space drowned all other fear. Scarcely daring to breathe, he worked one knee upon the ledge of rock.

An arrow grazed his arm, but he did not feel its sting. A spear was hurled, and it touched his hair as it passed, to be buried deeply in an interstice between the rocks.

His hands were slipping from their hold. With a last effort he seized the haft of the spear. It was firm enough to support his weight, and drawing himself from that terrible death, he rolled over and over on the rocks, to fall behind a huge boulder; but so exhausted was he by the fearful struggle that it was some time before he had even strength left to rise.

The rock sheltered Jack from his enemies' weapons, and not one of the savages dared to take that awful leap. If he could only escape their weapons he would be safe; but he well knew how certain was their aim, and directly he rose they would be on the alert to take his life.

At fifty yards or more a ridge of rocks appeared, and these would give him shelter if he could only reach them. Suddenly he darted forward, and as the savages' fierce shout arose, he flung himself on his face in the snow.

This, undoubtedly, saved his life, for the air was darkened with spears and arrows as they whizzed over him. In an instant he was on his feet, and, rushing towards the ridge of rocks, gained their shelter before a second lot of weapons were hurled.

Taking an oblique course, Jack gradually descended the mountain-side until he reached the plain. Now he commenced the journey to his home; but although he suffered many privations it was unattended by further perils.

In the hut he found Pete, whose joy at his master's return was most extravagant.

"Massa Jack," he explained, at last, "when I lost you I followed de horse's trail. He came back here, but he was riderless; den I didn't care what happened next. We've looked for you ebery day and most nights, but we neber found you, Massa Jack, and I hab no one else to care for in de world. I'll soon hab de fire alight. I've kept food ready each day for you, but you neber came. De fire I forgot to-night, because I feel sad 'bout someting or anoder."

Then, as Jack grasped Pete's brawny hand, tears were in the faithful negro's eyes.

That night a mysterious thing happened. Jack and the negro had been asleep for some time, when both started up. It was nearly midnight. The wind had fallen to a complete calm, and all was very silent.

Suddenly, as they remained listening, a terrible cry rang out. It seemed to be uttered by someone quite close to them, yet they could not tell from whence it proceeded.

"I think it must be someone outside," whispered Jack, hurrying on his clothes. "Follow me to the stables, Pete. Some ruffian may be trying to steal our horses, the only valuables I have left."

The horses, however, were all safe; but as Jack opened the little shutter which served as a window to the stable he saw a horseman riding slowly across his land.

It was a brilliant moonlight night, and as the rider drew nearer Jack's eyes were fixed upon him. Pete stepped to his young master's side, then both uttered exclamations of horror. They could see the man's face distinctly now, and both recognised the evil face of Murdock.

"I'll fathom this mystery!" cried Jack, hurriedly saddling his horse, while Pete followed his example.

Again they heard that weird cry. It seemed now to proceed

from the bowels of the earth. But taking no heed of it, both sprang on to their horses, then rode into the open.

The mysterious rider saw them, and, wheeling his horse round, galloped swiftly away, while the two men immediately gave chase.

Leaping every obstacle that came in their way the horses sped on; but though they kept the weird rider in sight they could not gain upon him. They were nearing Tom Burch's run, when from behind a ridge of hills other horsemen appeared, and they headed towards that Phantom Rider, who immediately took a more westerly direction.

Now the crack of a rifle was faintly heard. But still on the horseman dashed; indeed, he was far beyond range, and the chances of hitting him from the back of a galloping horse at such a distance were very remote. Jack was wondering why the shot had been fired, when he was joined by Tom Burch at the head of twenty or thirty riders.

"Who is he, Burch?" inquired Jack, as they galloped on side by side.

"He is Murdock! lad," replied Burch, in a low voice of awe. "That demon has come to haunt me from the grave. His curse is—"

"Nonsense, Burch," replied Jack. "Surely you are not so superstitious as that."

"I have seen him. I met him face to face!"

"So did I," replied Jack.

"Then you know he is Murdock, or his wraith!" exclaimed Burch. "Listen to me, lad. You heard the ruffian say he had dealt the blow which has marred my life? I'll tell you what he meant, Jack. Mind! We are nearing broken ground. Many years ago, more than I care to remember, for they have been very full of trouble for me, I had a wife and infant child. In my absence a raid was made upon my run by Indians as I supposed, though from Murdock's dying curse I believe he led them.

"On that night, my—my—pshaw! it is long ago—my loved ones were murdered, Jack, and I—I am only an old fool. Steady, lad. Keep a tight rein. The ground is getting broken."

Jack uttered no word, but leaning sideways in his saddle he placed his hand on the old man's shoulder, and something strangely resembling a sob shook old Burch's frame. For in spite of years he thought of his boyhood's love, which those years had never changed. And he thought of his young wife's grave by the scented pines where he had placed her.

"That fiend rides hard!" said Burch, at last. "But I will continue the chase so long as my horse can take another stride. For several nights that strange form has appeared at my run. On each occasion some wilful damage was done. My cattle have been butchered. But, worse than this, one of the poor fellows who was keeping watch, was found lifeless with a wound in his breast.

"But see! Yonder rider is making for the forest. The wind is springing up. Before long that bank of clouds will hide the moonlight, and I fear he will escape us in the forest depths."

This seemed only too probable, for by the time the pursuers gained the outskirts of the forest into which the mysterious horseman had ridden, the moon was already obscured, and the wind came howling mournfully among the trees.

They could now no longer see the Phantom Rider, but from time to time they could hear the galloping horse. It was necessary to slacken speed now on account of the density of the trees; but each pursuer seemed as determined as Burch himself to capture the fugitive, and no man thought of turning.

Thus the chase continued until they had penetrated far into the forest, then the riders reined in their panting horses, and sat listening for some sound to guide them. But they only heard the moan of the rising gale, and the distant howling of the famished wolves in search of prey. The Phantom Rider had disappeared as mysteriously as he had appeared to them.

Several minutes elapsed, then another sound arose—a sound that caused every rider to unsling his rifle, and hold it in readiness for the foe.

For that fierce cry which echoed round the forest was the war-whoop of the Moluche Indians, and those daring horsemen understood its portent well.

Steadily the little band awaited the rush, nor did they wait for long. With cries that rang through the forest depths, and caused the fierce wolves to fly in terror to their lairs, the savage warriors charged upon their foes. Then the rifles flashed into the blackness, and deadly bullets tore through the yelling horde.

Again and again the savages sprang towards the gallant horsemen, but each time the galling fire drove them back. At last Burch gave the word to charge. The horses dashed forward, and the savages scattered before their dauntless foes, while the spears they hurled were thrown at random.

Two of the horsemen only were wounded, and these but slightly. While they were being attended to by their comrades, the remainder of the little band kept guard.

And now the heavy wind grew strangely hot. A pungent



perfume filled the air. The darkness in the forest deepened, until it seemed as though a black pall were hanging over it. Then, through that intense blackness, a lurid glow appeared. A fierce roar filled the air, and rose above the moaning wind. The gleaming light grew brighter. Flames darted through the pines, and spread in one vast sheet of fire.

"To horse, comrades!" shouted Jack. "Those fiends have fired the forest!"

Only those who have witnessed such a scene can comprehend the awful reality. Like a furnace blast, though fiercer than the mightiest furnace, the flames shot through the pines, until a rolling sea of fire leapt after the galloping horsemen with an angry roar and crackle.

On dashed the horses, mad with terror, and the riders trusted to their instinct to guide them, and the fire came on almost with the speed of the wind itself.

Were one of those horses to fall, or the rider to lose his seat, his death must have been certain; but as each rider bent low in his saddle, the horses dashed on before the raging flames, which lit up the whole country for many a mile around.

Soon the outskirts of the forest were reached, and when the riders had gained some distance on the plain they reined in their affrighted horses, as the grass was too damp for the fire to spread beyond the forest.

They were watching the mighty conflagration, when once more they heard the fierce war-whoop of the Moluche warriors, and far away to the east, circling round the raging fire, they saw a band of mounted savages riding towards them at furious pace, brandishing their glittering spears.

## CHAPTER 5.

### A BRAVE DEFENCE—JACK RESCUES LEA—THEIR FLIGHT—THE CHASE—IN THE HUT.

"Ride for your lives!" shouted Tom Burch. "Make for my place! We will make our stand there!"

Away sped the little party, and several rifle-shots were fired after them, but the balls passed harmlessly by. For many a mile that terrible chase continued. The yells of the pursuers were drawing nearer. Tom Burch turned in his saddle, and slightly checking the horse's pace, fired at the foremost Indian, whom he could plainly see as the moon shone through the swiftly-floating clouds.

The savage flung his arms in the air, and fell sideways from the horse's back, while the remainder of the gang slackened speed, fearful of approaching too closely to that unerring rifle.

At last Burch's ranch appeared in sight. It was surrounded by a high palisade. There was no time to dismount, and each rider put his horse at the leap, then rode for a large barn.

They had scarcely got their horses in and barred the heavy door when the savages commenced the attack. But now, through the loopholes which had been made in case of such an emergency, the defenders' rifles poured their deadly fire. The savages' rush was checked, and, turning, they fled from the storm of bullets.

Nearly an hour passed by, and not a sound told that the bloodthirsty savages were lurking in the darkness.

Suddenly that silence was dispelled by a deep, fierce voice, which seemed quite close to the barn, though Burch and his comrades could see no one. But as they heard the words, a thrill of superstitious awe passed through many a brave man's breast. For they knew that it was Murdock's voice.

"You villain, Burch, you shall feel the weight of a dead man's curse! I swore to strike you from the grave! You shall die at my hand; but first you shall learn the full extent of my vengeance. My hand slew your wife, but I did not kill your infant daughter. I placed her in the power of the Moluches. She is living yet. This night she will be in my power. Then I will complete my vengeance on you!"

Tom Burch sprang to the barn door. With trembling hands he unbarred it. Then, with his rifle cocked, he peered round, hoping to catch a glimpse of the fiend who had uttered that threat.

At that moment a shot rang out, and the old man staggered backwards into his comrades' arms.

"I will avenge that deed!" cried Jack, springing on to his horse, and galloping from the barn.

With cries of vengeance his comrades followed. Leaping the palisade once more, they dashed furiously into the midst of their foes, and the rattle of revolvers rang out.

Jack saw the phantom rider gallop swiftly from the midst of the combatants, and he urged his horse in hot pursuit. The threat was ringing in his ears, and as he thought of the beautiful Lea—for in his own mind he was now certain that she was Burch's long-lost daughter—in that miscreant's power, a thrill of horror passed through him.

Thrice he fired at the flying horseman, but the shots were answered with a scornful laugh of defiance, and Jack began to

wonder if this fiend could really be human. Then, casting such idle fancies from his mind, he urged his horse to greater speed.

Until the forest was reached Jack was able to keep the fugitive in sight, but once amongst the trees he lost all trace of him. In the distance Jack could see the fire, which was still raging, and skirting round this, he determined to make his way towards the Indian encampment, which he hoped to find even in the darkness.

How he was to rescue Lea, Jack had not the slightest idea; but he was determined not to leave the beautiful maiden, who had saved his life, in the power of that miscreant.

For hour after hour through the dense forest Jack urged his jaded horse, with nothing to guide him but the direction of the wind, which was blowing from the west, and by riding against this he hoped to strike the encampment, which he knew lay in that direction.

At last, when day was breaking, Jack reined in his horse, determined to wait until it was light, in the hope of seeing some landmark which might serve to guide him, or that he might strike the mysterious rider's trail.

Scarcely a quarter of an hour had elapsed when he was startled by hearing a cry. It was a woman's voice calling for help.

In a moment Jack's horse was galloping through the forest in the direction from whence the cry proceeded.

Again it was repeated. It seemed to be rapidly drawing nearer. Presently he heard the sound of another horse tearing through the bushes, and a few moments later, in the gloom of the breaking day, he saw a rider galloping through the forest.

The man must also have seen him, for he changed his direction, and urged his horse at a still greater pace.

Once more the cry for help echoed through the forest, and now Jack saw that his enemy's horse bore a double burden, and he never doubted that it was Lea in the phantom rider's power.

Stride by stride Jack's horse drew nearer. The miscreant, supporting the terrified girl with one arm, drew a revolver, and, turning in his saddle, fired twice at his pursuer.

Jack heard the balls whizz past; then the fugitive's horse stumbled and fell heavily, flinging its riders amongst the bushes.

In an instant Murdock was on his feet, and as he disappeared in the forest he emptied the remaining chambers of his revolver at his foe. But in his haste the aim was uncertain, and, reining his horse on to its haunches, Jack sprang from the saddle to Lea's assistance.

"You have saved me from death!" she said, looking into Jack's eyes.

"Remember what a terrible fate you saved me from, Lea!" he answered. "I trust you are not injured by the fall."

"No. I am unhurt."

"Then let me rescue you from those people, Lea. Only trust to me, and, indeed, you shall never have cause to regret it."

"How could I doubt one who has saved me from that horrible man?" answered Lea. "Now the chief is absent, Ura terrifies me with his threats, if I will not become his wife. And I never will. I will meet death first. He will be on our trail shortly; there is sufficient light already. Then I dread to think what will happen to you and me!"

"Nothing shall happen that I can avert!" said Jack, taking her small hand in his. "I only hope the day will come, Lea, when I may live to repay your goodness to me. Something tells me that it will. Can you ride?"

"Oh, yes; ever since I was a little girl so high. You have not yet told me your name."

"Jack," he answered, assisting her on to the riderless horse, though she did not need any aid; and as she sat so easily on the horse, he could but admire her graceful figure, clad in closely-fitting furs. Then, having asked his fair companion as to the country, he rode back on his trail.

They had almost reached the outskirts of the forest when Lea reined her horse, and motioned to Jack to remain silent.

"They are coming!" she cried. "Ura will be with them. You are brave and good. Will you promise me one thing?"

"I will promise anything that I can grant with honour!"

"Never let Ura capture me!"

"He never shall while I live!"

"They might take your life, and then— Jack, swear to me that you will put a bullet through my heart if you see that we must be captured!"

"Heaven forbid such a thing! How can you ask it of me?"

"Then give me your knife, in case the worst should happen!"

"Never, for such a fearful purpose as that!"

"I thought you cared for me, but—"

"My beautiful Lea, I care for you very much!" replied Jack, quickening his horse's speed to keep pace with hers. "Far too much to be a party to sacrificing your young life. But we will escape, never fear. Your horse is fresh, and, if need be, I

will hold those savages at bay while you ride on. In that event you must make for Tom Burch's run. You will find both shelter and a protection there.

"Many years ago that man who tried to carry you off killed Tom Burch's wife. The Indians carried off his infant daughter. Lea, I believe that little child was you, and that my brave old comrade is your father. But we will speak of this some other time. See! we are reaching the open plain. And here come our foes!"

As Jack glanced behind he saw a dozen or more mounted Indians, with Ura at their head, riding in hot pursuit. And now the race across the open prairie began. Mile after mile was covered at a speed that must have been sorely trying to Jack's jaded horse; but the savages' fierce yells caused it to keep up the great pace, and the Indians gained little or nothing upon the fugitives.

Jack's intention was to gain Burch's run; but when he was still many a mile from it, he saw the band of warriors who had made the attack returning, and now he altered his course in the direction of his own place, while the remainder of the Indians took up the chase.

Once or twice he fired his rifle, hoping to drive off his foes, but the shots only caused fiercer yells, and the distance was such that there was little chance of the shots taking effect.

Day was closing in when the fugitives came in sight of Jack's farm.

"Now, listen to me, Lea," he said. "My horse can go no further. I intend to make a stand here. You must ride on, and—"

"No! I never will. We will both die together. Jack, you must not send me away!"

"I am thinking of your safety, Lea," he replied, glancing back at the pursuers. "Well, it shall be as you wish, though I dread to expose you to such danger. We will ride to the stables, and yonder yelling pack will find no easy task before them."

The door was unfastened, and as the panting horses entered, Jack quickly barred it; then, springing to the little window, he levelled his rifle through it.

The savages had reined in their horses. They seemed to know that they might expect a fierce resistance. Several minutes elapsed before the rush was made, then on they came in the deepening darkness, yelling hideously.

## CHAPTER 6.

### A CLEVER RUSE—MYSTERIOUS SOUNDS IN THE NIGHT—THE MINE—DR. JAKES'S VISITOR—THE ACCUSATION—A FATAL SHOT.

Jack reserved his fire until the savages were quite close; then, taking careful aim, he fired at the foremost one, who fell wounded to the ground, while the rest of the horsemen leapt over his prostrate body.

Jack slipped another cartridge into his smoking rifle. Again he fired; then, drawing a brace of revolvers, waited for the charge.

On came the savage horde, brandishing their spears and tomahawks, and into their midst Jack poured his deadly fire. One of the Indians gained the stable door, and dealt crashing blows at it with his axe; but the remainder turned from the galling fire, and when he saw that he was alone he also fled.

"I do not think they will make a fresh attack until it is quite dark!" exclaimed Jack, quickly reloading his weapons. "Now, Lea, will you keep watch here, and tell me directly if you see anyone approaching. I believe I have thought of a scheme that will enable you, and me to escape."

Jack took down Pete's old coat, which was hanging in the



Ura's tomahawk flashed in the weird light as he swung it round his head; then with all his strength he struck at his adversary.

stable, and, buttoning it up, stuffed it with straw, then he tied it on one of the horse's backs. It did not look much like him, neither did the dummy he made out of a sack much resemble Lea's graceful figure; but he had no doubt it would pass muster in the darkness.

Waiting until the night had closed in sufficiently to enable him to execute his design, he cautiously opened the stable door; then, lashing the horses with his whip, sent them galloping across the plain.

They had not proceeded fifty yards before a fierce yell from the savages told that they had fallen into the trap, and the whole band swept after the fugitives with cries that only quickened the terrified horses' pace.

Jack waited until they had disappeared in the darkness, then he led Lea from the stable into the little hut. Here he obtained water and food, of which they both stood in great need; then, after a very hurried meal, they made their way towards Tom Burch's run.

It was a very long journey, but Lea bore it bravely. A light was burning in Tom Burch's little sitting-room, and Jack could hear men's voices. Telling Lea to remain at the door until he called her, Jack entered. To his joy he found Burch sitting at the table discussing their future plans. The old man had been merely stunned by the ball which had grazed his temple.

"Why, my lad," he exclaimed, grasping Jack's hand, "this is indeed good! We have only just beaten off those savages, and as it was impossible to follow your trail to-night, we determined to wait until break of day."

"Tom, old friend," said Jack, "you remember the threat of the Phantom Rider, and how he said your daughter was living?"

"Tell me what you know, lad!" exclaimed Tom. "Good or bad, out with it—sharp!"

"I believe he spoke the truth. But you shall judge for yourself. She is outside. Lea!"

Tom sprang forward, and looked into Lea's beautiful eyes. It seemed to him that long years of trouble were lifted from him, and that once more he was looking into the face of the woman whom he loved.

"She is the image of her mother!" murmured Tom. "It is my little child returned to me from the grave. I could never forget her face."

"Can this really be?" exclaimed Lea, looking at Jack.

"Yes, Lea," he replied. "There is no doubt that my old comrade is your father."

"Then, dear father," she answered, placing her trembling hand in the old man's, "how can we ever repay all that Jack has done for us?"

"We never can, lassie!—we never can!"

But Jack had his doubts on that point. He thought he was already repaid by the glances that Lea gave him.

In a few words he told all that had happened, and that night Tom Burch unlocked the door of the little room where his dead wife had last slept, and which no one but himself had ever entered since; and here Lea—or Maggie, as he called her, which was his wife's name—passed the night.

The following day Jack and Pete, the former having borrowed a horse from Tom, rode towards their home, and here Jack found his horse with the dummy still on its back. It had escaped without a single wound.

In expectation of another attack from the Indians, Jack and Pete kept watch each night by turns. Several days passed by, however, without a sign of the savages.

One night Jack was keeping watch in his little cabin, wondering how he could ever replenish his stock, when suddenly he heard a heavy blow. Stepping to the door, he looked round the country. The moon was shining brightly, and every object was distinctly visible. No human being was in sight. As he re-entered the little hut again he heard the mysterious blow, and it shook the ground beneath his feet, while it awoke Pete the negro.

"Golly, dat am bery strange. I've heard dat sound before.

Massa Jack, I believe dis place am haunted!"

"Hark! Do you hear that?"

"Men's voices."

"It certainly sounds like it," exclaimed Jack. "And yet it cannot be. No one is in sight."

"I believe it's de Phantom Rider!" whispered Pete. "P'r'aps he's in dis room, and can make himself invisible. Golly, dere's dat blow again! It comes from de earth."

Motioning to the negro to remain silent, Jack lay down and placed his ear to the floor of the cabin; and now he heard the muffled voices more distinctly.

"I intend to fathom this mystery," he said. "Bring picks and spades, Pete. Men are beneath this floor, though how they got there is more than I can imagine."

Jack soon had up the planks which formed the cabin floor, then he and Pete commenced to dig.

The voices had ceased now, but Jack continued his digging until he had excavated a hole some three feet deep. Suddenly the ground beneath him gave way, and he fell downwards amidst a mass of earth. Struggling to his feet, he held the lantern above his head, and, to his amazement, found himself in a narrow tunnel. Pete was quickly by his side.

"Golly, what are dey up to?"

"I think I can guess, Pete," said Jack, shining his lantern on the yellow earth. "If I am not very much mistaken, this is a gold-mine, and seeing that it is on our land, it appears to me that we have the best right to it. Let's see where this tunnel leads to."

Jack made his way along it, and the ground sloped down as

he proceeded. Brattices had been run across the low roof in places, and presently they found a couple of picks, buckets, and some washing-pans. Soon a ray of moonlight appeared ahead, while the tunnel grew so low that he had to go on his hands and knees.

Now he found himself on the bank of a narrow stream which ran quite close to his hut. The exit to the tunnel was concealed by a large clump of bushes which grew on the river bank, and although Jack had passed the spot a hundred times, he had never noticed the opening. Indeed, it was impossible to see it from the bank above, and even from the water no one would have detected the opening unless searching most carefully for it.

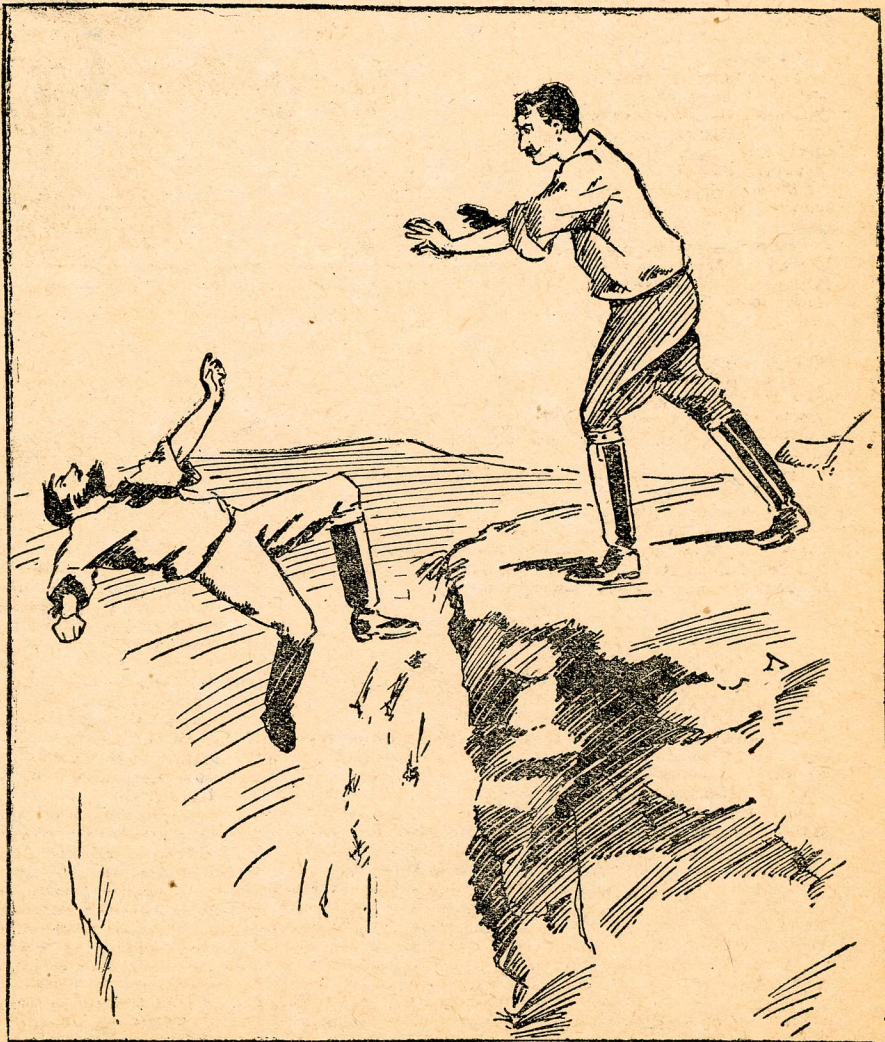
Jack could see men's footprints in the sandy bottom, and, following these downstream, he reached a bend in the river where the two men had left the water, for their trail across the country was quite plain.

This Jack determined to follow, and it led him in the direction of Dr. Jakes's house. For the first time Jack's suspicions concerning his friend's honour were aroused; and these suspicions were confirmed when he found the trail led up to the door of the doctor's hut.

Cautiously approaching the window, from which a chink of light appeared through the closed shutter, Jack looked into the room.

Two men were seated by the fire. One of them was Dr. Jakes; the other the Phantom Rider. Jack saw the miscreant's face distinctly with the deep scar down it. He was Murdock!

Feeling that his revolver was safe, Jack knocked at the door, which was almost immediately opened by Dr. Jakes; then Jack looked round the room in wonder, for the little doctor was the only occupant. There was, however, an inner apartment, and Murdock might have escaped into that.



Murdock uttered a cry of terror as he fell back.

"How are you, Jack?" exclaimed the doctor. "Glad to see you. Sit down."

"Have you seen anything of Murdock lately?" inquired Jack, fixing his eyes on Jakes.

"It's the strangest thing I ever heard of," answered the doctor, lowering his voice. "The apparition haunts me, and the awful part about it is that the man is dead. I have seen many mysterious things in my life, but this is the first time I have ever seen the dead appear as spectres."

"I suppose you know that I don't believe in such rubbish?" replied Jack.

"Yet Murdock was hanged and buried. Who is this Phantom Rider?"

"I fancy you could answer that question better than I!" retorted Jack, "seeing that you have dealings with the miscreant."

"I? My dear fellow, you must be dreaming. I am not so fond of spectres as that."

"Do you deny that he was in this room not two minutes ago?"

"Most certainly!" cried the doctor, springing to his feet, and looking round fearfully. "What ever makes you think so?"

"I saw him through that shutter quite close to you."

"No! Don't say that!" exclaimed Jakes. "I had a strange feeling that some fearful thing was near me, but I saw no one. If that fiend has been here he was invisible to me! But I believe it must have been your imagination."

"You will scarcely expect me to believe such a ridiculous thing as that," replied Jack. "I have found you out, Jakes. While professing to be my friend, you have been robbing me. Only this night you have just returned from my place accompanied by your ruffianly accomplice. I can well understand your object in trying to frighten me away from my run so that you might take possession of it. But, you see, your schemes have proved futile!"

"Indeed, you wrongfully accuse me," declared Jakes. "The mystery of that Phantom Rider is as deep a one to me as it is to you. You say you saw him in this room. If such was the case, where is he now?"

"In yonder room," replied Jack, taking the candle from the table.

"Go and convince yourself then," replied Jakes. "I opened the door immediately I heard you knock. If I had wished to conceal someone I should have given him time to escape. Search the place."

Jack drew his revolver, and, flinging the door wide open, held the light above his head.

The room was empty, but as he looked round he saw Murdock's vindictive face at the window which was immediately opposite the door.

Before Jack could level his revolver, the miscreant fired at him. The ball cut through his coat; then a fearful cry rang out.

Directly Jack turned his back, Jakes had sprung to his feet and levelled a revolver at him; but ere he pressed the trigger, the ball which Murdock had fired and which was intended for Jack's heart, pierced Jakes's breast, and he fell heavily to the floor, while Murdock fled across the country.

Pete now sprang into the hut, and the two bent over the wounded man.

"I—am—dying!" gasped the doctor. "The ball has pierced—my—heart!"

And those were the last words that the wretched man ever uttered.

"He is dead, Pete," said Jack, in a lowered voice. "Murdered by his accomplice."

"Dat's a lot better dan if it had been you, Massa Jack," replied the negro. "All we can do now is to make him a grave."

"It's a terrible thing," said Jack. "I looked upon him as my friend. Come, Pete, we will do as you say."

Close to the little hut they dug a shallow grave; then, having placed their false friend in it, they filled it up and hurried from the spot.

## CHAPTER 7.

THE SECRET OF THE PHANTOM RIDERS—UNCOVERING THE GRAVE—ON THE TRAIL OF THE PHANTOM RIDER—THE CHIEF'S LAST FIGHT.

"I want to return by the Haunted Valley," said Jack. "I have an idea I can clear up that mystery."

"Dis child would rader clear him up by daylight," replied Pete. "But I'm ready to come."

Jack led the way, and he spoke but little until they reached the spot. The fact is he was greatly shocked at Dr. Jakes's tragic death.

They reached the trees, and stood in their deep shadows, when suddenly Pete gripped Jack's arm.

"Look!" he cried, "de Phantom Rider. Golly, dat's no human form!"

"Quick!" exclaimed Jack, running across the valley at his utmost speed. Then when he reached the rising ground where the shadowy form had passed, he turned and pointed to the brow of the hill on the opposite side which rose behind the trees in the valley, and along its crest Murdock was riding at full speed, the moonlight behind him throwing the shadow of the horse on the spot where they were standing.

"You see, Pete," exclaimed Jack, "the mystery is very simple after all. The Phantom Riders we saw were merely a number of savages riding along the crest of yonder hill. Of course, we could not see them from where we stood, because the trees in the valley were in the way; but we heard their war-whoop, and, if you remember, it seemed to come from the air."

"Now let us get back, for at daybreak I intend to ride over to Tom Burch's. I do not feel at all at ease concerning his daughter while that murderer Murdock is at large."

Shortly after breakfast the next morning, Jack and Pete rode up to Burch's farm, and told him all they knew concerning Dr. Jakes.

"It's a bad job," exclaimed Tom; "but the man seems to have deserved his fate. There's no doubt he has been in league with that Phantom Rider, whoever he may be, for a long time, and I expect he was rather too friendly with the Indians. We know that the Phantom Rider was. What I can't understand is this ruffian so closely resembling Murdock. You would scarcely expect to find another face like his."

"I firmly believe he is Murdock, Tom," answered Jack. "I mean to prove it this very day. Lend me a spade, and come and show me the spot where he was buried."

In a few minutes they reached the place, and Jack commenced to uncover the grave. The ground was still quite loose, and he had soon reached the bottom.

The grave was empty.

"Are you sure I am deep enough?" he inquired.

"Certain!" exclaimed Tom. "You have got on to the hard ground."

"Then it is as I thought," said Jack. "The man was not dead, and Jakes knew it. He must have returned immediately, uncovered the grave, and got Murdock out before life was extinct. Jakes would know well how to resuscitate him."

"I believe you are right, Jack. I remember now that Jakes did leave us immediately. He was in a great hurry, and he pretended he wanted to overtake you. It would not have taken him many minutes to get Murdock out, because the earth was only lightly shovelled in. Besides that, one of the spades was missing, and we found it the next day close to the grave. I thought the man who used it must have left it there; but I expect Jakes hid it."

"There is no doubt that Murdock escaped, and that he and the Phantom Rider are one and the same."

"Yes," replied Jack. "And while that ruffian is at large your daughter's life is not safe. You remember how he swore to have vengeance on you? We know him too well to doubt that he will keep that oath. He shall be captured, Tom, and I will never rest till I have caught him."

"I'll come with you, Jack."

"No. Your daughter will need your protection here. At any moment the Moluches might make a raid, and you will need all the help possible to drive them off. I will leave Pete here, and go alone. I know where I can pick up the murderer's trail; then when I meet him let him beware."

Tom somewhat reluctantly consented to this arrangement. He did not like the idea of Jack going on such a perilous undertaking alone; but he knew the probabilities of an attack were very great, so he finally agreed, and Jack at once rode towards the valley where he knew he would strike Murdock's trail.

Meantime, a terrible scene had occurred in the forest among the Moluche savages.

The Chief Sura with the remainder of his warriors had given chase for many a mile to the two horses, but as they carried no weight they were more than able to hold their own, and eventually they escaped in the darkness, then the chief gave orders to his followers to camp in the forest.

A broad glade was selected, and soon a huge camp-fire threw a ruddy glow around. Seating themselves in a circle, a council-of-war was held.

There was a deep silence as Sura rose and addressed his warriors in their native tongue.

"Yonder lies our hunting-ground. Here the buffalo does not roam and food is scarce. My warriors would gain nothing by facing the white men once more. We have few guns, while they have many, and theirs shoot very quickly. Some of my warriors have already fallen. It is not well that other lives should be risked. Once more we will return to our hunting-ground. I have spoken!"

"And leave revenge behind!" cried Ura, springing to his

feet. "Shall the cursed white man rob me of my bride? Never, while my life lasts!"

"Ura's tongue is very brave," replied the chief quietly. "Once vengeance was in his power. He met the man who has stolen Lea and her love, but I did not see him strike his foe."

"Old man, you lie!" cried Ura fiercely. "Age is turning your heart whiter than your hair. Hear me, warriors. He fears to face his foes. I will be your chief, and lead you to victory!"

"When you have vanquished me!" said Sura, springing to his feet.

"Go to the squaws, old man, and let them take care of you!" sneered Ura. "You are more fitted to fight with them than me. Many winters have passed over your head."

"More than will ever pass over yours!" retorted Sura, whose black eyes were gleaming, though his voice showed no signs of his fierce passion, "for this night you die! Heap on more fire, my warriors. Light torches there. You shall see your chief's last fight!"

"I would I had a braver foe!" cried Ura, leaping upon his horse's back, while the old chief followed his example with wonderful agility considering his age. Then each warrior drew his tomahawk, and waited while the glade was lighted by the pine-knots, as the Indians formed a huge circle round the combatants.

At a word the horses sprang forward. Ura's tomahawk flashed in the weird light as he swung it round his head, then with all his great strength he struck at his adversary.

With a quick movement the chief bent down, the blow passed harmlessly over his head; but as the horses darted past he struck at Ura's back.

Maddened at the pain of the wound, he wheeled his horse round, and once more rushed at his foe. This time the weapons met with a clash; then blow after blow was struck and parried with marvellous dexterity.

Suddenly Ura swung his battleaxe round; the chief guarded the terrible blow, but such was its force that the handles of both tomahawks were smashed. The chief's arm shot out, and, circling round Ura's neck as the horses darted past, he was dragged from his seat to the ground, and ere he rose Sura, with drawn knife, stood over him.

The chief might have ended the terrible combat now, but he would not strike his prostrate foe. Allowing him to regain his feet, he waited for a fresh attack.

In an instant Ura sprang at him, and blows were dealt with lightning rapidity. Both the fierce warriors were terribly wounded, but neither showed signs of giving in.

Suddenly the chief sprang upon his adversary; his keen blade flashed in the red light, then it was buried to the hilt in Ura's breast.

The young warrior staggered forward; then, uttering his war whoop, he flung his knife with unerring aim at his victor, and fell lifeless at his feet.

"Warriors! I have conquered!" said Sura. "You have seen that I did not fear my foe. Soon the sun will rise over the hills and forest, but the chief of the Moluches will never see its light! But see! The weapon that has dealt my death blow shall never be used again!"

And, drawing the blade from his breast, he flung the knife into the blazing fire, then sank to the ground at his warriors' feet.

## CHAPTER 8.

### JACK MEETS THE PHANTOM RIDER—A STRUGGLE FOR LIFE—OVER THE CATARACT—CONCLUSION.

Jack never drew rein until he reached Murdock's trail, which was still quite distinct, and he was able to follow it at a rapid trot. For some distance it led along the hillside in a northerly direction, but presently it descended on to the plain, and struck in a direct line to the forest.

So long as the daylight lasted Jack pushed on, and towards night, on the borders of a morass, he shot a wild turkey. Here, as there was a spring of clear water, he determined to camp, and having built a camp-fire with some dead pine branches, he soon had his supper roasting before it. To this he did ample justice, for his appetite was keen after the long ride, and the food not to be despised.

Then, placing his rifle and revolvers in readiness, in case of a surprise, he lay down beside the blazing fire, and was soon sleeping soundly; nor did he awake until the sun had risen.

After a hasty breakfast, he once more mounted his horse, and by midday the trail brought him to a swiftly-flowing and broad river. This Murdock had ascended, and Jack followed at an easy gallop.

A few miles along the river-banks grew higher, while flakes of foam and a distant roar of falling waters told him that he was nearing a cataract.

Here, owing to the rocky nature of the ground, he was un-

able to follow the trail further; so, dismounting, he determined to leave his horse at the bottom of the cataract, and climb the steep bank on foot, in the expectation of once more striking the trail on the high ground.

Slinging his rifle over his shoulder by its strap, he commenced the ascent. He had gained about half the distance when a bullet struck the boulder to which he was clinging, and a moment later he heard the report of a rifle, though he looked in vain for his foe.

Presently, however, he saw a little cloud of smoke floating from the bushes, and he knew his enemy was lurking there.

Keeping under cover of the boulders as far as possible, Jack continued the ascent; but each time he exposed himself to his enemy's view a rifle-ball would come crashing into the rocks, once so near that his hand was slightly grazed.

Jack knew if Murdock was still mounted he must have made a circuit to gain the height, for no horse could have ascended the rugged ground; indeed, in places it was so steep that it was as much as he could do to climb it.

Presently Murdock's head appeared over the top of a boulder, and the ruffian levelled his rifle at his foe.

"If you come farther," he shouted, "you will meet your death! But if you choose to descend, I will let you go unharmed!"

"I intend to capture you, you murderer!" replied Jack; "however great may be the risk!"

"Then die, you fool!" cried Murdock, firing.

The ball whistled past Jack's ear, and the miscreant uttered a fierce oath when he saw his aim had not proved fatal; or, indeed, even wounded his foe.

Jack quite expected the ruffian would fire again, but no shot came, and now the truth flashed upon him. Murdock had fired his last cartridge, for, clubbing his rifle, he waited for his foe's advance.

Of course, Jack might have ended the combat now; but he would not fire at an unarmed man, however great a ruffian Murdock might be.

"Do you surrender?" he demanded.

"Curse you, no! Do your worst, I defy you!"

Jack unslung his rifle, and placed it among the rocks. Then, continuing his ascent, he gained the top, and suddenly sprang at his foe. Murdock swung the rifle round, but, springing aside, Jack avoided the blow, and before another was dealt he grappled with the murderer and wrenched the weapon from his grasp.

The struggle was a terrible one, for Murdock, who was possessed of great strength, knew that his life depended on the issue. In his blind fury he did not heed how fearfully close they were to the waters above the cataract, but he tried in vain to throw his adversary. Now, however, he had met his match, and the grip Jack had placed round the miscreant's body caused him to gasp for breath.

To and fro they swayed; then Murdock uttered a cry of terror as his foot slipped from the river bank, and he fell backwards into the swiftly-flowing water, dragging his opponent with him.

Jack wrenched himself free from his enemy, and with long, powerful strokes tried to regain the bank; but the rapid waters swept him out, and down to the raging cataract.

He saw Murdock carried over, and above the roar of the falling waters he heard the doomed wretch's cry of terror.

Swifter and swifter the waters bore him on. He saw a huge curling green wave in front. He was lifted up, then down the awful height he plunged.

He sank far beneath the surface, and when he rose the whirlpool swept him back, and he was beaten down again.

A moment later he was in the rapids, and being whirled along at a terrific pace. All he could do was to keep himself above the surface of the waters, above which many a black rock appeared; but the tide carried him past these in safety, until he found himself in calmer water. But he was now so exhausted with the terrible struggle that it was as much as he could do to gain the river bank.

After a short rest he made his way back to the cataract, and now, as he glanced at the torrent, he saw Murdock's lifeless body being swept round and round by the eddying waters.

Then Jack mounted his horse and rode from the scene where he had so nearly met his death.

The first thing Jack did on his return was to obtain miners' rights; then he took the faithful Pete into partnership, and together they worked the mine, which has brought them wealth greater than they had ever expected.

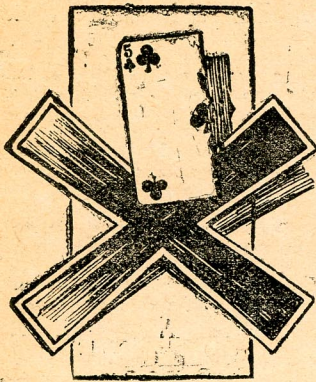
Jack spent much of his spare time at Tom Burch's run, and pretty Miss Lea looked forward to these visits more than she would have cared to confess.

At last, one day Jack asked the all important question, and Miss Lea gave her hand to the man who had saved her life and won her love, which will be his for all time.

THE END.

"FRIENDSHIP OR FORTUNE," By LIEUT. LEFEVRE, in next week's "UNION JACK."

YOU CAN BEGIN THIS TO-DAY,



# THE SIGN OF THE SCARLET CROSS

By CLAUD HEATHCOTE,

Author of "Four British Boys," "Val the Boy Acrobat," "Roy Royal of St. Miriam's," "The Red Light," "Dick Danvers," &c.

## READ THIS FIRST.

The story opens on Harry's fifteenth birthday.

Harry and Pierre Evison, whose son Harry thinks he is, are about to have tea, when Harry's great chum, Shaggy, a newsboy, enters, and tells them that a body has been dragged from the Thames at Limehouse, and that on the breast of the dead man is a strange tattoo—a scarlet cross, and half of the five of clubs.

On hearing this, Pierre Evison turns deadly pale.

Harry asks Shaggy to tea. The newsboy tells his chum that he has a few papers to sell first, and goes out.

He does not return, and Harry sets out in search of him.

In the street he meets Paul Lamaret, who asks if he knows where Pierre Evison lives. Harry directs him to their home, and goes on his way.

A few moments later, Paul Lamaret enters. "Pierre Evison, otherwise Pierre Gourbet, I salute you!" he says. And tells him that he has come to take his life because he has not killed one Horace Temple as he promised to do. The pair fight with rapiers, and Pierre is mortally wounded. The murderer escapes. Harry, meanwhile, goes to where Shaggy lives. He is out. Harry is about to leave, when he sees a rat gnawing a paper. He takes it from the animal, and discovers it to be a letter half eaten away. He puts it into his pocket and goes home. He discovers Pierre dying, and is told by him that he is not his son; that his family name is Temple; and that he must beware of the Lamarets, all of whom are marked on the breast with the scarlet cross and the half of the five of clubs. Then he falls back dead.

Mawker, a crafty old lodger in the house and the father of a fair girl, Angela, enters the dead man's room at night-time for the purpose of searching for a note Harry, whom he has drugged, has in his pocket. While engaged in this search, he hears some one enter the room. It is in perfect darkness, so Mawker cannot see the man's face. But when the latter leaves the room, Mawker finds that a dagger has been plunged into the bed where Harry had been lying.

Through the craftiness of Mawker, Harry is next day arrested on a charge of theft. But he escapes from the policeman, for the purpose of placing some mementoes on the breast of Pierre. To accomplish this, he is compelled to visit the mortuary at midnight, and while discharging this sacred duty, a lady (whose face he cannot see) enters and places a bunch of flowers on the shroud. Harry afterwards overhears a conversation between this mysterious lady and the organist of the church. Then, having fulfilled his duty, he voluntarily gives himself up to the police.

He is tried, and sentenced to be sent to a reformatory for a year. He escapes in company with a lad called Probyn. They are heard by Merrick, the reformatory bully, who arouses the officials. Probyn stays behind.

Harry decides to tramp to London. He changes clothes with a young sailor he meets. The police-patrol chases him, supposing him to be the sailor. He takes refuge in a cottage. The patrol enters, and asks the occupant if she has seen anything of a young sailor.

## CHAPTER 23 (continued).

How could Harry expect her to shield such a blackguard!

"The police had tracked out that much; but, strange to say, we cannot put our hands on him. We know very well he can't be far off."

"You're right there!" thought Harry. "A precious sight too near to be comfortable, if you only knew it."

"We keep getting information that a sailor has been seen in one or two places on the Portsmouth road, but, strange to say, just when we seem almost on the point of nabbing him

he slips clean through our fingers again. Our last information is that he was seen coming in the direction of Merrow, and as there isn't a house near this one for at least half a mile, I thought you might have seen something of him?"

Harry listened eagerly for the woman's answer.

"A sailor youth, did you say? Come to think of it, I did see a youth of that sort when I was going to the wood-shed this afternoon. He must be a mile or two further on the road by this time."

"Heaven bless you for a noble-hearted woman!" thought Harry. "She's staunch to me, though she must think me a scoundrel!"

"How long ago was this?" asked the patrol.

"Oh, quite two hours!"

"She's putting him beautifully off the scent!" thought Harry. But even as the thought flashed through his mind, he heard an exclamation which froze the blood in his veins.

"What's that?" cried the patrol. "Why, it's a sailor's cap!"

Harry had left his cap upon a chair near the clock; and at the very moment of turning away to go in pursuit of Harry the patrol's eye had caught sight of it.

He advanced into the room, and took up the cap from the chair.

"Why!" he cried. See! This is the very ship—look here—again!"

He leant against the clock-case in which Harry was concealed as he held up the cap before Mrs. Evans.

If Harry had awaited eagerly her answer before, his eagerness was now increased ten thousandfold. It seemed as though nothing short of a miracle could prevent his discovery.

"How did that come here?" she presently cried, after she had stood staring at the cap, apparently dumbfounded, for several seconds.

"That's what I want to know!" said the patrol. "How did it come here? The scoundrel must have sneaked in here, and is now in hiding in this very house."

"Yes; he must have sneaked in here while I was in the wood-shed. I'm so glad you've come, constable, or I might have been murdered in my bed this very night. You may be sure he's upstairs. Take this candle and look!"

With trembling fingers she lit a candle.

"I'm too flurried to hold it," she said, sinking into a chair. "Give it to me, my good woman," said the constable, taking the candle from her.

He took the candle from her, and advanced to the stairs leading to the rooms above. Harry's heart was beating rapidly.

He understood something of the woman's intention. She had shielded him thus far, in spite of everything. She had acted her part not only nobly, but to perfection. Her object now was to get the patrol from the room. The instant he mounted the stairs, her intention was to let him from his hiding-place and escape.

But again the blood chilled in his veins as he heard the constable return to the room and say:

"Stay! We must be cautious with a daring young scoundrel of this kidney! I see there's a lock to that door. We'll turn the key, so that if he's inside this house we may make sure of him."

He turned the key in the lock as he spoke, and put it in his pocket. He served the door at the back of the house in the same fashion.

Then, as a protection against violence, he drew his sword from the scabbard, and placed it under his arm.

"Now," he said, "if master Bob Ayres happens to be in this house, he's my prisoner, dead or alive!"

Harry felt that he had been caught like a rat in a trap, as the patrol once more turned to the staircase.

## CHAPTER 24.

### A PROMISE FULFILLED AND—AFTER! — THE WIDOW'S CONTEMPT—HARRY'S APPEAL.

No sooner had the patrol mounted the stairs than Harry stepped from his hiding-place and attempted to grasp the woman's hand.

She shrank from him as though he were a leper.

"Back—back!" she said, in a fierce whisper. "I will play my part to the end, and then—"

"But it is useless," said Harry. "The doors are locked against me. I am bound to be discovered sooner or later, so I may as well give myself up."

"Back—back!" she repeated, in the same fierce whisper.

Her stern look awed him. What did it mean? What did she intend doing. There was no time to conjecture. Harry could hear the heavy tread of the patrol overhead.

He knew well enough that in a few minutes his fruitless search upstairs would be ended, and that he would descend the stairs and renew the search below.

So without further parley he took up his position in the lock-case.

Scarce had he done so than he heard a shrill cry from the woman.

"My spoons!—my silver spoons!" she cried.

Harry was on the point of again leaping from his hiding-place, but it flashed into his mind that this was only a ruse on the part of the woman to get rid of the enemy.

The patrol came hurriedly down the stairs.

"What now?" he cried.

"My spoons—my silver spoons have gone!" cried the woman, pointing to an empty, old-fashioned tea-caddy that stood upon a chest of drawers at one side of the room. "My silver spoons and a pound in gold! I had them stowed away in that tea-caddy, and now they're gone—gone!" She wrung her hands as though overwhelmed by an irreparable loss. "I've had those spoons—twelve of 'em—ever since I was married. I would never part with 'em, and now they're gone—gone! All solid silver—genuine right through! I shall never be able to replace them—never, never!"

"What a tarnation fool I've been!" cried the patrol. "I see it all! That cunning youngster has done me—completely done me! He's taken your spoons and money and made off!"

"But how can that be?" cried the woman, in feigned astonishment, "when his hat's here?"

"Can't you guess? It takes a woman such a tarnation while to see through a brick wall! Why, he's left his cap behind just to make believe that he's somewhere in the house, so that while we're wasting time searching for him he can get further and further away. Now don't you see?"

"Ah, yes!" cried the woman; "I should never have thought of that. What a very artful youth he must be?"

"Artful? I believe you; he's as artful as a waggon-load of monkeys, else how could he have kept out of my clutches all this time? But I'll nab him yet. I don't s'pose he's very far on the road, as he's obliged to pad the hoof. I'll soon be on his track, and if those spoons are to be got back, Mrs. Evans, I'm the man to get 'em! Bob Ayres—Bob Ayres, there's a heavy reck'ning for you, my boy!"

With these words the patrol quickly unlocked the door, unfastened the bridle of his horse from the palings, leapt on its back, dug his spurs into its side, and started at a gallop down the roadway.

The instant he had disappeared, Mrs. Evans went to the clock-case and threw open the door.

"I have fulfilled my promise!" she said sternly. "I have saved you thus far even at the cost of falsehood. Now go!"

The good woman's eyes were blazing with indignation.

"I cannot go without first thanking you for so nobly—"

"I don't want your thanks!" she broke in fiercely. "The thanks of a despicable scoundrel are not to the taste of honest folk!"

"Despicable scoundrel?" faltered Harry.

"Yes, you gained my sympathy and protection by making me believe that you were an honest youth, who had been somehow wronged; but I find that I've been harbouring a thief—and—a blackguard!"

"You do me a great wrong, ma'am. I'm neither a thief nor, I trust, a blackguard."

"Aren't you Bob Ayres?—Isn't that your cap? Did you not hear the patrol's testimony to your character?"

Harry was writhing. This good woman had been so kind and loyal to him that her words were wormwood. He might never see her again. Come what might he wished to clear his

reputation in her eyes, and not to leave behind her as a hideous legacy of her kindness the false impression she had gained of him through the words of the constable.

"I think I can prove to you that I'm not so bad as I'm painted," he said, with feeling. "I'm not Bob Ayres—I'm not a sailor at all."

"Not a sailor at all?" she cried, in bewilderment. "Is this another attempt to deceive me? If you're not Bob Ayres, who are you?"

"Will you promise never to reveal what I'm about to tell you?"

She regarded him with the same searching glance she had previously bestowed on him.

"I promise."

"I can rely upon the promise of one who has done so much for me with as much reliance as I would upon a solemn oath, otherwise I should hesitate to tell you my story."

Then Harry rapidly told her the story of his life. She listened with amazed ears to the marvellous episode. At last it was evident that she had thorough confidence in him. She listened to Harry's story with breathless attention until he came to that part of it where he described his escape from the policeman in London, and the lift given him by the kind-hearted carman, Benjamin Ford, on his journey to Limehouse.

"Benjamin Ford?" cried the widow—"Benjamin Ford, did you say?"

"Yes," said Harry. "Do you know the name?"

"Know the name? He's my brother."

"Your brother?"

"Yes; he one time owned the Waterman's Arms at Limehouse. He's got a cripple son, poor Phil."

"Yes, yes!" assented Harry eagerly. "I saw the little chap. The father thinks a lot of him, though he is a cripple."

"Ah, yes, Ben thinks he's worth his weight in gold, though, to be sure, his weight isn't a great one. And my boy—if he were only here—what wouldn't he be worth to me? It was because you reminded me of him that I took pity on you and gave you shelter. But come—it is dangerous for you to remain here with those clothes on. I can give you some of Jack's. Then you can have his bed to-night, and sleep here safely till the morning. Follow me."

Harry followed her up the stairs into a small chamber.

"This was Jack's room," she said, "and that was his chest of drawers."

She took a bunch of keys from her pocket and opened one of them. Harry saw her head droop forward when the drawer was opened, and her lips were moving, but no sound came from them.

It was evident that the clothes stirred some memory of the past—some thought of her boy. Harry wondered, as he stood there in respectful silence, whether she was praying for him.

"You will find a suit in this drawer," she said. "You can put the sailor's clothes you are wearing in place of them."

Harry again thanked her. With those clothes on he might continue his journey safely on the morrow without attracting the attention of anyone—least of all, the police.

## CHAPTER 25.

### JACK'S ROOM—THE PORTRAIT—A MEMORIAL OF THE DEAD—A PATHETIC STORY—"WHERE CAN JACK BE?"

"So this was her boy's room, was it?" thought Harry, looking round it when the widow had withdrawn.

It was scrupulously clean. The bed was made, as though in readiness for Jack's return.

There was a bow-and-arrow slung across an engraving of Hagar and Ishmael in the desert; a cricket-bat was standing in one corner, along with a pair of skates.

A case of butterflies rested just above the chest of drawers, and on the drawers itself was the rough model of a ship, which had evidently been carved by Jack himself.

On the wall was the portrait of a somewhat delicate but kindly-faced man, with a curly-haired boy of about three sitting on his knee.

"Evidently Jack and his father," thought Harry.

Then he started, as he noticed close beside the portrait a mourning-card in a frame. It ran:

"In Loving Memory of My Dear Husband,  
JOHN PHILIP EVANS,  
Who Died March 15th, 18—,  
Aged 52 years.

A Model Husband; a Kind Father."

Then there was a verse beneath:

"And the stately ships go on,  
To their haven under the hill;  
But, oh! for the touch of a vanished hand,  
And the sound of a voice that is still."

Harry's heartstrings began tugging away at him as he read.

"FRIENDSHIP OR FORTUNE," By LIEUT. LEFEVRE, in next week's

"UNION JACK."

Why, the good man had been dead less than two years. How he pitied the desolate widow! Her life must be a very lonely one in that solitary spot. But where was her son? What had become of him?

Harry asked himself these questions as he quickly undressed and put on the suit of clothes belonging to the widow's absent son. They were rather tight, but he managed to squeeze into them.

"I've been going in for variety of apparel lately," thought Harry. "I shall do for a tailor's dummy, or a quick-change artiste presently. I wonder what luck I shall have in these?"

When he had put on the clothes, he folded up those he had taken off, and placed them in the drawer in the stead of those he had taken out.

"That's all serene!" he cried. "Now I feel a little more secure."

He locked up the drawer, and descended with the keys. The widow's glance went quickly up to him as he entered the room; her eyes filled with tears. Harry had again reminded her of her absent son. This time—now that he was in that son's clothes—more painfully than before.

With an effort she recovered her self-possession.

"Come," she said, "you may sit down now without much risk, for if the patrol did come, he wouldn't be able to identify you in those clothes. You have told me something of your story, and I dare say you're curious to know a little of mine?"

Harry acknowledged that he was, and at once took the seat proffered him, feeling all the more contented now that it was not necessary for him to make the journey to London that night.

"Well," said she, "I have not lived in this part of the country all my life. I'm really a cockney. Before I was married my name was Sarah Ford. Ben, my brother, was then in business in the Waterman's Arms—the inn at Limehouse you spoke about—and was doing very well. As he told you, bad luck set in with him after that murderous fight with knives. I well remember the thrill it gave me, especially when I heard about the man with the scarlet cross."

"You lived in the neighbourhood, then?" asked Harry.

"Yes, close by—in a small shop. My husband was a master plumber and house decorator. We employed several hands, and had a very good business. But the ill-luck which came to brother Ben came to us. I verily believe that the blighting shadow of that scarlet cross rested on all the family, that I do."

"We had only one child—Jack. Being the only child we doted on the very ground he walked on. It was wrong on us, but we couldn't help it. I think my husband was even prouder of Jack than I was. You guess what followed? We quite spoilt him. He grew up insolent and unmanageable. Still, we loved him."

She paused to wipe away a tear.

"About this time my husband's health broke down. He had an attack of typhoid, and the doctors said that the only chance of his getting well and strong again was by living in the country. We thereupon sold the London business, and bought this cottage and the ground attached with some of the money."

"My husband began to get better, but as he got better Jack got worse. He grew more and more insolent—told us that he wasn't going to live-poked away from what he called 'life,' in a 'dull country pigsty' like this; and frequently threatened us that he would run away. He knew that that threat threw greater dismay into our hearts than anything else, and often used it."

"Then he took to stopping out at nights, and going about with poachers and other evil companions. We pleaded with him, and tried everything in our power to alter him; but it was no use. He would keep straight for a few days; then he would go wrong again."

The poor widow paused in her story, and sighed heavily.

"One night—I shall never forget it—we had waited up for him, my husband and me, until midnight. At length he came in. I asked him where he had been? He returned an insolent answer. Stung beyond endurance, my husband caught him a back-handed blow in the face. Then I saw—heavens! that I had been blinded first!—Jack lift his foot, and brutally kick the father who had been so kind to him. John—that was my poor husband's name; Jack was named after him—fell to the ground, and the boy, alarmed at what he had done, rushed out of the house. From that day to this he has never returned."

She bent her head lower to hide the tears that were coursing down the furrowed cheeks; Harry felt a slight huskiness in his own throat.

"Would that I had known a mother such as she!" he thought.

"But that seems to be the way of the world. No one ever seems to appreciate what they have got. They're always sighing after what they haven't got."

By which it will be seen that Harry, in his way, was a bit of a philosopher.

"But hasn't he ever written to you? Haven't you had any tidings of him?" he presently asked.

"Not a line? Nor have I heard anything as to his where-

abouts. I sometimes think that he is dead," she said mournfully.

"No, no; don't think that, ma'am," said Harry, with assumed cheerfulness. "Jack will be turning up one of these fine days, be sure of that. But what makes you think he's a sailor?"

"Oh, he was always talking about it, and hankering after it—cutting out boats and swimming them. He was very handy that way. P'raps you noticed the model ship in his room? He made that all himself." She said it with conscious pride.

Harry had noticed the ship, as we know; he had noticed also that mourning-card; so he simply nodded his head in token of assent, afraid to trust himself to speech.

"My poor husband died a few months after," she continued, in lower tones. "I'm afraid Jack's ingratitude, and that cruel kick he gave him, broke his heart. He never got over it; but as he died he put his hand in mine and said: 'Dear heart, I'm going. If the boy ever comes home, tell him I forgive him!'"

Harry's heart was as full as the widow's. He felt, as he afterwards put it, "like making a fool of himself;" but suddenly the sound of horse's hoofs again turned his mind from the widow's painful story to the perils of his situation.

He and the good woman looked into each other's eyes.

"It's the patrol again!" whispered Jack.

"Yes, I'm afraid it is; you had better get into your old hiding-place."

"No," said Harry, "I'll sit it out. It's only fair to give my new suit an opportunity of distinguishing itself."

There was a loud knock on the door. Mrs. Evans got up and cautiously opened it, taking care not to make it wider than would be sufficient for her own figure. Fortunately, her precautions were not necessary.

The patrol did not advance inside the garden-gate. He contented himself with addressing her from the outside.

"It's only me, Mrs. Evans!" he cried. "I know you'd be anxious to know how I got on. Well, I haven't succeeded in nabbing the young rascal, though I've scoured the country for several miles. But full information has been passed on to every station for miles round, so we shall be bound to have him to-morrow. His sailor's toggery, and having no hat, will be sure to settle him. By the by, that's another thing I've called for—his hat. You might hand it out to me, will you? It will be useful as evidence against the rascal."

"Certainly. Excuse me for putting the door-to a bit; it's rather gusty."

She put the door-to, and Harry handed her the sailor's cap without being seen from without. This she in turn handed to the patrol, who wished her good-night, and rode on.

"He's got your cap," said Mrs. Evans, with a smile, "but that's all he has got of you."

"Thanks to you," said Harry fervently. "You have saved me twice or thrice, and if I can ever help to find your son Jack, be sure I will do so."

"Ah, I begin to despair that he ever will be found," said Mrs. Evans, clasping her hands.

When Harry remounted to his chamber he regarded with renewed interest the portrait of father and son; then he looked with deepest melancholy on the mourning-card at the side.

"Where can Jack be, I wonder? Where can he be? But what a cur he must have been! He caused his father's death, if ever boy did!"

Notwithstanding the exciting events of the day and evening, Harry was soon fast asleep.

(To be continued in next Friday's UNION JACK.)

## Friendship or Fortune

BY

Lieut. Paul Lefevre.

See next Friday's

"UNION JACK."



# FOR DEAR LIFE.

By W. SHAW RAE.

"Here's a pretty kettle o' fish!"

The testy speaker was the captain of the steamship "Orion." We were preparing to sail from New York, on our usual southern trip, and the skipper had popped into the purser's den to see whether I had all our papers in order. His peevish exclamation was called forth by the contents of a note he had received on the way, and opened in my cabin.

"Here's a pretty kettle o' fish!" he repeated vexedly.

"What's the matter, sir? Nothing wrong, I hope?"

"Well, not absolutely wrong, Charter; but it's a confounded nuisance, for that!"

"You recollect that humbugging showman, Sam Sloper, whom we shipped last voyage at Villa Rica; he had a so-called Aztec mummy with him, a seventh-century corpse. Said mummy proved to be the fugitive Luiz Sangrano, the assassin of President Garceau, of Aristolia. The fraud was exposed by George Grieve, of the Aristolian Secret Service?"

"Yes, yes, skipper. Of course I remember. I am not likely to forget the affair. It made me look so foolish I felt inclined to kick myself. Why recall it?"

"Because, Charley, we have not done with the plaguey business yet. I thought, when I handed over accusers and accused to the New York police, that there was an end of the matter so far as we were concerned.

"But no. It appears the United States Government have granted the extradition of Luiz Sangrano, and we are to be honoured with the task of conveying the accused assassin back to Villa Rica. He goes in charge of Grieve the detective, and 'Showman Sam' accompanies them. Bother it all, I'd sooner carry a company of lepers; but there's the order, and I suppose we must obey."

So saying, the vexed skipper threw down the paper and left my den, without stopping to make the inquiries that had brought him there.

It was even as my commander had said. There was the order issued by the American authorities, countersigned by our owners, the "Constellation" Company, authorising the passage to Villa Rica of George Grieve, detective, in charge of Luiz Sangrano and Samuel Sloper—per steamship "Orion;" and that order had to be unquestioningly obeyed. Although I felt fully as vexed as the skipper, I had to swallow my spleen.

The unwelcome party came on board shortly previous to our sailing-time; but, I must say, Detective Grieve showed considerable regard for the feelings of his captives, and also for those of us—the outwitted officers.

They did not appear as prisoners and guard at all—there was nothing in their appearance to distinguish them from ordinary passengers.

Grieve and Sangrano came down the wide gangway arm in arm, like intimate and attached friends; Showman Sam followed in the character of their servant.

Indeed, Grieve paid but little attention to Sloper. No doubt the two had come to some arrangement. I fancy the detective required the versatile showman as a witness rather than a prisoner. Anyhow, Sam Sloper, in his capacity of servant, had all the liberty of a valet, being berthed in the second cabin, but having the run of the saloon in attendance upon his master.

Far different was it with Sangrano. The detective stuck to his prisoner like glue.

Grieve requested, and obtained, the use of the deck state-room which Sloper and his mummy had occupied on the run up.

In the corner previously occupied by the mummy case he caused a stout bolt to be fixed, from which depended a strong steel chain, with a handcuff at the end; and every night—during the day also, if need be—he safely fettered his prisoner on the very spot where that assassin had personated his "mummy-rôle." There was a certain dramatic justice about Grieve's preparations.

The two never appeared at the public table, but took their meals in their own state-room; and, during the day, Grieve would often bring his captive out for a promenade, to get a breath of briny air; then the two would stump up and down the deck, arm in arm, like inseparable friends, so devoted to each other as to be quite indifferent to all besides.

I don't think any of the ordinary passengers suspected the real relationship of the pair; though many of them, I know, thought it "rather queer."

So our run progressed as quietly and as comfortably as could be desired. We had grand weather, and I was beginning

\* Note.—See "The Aztec Mummy," in No. 217 of this paper.—Ed.

to hope that all would pass off pleasantly; but, on both sea and land, unexpected storm often interrupts placid calm.

A couple of days ere we expected to reach Villa Rica, most of the ship's complement came on deck in the forenoon to enjoy the glorious weather.

The sun blazed brilliantly in the cloudless sky; not a breath of wind stirred; the silent sea lay calm and placid as a mill-pond, save for its great heart-beat, the heave of the ocean swell; and the great steamer sped swiftly yet imperceptibly forward, seeming motionless but for the throb of her propeller.

Now I always make it part of my purser's duties to attend to the comfort and cheering of my passengers, introducing one to another, organising games and sports, making things lively, and "keeping the ball rolling." But this day there was no occasion for any "master of ceremonies;" none need initiate the revels, as each one found amusement for himself.

Under the canvas awnings the company frisked about as gay as holiday-makers at a fair. On the starboard side two sets had formed for a game at ship-billiards, a little crowd around eagerly watching the play. Higher midship, a boisterous group was romping over deck-quoits; and other passengers were lounging and chatting about.

For some reason, the port-side was pretty well deserted that morning, most of the gay throng keeping to starboard; then my eye caught two linked figures promenading up and down the clearer space.

They were those of the detective and his charge. Grieve had brought out Sangrano for his usual morning walk; and, arm in arm, the two paced up and down, to all seeming on the terms of dearest, closest friendship.

The sight of these two made me think of Sloper, "Showman Sam," the aider and abettor of the assassin Sangrano in his abortive attempt at escape.

There he was. There stood Sam, the pseudo-servant, paying no attention to his supposed master, but intently watching the billiard-match.

Presently I saw Sloper pick up a piece of chalk used for marking the game; then he strolled negligently to port, and looked and leaned over the side as though gazing into the sea.

Carelessly, with his chalk, Sam drew a clear white line across the broad, black bulwark-top; then, with seeming thoughtlessness, moved further astern, and drew another staring mark about five-feet distant.

What was the fellow about? Was he thinking over some new game or puzzle?

Seemingly not. Strolling nonchalantly across to the billiard-players, he replaced the chalk, and resumed his listless watch of their game.

Rather curiously I eyed the man, wondering whether he had any method in his artless conduct; but suddenly my attention was attracted to another quarter.

Monotonously Grieve and his captive had been pursuing their linked march up and down the port side; but at length, in turning at the after-end of their beat, Sangrano suddenly started, wrenched himself free from the detective's lightly restraining arm, then, striking Grieve a smashing blow upon the face, dashed his gaoler to the deck.

Another spring, swift as a panther-leap, and the miscreant was on the bulwarks; and, unthinkingly at the moment, I yet noticed he landed midway between the chalk-marks.

Steadying himself for a second by a stay, he gazed below, then softly dropped overboard.

His disappearance broke the astounded spell that held us all enchained. A cry of dismay burst from every lip, and all on deck rushed frantically to port, and gazed horror-stricken into the sea.

Ah, what was that? A black thing showed momentarily amongst the foaming whirl of the milk-white wake—seen only to disappear. What was it? The man's head, his arm, his body? Who could say.

Grieve acted like a madman. His face gory with still flowing blood, he would have followed his man into the water had he not been forcibly restrained.

As quickly as possible the machinery was stopped, the wondering engineers as startled as any at the jangling peal ordering "Full stop! Hard astern!" in mid-ocean.

It took a little time, of course, to pull up the steamer, during which she ran some distance; but scarcely was her way off ere a couple of boats, fully manned, dangled from her davits; then, with the purr of tackle, they slipped down, and lipped into the water. The slings deftly unhooked, they sped away astern to render aid, if mortal aid might yet avail.

I leaped into one of the boats, and noticed that the now-calmmer Grieve was in the other.

For an hour and a half we scouted and searched, the "Orion" circling round the while in hawk-like sweeps.

Once we thought our quest successful. A round, black speck appeared on the surface far astern, and we dashed eagerly towards it. Alas, it was only a man's cap—that cap, however, easily identified as Sangrano's.

"FRIENDSHIP OR FORTUNE," By LIEUT. LEFEVRE, in next week's "UNION JACK."

That was our sole find. Body there was none; and gradually the conviction grew upon us all that that body was beyond reach of human help, slumbering peacefully in the unplumbed depths of the ocean.

Ultimately we were recalled to the ship, and the "Orion" proceeded on her voyage.

Of course there was much comment amongst the passengers. Most thought it a case of sudden madness. A story somehow got whispered around that the lost man was a person of weak intellect, and that the other was his keeper. That during a maniacal outburst the weak-minded one had committed self-destruction.

Suicide? Very likely, I considered; but from quite a different motive. Sangrano knew his fate to be sealed directly he landed at Villa Rica. Perhaps better die quietly at sea, unknown and unexecrated, than fall under the rifles of the Aristolians, amid the taunts and jeers of the rabble, and the invective of those who had formerly applauded him. Was not that most likely? Who knows? In any case, the man was gone.

It is always my habit when at sea to make a daily inspection of such of the holds as are open. As purser, and responsible for the cargo (bar sea-risks), I like to do my work carefully and thoroughly.

Accordingly, as evening was drawing on, I started on my rounds.

All proved right so far, and soon I had only to visit what we called the "orlop" hold.

The orlop, or lower deck, was occupied from the engine-room aft by passenger-cabins; but owing to the noise and vibration of the propeller, these cabins did not extend quite to the stern, a stout bulkhead cutting off a space of about thirty feet—the "orlop hold." We used the place for the storage of perishable articles requiring fresh air and normal temperature, and at New York I had stored therein half a dozen hogsheads of port-wine.

For additional ventilation the side of the ship had been pierced, an oblong space being cut, six feet by about fifteen inches, close to the floor. This was fitted with a stout, heavy trap, watertight when closed; but, opening like a flap, it could be screwed outward and upward, leaving a clear space through which the cool wind entered freely.

Of course, being so close to the water-line, the flap could not often be raised at sea; but the ocean had been so calm, and the weather so settled, I had opened it ere the breakfast hour. Now it must be closed for the night. The port-wine had had a good cooling.

The only light in the hold came through the open flap, the setting sun reflected from the still waters streaming in in ghastly glow, till the place appeared stained with blood.

Making my way to the trap I suddenly slipped, lost footing, and came heavily down on deck. Pah! The floor felt wet and clammy. Glancing at my hands, I found them red with blood; springing wildly to my feet, I found my white trousers stained with the same sanguinary hue. The whole floor was deluged with blood; the entire hold reeked with it. What terrible tragedy had here been done?

Ugh! the sickening stream welled across the deck, gathering here and there in gruesome puddles; a little lake, fast clotting, lay in the scuppers by the open flap. The place was like a shambles.

Stay, though! Was it blood? I looked at it carefully, stirred the congealing puddle, smelt it— Why, it was only port-wine!

Eh! What of my precious casks? Wonderingly I traced back the sanguinary stream; it had its source at one of the casks.

Then I saw the cause of the flow.

The spigot of the hogshead had been forced inwards; the entire contents had run out.

Yet how could that have chanced? All the spigots, as I had satisfied myself when storing, had been securely fixed; they were sawn off flush with the face of the staves. This one could not have slipped accidentally, yet how otherwise? The hold had been locked all day, the key in my own possession. The casks had been all right in the morning; no one could have entered the place in the interim. Then how—how—

Wonderingly I kicked the side of the cask; it answered hollow as a drum, seeming to mock me with an echoing "how?"

Angrily I dashed my fist upon the head. The lid turned under the blow, momentarily poised erect, then it flew straight at me, catching me crack on the face.

Wildly staggering back in affrighted amaze, I had a vision of a black thing—a demon I took it to be—springing, "Jack-in-the-box" like out of the cask. Yet even as it leaped I caught sight of the malign features of Luiz Sangrano; another second, and I was in deadly grip with the assassin, the murderer of President Garceau.

The pouncing spring of the murderous wretch bore me backwards, pressed me downwards; my foot slipped on the sloppy floor, and I fell crashing on the deck—undermost; Sangrano,

spreading himself over me, squeezing my breath out, tearing and worrying me like a furious hound.

And now, even at such a moment, I found time to think of the past, and blamed myself for my blindness in not seeing through the affair before.

Sangrano's wild leap in the morning from the bulwarks was no frenzied attempt at self-destruction, but a desperate effort to escape. The plan had been definitely arranged between the assassin and his creature—Sloper. The latter had noticed the open flap, and had chalk-marked its position on the bulwarks. Sangrano had dropped, not into the sea, but on to the projecting cover, had wormed round it, then wriggled his body through the aperture ere the astounded spectators on deck thrust their heads over the side. Seeking further concealment, the desperate fugitive had broached one of the hogsheads of wine, and ensconced himself within. Possibly he expected further aid from his accomplice; failing that, the vessel would soon arrive at Villa Rica, when he might have a chance to act for himself.

Such reflections, however, were speedily banished by the exigencies of the situation. Sangrano was a bigger, heavier, stronger man than myself; and my greater activity spurred to desperation could not restore the balance. Quickly I realised I must soon be overcome by this remorseless, reckless fiend!

I had left the door open when I entered, and now I shouted at the top of my voice for help. My desperate cries, however, were quickly stifled, as the villain fixed his claw-like fingers round my throat, and pressed it to suffocation.

We were both unarmed; but all too soon I recognised the fiendish purpose of my maddened adversary.

Slowly, jerkily he commenced to drag my body across the slippery floor towards the open flap. Now I saw his design. Mercy! He meant to thrust me through the aperture, to throw me, spent and almost stifled, into the sea. Hard I strove, but stronger was his power. Nearer and nearer was I drawn. I was forced into the hole. Another shove, and I should be tossed overboard like a bucket of refuse, in no condition to continue the struggle for dear life.

Then, somehow I managed to jamb myself into the opening, with arched back, and convulsive strain resisting the pressure. The throttling hand was withdrawn from my windpipe, and I shrieked, with all my failing strength, again and again.

But the pressure was overwhelming. I could not long resist the strain; all must soon be over; when, on the conclusion of a last despairing cry, there was a rush of hurrying feet, a flash of yellow light; the assassin was dragged away, I felt myself drawn from that awful aperture; and, looking round weakly, uncomprehendingly, I saw Sangrano in the grip of Detective Grieve and a couple of brawny sailors, while our good old captain, wonderingly, anxiously bent over me.

That was all I remembered for the time. I knew I was saved, yet fainter under the reaction.

When I recovered consciousness I was in my own cabin, where I remained till we reached Villa Rica; and never was purser more glad to see the back of any passenger than was I at witnessing the landing of Luiz Sangrano and Sam Sloper, under charge of George Grieve, escorted by a strong Aristolian force.

Sangrano, I understand, shortly afterwards paid the penalty of his crimes, being executed in the public square. Of Sam Sloper I never heard any more. Nor do I desire to.

THE END.

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In next Friday's

"UNION JACK."

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"10, Dean Street, Liskeard, November 1st, 1897."  
"Dear Sir,—I received the Watch and Chain on Tuesday last, and I am very pleased with them. The Watch is keeping good time.—Yours truly, Miss E. Swain."

"The Folly, 43, Thornton St., Hertford, November 1st, 1897."  
"Dear Sir,—I received your Watch and Chain quite safe, and was very well pleased with them; and many thanks for your kindness for sending me one of your catalogues; and perhaps I will have the pleasure of giving you another order hereafter. I remain yours truly,—Miss E. GATES."  
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"Dear Sir,—Just a line to say that I received the Watch and Chain which you sent me, and was highly pleased with them. I have shown the Catalogue to many of my friends.—Yours respectfully, Miss Adairson."

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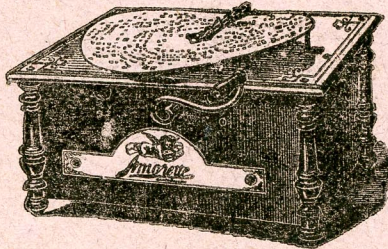
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