EVERY "BOY SCOUT" SHOULD READ THIS

AMERICAN INDIAN WEEKLY

BY COLONEL SPENCER DAIR

STAGE COACH BILL'S LAST RIDE

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Stage Coach Bill's Last Ride

or

The Bandits of Great Bear Lake

By COL. SPENCER DAIR

PRINCIPAL CHARACTERS IN THIS STORY.

STAGE COACH BILL BECKER—Almost the last of his class, is this doughty man. How he was pursued by a band of outlaws, who were the dread of Mackenzie territory, British North America, and who had sworn to exterminate the brave driver, reads like a romance plucked from the olden days of early frontier life in the great West. Stage Coach Bill's fight at odds against the bandits, and his winning of a vast fortune, and his life shows what can be done in the far silent North-West, where men meet now on a common ground of bravery rather than upon a pavement of gold.

MINNIE BECKER—The fair, brave, bright daughter of Stage Coach Bill. When it came to dealing in the occult, Minnie knew a thing or two. Her story is tinged with the supernatural arrival of her father, Stage Coach Bill, just in time to frustrate the onslaught of a band of outlaws who were thirsting for her blood.

PAUL CASSEL—The guard to the golden treasure which excited the cupidity of an outlaw band. His bravery, like that of Stage Coach Bill brought the treasure safe home to Fort Rupert on the Coppermine coach in spite of dangers that would appall any man, had he known in advance that he must face them.

POLACCA DELGADA—The leader of a dreaded outlaw band who scourged the North-West for years, and who was daring, brave, self-contained, treacherous, wily and murderous. His leadership finally ended in his sentence of death at the hands of Judge Lynch. Then he showed the craven heart of the outlaw and gun-fighter, standing on the scaffold with a rope around his neck, and the light of the mysterious future beyond the grave dancing before his white face.

JOE KAMUS—An Indian, mysterious, stoical, self-contained. A bandit and an outlaw by choice, he died silently, uncomplainingly, like an Indian should, looking forward with no fear, and backward with no regret, even if his life had been a terror of evil deeds.

KINISTINO—A Nunatalmute tribe Indian and a bandit-outlaw, who had "followed orders" of the chief of his gang, Polacca Delgada, until the grave of sudden-death closed over him.

KARL THURLAW—The young, stalwart, fighting Postmaster at Fort Rupert, British North America, near Great Bear Lake. He represents the best type of the new style Postmaster in charge of Hudson's Bay Company property. His winning of something that he was sure was worth a million of dollars—and was at that—is worth discovering.

FLAT-FOOT HANK MILNER—Keeper of the stage coach station at Milner Cut, on the line of the Fort Rupert and Fort Coppermine Stage Company, in Mackenzie territory, British North America. "Not afraid to hitch up untamed bronchos to any stage-coach in the world."

"MEXICAN BILL" LANE—"Judge Lynch" whose verdict ended the lives of three truculent bandits.

BUCK COOPER—This stalwart man saw that the sentence of "Judge Lynch" was carried out on Polacca Delgada's outlaw band, after a posse from Fort Rupert, had arrested the treacherous outlaws.

CHAPTER I.

THE RAID OF THE BANDITS.

"Not a horse left on the ranch."

Flat-foot Hank Milner swore a round oath as he spoke these words.

Stage Coach Bill Becker, from his perch on the top of the fast Fort Coppermine flyer, pulled the reins over his four spirited bronchos, and sighed resignedly.

Paul Cassel, guard of the half million dollars worth of bullion in the treasure box of the coach, climbed down to the ground from his perch behind Stage Coach Bill, driver of the flyer, and threw his sawed-off double barrel shot-gun over his shoulder with a second sigh.

"When did the horses vanish?" Cassel asked Milner.

"Some time last night," came the quick reply.

"Who got them?" asked Stage Coach Bill with a humorous twinkle in his eye.

"Stop joking," cried Milner. "Who gets all the crooked stuff up here?"

Stage Coach Bill laughed and nodded.

"I suppose you mean Polacca Delgada, the outlaw, and his band, eh?" put in Cassel, as he shifted his gun to his other shoulder.

"Sure," replied Milner with fine scorn. "Who else is at the bottom of every bit of deviltry that goes on in Mackenzie territory, British North America——"

"In the Dominion of Canada," cried Stage Coach Bill with a wink.

"I am willing to put up against Delgada and his outlaw gang a lot of crimes about Great Bear Lake, and over the road that leads from Fort Rupert on the North shores of the lake to Fort Coppermine, on Coppermine River, several hundred miles away, but I am not going to admit that he and his gang are at the bottom of every crime in the North-West," replied Cassel.

Stage Coach Bill laughed.

"I drive a fifty mile strip of this territory from Fort Rupert, to Milner Cut right here, where we are, and where we ought to change our four hosses, and I'm willing to state that this far Delgada and his gang do about all the shooting, murdering, and robbing that there is done out here."

"There's forty-three other stations where the Fort Coppermine and Fort Rupert Stage Company's coaches stop to change hosses while travelling this here stage coach line," quoth Milner, "and from all reports I hear along the line, the Delgada band are just as numerous everywhere as they are here."

"They are numerous here on my division," answered Bill. "Too darned numerous. It's getting so it's as much as a man's life is worth to drive this here coach over my division which begins at Fort Rupert and ends here at Milner Cut. One way one day; 'tother day back over same route; and all the while I'm getting cross-eyed watching for Pol Delgada's outlaw band to hold me up."

"Well," softly remarked Paul Cassel, "there hasn't been any hold up since I started in to guard this coach six weeks ago."

Bill and Hank roared.

"Don't get chesty," cried Hank. "Pol Delgada has been a runnin' off cattle and horses down on the other end of the stage road, about Coronation Gulf, near the Arctic Ocean. It's fur-trapper time there now. Good pickings in furs for the outlaws that-a-way; but you wait till the gang ride back this way. You won't be so chesty, after that."

"Looks to me as if this round-up of hosses just when we ought to change to go onward is part of the game of the bandits. Did they get all the coach hosses?"

"Every darned hoss."

Milner, the keeper of the station named after him, swore again in a hearty way.

"Hully Gee!" Bill cried. "Hank, you certain have got a fine flow of language. I admire you man, for you certain throw language beautiful, like."

It was Cassel's turn to laugh.

Feeling the sneer in the station-keeper's words about his being "chesty" more than he wished to appear, Cassel was glad of the opportunity.

"I know I rip-an'-tare more than I ought to," replied Hank, "but I've been a keepin' this station for the stage company—say how long is it Bill?"

"You came here the year I began drivin'," replied Bill. "That was forty year' ago come this next July —that is about a month from now."

"That is a long time," said Cassel.

"You bet! Especially when the past five years has been made pretty merry by the Delgada gang. Afore they showed up about here, it was a pretty darned good job. Now it's——"

"As bad as that, eh?" smiled Cassel.

"Well, we had a rest for awhile, while the outlaws were off Coronation Gulf way, didn't we?"

Bill spoke these words.

"We did. But the running off of the stock last night seems to indicate that Delgada's back on the job here," rejoined Milner.

"Looks that way. Now, man, we have got to do something. We have got to get this coach through some how," cried Bill. "We must get to Fort Rupert on time if we bust a fifth-wheel, because, man, we have all the bullion that must be sent down the Mackenzie River somehow by the next fur-packet going out, and there must be some way to get on with the cash."

"Gee! Got treasure aboard?" whispered Milner.

"Half a million this trip."

"That accounts for your being stopped here," remarked Hank.

"Think Delgada's after the gold?"

Hank nodded.

"Can't he hold us up any way, without this hoss-stealing game?" asked Cassel.

"If he wanted to, he could in a minute," said Hank.

"Then why go to work and run off all the horses here at this station, Hank, and go to all such trouble as that when if he wished, all Delgada would have to do was to step out of the bushes, somewhere along the stage road, and gently remark——"

"Hands up!" put in Bill.

He did it with such an imitation of the real thing that all the men grew serious.

A hold-up of a stage coach in the far North-West usually meant a murdered driver, or an assassinated coach-guard.

"Well," said Bill, who was the first to come back to the realities of the situation from the imaginative,

" anyway, we have got to get on toward Fort Rupert. Now, Hank, think hard! What can be done?"

" There's one thing—hold on, you fellers! Any passengers in the coach, this trip?"

" Not one."

Bill and Paul Cassel cried these two words in unison.

" Now, you wait," replied Hank. " Mayhap I can do something. I have just got an idea. While I'm thinking it over, Bill, you switch the coach back there one side of the station-house, and I'll have them critters put out and fed. Why can't they carry you on a bit? It's only twenty-five miles to the next station where you'd change hosses again."

Bill did not reply.

He pointed to his four steaming, weary horses, who stood in the early morning sun with heads down, the pictures of equine collapse.

Hank saw the point.

The four bronchos were done up. They could go no further.

" Well," went on Hank, " I will see what I kin do."

Hank hurried away.

Bill slowly climbed down from his seat, after he had turned the coach near to the adobe one story building that made the station-house master's home, and where the passengers over the stage-line usually breakfasted.

Hostlers unhitched the weary horses and led them away to rest and feed.

Paul and Bill then mounted quiet guard along the side of the coach.

The steel treasure box was still in its safe-like receptacle just back of the driver's seat of the coach, and neither men, knowing the desperate chances that the outlaw, Polacca Delgada, would take to loot the coach of its bullion, dared to get far away from it.

" Looks to me as if we were up against it, this trip," remarked Paul, to Stage Coach Bill, as soon as Hank Milner started away.

" Seems so. But the Delgada gang have been after me a long while, beau, and they ain't got me yet."

" Who runs the gang of desperadoes?"

" Polacca Delgada, as he calls himself. It's a Spanish name isn't it?"

"Or Italian."

" Well, it's probably not the outlaw's name, at that. He don't look like either a Spaniard or an Italian."

" He don't?"

" Not a bit."

" Probably he took his name to shield his real one."

" Y-a-s-s! Ain't any fellows out here known by their real names among the outlaw gentry. Too many jails awaitin' for them somewhere in the civilized line. My daughter says, she thinks Pol is a murderer escaped from some prison just before he was executed, an' then he comes out here to make it unpleasant for her old dad."

" If he is a murderer at all, and he escaped from a cell, he certainly must have escaped before he was executed, not after?"

" That's some sure thing."

" Well, why didn't he hold us up before we got here ?"

" I have an idea about that."

" What is it?"

" I don't think he has many of his gang along with him. In fact I suspect that Pol is just back here with his devil side-partner, and that they came back when they heard about Fort Coppermine that the bullion was sent on from there to Fort Rupert."

" Ho! Ho! Then you think they have been following this coach ever since it left Fort Coppermine?"

" Every darned foot of the six hundred odd miles."

" Whew! Why didn't they rob it further back on the road?"

" Oh, I don't know. Guess Pol didn't dare to. Every other station they put two or three guards on the coach, but this here one, they have you only."

" Why?"

" Lord only knows. Like the charge at Balaklava, 'some one blundered.'"

" You mean that some of the upper-works of the stage-line failed to see that two extra guards came here with the coach to help me out?"

" That's what! When we changed hosses, an' we took the coach twenty-five miles back at Shootin' Jimmy's station, did you see any extra guards loafin' about?"

" I saw the usual chap, Fred Harley, and two extra men I didn't know with him and that was all."

" Did they say why the extra men were along?"

" No."

" Just let you git on the coach back o' me and start?"

" Yes."

" Bright lot of guards, this line has. Why, they ought to have told you there was extra treasure on this trip."

" If they had I might have insisted on the extra men coming on with me which would have made twenty-five or fifty miles of extra work and not a cent of extra pay, because the line isn't noted for paying when it can avoid it."

" Having not ordered the extra men to come on with you, no one would pay them, higher up?"

" Precisely."

" Then this coach has only one guard, and a bigger lot of bullion in its treasure box than it has had before in many a trip."

" That's about it."

" Fine lot of chance we got to get through without being held up."

" Bet your life. But we are going through just the same."

" I don't see any other way out of it."

" Nor I."

The two men pondered deeply.

Stage Coach Bill was a character in the territory.

Nearly sixty years of age he had driven his coach, the old, old, coach, that made the great American west its only mode of locomotion for so many years, over and back on his share of the stage road; summer or winter always doing his duty well.

" I was almost born up on the driver's seat of one of those coaches," Bill was wont to say. " I druv all my life on that box and I hope to die on it."

The coach which Bill so loved was a high old-fashioned affair at best.

It was mounted on high springs with a big " S " at each end. The high steps gave ingress at a door in the center of the coach. There was a smelly leather back seat, a center seat and a forward one, so that six persons could ride inside.

On the roof there was the driver's seat, with a great foot-brake that jutted up from the forward part of the

coach, but was so powerful when in action that it could lock the back part of the coach wheels fast by one powerful shove of the driver's foot.

Back of the driver's seat was that of the guard of the treasure usually carried by the coach, and by the side of each was room for two passengers, in case they wished to ride outside.

Four mettlesome bronchos, about half tamed, made up the drawing force that whirled the coach along, and they always went at top speed.

Some of the stages before horses were changed was only ten miles long, owing to the rugged country; other stages were fifteen and twenty-five miles made up the extreme journey for one of the sets of four horses. It had to be a good road for them to last that far; and such roads were few and far between.

It was a marvellous journey the coach took from Fort Rupert, on Great Bear Lake, to Fort Coppermine on the Coppermine River, in the wonderful North-West of British America.

Through forest, skirting splendid canyons, over snow-topped mountains, along a mighty river, through bottom-land and up-land amid wild beasts and wilder white men, Indians, and half-breeds, the coach ran, day after day, year after year; in the summer on wheels, in the winter on sleds, drawn by dogs; a splendid epitome of endeavor to keep open communication between points under control of the great Hudson's Bay Company, the organization that has systematized the fur business of the world, for in the North-West can be found the finest of the furs that decorate beauty in civilized lands.

Bill was the first to break the silence.

He pulled off his wide-brimmed white felt hat and wiped his brow with a bandanna handkerchief of gay colors.

"Well," he ejaculated. "It's up to us. We go to put her through by daylight on this shift, or we don't get her through at all."

"Guess, you're right. Look to your automatic Army gun there. You need a high powered gun, and one that can spit a slew of steel-bullets when the outlaws come to get that treasure."

"Right you are! But my side-guns are all right. This rifle is ready to do biz also."

"Then here's this sawed-off double barrelled shot gun. There's a pint of slugs in each barrel."

"We can at least give a good account of ourselves, eh?"

Bill nodded.

A hail from Hank Milner at this point interrupted the conversation.

"Hey," he yelled. "I can fix ye out so you can git on if you have the good old sand to get forward with."

"That's the talk," yelled Bill in reply. "Come over and tell us your plan."

Hank slouched forward.

"Boys," he remarked, as if his astonishing statement was the simplest thing in the world. "I've got four bronchos, that never had a bridle or rein on 'em left out of all our twenty head of hosses. These belong to me, not to the line."

"Untamed bronchos? Why we can't use them on this coach," laughed Paul.

Bill stepped forward his face hard and set with grim resolution.

"I can drive anything that you can hitch to that coach, Hank Milner," shouted Bill. "If you can harness four panthers to that coach, I'll drive them. And if you can hitch those untamed bronchos to the coach, I'll drive them, if they run away with me into the infernal regions."

"By Gosh! Bill, you are going to have the chance to try. Hi! you stable-men bring out those four bronchos. You'll have to blindfold and rope them before you can get them, but get them. They are going to take this coach out, in one hour."

"If Bill Becker can drive four bronchos like these," cried Hank aside to Paul, "he can drive any animal alive. But they will run away and kill Stage Coach Bill the first five hundred yards."

"I'll drive them if they drive me straight to death," roared Stage Coach Bill. *"Hitch them up!"*

CHAPTER II.

THE OUTLAWS' PLAN.

"Well what is Polacca Delgada going to do next?"

The soft voice of Joe Kamus, a Saulteaux Indian, whispered these words to the famous outlaw who bore the first name.

The two men were talking together in the depths of the magnificent forest, not a mile from where Stage Coach Bill had challenged fate by his daring pledge to drive four untamed bronchos over the last stage of his journey with his precious freight into Fort Rupert.

"Polacca Delagada is going to sit still and rest," came the laughing reply to the question from the owner of this dreaded name.

A big man, with a dark, hard face. Thug looked out of his eyes. His every movement was that of the born desperado.

This described the terror of the North-West, Polacca Delgada.

His companion, Joe Kamus, was an Indian, but one who had associated with white men, until he dressed, acted and spoke like them.

His cruelty was abnormal.

His treachery to friend and foe was noted even among the bad men of the territory, but his undoubted courage, and his dare devil taking of chances had endeared him to Pol Delgada, the outlaw chief, so that no one of the men that made up the Delgada band was so trusted as Kamus.

Kamus tied the two fine horses, the two outlaws owned, to a nearby tree.

"Better let 'em trail, eh?" suggested Pol. "There's good grazing about here and they might get a bite. They may have to go far to-day without much to eat."

Kamus shook his head.

"No," he remarked, "we are too near the station to have our horses where we can't get to them quick. We may need them any second."

"Guess you're right. Has the coach got to the station yet?"

"Yes."

"How do you know?"

"When you sent me to see what the coach was doing, I crept nearly on top of it, without Stage Coach Bill's knowing anything about what I was doing."

"That's funny. Stage Coach Bill is a good deal of a woodsman, and I don't see how you got so near without his knowing it."

"He was busy talking with his guard."

"His guard? You mean his guards."

"No. There's only one guard left."

Delgada smiled with a fearful grin.

"Good business," he cried. "Say, our luck is turning. All the way along from Fort Coppermine there has been three guards on top. I didn't dare, with just us two to hold up the coach, in the face of three guards. We might have got one of the men, or two, but the third guard would have got one of us. We ain't so strong that we can afford to lose any of our men, just now."

"We ought to have had more of our men with us."

"That's right. But I didn't know there was going to be the big bullion shipment made this trip of the coach until about ten minutes before the coach started."

"The boys were all out of camp."

"That's right. Most of them were out robbing fur-trappers, which about Coppermine River is the best thing in the world to do for easy cash at this season of the year."

"I should think the boys would get caught at that game. You know I was always told to stay in camp with you when the boys went out after furs."

Delgada grinned.

"W-e-l-l," he replied, "there would be a come-back if the trappers, after our boys get through with them, were in a condition to kick, about losing their winter's work."

"Oh, ho!"

"And hee! Hee! You see the fur men in the early spring way out from Fort Coppermine, are just now packing up preparatory to coming in to the fort to sell their fur peltries to the Hudson's Bay Company."

"Hum."

"Now if—mind you Joe I say, only, 'if,' a shot came out of the sky, and accidently killed that trapper, way out in the wilderness, where no one could see the action, why, naturally, one of our boys might happen to saunter by on his snow-shoes just then."

As the outlaw paused his companions smiled with a sneer of understanding.

He caught up his leader's words.

"Why, naturally, as you say, our boys would take the furs. A dead man ain't got no use for furs no matter how valuable they may be. He ought to be buried handsome like, because he was some poor devil of a trapper turned loose by fate, and with no one to bury his poor remains."

"So out boys bury the dead man, and take his goods which is trapper law all over the North-West."

"Forfeit when a man is dead, eh?"

"Of course. Then we sometimes bury him by dropping him through a hole in the ice."

"Result—you have the furs and the trapper has the river for his winding sheet."

"That is it."

"How about getting the stuff off the coach?"

"We will get it all right, but we may have to fight for it, now that you have learned there is only to be one guard on the coach."

"Oh, one guard can not make much trouble."

"This chap, Paul Cassel, is a man with a fighting reputation."

"He is?"

"You bet he is! This fellow is pretty well known as a gun-man all about Fort Rupert, and if I were in your place, I'd think carefully over an open hold up."

Both bandits were serious in a moment.

"The quickest way is to jump out of the bushes with a mask over one's face, riddle the driver and the guard, and then shoot down a horse and you stop the coach; no one to dispute your right to the cash."

"That's the game nine times out of ten, but man, in this case I don't think we could make it win."

"Why not?"

"Because first there's Paul Cassel, as guard."

"Bang! Dead Paul Cassel. There goes one shot!"

"Perhaps."

"Well, there is Stage Coach Bill left! Bang! There's two shots—and plenty shots left for a horse."

"Yes, that's right! Providing that Cassel and Stage Coach Bill stand still to be shot at."

"A bullet can go faster than the best stage coach driver in the North-West can drive."

"True."

"A bullet goes quick through the bravest guard that ever sat on the top of a treasure coach."

"True."

"Then what's the matter with an open hold up?"

"It sounds good on its face, but man, somehow or other it don't seem to win out."

"Why?"

"I don't know. I've sent three of our best men out to stop that coach with Stage Coach Bill up on the box. Well, what do you suppose happened?"

"I don't know. What happened?"

"Stage Coach Bill or the guard got my man."

"What?"

"Sure as you're born."

"How do you account for that?"

"I do not account for it. I just know that we found our man each time lying in the road dead."

"Shot?"

"Yes. Rifle shot."

"Sure he tried to hold up the coach?"

"Yes."

"Coach was the one Stage Coach Bill was driving?"

"Yes."

"Paul Cassel on it too?"

"No, think it was not Paul that was the guard each time but some other fellow."

"Oh."

The outlaws did not seem to be able to comprehend the mystery of a man who could escape one of the hold-ups they planned, and each man wagged his head in wonder.

"Strangest story I ever heard," finally said Joe Kamus. "Why, I'll bet I can hold up Stage Coach Bill."

"I'm not going to let you try," replied Delgada, "I've lost enough of my men as it is. You will not jump out of the bushes at this coach. We will try and think up a better game than that."

"Good, I'm not anxious to get killed, thank you. But I would like to put Stage Coach Bill under ground. He has outwitted us too easily for my peace of mind."

"Oh, we will see he takes his *last ride* before long, Joe, don't you worry but that we will."

"And this chap, Paul Cassel?"

"We will send him along as chief mourner for Bill."

"How about his daughter?"

"Whose daughter?"

"Stage Coach Bill's."

"Oh, I'd forgotten all about her. Where is she?"

"Living over in Fort Rupert. They have a shack there, Bill and the girl."

"She keeps house for him?"

"Yep."

"Likely looking girl?"

"Peachey."

"Tall?"

"About five feet five and a half."

"Weight?"

"Oh, one hundred and thirty—or so—maybe more."

"Eyes?"

"Brown. Hair brown, too. Fine complexion. Neat figure. Nice girl."

"Loves her dad, Stage Coach Bill."

"You bet."

"Well, we will see about her later. First let us get rid of her dad, Stage Coach Bill."

"All right. Have you any way of doing this?"

"I think I will get Bill this trip."

"You do?"

"Yes."

"How?"

Delgada thought some time before answering. He had implicit confidence in Kamus, but naturally was cautious as to revealing his plans in advance of their experiment.

But Delgada finally made up his mind that it would do no harm to tell his companion, some if not all of the news.

"Do you see that space there," he said.

He pointed to a turn in the road directly in the view of both men, who were perched on a high rock above it.

"Yes, I see the road," replied Kamus. "It's pretty plain. All you have to do is to wait here awhile and the Stage Coach Bill equipage will sweep by at top speed. If you say so I'll take a shot at Bill, right from here."

"Oh, I've got that game beat to death."

"You have? How?"

"Right in that vacant bit of road you see—see it?"

"I am not blind."

"I have buried two hundred pounds of dynamite right there in that road."

"Eh?"

"That's right. Two hundred pounds of dynamite will make an explosion that ought to crack the sky."

"You bet."

"When that dynamite blows up, it's good-bye, stage coach, ta ta Stage Coach Bill, and farewell, Paul Cassel, now, isn't it?"

"No question of that, boy. Not the slightest in the world. That two hundred pounds of dynamite will blow this coach we are waiting for up to the sky-line. But, Pol, where and how are ye going to shoot off the stuff?"

Delgada laughed in sheer wickedness.

"Come here," he whispered to Kamus.

Kamus obeyed, drawing nearer to the outlaw leader.

Delgada led the way to a rock about twenty feet from where he and his fellow bandit stood.

Delgada stooped down.

He pressed a portion of the rock.

Out flew a spring-like door.

Kamus saw in the niche behind the tiny concealed door, the top of an electric button.

"I have only to press this button," Delgada hissed, *"and Stage Coach Bill, Paul Cassel and the stage coach with the treasure on board will be shivered into atoms."*

"But the half million dollars in gold, will not that be blown up?" asked Kamus.

"Confined in its great steel chest it will probably not be injured by the explosion which will kill Stage Coach Bill and Cassel. But even if the gold is blown to atoms, we will have the pleasure of getting Bill and Cassel. Any way, the plan is a good one, and I think it will succeed."

"So do I. When are you going to try it out?"

"Listen," hissed Delgada, the outlaw chief, "hear the rattle of the coach? Stage Coach Bill and Paul Cassel are on the coach. Get ready to help me fire the dynamite mine. Stage Coach Bill is taking *his last ride.*"

The bandits, now, could plainly hear the rattle of the on-coming coach, which they saw was rushing toward them at frightful speed, drawn by four untamed, unbroken, fiery bronchos, who came at lightning speed down the road with the swaying coach dragging behind them.

"There goes Stage Coach Bill," yelled the bandit chief. *"We'll snuff his life out at last. Fire the mine!"*

CHAPTER III.

TAKING LONG CHANCES.

"Hey, Bill! Don't get crazy!"

Hank Milner thus accosted Stage Coach Bill when he heard the indomitable driver of the coach roar out his words of defiance.

Bill repeated what he had said when Milner had told him that there were four untamed bronchos—the outlaws had not stolen.

"I'll drive them if they drive me straight to death."

The firm voice of Bill echoed over the scene.

"Why, Bill," insisted Milner. "Don't be such a locoed fool. Them bronchos never had a rein over them."

"I don't care," replied Bill.

"They never had a harness put across their backs."

"I don't care."

"But Bill! I say, don't be foolish. Listen."

"Listen to what?"

"They never were hitched to a coach, or even to a baby carriage in all their lives. That's why the outlaws didn't steal them. They were no good to them. They are a lot of unbroken colts, strong as hosses, but man, why if they didn't kick the coach into matches in a minute, they would snake the old girl off her running gear in the first hundred yards. Drive 'em? Nonsense Bill. There isn't the man alive that can drive them hosses."

Bill roared out a lusty oath.

"By thunder," he yelled, "if you are afraid to try and hitch those bronchos up, why Milner, say so. I'll hitch them up myself if you are such a coward."

"Hey?"

Milner jumped up three feet in the high boots he wore.

"Coward!"

He shrieked the words at Stage Coach Bill while his face was crimson with wrath.

"Coward?" Milner yelled in a howl of rage again. "Bill, if you and me hadn't been friends for years I'd put a bullet hole in ye, so help me General Jackson."

The memory of General Jackson, for some reason or other was dear to Milner. He wasn't born until after the death of the doughty old hero, but Milner never used Jackson's name in any of his quarrels until "shooting-time" had come.

It had arrived, but the long friendship between Milner and Bill made the shooting part end in a war of words only.

After Milner had thoroughtly "cussed-out" Bill, that worthy laughing at Milner's wrath, Milner took the position by its horns and gave an order that caused all the stable-hands to look at him in surprise.

"Hitch up them four bronchos to the stage-coach," howled Milner.

The men buckled to the job with a will.

Soon the corral became the scene of a small horse-hunt.

There was a great whirring of ropes. A terrible plunging of kicking and squealing horses, madly plunging hither and thither to escape dexteriously swung lassos.

But soon, in spite of the struggles of the angry, kicking, biting horses perfectly wild, and from rage and fear now thoroughly frantic, the stable-hands soon had each horse roped and tied, a trembling mass of horse-flesh, ready with the slightest loosening of bonds to begin the wild scramble for liberty over again.

"Blind-fold the beasts. You can't never lead 'em to the coach," cried Milner who in his anger at being told he was too cowardly to hitch the horses to the coach, would have now hitched a wild-cat to the vehicle. "You can't get those horses near the coach unless you blind-fold 'em."

Under the effect of the sudden darkness that seemed to envelop each animal, they were finally harnessed and hitched to the coach.

As if the trembling, panic-stricken beasts were staid horses warranted to drive along without stumbling on any thoroughfare, Stage Coach Bill stood calmly by the front wheel of his coach, ready to mount to the driver's seat, while all the stable-hands watched him with curious eyes.

"This is the end o' Bill," one stable-hand said in a low tone to a companion. "He won't be able to drive them critters a mile before they will bolt and will whirl that coach down the rocks into some canyon. It's all over then for Stage Coach Bill."

But perfectly calm, Bill finished buttoning up his gloves.

He then began to arrange the lines that he was to use in his attempt at driving the bronchos.

Paul Cassel who had been watching Bill ever since he had roared out his challenge, tried to dissuade the driver from his crazy folly.

"There's not one chance in a hundred of your driving that team," cried Paul. "Why don't you give it up? What's the use of killing yourself?"

"Are you livin' my life?" asked Bill.

"No."

"Then what is it to you whether I end it or not?"

"Not anything."

Having made this remark, Paul shouldered his double-barrelled shot gun with its sawed off bull-dog appearance and climbed to the top of the coach and took his seat as usual, as if Bill, instead of having to drive four dangerous untamed horses, was about to start along the rude road with four rabbits at his propelling power.

Paul knew that the road ahead was one that needed steady horses and a steady brain.

But he did not quail.

"If the bronchos bolt down into that canyon we have to skirt about a mile ahead, it's good-bye for us. That canyon is a sheer descent, for any one falling over its brink, of at least a thousand feet."

Paul thought of the canyon and in spite of himself shuddered.

It was unpleasant to think of crashing down that dreadful depth to be dashed to a painful, bloody death in the bottom of the rocky ravine.

But Paul knew there was no use of finding fault.

Bill was on his metal.

He would have driven over into ten canyons now, no matter what his fate was.

Bill having looked over the harnesses on each horse carefully, now looked up at Paul.

"Better climb down," Bill counseled. "Going to be some drive this."

Paul shook his head.

"Probably if you stay you'll get killed," added Bill.

Paul shrugged his shoulders.

"Guess you're bound to stay set?" asked Bill in grim admiration.

Paul bowed.

Stage Coach Bill with a nonchalant manner at length climbed up to his seat on the coach.

He flung his long whip with its great "popper" at the end, which when wielded with skill, made an explosion like a small cannon out until he was sure that it was free and in working order.

"Straighten out the team," cried Bill, in his vernacular anything being a "team" when it was hitched up to a vehicle, if it was one horse or twenty.

With infinite pains, and amid much bucking, jumping, snorting and kicking of maddened horses the stable-men got the bronchos in some sort of order.

"Take off their blindfolds," now yelled Bill. "Let go all!"

The blindfolds were off in a trice at the command.

For a breath the horses, dazed with the sudden change from darkness to daylight, stood trembling.

Then on their frightened ears there came the wild yell of some fiend on the box of the dreadful stage-coach, which they had seen their tamed brothers so often draw to the station.

Pop! Pop!

Bill's great whip sounded thus.

He gave another terrible yell.

The long whip lash came down on the tender backs of the bronchos.

It seemed to strike each untamed horse at once.

Pop! Pop!

Whoop!

Cracking of whip and yells from Bill mingled with the blows he rained on the backs of his frightened four beasts.

His muscular arms sawed at the bits now for the first time inserted in tender equine mouths.

The horses reared, plunged, kicked.

Pop! Pop!

Whoop!

This was enough.

With one wonderful, leaping bound, the four bronchos as one horse, fled down the road in a mighty effort to get away from the yelling man who sawed their mouths until they bled, whipped their tender backs until ridges come, after a fusillade of whip-cracks.

The wild, untamed horses picked the heavy coach up as if it had been a feather, jerked it straight ahead until the body of the coach seemed sure to part from the wheels.

Then in spite of themselves, under Stage Coach Bill's fine, steady guidance with the reins, the horses, for the first time feeling that intangible domination of man, whirled at a leaping run straight down the trail headed for Fort Rupert.

"He is going to drive them, by thunder," thought Paul Cassel, when he saw the horses straighten up with the coach behind them and go tearing down the road like wild things, bringing the rumbling, bounding coach after them.

Cassel lost his hat in the first hundred feet.

He also nearly lost his balance and tumbled off his seat, to a fate not pleasant to think of, for along side of him, there yawned a deep canyon, down the sides of which it would have been fatal for any man to fall.

"If that canyon looks deep," howled Paul, "look out for what's coming a mile ahead. This canyon is a mere rocky fissure to that one."

Stage Coach Bill nodded.

Well he knew the depths of the canyon to which Paul alluded for he had passed it often enough in his years of stage-driving.

Bill was too busy watching his horses to reply to Paul, but he was determined to negotiate the pass to which Paul called attention some way or another.

The popping of the whip-cracker; the yells of Bill were not silent for a moment.

"If I ever let these brutes get to thinking that they want to do anything but escape the welting they are getting from this whip, or the fright my yells give them, it's all over for us. They would bolt down the canyon there in a jiffy. But if I can keep them goin' so all they think of is to run straight ahead to escape me and the whip in the next fifteen miles I'll have the mettle worn out of them. But one long fifteen miles ahead of me and I'll have tamed these horses.

Bill's work was certainly magical.

The horses ran like one horse would do under the combined fear of his voice and whip.

They gave long leaps like running lions; froth flashed from their wide open jaws; terror darted from their wide eyes; they panted like animals oppressed with fear.

The taunting voice that shrieked from behind at them only seemed to increase their speed.

The steady blare of the popping whip only made them exert themselves further.

"Bill, you are going to turn the trick," shrieked Paul Cassel, now almost beside himself with pleasure at the success of Stage Coach Bill in driving over a winding road, amid dreaded precipices, and along tremendous deep canyons, four bronchos that had never before that day felt bit, harness, or reins.

"Can't tell you yet whether I am or not," cried Bill over his shoulder.

He had hardly spoken when a change came over the scene.

"Look!" howled Paul who had been keeping a sharp look ahead.

"Look where?" shouted Bill in return as he took a firmer grip on his reins.

Two dark forms stole silently into view with rifles ready.

The men were Polacca Delgada and his myrmidon Joe Kamus.

Paul knew them in an instant. He had often seen them about Fort Coppermine.

"The outlaws," cried Paul, "look out!"

Stage Coach Bill inadvertently pulled back on the reins of the dashing young horses.

This checked them a moment.

The coach swayed dizzily toward the canyon that was yawning hundreds of feet deep, right before the affrighted eyes of the two men.

"We will be over in a moment," shouted Paul.

With almost superhuman strength Stage Coach Bill pulled his steeds back toward the road.

The animals had hardly straightened out when a gigantic explosion ensued.

Directly under the noses of the leaders of the four-in-hand smoldering equine steam-engines the entire road-bed spurted up with a roar, and a fierce burst of flame and smoke.

A tremendous blast or mine of dynamite had been exploded by the outlaw Polacca Delgada, directly in front of the frantic, savage horses.

And at the left of the charging bronchos was an awful chasm; at the right steep, rock-lined woods fringed the road.

Paul Cassel closed his eyes so as not to see the coach plunge into the chasm.

CHAPTER IV.

A GIRL'S STRATEGY.

"Well! I'm darned!"

This speech was forced from the lips of Kinistino, a Nunatalmute Indian.

His copper-colored face was as near white as any Indian's face can grow.

His knees were knocking together.

His rifle shook in his almost nerveless hand, and the big feather on the apex of his oiled hair which fell around his fierce face, trembled with the stress of his emotion.

The gay-deer-skin blanket, scrolled with bead work, and with strange painted figures of unknown animals, was also trembling upon the muscular form of the Indian.

Never was man more fear-stricken than Kinistino, the outlaw.

Things usually did. not frighten the Indian. He was known for his deeds of blood all over the territory, and it would not have been supposed possible to frighten him.

There did not seem any reason either, for the man's fear.

He faced a low log-cabin with a few narrow windows in it, a door, and the entire affair chinked in, and covered with the usual adobe plaster made by mixing alkali dust into a sort of paste.

This rude hut was the home of Stage Coach Bill, and his only daughter, pretty Minnie, whose last name was Becker, not Minnie Stage Coach Bill as many of her friends liked to call her.

Because her friends knew her father better by his universal name of Stage Coach Bill than by the one that really belonged to him; Becker.

"How this happen?"

Kinistino, the Indian, softly muttered. He was staring forward at a shadow that was outlined upon the narrow window-glass of Bill's home.

Behind the hut was the great, fort-like stockade surrounding the mass of Hudson's Bay Company buildings, called Fort Rupert.

Around the fort was the tiny hamlet, where the people associated in business with the great fur-trading company lived; a village of a few thousand souls.

Stage Coach Bill's home was on the outskirts of this tiny village.

"Fresh air, quiet, and no rent is about all any man needs in this world," Bill used to say when told he ought to own a more pretentious village home. "This place was good enough for my daughter Minnie's mother to live and die in. It was good enough for Minnie to be born in; an' it seems to me it's good enough for me to live in."

No inducement would ever make him move from his humble hut.

Minnie Becker knew, Stage Coach Bill knew, and almost every decent man or woman in the territory knew that for some time the isolation of the spot had made it a dangerous one.

The silent enmity of the Polacca Delgada gang of outlaws, had for a long time been directed at Stage Coach Bill.

He had thwarted some of their dearest plans.

They had tried to murder him but for some reason or other Bill had managed to circumvent their wiles.

In spite of all attempts to kill him, he had "won out" in the game and was alive; and this hurt the prestige of the outlaws, a fact they well knew.

When Pol Delgada, the leader of the outlaws, had decided to kill Stage Coach Bill if he could by firing under him a charge of dynamite, which ought to have blown him into the next world in a breath, he had been asked for instructions by Kinistino, the Indian, who had been sent to the bandit by other members of his gang, who were about Fort Coppermine.

"What are you doing here?" cried Delgada when he first saw the Indian, Kinistino, and before he had ordered the exploding of his assassin-like mine.

"Sent back from band. Told to tell you all well. You might need help so was sent back."

"Boys doing well, eh?" asked Delgada.

"Yes."

"No one killed lately by outsiders?" put in Kamus.

"No. Had big whiskey fight other night. One Indian carved up little bit. He will get well," replied Kinistino.

"Hear anything about the treasure?" keenly asked Delgada.

"On Stage Coach Bill coach, he sure there. Every one say so 'bout Fort Coppermine."

"That's good. Glad to hear that," cried Delgada

"Now how did you learn that?" asked Kamus.

"Found out at fort. Went there begging. No one get wise."

"Good boy, Kinistino," shouted Kamus. "Now you toddle on. We have got to get this coach, now that it's coming our way."

The two bandits then discussed a few minor plans, just before the dreaded order to fire the mine, issued by the outlaw.

Kinistino stopped long enough, however, to get a positive order.

"Where I go?" he yelled.

"Go to Fort Rupert. You find home of Stage Coach Bill. Find if girl Minnie, Bill's daughter is there. Then you come back and report here to me."

Kinistino accordingly hurried away.

When he heard the roar of the coach on which Bill and Paul Cassel were riding behind untamed bronchos, to what he felt sure was a terrible death, he hid in the bushes.

"I wait to hear roar. Wow! Bang! Stage Coach Bill he dead. Wow!"

The evil-looking Indian peered around the corner of a rock until he saw Stage Coach Bill come down the road, a veritable fury of haste, with his maddened bronchos almost leaping out of their harnesses.

The moment the roar of the exploding dynamite smote his ears, Kinistino started through the woods at his half lope, half walk, which the Indian adopts when engaged in any sly, spying movement, and soon was lost to view.

"I see Stage Coach Bill," he muttered to himself, "Stage Coach Bill he take his *last ride*—woof, up go Stage Coach Bill—maybe he go down—any way he dead."

These circumstances were really at the bottom of the terror of the Indian.

For while he knew that only a short hour before he had seen Stage Coach Bill, ten to fifteen miles away by road, and about ten through the forest, as he had come, yet here was Stage Coach Bill looking out of his home window, calmly engaged in smoking his pipe.

It was this apparent fact that had so frightened Kinistino.

"A ghost," the savage muttered "I see Bill, miles, and miles away—woof, I hear big mine blow up. I run here through woods. Here is Bill smoking big pipe. His ghost!"

The Indian whirled about and ran into the forest at his best speed panic-stricken and half crazed with fear.

He had hardly vanished when a girl looked out of the window over the head of Stage Coach Bill, and peered out into the bright, sunny afternoon.

The girl was Minnie Becker.

The only child of Stage Coach Bill made a pretty picture as she stood in the doorway.

One can not be twenty years old, with big brown eyes, brown hair that when uncoiled fell to one's feet, and with a well moulded form, without being more or less happy.

So there was a merry glint in the eyes of Minnie Becker.

But they showed extreme anger not a second after, for woods girl as she was, she had seen a single trembling leaf indicate where Kinistino had vanished into the forest.

"The sneaking Indian hound," muttered the girl.

Her eyes had told her that an Indian had been spying upon her father's home.

Minnie's revolver was in her hand in an instant, from where its fellow dangled in a belt about her trim waist.

The revolver was pointed, and aimed and fired in a breathless second of intention.

Pop!

The startling message of "keep off" when it is sent toward an Indian in the form of a conical steel bullet from a magazine 45, usually is enough to make the dullest Indian understand.

Kinistino, Indian outlaw, and murderer, understood at once.

He was too far out of range to fear the bullet, but he vanished further into the bushes, and after thinking a second started back at his half lope, half run, to tell Polacca Delgada that he had visited the home of Stage Coach Bill, whence the spirit of the stage-driver had fled, after it had been blown from its body, when the dynamite mine exploded.

"I know Stage Coach Bill," said the outlaw to himself. "I know him for thirty year. He sat in the home a-smokin' his pipe. All time he dead, under blow-up coach, miles and miles away."

Kinistino hurried to tell the discovery of the ghost of the body of Stage Coach Bill to his thug leader, Delgada.

For a few moments Minnie Becker, shading her eyes with her hands watched for the success of her shot.

"Pesky brutes!" she said. "Hope I hit him. But no such luck. He is too far off."

The girl was right.

Her shot while it accelerated the speed of Kinistino, did not in the slightest degree come any where near him.

Fearing that the girl's revolver sound might hurry to her aid, a man with a rifle that would carry to him and would put a hole in his dusky hide the thug ran hurriedly away into the forest shade.

It was fortunate that he did so for his own sake, because the shot went in startling sound down the trail-like road that led to Fort Rupert and startled the ears of a tall, good looking broad shouldered young man about the age of the girl, who had fired it.

"Thunder!" cried this young man, whose alert carriage and general air showed him to be of consequence in the world in which he moved.

As a matter of fact he was of great importance in the vicinity of Fort Rupert.

For Karl Thurlaw was Postmaster at Fort Rupert for the Hudson's Bay Company.

This great fur-buying organization was practically the only method by which the catches of trapper or hunter, could be turned into money.

The company made the price per peltry, or skin; the trapper took the price, be he Indian or white, without murmur.

The grading of the skins, the fixing of the prices, all came under the day's work of Thurlaw!

Then there was the general business of the post, which was under his charge; the sale of groceries, clothing, all the stuff that goes up to make a general store, the only one at Fort Rupert, all was part of the official business of Thurlaw.

It was somewhat of a cause for wonderment why this important and busy man should be here on a quiet trail, two miles or more from where his business was situated, in the early summer afternoon.

But there were many who looked at the bright brown-eyes of Minnie Becker, and after they did, said that they didn't wonder at all.

"That shot came from the vicinity of Minnie's house," Thurlaw pondered, after a second's thought.

He took his revolver belt in his hand to keep the two large shooting irons confined that he had swinging at his belt, and then rushed up the trail with all the agility that a six feet high frame gave him, together with a very fine muscular development.

He found Minnie Becker quite unharmed, shading her eyes with her hand, and holding in her other hand, her still smoking revolver.

"Say, Karl, did I hit him?" asked the girl when the young man ran forward with a cry as soon as he saw her.

Karl looked his astonishment.

"Get who, Minnie?" he asked.

"That Indian."

"What Indian?"

"The one I shot at."

"Oh, so you shot at an Indian, eh?"

"What did you think I was shooting at—you?"

"I didn't know."

"But did you see the Indian?"

"Which Indian?"

"The one I shot at."

Karl laughed.

"My dear girl," he cried, "do you think that I would ever see an Indian about where you are, and let him get away?"

Except to make up a face, Minnie did not reply.

"Well," she commanded, "I shot at one. He was just disappearing in yonder bushes, when I shot. My guns can't carry there, I'm sure, but anyway, just skip down to those bushes and see if you can find the redskin."

"Shall I shoot him if I find him?"

"You know best. It's said about the fort that you have the rights of the middle justice, the high and the low, hereabouts."

"Now Minnie. You know I haven't for if I had there would be business for the preacher up at the fort, between us, eh?"

Minnie's face slowly turned pink.

"When I marry a man, I want a real man."

"Am not I the 'realest' thing of a man, you ever saw?" replied Thurlaw to the girl's words.

"If you were you wouldn't stop here like this. You would be chasing through those bushes in hot search after that Indian, who threatened my life for all you know."

Thurlaw looked over the girl's head.

"Why there's your dad, Stage Coach Bill," he cried. "Has the Fort Coppermine coach got in? I didn't know that when I left the fort, there. My, I must hurry back if the coach is in. There's treasure worth thousands in bullion on the coach this trip."

But not wishing to incur more censure from Minnie without more than a smile and a waving salute to

Stage Coach Bill, whose heavy whiskers, of sandy-brown, iron gray hair, and short pipe, could be seen as he sat apparently smoking in high pleasure at the window behind his fair daughter, the young Postmaster hurried down into the bushes where Kinistino had so recently left them, as he hurried away from Minnie's shot.

But there was no Indian in sight.

The outlaw had disappeared as if he had fallen off the earth.

"There is no Indian here," said Karl, "not a sign of any one. No outlaw white, red, or black seems to have been here."

Karl thoroughly threshed the bushes but not a sign could be found of the bandit.

"Guess Minnie was dreaming," Karl ejaculated. "Not a sign of an Indian here."

Karl then retraced his steps to where Minnie was still standing, he saw, just as had left her a few moments before.

"There's no outlaw there, that I could find, Minnie," Karl cried—"but—why, Minnie, where is he——"

Minnie looked disturbed.

"Where is whom?" she asked.

"Your father."

"My father? Why he is out with the coach. The coach from Fort Coppermine isn't in yet, is it?"

Thurlaw's face was white. His eyes popped out of his head until they seemed to lay on his cheek.

"Minnie!" Thurlaw cried, *"am I crazy? I saw your father sitting there not five minutes ago; there in the window of your home, behind you. Did I see the ghost of Stage Coach Bill?"*

CHAPTER V.

STAGE COACH BILL'S DARING DRIVE.

While Minnie Becker, and the young Postmaster, Karl Thurlaw, were looking at each other in amaze, while Thurlaw tried to understand how he could see right behind the girl the face of her father, whom he realized was miles away from the scene, Stage Coach Bill was battling for his life and that of Paul Cassel.

The roar of the dynamite mine smote the air as if it would tear the heavens asunder.

"Blown up by a concealed mine in the center of the road!" howled Paul Cassel.

Bill nodded.

His face did not whiten.

Only his firm lips closed over his even, white teeth, in spite of his years.

His iron nerves did not give way.

But his long, lean fingers seemed to shoot up, grasp the reins that swayed his team, and with the same breath in which the explosion seemed to come, Bill swung his team away from the fiery breath of the mine.

In an instant of time, to the utter surprise of Paul, Bill had straightened out the four bronchos, pulled them away from the sudden and terrible spectacle that sent them dancing in the air, and charged them directly up the side of the forest clad mountain that lay at their left and which would appear to be an impossible barrier to surmount.

By one of those freaks of good fortune that sometimes hover over those caught in breathless danger from accident, the mine had been exploded just a second too soon.

The pressure of the electric button, upon the order of the outlaw, Polacca Delgada, had touched off the mine, under the nimble fingers of Joe Kamus, when the leading broncho was not ten feet away from the mine.

Delgada supposed that the leader was over the mine, it looking to be so from where he stood.

Hence he had roared the order "Fire the mine."

But the few feet that separated the horse, together with the nimble wits of Bill always strained and ready to answer to any sudden call, owing to his dangerous profession of a stage driver in the far North-West, saved the coach and its living freight from disaster.

The time was just enough for Bill to swing his horses up the side of the mountain, where, fortunately, wood-choppers had cleared a few acres of land, and right up this rocky refuge the four bronchoes sped, dragging the coach behind them.

How the coach managed to hang together was a cause for wonder.

But the bronchos, already weary from their long fast run, from Milner Cut to where the mine had exploded, could only drag the coach for a few hundred feet.

The wheels of the vehicle locked between two big stumps.

The bronchos made one or two plunges.

They gave up, driven into tameness.

Bill had kept his word.

In the face of what looked like certain death he had driven four untamed bronchos ahead of his whirling coach.

A record that stands to this day in the mysterious North-West where there are many brave stage coach drivers; but no one has ever equalled Stage Coach Bill's great drive.

The coach had not stopped, hardly, when the tall form of Paul Cassel vaulted from the roof.

His sawed-off double-barrelled shot gun was swung to his shoulder.

Its bellowing note did not drown the hissing of the cargo of deadly bullets and slugs that filled each barrel of the shot gun.

The bullets searched the bushes about the coach like the steady whirr of a Maxim gun.

With equal noise the shot-gun unloaded its second barrel in the rank vegetation that lay directly in front of Paul.

Bang! Bang!

Then Paul's revolvers began to spit fire and fury.

The bullets sang in the trees, and as soon as he had emptied the chambers, Paul replenished them.

The smoke and the fury of the shots at any other time would have driven the bronchos mad with fear.

Instead they mildly turned their dripping heads, which hung low to the ground and looked at Paul in amaze.

The fight was all out of the untamed bronchos. They were tame enough now.

As soon as Paul felt that he had pretty well threshed through the forest and had frightened away any at-

tacking party that had fired the mine, he returned to the coach.

Stage Coach Bill was calmly rubbing down the dripping bronchos. He was whistling to himself in true hostler style as he did so.

"Well, here we are, Paul," Bill remarked.

To drive untamed bronchos, along a terrifying steep, mountain road, face a dynamite mine sprung by two outlaws, in no way seemed to have affected the nerves of the wonderful man.

Paul looked his surprise.

"I suppose the coach is broken all to bits about its running gear?" he answered.

"I guess not," drawled Bill. "It looks all right to me. I can't see as there is anything sprung or broken. Guess we can turn her round and git her down that cliff some how."

Paul looked back toward the road.

"Thunder!" he cried.

The coach had run up what looked to Paul to be the almost straight side of a rocky mountain.

"Gosh!" shouted Paul, "Bill, how did we get up here? We could ride up the side of a house after this. Say, Bill, this is great stage-coaching."

Bill grinned.

"It was goin' some," he admitted. "I didn't think we had much chance of gettin' through when that mine sprung out there in the road."

"I thought we were goners sure."

"You see there's a terr'ble fall down that canyon to the right and it isn't good going up these hills, this side o' the stage-road."

"Whew! I should say not. It's thousands of feet to fall down into the canyon, and up here, whew!"

Paul's glance was eloquent.

To charge four horses up the side of a mountain, is something of a deed even in the country where great deeds were at the nod and beck of every man with good red-blood whose feet pressed the land of men and of deeds!

For this reason a hero halo didn't suit Bill.

"Shucks!" he cried, "there was nothin' else for me to do. I charged up the mountain because there was a chance that way. If we went over into the canyon there wasn't a chance any way."

Thus Stage Coach Bill minimized his splendid deed.

"But man, if your eye and courage had not been of the best kind on earth you would have been over the cliff and down into the deathly dark depths before you could have thought of steering the horses up this way."

"Well, I expect that drivin' stage-coach out here for forty year or so, makes a feller think quick. I know that I wasn't sensible that I sensed the danger at all. I don't think I knew there was a mine there or a reason to claw up these hills. But I jest flew up because my old brain told me it was the thing to do. Here we are, anyway, Paul, safe—perhaps."

Paul had been searching the bushes with his eyes expecting every second to be attacked by outlaws.

His mind had told him quickly that the explosion was merely the beginning of an attempt to rob the coach of his treasure by outlaws.

"I suppose the Delgada gang did this, eh?" Paul asked.

"Sure."

"They laid the mine?"

"Of course."

"Just waited till we came along."

"Yes."

"Then pulled some string or other and let off their dynamite mine."

"Yes."

"Wish I had one of them by the neck."

"I don't."

"Why not?"

"Wish I had a halter about the neck of one of them, and I had the other end of the halter strap in my hand. That's more to the purpose."

"Guess you are right."

"Well, I shelled out the gentry pretty well, soon as the coach stopped," went on Paul. "Guess they won't dare to attack us just now. Now, you tell me what you are going to do next."

"Me? Oh, I'm going to sit down."

Stage Coach Bill then took a restful position on a nearby stump.

"Now," he went on, "I'm going to tell you what I will do."

"What?"

"Drive back over the road we came to where the mine exploded and then try to git by. I want to hustle up and git to Fort Rupert tonight. My girl Minnie may be anxious."

Paul smiled.

"You are a wonderful man, Bill. I guess you will do it, but how, Lord only knows. It is going to be something of a trick to get the coach back to the road."

"Mebee."

"Bill, how long have this gang of bandits been after you?"

"'Bout a year."

"Whose gang is it?"

"Polacca Delgada's."

"Whew!"

"That's right."

"Hard gang to win over?"

"That's right."

"Fighting gang, that?"

"Yes, you bet, they'll fight hard enough for any man."

"How do you expect to win over such a gang?"

"Goin' to fight harder than they do. See?"

Paul saw.

This was the secret of Stage Coach Bill's success.

He always fought harder than the other fellow.

"Well, does your daughter know about this game the outlaws are playing with you?"

"What game?"

"This game of hide-and-seek."

Now Bill laughed.

"Guess that's a good name for it. They have been seeking my life for quite a spell and I've been a hiding from them quite a time, at that."

"Have they ever tried to hold you up before?"

"Lots of times before you came on my division as guard."

"How did you escape?"

"I don't know. It seemed as if I smelled what they were trying to do to me. I never took many precautions but when they started to get me—and you would think it easy to pot a fellow off his driver's-box on a stage coach, out of any part of the woods through which I drive—something always helped me out."

"As how?"

"Once they fired at me out of the woods."

"What saved you?"

"Of course I didn't expect no bandit was goin' to try to assassinate me, so I wasn't lookin' out this time for any shot from the forest at me. I happened to see one of my buckle-strings to the nigh leader's reins was loose. I leaned over to get a better squint at it. That was just the moment the outlaw who was takin' aim at me fired."

"He missed."

"If he hadn't I wouldn't be here."

"Well, you escaped by a lucky move to see what the accident to a part of your harness might mean to your horses."

"Sure. Then that's about the way it's gone ever since. They try to kill me. Some how or other some little thing gets me off. I suppose it's luck."

"Or Providence."

"Or Providence," cried Bill.

The two men turned over in their minds the wonderful escape of Stage Coach Bill from the efforts of the outlaws to kill him.

"My daughter, Minnie, says, that the outlaws never will kill me. She says it is because she needs me so much. But I ain't so sure. 'The pot that goes to the well oftenest, is sure to git broken some trip.'"

Paul smiled at the new way that Bill presented the old adage about "the pitcher going too often to the well," but only remarked that it was wonderful how Bill's life had been so mercifully preserved.

"We had better be getting along," remarked Bill, as he began playing with his reins. "It's quite a piece yet to Fort Rupert."

But when Stage Coach Bill turned about he found the eyes of Paul Cassel turned toward a great rocky side of the mountain.

It was such a great rock.

It was twice the size of the stage coach.

It sank deep into the monstrous mountain.

"What are you staring at like a ninny?" growled Bill at Paul, who seemed fascinated by something he was keenly looking at.

"Look there," gasped Paul whose lips were tense and white with emotion.

Bill followed Paul's indicating finger with his eyes.

There in the center of the great rock was a gigantic padlock and chain, directly below it was a giant key.

Paul darted forward!

With super-man strength he grasped the key and wrenched it from its fastening.

The key was mouldy with age.

Paul forced the key into the hoary, rusted lock.

"The lock has not been opened for many, many years, Bill," Paul whispered to Bill.

Paul thrust the key into the lock.

He tried to open the padlock.

It would not move.

Bill rushed forward to help.

Under the strength of the two men, the key grated in the lock and the padlock sprung back with a hollow sound!

"*Look! Oh, look Bill!*" whispered Paul in a voice of awe and wonder.

CHAPTER VI.

THE MYSTERY DEEPENS.

Karl Thurlaw could not conceal his astonishment.

He was confident in his own mind that he had seen Stage Coach Bill looking through the window over his daughter Minnie's head.

Yet here stood Minnie, alone.

There was nothing in the background the adobe cabin made that in any way now suggested Bill, her father.

Thurlaw grinned sheepishly.

"I'm all in," he said to the girl viewing him with amazement depicted on her countenance.

"All in? Why, Karl. What makes you look so strange?"

Karl shook his head.

"You would look strange if you had seen a ghost."

"Seen what?"

Minnie made one step nearer Karl.

"A ghost," firmly repeated the young man.

Minnie laughed.

"Where was the ghost?" she asked.

"In the window of your home," firmly replied Karl. "I saw your father sitting there."

"In the window of my home? Nonsense."

"Not a bit of it."

"That's what I said."

"Of course you are not serious?"

"Never was so much so in my life."

"Why, I really think you are."

"I am."

"Do you wish me to seriously think that you believe you saw the ghost of my father in our house?"

"I do."

"Where was this ghost?"

"It sat in that window right behind you."

Minnie giggled.

"That's where dad always sits when he is at home," she replied. "I wonder at nothing now, but it would seem to me that if dad was a ghost that he would have some new scenes to visit, for awhile anyway, and wouldn't want to come back home and sit in his old seat."

"Now you are poking fun at me."

"Not at you, but at the ghost."

"You don't take what I saw seriously."

"No, because I don't think you saw anything. Do you drink?"

"If you mean coffee and water, I must plead guilty."

"Don't you ever touch intoxicants?"

"Not much. A man in the North-West is always better without booze."

"I know you to be a generally truthful man."

"Why do you say generally?"

"Because in this case I don't know whether you are truthful or not."

"Oh."

"You come here to call on me, I presume, and you end by telling me that you have seen my father's ghost."

"Well, I did see your father sitting there in that window, when I first came here, smoking a pipe."

Minnie threw back her head and made the woods ring with her laughter.

"What are you laughing at?"

"Because what you said makes me know that if dad's ghost did come back it would come smoking a pipe. Dad alive or dead would smoke."

"It's a wise child that knows its own father!"

Minnie smiled.

"This child knows its dad all right," cried Minnie. "Dad, always loved to smoke."

"You don't take much stock in my idea that I saw your dad's spectre?"

"Not a bit. Dad ain't dead."

"Well you are a brave girl anyway. I wouldn't want to stay in that house a moment after what I have seen."

"Sugar! Why Karl, let me tell you one thing. Dad's ghost isn't here, it hasn't been here and it ain't coming here."

"Why are you so sure?"

"Because dad isn't dead. He will be in soon on the box of the Fort Coppermine coach. He is due any time between now and midnight. Don't you worry about dad. When the Coppermine coach comes in dad will be driving on the box as usual."

"You have great confidence in your dad."

"You bet I have."

"But it's a well known fact that the Delgada outlaws have been after Stage Coach Bill for months."

"It is also a well known fact that the Delgada outlaw band haven't got dad yet. No, don't you worry."

"But how do you account for the ghost?"

"Whiskey."

"I like that."

"Sorry to hear you confess it."

"Confess what?"

"That you like whiskey."

"Minnie Becker! I didn't make any such shameful confession."

"Oh, didn't you? How easy it is to be mistaken."

"Mistaken in what?"

"In what you hear said to you."

"How are you mistaken?"

"Because."

"What a reason."

"Isn't it a logical one?"

"Now you are making fun of me."

"What a wonderful brain you have?"

"Eh?"

"Yes, it's wonderful how one head can carry all you know."

"Oh say now."

"The brain that can see my dad's ghost sitting in our window, said ghost smoking a pipe, is a wonderful one. I'd like to have a photograph of your brain."

"Come, now you surely are chaffing me."

"Yes, and to think that your brain did not tell me whether dad smoked the same old kind of smelly tobacco, strong and pungent, that makes our house take on the attributes of a cigar-store."

Karl roared.

"Well, Karl, you are a wonderful man, but anyway I always did like wonderful men."

"Thank you. I'm obliged for your father's ghost."

"Why?"

"He has also made you make a confession that I have longed to hear you make."

Minnie looked surprised.

"I don't understand," she added after a breathless moment.

"Shall I explain?"

"As you wish."

"It made you say you liked me."

A wave of color dashed over the girl's face.

"Now don't get silly," she cried.

"I am not silly. It's you that are so silly that you don't see——"

For answer Minnie clutched the astonished young man by the arm.

Minnie, whose out-door life and plain living had made her a woman of brain and muscle, simply yanked Karl by the arm in a sort of flying leap, big as he was, backward into the house.

With a quick motion she slammed the door.

She was not a second too soon.

Lithe dark forms rose up out of the underbrush that fringed the house.

The sharp staccato sound of exploding rifles came to the ears of the two now safely within the house.

Bullets pattered upon the adobe hut.

"Outlaws," cried Minnie, as she saw Karl set his teeth, and pull his revolver from its holster, "we are attacked by the Delgada band!"

A swift rain of shot pattered on the hut.

The vindictive yells of the bandits could be heard outside.

"Barricade that door!" shouted Karl. "I'll try a shot out of this window. We must keep off the outlaws at all hazards. If they get a chance to charge they will murder us."

CHAPTER VII.

THE GNOME KING'S HOME.

Stage Coach Bill, and Paul Cassel looked at each other in sheer wonder.

The solid rock gave way under their pressing hands.

It swung back like a gigantic door.

There was revealed to them with sensations of mysterious awe, a wide road.

They could see ancient marks of long vanished wheels leading down into a tremendous depth, that was lighted by rays of the outside world for some distance and then was lost in deep blackness.

Irresolute and tremulous the two men stood upon the threshold of a scene of wonders!

For several moments they looked straight ahead. Neither dared breathe.

"What is this?" said Paul in a low tone to Bill, his face white with emotion.

"You can search me," cried Bill in return. "This is the most wonderful discovery that I ever heard of."

"Isn't it?"

"How did you come to see that padlock?"

"I don't know."

"All I do know is that I heard you yell. I looked up and saw you staring at the rock."

"That's the funniest thing."

"What is?"

"I seemed to hear a voice say, 'look in the very center of that rock right ahead of you.'"

"You did?"

"Yes. I followed the voice's advice. The voice seemed to be a part of me and yet it wasn't either. All I know was that I looked and saw the big lock and the confining bar."

"It was strange how you could see it at all."

"Wasn't it? Ten feet away it was nothing but a part of the rock, it seemed to me. It looked like a sort of moss-grown fissure in the great solid rocky wall."

"That's so."

"But when I came nearer there it was, a plain padlock."

Stage Coach Bill mopped his heated brow.

"That's just what I thought," he said, "there's something neither you nor I can fathom about this discovery. I tell you it's all on a par with something that seems to me to be protecting me from the bandits."

"Doesn't it seem so? But we must not stand here talking about what made or did not make us see that lock. We aren't out of the danger zone yet. The outlaws may attack us any time."

"What do you propose doing?"

"First let us light up the lanterns on the front of the coach."

"All right."

Stage Coach Bill performed this duty in a jiffy.

"What next, Paul? You are in command of this party now."

"Get out the two lanterns from under the boot."

Bill followed this order.

"Now light them also."

This action was soon accomplished.

"Now, Bill can you manage those bronchos?"

Bill roared.

"Paul, them bronc's are the tamest things you ever saw. They will have to be whipped now to make them go at all."

"All right hop up to your seat Bill. Drive right into the road there. It looks dark but we have got to try and see where it takes us."

"Guess this is all that's left or let the treasure box fall into the hands of the outlaws. Nothing by thunder, but a steam-derrick would ever get the coach back on the road up the way we came."

"That's a dead sure thing. Well, Bill, let her pop. We might as well be killed going down through this unknown road as to wait here until the outlaws smoke us out and murder us with bullets from their weapons."

Stage Coach Bill jumped to the top of the coach.

He swung the horses directly toward the darkness that enshrouded the interior of the pit-like depths that confronted him.

The horses were as mild as any old road four-in-hand lot that Bill had ever driven.

"Didn't I tell you that them cattle were well broke-in." cried Bill.

He was correct.

In fact he had to use a whip to get even a sluggish walk out of the cowed bronchos, who a few hours ago had dashed madly away from Milner Cut.

The coach swayed a little as it passed by the doors of the rocky entrance to the mysterious depths.

The lamps showed Bill that the way was clear.

At a gentle trot the horses ambled forward.

No sooner had the coach passed the rocky entrance than with a crash of clanging rock the gate-like entrance to the grotesque place swung shut.

"Trapped!" said Paul.

"When we started down the road into these infernal regions we must have hit a concealed spring that released the door and shut off the possibility of our retracing our steps," replied Stage Coach Bill.

Paul ran around to the rear of the coach.

With the lantern he carried he tried hard to find the concealed spring which had released the door but could not see it.

He examined the rock.

Without question it had swung back to its original position.

The stone was again immovably fixed in its niche, and Paul saw that he could not again cause it to move back to allow them to return unless he could find the secret of the inside spring.

Paul communicated the result of his search to Stage Coach Bill, who remained on the box, while the now thoroughly tamed bronchos stood like statues awaiting an order from their driver.

"Don't seem to me that we can do but one thing," chuckled Bill after he had turned Paul's information over and over in his mind.

"What's the one thing?"

"Go ahead! Jump up Paul, and we will go down and see if his Satanic Majesty is in. Might as well arrange for our apartments now as we go by."

Paul chortled.

"Bill you are always looking ahead. I'm with you. Let her go, William of Stage Coach Fame."

While speaking Paul hopped up on the top of the coach.

"Anyway," he added. "There's no fear of outlaws down here."

"Don't be too sure of that. This way's been traveled by someone before and honest men don't burrow under ground."

Bill drove his fore-in-hand forward with infinite caution.

Shadows ahead were flung into half lights by the lanterns.

The situation was one of hidden meanings, suggestive of dark nameless dangers and terrible things.

"Whew!" cried Bill. "There seems to be plenty of air down here, but by Gosh, Paul I'm covered with lather."

Paul wiped the perspiration from his brow.

"I'm sweating like a butcher," he replied, "yet why? It doesn't seem to be hot down here. Are we in a tunnel?"

Stage Coach Bill stretched his whip far above him.

"Don't seem to touch no top," said he.

Paul in turn tried to flash his lantern light along the sides of the place but could throw no beam far enough to separate the darkness.

"Looks wide enough," Paul remarked.

Both men peered ahead.

They could see that there was what looked like a wide road leading at quite a steep pitch downward.

This road was formed of whitish sand, and small rocks.

Even in the glimmering light of the lanterns the two men could see that the road had apparently been traveled at some past time; but the meager tracks were old and in the dry atmosphere, with no rain, no obliterating people to tread down the tracks, they

might have been made ages before by some person long now in his grave.

Through the bottle-like mouth of the descent the coach creaked and groaned.

Then the way became steeper.

The coach gave a gentle jolt and the road seemed to be now on a level.

The startling click-click of the shot gun of Paul broke the echoes as he pulled the weapon ready for use, quickly up to his shoulder.

A group of shadowy white figures seemed to be starting from the darkness to destroy the coach and its trembling occupants.

A white, skeleton-like figure with one hand stretched out as if in grim warning stood out under the direct rays of the lantern Paul flashed upon it.

Around this silent figure were ranged in canopied niches hundreds of other shadowy figures, and behind these were ranged still others that were so many that the feeble light of the lanterns could not fully define each spectral form.

"Bill, get ready to shoot."

The two men raised their weapons ready to meet the expected attack.

CHAPTER VIII.

POLACCA DELGADA IS VEXED.

The wild, startling laughter of the outlaw, Polacca Delgada, was not pleasant to hear, when his fellow fiend, Joe Kamus, pressed the electric button that exploded the dynamite mine, which both bandits felt sure would end the lives of Stage Coach Bill and Paul Cassel.

"There goes Stage Coach Bill."

Kamus chuckled these words in a growling, bitter tone of hatred.

"*Stage Coach Bill's last ride,*" yelled Delgada. "We have got him at last and along with him we have blown to bits his side-partner Paul Cassel. A fine day's work, Joe."

The two bandits laughed and shook hands, danced and sang.

They were sure that the man they hated so was dead, and with him their other bitter enemy.

"Say, that's a good lesson. It will teach some of the people about this territory that Delgada and his band must be reckoned with. We may be some time getting men that fight us. But we get them all right."

"That's the stuff. Why, Stage Coach Bill has defied us for months. We tried time and again to get him. Well, we won out this time. Hurrah!"

Neither man saw a third figure which had stolen up to them.

When Delgada saw a man standing near his hand rushed his gun out ready for use, but when he saw it was the figure of Kinistino, the Nunatalmute Indian member of his band, he refrained from shooting.

"You idiot," roared Delgada to Kinistino. "You idiot! Don't you know better than to come quietly down on me this way? Man, I came near shooting you."

But one glance at the face of Kinistino stopped further reproaches.

Delgada saw that the visitor was one overcome with fear.

"What is the matter?" the chief outlaw cried.

"Stage Coach Bill," panted Kinistino.

"Oh, I have settled Bill," sneered Delgada, "his body lies out there in many pieces. I've blown him to Kingdom come."

"What?" cried Kinistino.

Delgada narrated the story of the dynamite mine.

"You go back, Kamus," further ordered the outlaw, "and see if the body of Bill is blown to atoms, and find if that—guard is dead. We can't stand for any mistakes this time. If either men are living, now, just kill them."

Kamus nodded and started off on his mission.

Delgada turned to Kinistino.

"Now what are you so chicken-livered over?" questioned the outlaw chief.

"You say that Bill is dead?"

"If he isn't he is a wonder of a man. Any way I hoisted him and his coach up toward heaven by a dynamite-mine."

"Nonsense. Stage Coach Bill isn't dead."

"He isn't?"

"Or if he is he has come back to earth to haunt us."

"Eh?"

"That's right. If you killed Stage Coach Bill his ghost has come back. If you didn't kill him, he is at his house now, or was an hour since."

"You're crazy."

"No, I am not. I went to spy out what Stage Coach Bill's daughter was doing."

"Yes. I sent you on that mission."

"When I got to Stage Coach Bill's house, his gal was standing in the door looking out."

"Yes."

"Then I got busy. I stole up nearer where I could see the girl and then *I saw Stage Coach Bill seated in the window of his house smoking his pipe.*"

"Good Lordy!"

Delgada truculent outlaw as he was, sat down hard on the ground with his mouth wide open and his eyes like saucers.

Then he came to himself.

"How long ago did you say you saw Stage Coach Bill at home seated in his window smoking his pipe?"

"Not more than an hour."

"Impossible."

"Why?"

"Because at the time you state that you saw Stage Coach Bill at his home a good hour's run cross country from here, Stage Coach Bill was on the box of his coach driving four untamed bronchos right down upon our mine here. I saw Bill with my own eyes. He could not have driven home from here in much less than three hours, and therefore you must be mistaken."

"I wasn't mistaken. I stood trembling looking at Bill because you know I had seen him at Milner Cut not two hours before I saw him in his home at Fort Rupert. I couldn't be mistaken, man. I saw Bill in both places."

"It beats me. I can't understand it one bit. What does it mean?"

Before Kinistino could answer there came the sound of swiftly running feet.

Another panic stricken bandit joined the other two frightened thugs.

"Gone!" gasped Kamus.

"Gone—who is gone?" snapped Delgada.

"Stage Coach Bill," was the reply.

"I know he is gone. Men don't live long when hoisted up in the air by a charge of dynamite as heavy as the mine that I sprung carried."

"No, not gone that way. Gone, quit, vamosed, vanished, not there," yelled Kamus.

"Another locoed Indian," yelled Delgada. "Is my band going crazy man after man?"

"I'm no more crazy than you are. I tell you that Stage Coach Bill has vanished."

"Ah! Ha! Then I blew him to atoms," sneered Delgada.

"No! No! Not that. He is gone away. He isn't even an atom there."

"Is Cassel there?" questioned Delgada.

"He's gone too!"

"You don't mean to say that—here you, Kinistino, go back to the road where the mine was sprung and see what is there. Hurry back and report to me."

Having given this order Delgada his face black as night, questioned Kamus further.

"Now don't let your brain wobble more than it usually does," Delgada remarked. "Tell me quickly just what you have discovered."

Thus abjured, Kamus began his tale.

"I went out to where the mine was sprung," he said. "There's a dreadful big hole in the ground."

"Yes. But about the two men, Stage Coach Bill and Paul Cassel?"

"There is not the slightest vestige of either man."

"Well the coach, and the horses? Are all destroyed?"

"There is no coach, nor are there any horses there."

"What?"

"No coach, no horses, no bodies—just nothing save a gigantic hole in the ground where the dynamite exploded."

Delgada broke into horrid oaths.

"Man," he fairly screamed, "you are a lunatic! You are locoed. You are stark staring, staving crazy and ought to be in a padded cell."

"No, he isn't."

The voice of Joe Kamus broke into the ravings of Delgada.

"Well, what did you discover?"

"Just what Kinistino did. The coach, Stage Coach Bill, Paul Cassel, and the four bronchos have vanished into thin air."

Delgada dancing with rage asked Kamus if he had looked over the cliff that led into the yawning canyon that ran along the road.

"I have. And no stage-coach is down in those dreaded depths."

"Did you look up the mountain side?" asked Delgada.

"How could the coach and the horses climb up the side of a mountain?" sneered Kamus.

"Why, Delgada," cried Kinistino, "the coach couldn't get up that steep rocky mountain, not in a thousand years of trial."

"No ordinary coach could. But one driven by Stage Coach Bill might. Before I venture an opinion I'm going to look over the scene myself."

While speaking Delgada rushed to the point where he had last seen the stage coach, just as he ordered Kamus to fire the dynamite-mine.

Rumbling strange, uncouth oaths Delgada, searched the scene as if with a fine-tooth comb.

His fellow outlaws stood at one side watching him with smiles of superior knowledge on their faces.

"Ho!" at length cried Delgada, sneeringly calling the attention of his companions to the place where broken trees of small size, crushed shrubs, deep indentations in the earth, showed where the coach had mounted the steep side of the mountain when Stage Coach Bill reined his flying bronchos up the mountain in a wild almost hopeless scramble to escape the fury of the exploding mine.

"Here, you two—fools," yelled the outlaw chief, "here is where they ran the coach. They are up the hill a bit. Stage Coach Bill can drive anything anywhere, boys, and he has fooled us this time."

While running up the steep hill that led to the more dangerous passes of the mountains, Delgada looked well to his weapons.

"Boys," he cried, "get ready to shoot. The men we are about to attack are fighters."

It was inevitable that keeping along the trail so sharply marked, that soon Delgada would reach the rocky gate to the mysteries below the earth which Stage Coach Bill and Paul Cassel at this very moment were viewing.

So, in a few more hundred feet Delgada came smack against the great rock, now swung back into place, and apparently a rock that had never been moved.

"Where's the trail?" yelled Delgada.

Like fox hounds the three bandits harked over the ground.

The trail was plain to the rock.

There, right at the foot of the rock, the rounding trail of the wheels, and the torn up condition of the ground, showed that the coach had been turned about at this point.

The outlaws were trained woodsmen.

They pieced out the fact that the coach had come up the mountain as far as the rock.

Then they saw the coach had been turned around.

But they also saw that there were no retreating tracks.

Delgada looked up the side of the mountain.

From where the party stood the mountain broke into one great mass of steep rocks, some a thousand feet high, and between all of the rocks were deep ravines, that edged along rocky rims, to sink again into tremendous canyons.

"Unless Stage Coach Bill turned this coach into a bloody air-ship, loaded the bronchos on it, and flew over this mountain I don't see how he got away from here," grumbled Delgada.

"We were right, were we not? The two men, the stage coach and the four fleet bronchos have disappeared?"

"Yes," mourned the outlaw chief.

Then a thought came to his mind.

"I don't know how it was done, for it seems magic art that allowed these two devil-men to escape. But they have got away and I guess that Stage Coach Bill is home as you said," cried Delgada turning toward Kinistino.

"Well?" asked the two outlaws together.

"It's only an hour from here cross-country to where Stage Coach Bill lives."

"Yes." answered Kinistino.

"Forward! March!" cried Delgada. "We will go and shoot up Stage Coach Bill."

Thus it was that shots pattered like rain over the hut of Stage Coach Bill in which Minnie Becker, the fair daughter of the stage coach driver had taken refuge with Karl Thurlaw, the young postmaster of the Hudson's Bay Company at Fort Rupert.

The brave young man, and the fair and brave girl, were determined to die where they were rather than to allow the attack of the bandits to succeed.

Thinking that they were facing Stage Coach Bill and his daughter and bound to murder both, Polacca Delgada, the outlaw, urged on Joe Kamus and his associate, Kinistino to further endeavor.

"Shoot fast, and kill the scum of the earth as soon as you can, boys," yelled the outlaw chief.

CHAPTER IX.

IN A MAGIC WORLD.

But the white shapes did not move!

Stage Coach Bill and Paul Cassel awaited the expected charge from the gaunt forms that surrounded them, but there was a silence about them that appalled, for it was so different from the rustling of the upper-world above them.

"What are those white shapes around us?" Paul asked.

"Dunno," replied Stage Coach Bill. "They look like ghosts."

"Ghosts? Nonsense. Hand over that lantern. I'm going to investigate."

Lantern in hand Paul climbed over the wheel and down to the ground.

Paul turned his light toward the shadowy somethings.

"Oh!" he gasped in sheer wonder. "Bill, come here."

Stage Coach Bill knew that the horses would not move in the great darkness about them.

He hurried to Paul's side.

"Oh?" Bill shouted.

He saw that he and Paul were standing in the center of a great room that must have been several hundred feet in size.

The ceiling of the room was at least one hundred feet above them.

About the two men long corridors of glittering white, sparkled with gold, seemed to be disappearing in immeasurable distances.

Massive columns of sparkling, white, rich with grooves and fluting, rose from the floor where they stood, to the roof.

Around yet in shadow were other columns of striking form and color.

Snow-white stalactites hung in great masses on every side.

"We are in an enchanted palace!" shouted Paul.

"It's the work of fairies," replied Stage Coach Bill.

The room was indeed, a vast grotto of wonderful things.

On every side were strange and beautiful objects.

Pillared walls, seemed to be hung with beautiful folds of sweeping tapestry, banners hung with overhanging galleries. Long pendants of a dazzling white dropped from out of the thick darkness that hid the high ceiling.

In the center of the room was to be seen the figure that at first so startled Paul.

"Look!" he whispered to Stage Coach Bill. "It is wonderful indeed. That figure seems to be a man standing there with outstretched hands defying us to approach further."

"Doesn't it?" returned Bill, "and look, all around seems to be other men, frozen by a magician's wand into strange attitudes, awaiting some one to speak the magic word that will return them to life and friends once more."

The two men feasted their eyes on the wonders before them.

Every place that they flashed their lights gave them new beauties.

Such grandeur and sublimity the men had never seen in a country where the grand and the sublime of nature's handiwork is to be seen with every passing glance.

"How do you suppose this place came here?"

Stage Coach Bill finally asked this question.

"Some great convulsion of the world when it was young probably hollowed out this wonderful spot."

"We are in an immense cavern, it would seem?" again questioned Bill.

"That would be my idea of it. I don't know how deep we are in the earth, but we must be down hundreds upon hundreds of feet under the surface of the rocky soil above us."

"I wonder how far this cavern extends."

"Let us try and see."

With the words Stage Coach Bill jumped up on the coach again followed by Paul.

They resumed their way.

The road now led down a long aisle which seemed to be a sheet of drapery thrown over a gigantic alabaster column.

At the end of the aisle was a natural fountain, where clear water was dripping into a transparent cup of spar.

The sound was like that of fairy bells.

"Whoa!" cried Paul. "That makes me thirsty."

The two men quenched their thirst in the half gloom by the fountain for the extreme whiteness of the walls appeared to so shed light that there was a vague luminous mist in the place of the Gods, as Bill termed it, and this with the thin lights of their lanterns made the scene now not one of darkness.

"Don't forget the horses, Paul," cried Bill, as he took a bucket out of the boot of the coach and gave the thirsty animals liquid solace from the drinking-place.

Then the way was resumed.

They slowly traveled onward.

By and by there began to appear on the floor and walls as they went along a soft greenish tint which gradually grew greener and brighter until they rushed forward to where daylight was streaming in upon the cavern.

"What is this?" they both cried at the same moment. "Have we come to the surface of the earth again?"

"I don't understand how we have," laughed Paul as he once more jumped from the coach.

"By George!" he cried with a shout. "It's daylight all right."

When Stage Coach Bill had joined him, however, both men were dismayed at finding that the daylight came from a conical sort of well, or fissure in the rock.

"It's a long way to the surface of the earth," whispered Paul, "look there! See? The conical hole runs up to an immense distance."

"If we were only ramrods we could fire ourselves out of guns up that hole, but being mere men, we can't," rejoined Stage Coach Bill.

"I'd like to know what those outlaws are doing," speculated Paul.

"So would I."

"They must have learned by this time that we have escaped their infernal machine."

"I should think so."

"I suppose they started a search for us at once."

"That is what I'd have done under the same circumstances."

"Well, they didn't find us."

"But that don't help us any. We haven't found ourselves, at that."

"We are here. The earth's surface is lost. We ain't lost."

"I should say not. I could find you, or you could find me at any time. But there's one thing I would like to find."

"What is that?"

"The way out of this place?"

"Well, there's one way out."

"What is that?"

"The way we came in."

"But the rock has closed us in here, you know."

"Yes, I know. But as we stumbled into here, we may have to stumble out."

"True. But which end of the game are you going to stumble out of?"

"How can I tell? Here we are shut in down under the earth, by no fault of our own. I am trying to get back to the surface of the earth, and it will be no fault of mine if I don't succeed."

"You're the stuff."

"Nothing great in desiring to live, is there?"

"No. But it's good to see that you'd rather die struggling, than howling for sympathy."

"I don't propose to try to get either death or sympathy. I'm going to break out of here some way."

The two men shook hands and laughed at each other.

"Is there anything to eat in the coach?" laughed Paul.

"My lunch. I got one at Milner Cut, little thinking I was going to eat it underground. I like to carry a snack of beef and bread on the coach, for one never knows over these North-West roads how one is going to fare on any trip. A little bread and beef goes a long way toward keeping a healthy stage-coach driver, when his coach is late as it is about every other trip."

"Is that so?"

"Oh, yes. In the winter we have to run on sleds with dogs. There's any amount of snow out here, and you can't see the mercury with an average spyglass in any average thermometer."

Paul smiled.

"But we have a time allowance on coaches arrival here," went on Bill. "If we are not more than three days late we are considered to be on time."

Then Bill winked.

"This trip you will be at least a day late?" Paul said.

"Oh, detention by outlaws is put under the head of 'mysterious acts of Prividence.' I never could see where an outlaw got off."

"Nor I."

"They are useless."

"Yes."

"We can get along without 'em."

"We can."

"Yet like the poor they seem to be always with us."

"It's all the fault of honest men in this territory."

"Is it? Why?"

"One group of honest men, one rope, one branch of one tree, and one general determination to put down the pests is all that is needed."

"You mean to lynch the outlaws?"

"Not all of them."

"How many?"

"Well, you hang Polacca Delgada."

"Yes. Consider him hanged."

"Then you stretch the neck of Joe Kamus."

"All right! Swing off Joe, there!"

"Then you hang that sneaky hound of an Indian thug, Kinistino, and you have taught all the rest of the bandits in this territory enough of a lesson. Say, after that the atmosphere will be full of holes where the outlaws that are alive have jumped through it."

"Your lesson is a drastic one but necessary."

"Of course while you will rid us all of the Delgada gang at once there will be other gangs ready to take its place."

"To what do you attribute this fact to?"

"We are a frontier country. We are unsettled, we have no reform schools, no prisons in which to confine people who offend against our laws. That is a condition which will mean the flocking of the lawless to us, until by and by we get civilized, and get the things that civilization brings, schools, prisons, courts laws, men to enforce the laws—out here now it's the first man out with his gun. He wins the suit!"

"Quite a lecture."

"That's what."

"But talk isn't going to get that four-in-hand lot of bronchos out of this underground vault, nor the coach, and for that matter it won't get us out. Don't you think I'm right?"

"Sure, but what can I do about it?"

"I didn't put your darned old coach down here, and it isn't up to me to get that darned old vehicle out of here."

"It isn't up to either of us. But the horses can't live on water, and after that lunch is gone, neither can we."

"Hence it behooves us to hustle."

"I'm ready to hustle, but what and where shall I hustle? That seems to me to be the problem."

"There is no use of going back. The sliding part of that stone alone will shut us from getting out the way we came in."

"And what's the use of going back? If we do get out only to be met by the outlaws and riddled!"

"Isn't it better to die quickly by a bullet, than to die down here slowly by sheer starvation?"

"I don't know. I never died either way. Each way don't some how by the sound appeal to me."

"Well, start ahead and let it go at that."

After some time Stage Coach Bill sent the bronchos ahead at a fast trot, for the way now wound through a long gallery with a firm floor.

The fantastic shapes the coach hurried by seemed anxious to clutch the two men and crush them to death.

Every moment some beautiful new arrangement of the snow-white shapes added to the grandeur of the scene.

"Whoa!"

Stage Coach Bill pulled his horses quickly to a stop.

A gigantic oyster-shell of pure white barred the road.

It was easily a hundred feet in dimensions.

The two halves of the shell were glistening.

Right between the two shells was suspended *a human skeleton.*

"Lord, look at the ghastly grin that skeleton bears," cried Paul.

"He has a gun in his withered hand," yelled Stage Coach Bill.

Then as the two men gazed spell-bound there arose from the deep darkness that enshrouded the queer, gigantic monstrosity of the white oyster-shell a long, piercing, heart-rending yell.

"Good God!" cried Paul, "that sounds like a human voice. Is a human being confined behind that terrible shell guarded by a skeleton sentinel?"

CHAPTER X.

SHUT UP IN THE BECKER HUT.

"Is the door barricaded?"

"It is."

This question fell from the lips of Karl Thurlaw, and was as quickly answered by Minnie Becker.

Man and girl each had knowledge of life on the far North-West frontier and they did not hestitate in giving and obeying orders.

They worked for a common purpose.

That was to keep alive.

"Who is holding us up?" asked Karl, as soon as Minnie had assured him that the doors were barricaded. "Keep out of range of the window."

Crash!

A bullet whipped its way through the upper pane of glass in one of the windows as the speaker drew the girl out of range just in time.

"Ah! Well, no one is hurt!" Karl added. "Now who has held us up, do you think?"

"The Delgada gang. They are after dad. Been after him for months."

"I've heard something about this. Why didn't you come into the fort and tell us about this?"

The girl shook her head.

"We have lived a long while in this country without asking for protection from any man," she cried. "Dad came here fifty-three years ago. I've lived here all my life. In fact I was born here."

Spat!

This was the sound the bullets made as the outlaws, still yelling and cursing, sent a leaded hail against the sides of the hut-like cabin.

"Oh, well, don't be squeamish. You might as well come in and ask for aid, for if our positions were reversed I would ask you."

"Would you really?"

There was sly challenge in the girl's eyes.

"No, not—but then you are going to marry me some day, so you might feel like asking for a little thing like help to stop a very blood-thirsty bandit from shooting up you and your dad."

"Going to marry you—of all the nerve! Why if I did my duty I'd put you out doors to face those pirates alone."

But the pretty blush that appeared on the girl's face, the tender light in her eyes, made Karl sure that possibly she might be induced to change her denial to an affirmative, later.

Karl was happy as a sand-boy at the attitude the girl took.

But before he could go further in his love-making the outlaws with a wild yell began firing more rapidly at the house.

"I will crawl up in the little garret up this ladder," urged Karl, "and will see what I can do there toward taking a shot at those rascals."

"A good idea," replied the girl.

Karl's weight made the ladder that led to the garret creak with a dread, apparently, of having to give way under the burden.

"Gosh!" he shouted. "I'm no light weight. Minnie, will this blooming thing hold?"

Minnie was sure that it would.

So Karl ventured up carefully.

He found there was barely enough space for his bulk up in the tiny place, which was merely the space between the ceiling of the room below, and the peaked roof above.

But after some difficulty Karl managed to draw himself up and hide himself along the side-logs of the house.

He drew his pen-knife from his pocket and began to dig the adobe out from between the chinks of the house.

Soon Karl had made a space so that between the chinks of the long logs he could see out into the front of the house.

"I can see Delgada plain," Karl thought. "He is sheltered behind the trunk of that tree. You bet he will stand where his hide is safe. There's Joe Kamus in the foreground. If I can make a bigger hole for my revolver muzzle to get through I'll trot a heat with that chap in a minute. I'll blow his brains all over the landscape."

Karl began the tedious work of cutting out enough of the soft cotton-wood of which the hut was made, so that he could poke his revolver through the hole and get a shot at the outlaws.

"Minnie," cried Karl, "look out. They seem to be getting together for a charge."

A suppressed snicker came to his ears.

"By George," thought Karl, in vast admiration. "Minnie isn't a coward at any rate."

"All right, up there, Karl?" cried Minnie from the room below.

"All right!"

"Can you see the outlaws?"

"Clearly."

"How many are there?"

"I see Delgada, and Kamus—yes I see the Indian Kinistino also—wait till I get a hole in this confounded hut you call a house, and I'll get a bullet into one of the three, I swear."

"Don't swear."

"Who is?"

"I don't know who is going to, but you just said you would and I hate to hear swearing unless dad does it. Oh, he does it so beautifully. He has such a fine vocabulary."

Karl chuckled.

"Can you see what the bandits are doing now?" again questioned the girl.

"They are forming to charge. By Jove, Minnie, here they come. Look out I'm coming back to help you defend the house down there. I can't do anything stowed away up here."

The flashing of the rifles of the outlaws outside made a continued booming.

Karl hurried to the hole where the ladder should have been and let himself rapidly down to where he supposed the ladder was standing to receive his feet.

But there was no ladder there.

Karl was sweeping the air with his feet, when he heard a terrible yell outside the hut.

The sound of shots suddenly ceased.

"The ghost! There's Old Bill, there, sitting in that window," cried a voice outside.

Then there came the sound of running feet.

Then silence fell over the scene.

Karl kicked about a few moments in search of the erring ladder and then giving up the quest, let himself go with a bad word in his mouth and landed a heap of angry manhood in the room below.

He blinked in the sudden rush of light that came to him.

Then he turned around to see a very much amused girl seated in a chair with a ladder at her feet, and stuffing her small pocket handkerchief in her pretty mouth to stifle her shrieks of laughter.

When Minnie saw Karl leap to the floor she withdrew the handkerchief and gave full vent to her merriment.

Karl stood watching her with a frown on his face. As she laughed this expression gave way to a puzzled smile and then he also broke down and laughed like a merry lunatic.

By and by the girl stopped laughing.

"Good!" burst in Karl's voice. "Now then we have both laughed heartily. Now, what's the joke?"

"You were the joke."

"Huh?"

"You stood or rather hung up there like a June bug, all legs, and kicked like a crazy man, while, oh my, how you swore. Dad never did anything along the cussin' line that came within a yard of you."

Karl grinned.

"What became of the ladder?" he asked.

"What ladder?"

"The one that leads usually up to the attic."

"It didn't lead anywhere when you started to come down. Well, there it is on the floor where you kicked it."

"Why didn't you put it up when you saw it fall?"

"Too weak."

"Pshaw! You look strong enough to put up that light ladder for me."

"I was and am. It was weakness due to my mirth. You were so dreadfully funny. I wanted to put up the ladder but I just couldn't. I was so weak from my laughter."

"Suppose the outlaws had rushed in—would you have laughed then?"

"Oh, I didn't begin laughing until they were gone."

"Gone?"

"That is what I said."

"You don't mean to say that Pol Delgada, who is about as brutal a thug as I ever heard of, when in full rush on the house, with his two best and worst men along side of him, quite and run away without either you or I firing a shot at the band?"

"Uh-uh."

"Why did they go?"

"Don't ask me. They didn't see my face so they couldn't have been scared off by that?"

"Shucks. That face would have probably lured them on."

"Sir, you flatter me."

"Don't mention it. But you tell me quick why did that gang run away after they had rushed at the house," cried Karl in a fever heat of wonder.

"Down by the willows, oh, sweet grow the rushes oh—any more rushes that you want to talk about?"

"You are a provoking girl."

"You are a sarcastic man. You expect me to answer questions about things I know nothing of and man-like you are angry because I can't answer your questions. Now, Karl, first, I didn't know why Delgada attacked this house. I don't know why he has such bitter enmity against dad. I don't know why he wants to kill me, and Karl, how can you, therefore, expect me to explain why the bandits ran away like mad?"

"You are right," returned Karl. "I know how you feel. You see, it was so wonderful to me, the charge of the outlaws, the ending of the shots, the yells of 'ghost' and all that sort of thing as the three outlaws ran as if the end of the world was four jumps behind them, that I was rather short in my questions."

"Dear me! What a husband you'd make. Goodness knows I'm glad I haven't yet decided to marry you. I'll have to think over the way you domineer over poor weak me."

Minnie laughed as she spoke.

Karl's eyes gleamed.

"We will talk of the marriage question later," Karl said softly. "Now did you see a ghost anywhere?"

For answer, to the intense surprise of Karl, Minnie burst into a flood of hysterical tears.

"Ghosts!" she cried, "nothing but ghosts. That's all I hear now days. I wish I was a ghost myself."

There came a whoop of voices from many riders. The little place was soon alive with men on plunging horses.

It was a rescue party from the fort who had heard the shots fired by the outlaws and had rushed to assist in warding off the attack.

"Which way did them fellers go?" cried Big Tom

Balser, one of the assistants at Fort Rupert to the young Postmaster.

"Through the bushes, there," cried Karl. "Get after them boys, they have only a half hour's start on you."

With a whoop of pleasure the rescuers darted toward the fringe of shrubs behind which the flying outlaws had vanished.

"There will be a lynching bee if they find them," cried Karl. "Now Minnie, you must return to the fort with me."

CHAPTER XI.

THE BATTLE IN THE CAVERN.

Paul Cassel, when he cried out in alarm in the depths of the mysterious cavern, was sure that the voice he heard was that of a human being.

But in a moment he saw his mistake.

A long, lithe, dark, dreadful form crept slowly toward him, and swung itself from beneath the gigantic oyster-shell and came hurrying with a creeping motion toward him.

Paul's shot gun flew to his shoulder.

"It's a wild-cat!" cried Stage Coach Bill. "There's another one behind the first animal. You shoot the first. I'll fire at the second beast."

The two men had come unaware upon the den of two fierce wild-cats, animals always dreaded in the North-West when met in the open, and now when they thought that their den was to be invaded, more to be feared than ever.

"For God's sake, don't miss," whispered Stage Coach Bill. "If you do we are dead men."

"I won't miss," replied Paul with grim purpose. "There they come. Now fire."

The animals were stealing forward ready for a spring. Their cries so like the appeal of an agonized human being had deceived Paul into thinking a human person was confined in the cave.

Bang!

In absolute unison the shots from Paul's shot gun, and Stage Coach Bill's revolver of high power, rang forth.

The missiles went home.

The snarls and screams of the two ferocious feline animals could be heard flinging the echoes back and forth through the cavern.

They rolled over and over, dyeing the ground with their blood and then lay still.

The horses attached to the coach plunged and snorted. It took all of Bill's strength to hold them in check.

Little did the bronchos seem like the wild animals that had been hitched to the coach early in the morning.

Never were beasts tamer or easier to manage.

When they had left off plunging and snorting and stood trembling, Paul hurried over to where the two wild-cats lay.

He saw that his shot gun had blown the head off of the largest cat, a male.

The second animal evidently a female and the mate of the male cat, had been shot directly through the eyes.

"What if we had missed?" thought Paul as he glanced at the powerful claws of each beast. "They would have rended us limb from limb."

"What are you doing," put in Stage Coach Bill. "Are you wondering why, when a steel bullet goes in a wild-cat, life goes out?"

Paul grinned.

"No. I was thinking how narrow was the line between our deaths and theirs. If either of us had not landed the shot there would have been two dead men and two live wild-cats."

"Right. But a man who has a weapon and don't know how to do business with it deserves to die, I think. But aren't those wild-cats whoppers. I never saw two bigger ones."

Turning from the two dead animals now powerless to harm them, Paul swept Bill with a glance.

"Bill," he said, "who was that man there, that grinning skeleton?"

"I don't know. But if I was to guess I should say that it is all that is left of some outlaw."

"Do you suppose he belonged to Delgada's band?"

"I hardly think so."

"Why?"

"Because if he had been, Delgada would have been hunting for us down here long before this. I take it that the skeleton over there is a member of some other band of outlaws who years ago knew of the concealed wonders of this splendid series of caverns."

"You are right, Bill. It seems so to me also. If Delgada knew of us down here, if he knew of any entrance to this dread place he would have been after us long since this, and we would have had to fight him off——"

"Yes. We would have killed him and his gang as easily as we have killed these wild-cats."

"You can't say. These cats didn't have shootin' irons in their hands, while the bandits would have had them. Well it all looks to me as if that skeleton must have been here for many years."

"Yes. I see there is no flesh on that dead man's bones. He must have been here for many, many years. Let us go and see if there's anything to identify him."

The two men drew near the grewsome skeleton.

The clothing that the man must have worn in life was utterly gone.

The flesh had stripped itself from its bones.

The fleshless hand, however, still touched its weapon.

Paul stared at the gun.

"I never saw a gun like that outside of a museum," gasped Paul.

He leaned over and clutched the gun.

As if his touch was the signal for the final disintegration of the skeleton it fell, as he grasped its weapon, into a shapeless handful of mere bones.

The skeleton fell into a heap of nothingness but a few calcined bones as if it had been blown into vapor with one convulsion of nature.

Stage Coach Bill was white. He gasped in terror.

Paul was equally disturbed.

"Gosh!" was all that Paul could think of that fitted the occasion.

"Look at that fellow's gun," ventured Stage Coach Bill.

Paul turned the weapon over.

It was an old flint-lock musket.

It was a single-barreled weapon, long, extremely heavy, and with its uncouth lock, and heavy, cumbersome firing trigger, looked as antiquated as the moldy bit of white dust and bones that was now all that was left of its owner.

"There is a name engraved here on the stock of this gun," said Paul as he drew toward the lantern that blinked near by, making a semi-darkness only, with its feeble light.

"Read it," cried Bill.

Paul tried to decipher the words.

"No," he decided, "it's not a name but it seems to be figures. Say, Bill, if that number isn't 1783, then I'm a Rocky Mountain goat."

"Impossible," cried Bill. "You must be mistaken."

But when both men together tried to decipher the inscription they were sure after a long inspection that Paul was correct.

"Gosh, that's a great many years ago," cried Bill. "Do you suppose that fellow has been here since the year 1783?"

"I am forced to believe so. That accounts for the fact that the entire flesh was gone, and nothing but the bones left of that man."

Bill had been examining the interior of the gigantic oyster-shell, between which the skeleton had been perched.

"Say Paul," he announced, "that chap was not staying here because he wanted to do so."

Paul smiled.

"I suppose no man wants to sit peacefully awaiting the arrival of the hearse."

"No, I don't mean that way. What I mean is that this chap was *chained to that oyster-shell.*"

"You don't mean it?"

"Look for yourself."

Paul hustled around the side of the shell which he saw was really only a grotesque stalactite, which happened to fall into the semblance of an oyster-shell.

"By thunder!" he cried. "You're right."

There lay a chain rusted and worn, but which still hung to its rusty staple.

One end had been fastened to the waist of the skeleton, for a bit of the link of the chain where it had fallen apart was still clinging to one of the bones.

"Yes," summed up Paul. "This figure has been confined here. I wonder why?"

Paul stood gazing into vacancy wondering what it all meant when his eyes fell upon a tiny patch of green just behind the oyster-shell.

"What in the world is that?" thought Paul as he rubbed his eyes.

He rubbed them again, but still the green light was there; right there in a back-ground of other lights made by the reflection of the two lanterns upon the white stalactites.

"See here, Bill," cried Paul. "Do you see a light there?"

Paul pointed to the shimmering green color.

"Naw, not to speak of—by George, Paul, I do see something! Say, it's a green light."

After an attack upon one or two fierce wild-cats with voices almost human one doesn't approach a queer green-light without caution.

So with weapons ready for instant use the two men stole forward.

The green light did not stir.

"I suppose in this darned enchanted place the light will move out of sight just when we get to it," cried Paul.

Bill chuckled in merriment.

"That's been our fate ever since we came in here."

"Well," rejoined Paul, "if we hadn't been lucky enough to get in here our quarters outside would have been made permanent by the bandits, it seems to me."

"Say, Paul is there anything more permanent in this world than the grave—eh?"

Thus the two wayfarers kept their courage up to the sticking point.

Softly they stole forward.

"Wow! Wow! Hip! Hip! Hurrah! Wow!"

The foregoing shows in words quite as well as plain type can express it, the sound which suddenly burst from Paul's lips.

In a frenzy he cast away his weapon.

He took one big step forward right upon the green ray.

He picked up something.

He held it high above his head.

He shouted, he sang, he cried, he yelled all in a breath.

Above his head gleamed the green light.

"Crazy! Gone crazy!" cried Stage Coach Bill in strong conviction. "Poor boy. Brain busted. Couldn't stand the strain of all these dangers. Oh, thunder! How am I ever going to get a coach, four bronchos and a crazy man back to Fort Rupert."

Bill approached Paul.

"Does um want um 'ittle, 'ittle green light-ee; well um shall have un, um shall," Bill coaxed, as if soothing a refractory baby. "Now um come to um coach and go by by."

Paul stopped dancing.

"What in thunder ails you Bill? Have you gone crazy?"

Paul's words made Bill stare.

"No, by gosh, I ain't crazy," he replied, "but you are."

For the first and only time on record Paul swore at a friend.

"You higgle-te-piggedelty, son-of-a-rhinoceros," he yelled (or words that sounded that way or worse). "Crazy? Nit! Why man, *we have struck the loot of the greatest pirate that ever ranged the far west shores.*"

"Huh."

"Did you ever hear of the pirate, Philip Petrowna?"

"Never."

"Well, in the early seventeen hundreds, he followed up the Hudson's Bay Company development of the fur-traffic of this part of the world."

"Oh?"

"Like-wise, yes! Petrowna laid tribute to all the country hereabouts. He swept the Coppermine district with his avenging sword, robbing and killing the traders of that day, and making himself a scourge. Up in the Arctic he pirated among the whalers. He even extended his scope far afloat, and when he could, looted peaceful merchant men of all countries."

"What happened to him finally?"

"He was captured and hanged."

"Well?"

"All that could be found of his gang were also hanged."

"Fine. Best plan in the world."

"Well, that is not all. Although it was known that he had amassed a wonderful treasure by his piracy, *not one groat of cash was ever found by any one!*"

"Was search made?"

"For year upon years, until 'Pirate Philip Petrowna's Loot' has become a household word in this country."

"I never heard of it?"

"Did you ever hear of anything excepting driving your coach?"

Bill laughed.

"Guess you are right. My stock of general information outside of my business isn't greater than that of the average business man."

"Well, if you haven't heard of the 'Pirate's Loot' everyone else up here has."

"Well what of it? What's that got to do with us here deep in this hole of an underground cavern."

Paul pulled his hand from behind his back.

It held the shifting light of green.

"See that?" yelled Paul.

He displayed a wonderful thing.

In his hand shone in beautiful green radiance a splendid spray of artificial flowers. But the stem of the flower was of gold, and each leaf, each spray was made of that magnificent gem, the emerald.

"Thunders of Ages!" shrieked Stage Coach Bill. "This here flower is not a flower at all, but an artificial flower, built of splendid emeralds, and that there light was made by them, these, those—emeralds."

"You're slightly mixed as to grammar and vocabulary, but Bill, you've told the story. That's just what that is."

"Gosh! How much may that be worth?"

"I should think from what I know about gems that every stone here came from Peru. There, you know, are found in clefts of granite, and in granite veins, and other primary rocks, the best emeralds in point of intense color and value. Let me see—this flower-spray is worth to my mind—oh, about $100,000."

"Hully gee!"

"Yes. I should say this spray was looted from some ship coming to America from some South American port by the pirate. The old, opulent South American was fond of decking his wives in rare emeralds made in the form of flowers."

"How many wives did the old opulent gentleman have?"

"This is no census bureau. I am getting as mixed in my excitement in metaphor and grammar as you were awhile ago. What I meant to convey to you was that an Opulent South American, was fond of decking his wife in gems made up in flower-sprays, like this."

"I'm an old man, but I could be very fond of a lady thus decked," replied Bill.

"Or of her gems?"

Bill winked.

"Anyway," added Paul, "what we have found is this spray, and you see, as we get the date from the old musket, when this treasure must have been buried; we know that in all probability the flower was part of Pirate Petrowna's loot."

"Say, that skeleton must have been put here as a guard."

"That's the way I figure it."

"And Pirate Petrowna knowing his gang pretty well, made each man while on guard submit to being chained to the rocky oyster-shell there, by a chain and lock to which he alone had the key."

"Ho!"

"So this guard was left to die miserably with a fortune in sight there before him, because after the arrest of Petrowna, there was nothing possible in the way of rescue for him. If the pirate had told of this cave which he had discovered and used as the headquarters of his gang, the guard would be arrested and executed, why take all that bother? Let him starve in chains, argued the freebooter."

"Whew! Think of the sufferings of that man."

Paul shook his head.

"Do you think this is all of the pirate's loot?"

"No."

"Why?"

"See that big box there? It's a great iron chest, but now it seems to me it is so rusted that—well let us look into it."

The two men advanced.

Paul pulled open the top of the chest.

Stage Coach Bill gave a cry of wonder. He fell upon his knees and grasped a double-handful of splendid gems.

"Look, Paul," he shrieked, "here are diamonds, pearls, rubies—oh, oh, look at this!"

Bill held up a wondrous emerald.

It was as big as an ostrich's egg.

Paul himself gasped.

"I know of only one other emerald as near that in size," he cried, "and that is one worshipped by ancient Peruvians under the name of the *goddess or mother of emeralds.*"

"What is this big emerald worth?"

"I can't really estimate it. Possibly a million dollars."

Bill turned purple.

"Why man," cried Paul, "there has never been an estimate put on the real value of the Goddess or Mother of Emeralds. But I'll tell you this much. Priests watched the wondrous stone in a splendid temple in Peru. And worshipers used to send smaller emeralds as offerings to the Mother Emerald, which were called 'daughters,'—oh let me have one of those smaller stones."

Bill handed up a stone about the size of one that is set in an average ring now days.

Paul popped it directly into the lantern flame.

In twenty minutes it came out a beautiful blue color.

As the emerald cooled it resumed its usual green tint.

"That's the fire test to ascertain what emeralds are really worth, and it shows that these stones are the Peruvian article—oh, I should assay the contents of that box as it stands at about five million dollars."

Bill sank back, happy as a king.

"Paul, we go snucks on this, eh?"

"You bet. We are equal partners in this game."

"Paul," cried Bill. "If we get out of here I figure that I am worth two and one half millions. Well, Paul, how much tobacco can I buy with that? And say, Minnie always wanted a real silk dress. Gosh! This sure is *Stage Coach Bill's Last Ride.*"

Bill thought a moment.

"I mean I'll drive this coach back to Fort Rupert—if we get out of here but never again. We are rich as

any man need be; a good deal richer. If we get out of here——"

"If," replied Paul with a gesture of despair.

CHAPTER XII.

THE END OF THE DELGADA GANG.

"Hang them!"

Two words only but freighted with the smell of the grave.

They were roared by a band of twenty men assembled in the great council room at Fort Rupert.

"Hang them!"

Again the appeal for blood came.

For the decent citizens of the tiny hamlet of Fort Rupert had at last thrown off the yoke which Polacca Delgada, the outlaw, and his band of cut-throat bandits had so long made them bear.

The posse which had chased after the outlaws from the hut-like house of Stage Coach Bill and his daughter, Minnie Becker, had been successful.

Polacca Delgada, Joe Kamus, and the Indian thug, Kinistino, were seated before a band of citizens, heavily ironed, mute, panic-stricken.

They had been tried by Judge Lynch, and the verdict was now being roared into their affrighted ears.

"Hang them!"

Mexican Bill Lane, a tall man, who had served his time of danger and blood in far off Mexico in his hot youth, had been made Judge Lynch.

He had presided at the deliberations of the court.

Ives Marsh, a staid, trapper, known for his judgment and careful attention to the rights of others, had acted as prosecuting attorney; there had been a defense by Clubfoot George, a man known to be friendly to the outlaws, and therefore who was thought best to act as attorney for their defence.

The court had been regular so far as such courts could be.

Men, who a few weeks ago would never have dared to have testified against the outlaws, fearing that they would be murdered if they did so, now that the bandits were facing a jury, had gladly come forward and told their terrible stories of bloodshed by the outlaws.

"Murder has been charged against this hyear, Pol Delgada," Judge Lynch had summed up, "and it seems to me that that thar murder has been a proven on this hyear Bandit Pol Delgada."

"Right you are Mexican Bill," cried Whiskey Frank Carter, foreman of the jury. "That's on'y one murder proved agin' him. Can we hang him twicet fer another one?"

"Wall, it seems ter me thet arter we've hung this hyear pirate oncet, it is enough punishment. We won't bring no other murder inter this case. We'll string Pol up for the murder of that young chap Ray Ives, what was foun-ded wit a hole in his stummick, and quite ded, along thet thar Summit trail, last summer. The evidence hyar before ye, gentlemen o' the jury shows this year Delgada, shot this Ray Ives, and that with him as ac-ce-sorries ter that thar crime was this Joe Kamus and this hyear Injun Kinistino, who war thar at the time, of the firin' o' the shot that killed Ray Ives—but say fellers git in yer verdict. Make it all reg'lar like. I want ter git home ter dinner soon as I can."

"Hang them!"

The verdict came again from each lusty, brawny man.

All knew that it was time that this gang of gunmen, these unspeakable outlaws should be "cleaned up:" the territory was not safe with them above ground.

Polacca Delgada knew his fate.

His dark face was ghastly, his hand shook, and he sat chewing great chunks of tobacco as he awaited the verdict which he well knew would mean his death.

But so far he did not break down.

Joe Kamus, an Indian to the core, was not so outwardly nervous.

A sneer on his face seemed to show that he looked with disdain upon his captors.

Kinistino, with an Indian's acquiescence at fate was chanting the death song of the Nunatalmute tribe.

He knew.

And he was getting ready for death in his savage way; the way that his treacherous ancestors had done for un-numbered centuries.

An Indian is never anything but an Indian.

Judge Lynch arose.

"Gentlemen of the jury," he said solemnly. "Accordin' to this verdict here in this year court rendered this year day, I order that them three outlaws, Polacca Delgada, Joe Kamus, and Kinistino, be taken from hyear and thet they be hanged by the neck until they are dead."

The hand of the law had been placed at last on the shoulders of the three men of blood; their outlaw careers were drawing to a close.

The condemned men were marched to a canyon about a mile from Fort Rupert.

It bore the name of Murderer's Gulch.

There a gallows was hastily built.

When he saw the men raising the cross beam to be nailed to the two uprights, Delgada broke down.

"Save me, gentlemen," he cried, "Don't hang me. I'll leave the territory. I will confess. I will do anything to save my life."

But the men around him were not there to listen to confessions.

The outlaw's chance to leave the territory had been long since lost. He should have gone when he was free; not before Judge Lynch had grasped him.

In the North-West Judge Lynch never lets a murderer escape as some Judges seem to do in other parts of the world.

There is always a corpse after the verdict of Judge Lynch is in.

But in spite of tears, prayers, entreaties, Polacca Delgada was dragged to the scaffold.

"Mercy! Mer—!" he shrieked.

The rope stopped his wild appeals for the mercy he had denied to many a victim.

Even in his death struggles the outlaw tried to untwine the rope from his neck, with his futile fingers.

"The sentence of Judge Lynch has been carried out upon the body of Polacca Delgada," said the deep voice of Buck Cooper, who was filling the position of Sheriff. "Bring forward the bandit Joe Kamus. And may God have mercy on his soul!"

The dead body of the chief of the dreaded outlaws, a mere clod, a mass of flesh, bones, and now no longer a breathing, living man, was taken down from the scaffold and laid at one side.

Joe Kamus, second in command in the dread band, took the place of his leader on the scaffold.

The Indian's face bore its habitual sneer.

His swarthy skin had not paled in the slightest degree.

For a few seconds he glanced over the sea of heads that were about the scaffold.

Then he spoke.

His quiet voice could be heard distinctly for not a word was lost in the death-like hush that came over the crowd.

"There isn't much use of my confessing to you that you got us all right," said the outlaw. "We killed Ray Ives. We have been outlaws for years. You are doing your duty in hanging us——"

The speaker stopped a moment.

Into his eyes there shot the gleaming cold light that comes always in the eyes of the true outlaw, the tiger-love for blood.

"I wish I was free for one moment," Kamus went on, "with my good gun in my hands."

A long sobbing gasp went around the crowd.

They knew what it would have meant had Joe Kamus his freedom and a gun!

There would have been many dead ere the outlaw died.

Kamus shrugged his shoulders.

"But now——"

He made an eloquent gesture.

"Put the rope around my neck," Kamus said to Buck Cooper. "I'm ready to cash in seeing as there's no escape."

Buck placed the rope around the outlaw's neck.

Kamus looked around again.

"Gentlemen," he said in a loud tone. "Seeing as I've never been hanged before, do I jump off or do you pull me up?"

"By Gosh!" hooted Buck Cooper. "We had ter pull Pol Delgada up, but you are a man, if you are an outlaw. I'm Sheriff here. I'll give you your choice Kamus."

Kamus smiled.

"I'll jump," he shouted. "No man then can say he helped string up Joe Kamus, the outlaw."

With a great laugh of hatred Joe Kamus leaped into the great unknown world of the hereafter.

Kinistino, the Indian, was the next and last one of the outlaws to suffer death.

"Come, Kinistino," yelled Buck Cooper. "But one left now boys. Then we have cleaned up the brains of the Delgada gang."

Kinistino lay quite still.

There was a smile on his Indian face.

Then Buck Cooper turned the outlaw over.

He had cheated the scaffold by killing himself.

He had opened a vein in his arm with his keen pen-knife.

"There is no refuge from confession but in suicide," quoted Cooper "'and suicide is confession.'"

The crowd of executioners then quickly vanished, leaving a few men to bury the outlaws in unmarked graves, sprinkled in quick-lime.

"Well boys," quoth Buck Cooper, "that's the end of the Polacca Delgada gang of outlaws. I feel that dirty as has been this job, yet it means cleaner time fer us all in this here territory. Human life will be safe, and property will be safe fer awhile now them bandits is under ground. The rest o' the Delgada gang won't need no hangin'; this hint is enough fer them."

Buck Cooper spoke truly.

The atmosphere was punctured by the wild leaps every member of the Delgada gang, who heard the news of the execution of the chiefs of their band by Judge Lynch, were seen to make, in their wild endeavor to get out of the far North-West.

CHAPTER XIII.

"MILLIONS, MY BOY, DON'T LEAVE ONE GEM."

"What are we going to do with that chest of riches?"

"'Give them away to the poor."

"Well I'm pretty poor myself."

"That's the poor I'm thinking of giving the gems to."

"What poor?"

"Us—we are the poorest people I know of that need first aid to the poverty-stricken."

Stage Coach Bill and Paul Cassel thus cheerily talked while they looked through the loot of the great pirate chief, Philip Petrowna.

"Say, Paul," added Bill, "this here pirate, Petrowna, had Pol Delgada stopped in the first round in gittin' to the good stuff, didn't he?"

"You bet."

"Why I don't think that Delgada got all his dirty life as much as there is here."

Bill held up a diamond as big as a roc's egg as he spoke.

"That's right. Say, we never can even guess what all this stuff is worth."

"Why not?"

"Because half of it seems to be uncut gems."

"Well there's one thing sticks out in my mind."

"What is it?"

"That there's never going to be a time in my life hereafter, that I've got to worry about when the rent is due."

"And you can look the butcher firmly in the eye when you meet him."

"Betcher life. Say, Paul anyway, there's millions, my boy, don't leave one gem?"

"Leave a gem? Watch me! Why man I'd carry that chest out on my back if it wasn't for the coach here that would carry it better."

"Ain't that human nature? Put a man up agin' a lot of gold or gems and he ain't moderate. He don't say, 'Now my pockets, and my hands, and my clothes generally will hold enough of this stuff to last me in moderation all my life.' No, not he! He goes out to corral the whole boodle. An' he breaks his back in a gettin' out the pelf and can't never set up and enjoy it any more, on account of his broken back."

Paul nodded.

"Right you are Bill. Old Human Nature is the same always. It wants the whole hog, or it won't take any part of the pig."

"In this case, you load the diamonds under the seat where I set, boy, and you load extra shot into that danged sawed-off gun o' yourn. If you meet the shadow o' a bandit or a ghost of a pirate, you get busy, see?"

"Sure. You know Bill, we have yet to get out of this place. The skeleton back there, my man, shows what it would mean to not get out."

Bill whistled.

"When I came in here I forgot to get a blue-print showing me how to get out. You see I came in here sudden and onexpected like, and forgot anything but that I was about three jumps ahead of Pol Delgada."

Paul winked.

"Feeling this way, I can't help you get out of here. I'm a millionaire, but my millions ain't no more good to me than they'd be to a nigger in Central Africa, where there's no place to spend any money, and no money to spend if there was a place."

"Well I have something of an idea about this series of wonderful caverns down here."

"Tell it."

"Seems to me that this place is near Great Bear Lake. You know the lake itself isn't far from here. Pol Delgada and his gang are always called *The Bandits of Great Bear Lake.*"

"Well, what's that to do with getting out?"

"Every thing."

"Don't savez."

"Don't suppose you do, so listen."

"I'm all ears as the jack-ass said to the robin, who told him he had a scandal to relate to him."

"Well, this place here seems to me to have been a subterraneous outlet once to Great Bear Lake."

"Yes."

"Well, the lake used to flow down here but by some volcanic upheaval was probably diverted to its present bed."

"What do I care about volcanos. I want to get outen here."

"I know. So do I for that matter. But what I want to show you is all dependent upon the conditions I am citing."

"Well push onward."

"Granting that we are under Great Bear Lake, now we know that then to be a starting point in the figuring of ourselves out of this place."

"Sure."

"Well then we are only to remember that Great Bear Lake runs North and South."

"Yep."

"So that if we go North, for when we entered this series of caves we were on the North shore of Great Bear Lake, we will in due time come near to the North or entrance end of the lake, now won't we?"

"Yes. That's good logic."

"Then if we start to the South we are pretty sure to come out where the South end of the lake is to be found?"

"Surest thing you ever heard."

"Well if there's not some place where the water once flowed out of this under-ground channel at the South, I'm a Dutchman."

Paul cried these words in an attitude that suggested "dispute-me-if-you-dare."

But Stage Coach Bill did not even put up an argument.

"Help me heave up this lot of diamond and emerald and gold plunder," he cried. "We will start South any

old time you figure where the South is situated in this hole. I always loved the South anyway."

Paul grinned.

"Look here, William," he said.

"Huh?"

"Here, I mean."

Stage Coach Bill looked carefully at the bauble Paul held up.

"Shucks, Paul, quit your foolin'," said Bill. "I ain't interested in the watch-chain your holding up."

"It isn't the watch chain I'm calling your attention to Bill."

"What is it then?"

"It's this compass."

"Eh?"

"This compass that I always carry suspended to my watch chain as a charm. It isn't the most accurate compass in the world but Bill, it will tell us where South is."

"Hurrah!" cried Bill.

Paul adjusted his compass.

"There," he cried, "drive down that corridor, along side of those gleaming ghosts."

Through a beautiful long white aisle, where the stalactites made many wonderful figures of startling grace and mystery, the two men rode on the coach, which ran along the firm hard sandy bottom of the caverns, as they passed an endless chain of beautiful caves.

"There must be hundreds of these caverns," cried Paul. "My, if we hadn't happened to have this compass. We would have wandered through cavern after cavern, aimlessly rushing from this corridor to that aisle until we would have laid down to die of starvation—and no one probably would ever have found us."

"How do you suppose that pirate Philip Petrowna knew how to get in and out of the place where we found the loot of his band?"

"He must have had some rough chart. Our finding the gems was entirely due to cold luck. We are going to be equally lucky and get out of this I'm sure."

"Hope so. I'd hate to die here a millionaire and no one know it."

"If you do you'll die in the company of another millionaire and that's a comfort."

"Just my dumb luck to kick when I've got every money reason to want to live just now."

"Ah, Bill, that's the curse gold brings with it. Better honest poverty, your stage-coach, your daily stint of work, and your meager pay than this quest with millions of dollars' worth of property for a chance to spend your cash."

"All right, youngster, old Bill will take a chanst at that, of getting out of here with the gems. Rather stay here and die a millionaire now I have my flippers on the stuff than to go back and regret all my life the leavin' of a fortune behind to save my worthless life."

"Human nature, again, Billy boy."

As they rode along a soft purplish-white tint began to creep into the cavern.

It looked like delicate moss.

And as they turned a corner they came smack upon a blasting stream of day light.

"Whoop!" yelled Stage Coach Bill.

"Wow!" shrieked Paul, "Here's the South end of Great Bear Lake. We are saved. Hurrah!"

CHAPTER XIV.

THE LAST RIDE.

"Now then I want you to tell me of the ghost of your father."

With a shake of his head Karl Thurlaw thus opened a conversation with Minnie Becker, the pretty daughter of Stage Coach Bill.

The couple were standing on the wide veranda of Fort Rupert House, as the home of the young Postmaster at the Fort was called.

His housekeeper, a pleasant face old lady stood behind him as he spoke but tip-toed away smiling.

"Sir, I wish you to understand that *my* father is no Hamlet. *My* father never had a ghost even if Hamlet did."

Karl laughed.

"No, but honest Injun, tell me about the ghost of your dad that I saw at your home, before it was attacked by the late outlaws."

"The late outlaws? What do you mean by that?"

"Well, I should say the defunct outlaws."

"Are they dead?"

"Considerably—at least they are being buried."

Minnie opened her eyes very wide.

"Who are dead?" she asked.

"All three of the outlaws, Polacca Delgada, Joe Kamus, and the Indian, Kinistino."

"Posse get them?"

There was a matter-of-fact tone of the frontier girl as she asked the question.

The execution of three bandits was what she had expected to hear any day that the decent citizens in the territory awoke and claimed their right to stamp out lawlessness and murderous works, along with the outlaw thugs that performed them.

"Yes."

"What next?"

"Judge Lynch."

"Oh. The men were strung up, eh?"

"Yes."

"Good day's work. Hope you were in it. We must keep the territory clear of such gentry as those three assassins, and it will put a stop to the depredations of other gangs of outlaws."

"I fear not. The Delgada gang will flee. But there will be always some thug who wishes to be a bandit, not having brains enough to see that there's riches here for any man, but only the rope, revolver and the knife for the gun-fighting outlaw."

"Well, I'm glad it's all over."

"So am I."

"When are you going to marry me?"

The girl blushed.

"Now you must take that matter up with dad. If he says yes—I —might——"

There was a smothered scream.

But it was drowned in the loud shouts of applause that came floating around the veranda sides to the happy man and woman, who stood listening hand in hand.

Oop! Pop! Oop!

Stage Coach Bill's voice and whip was heard to be urging his fast flying four-in-hand of bronchos.

On the top of the coach yelling like a maniac was Paul Cassel.

"Hooray! Hip! Hip! Hooray!" shrieked Paul. "Bill here we are again. Home again!"

"Betcher life," winked Bill in one sentence. "Wasn't it lucky our escape from them caverns?"

"Wasn't it? And so easy."

"When we saw the light all we had to do was to hustle ahead, and there the road wound around until it stopped at a sort of earth embankment, which we dug through in about an hour."

"Lucky there was a load of shovels and pick-axes sent to the fort as freight from Fort Coppermine, eh?"

"Yes. Luck has stood by me all through this campaign with the outlaws. I wonder where those chaps are?"

"We are in the confines of the fort now. No danger ever again from them."

Paul remembered this remark when he was told later of the lynching of the three outlaws.

"Shall I drive right up to the fort?" asked Bill.

"Sure. I want to turn over this treasure to Karl Thurlaw, as soon as I can."

"Better put that chest o' ourn with them millions of gems in it right into the big safe vault of the Hudson's Bay Company as quickly as you can. We can't afford to lose our newly found millions."

Stage Coach Bill chuckled.

"You darned old miser," roared Paul Cassel. "Now touch up this team. We are in a hurry to get home."

The "team" of four bronchos was accordingly "touched up."

The process seemed to need much snapping and popping of whip and many strange yells from Stage Coach Bill and Paul Cassel.

The noise brought out the entire population of tiny Fort Rupert.

"Coach Day" was an institution in the hamlet.

Still further not a man, woman or child, not even a yellow dog in the hamlet but that had heard discussed the bitter fight that the outlaws were waging against Stage Coach Bill, the luck with which he had avoided their devilish plots, and now that he was back again in Fort Rupert with the outlaws buried in graves their crimes dug for their inert bodies, the population turned out with a will to meet the returned coach driver for Stage Coach Bill was extremely popular in the hamlet.

"Here comes Bill!" cried Buck Cooper. "Hurrah! Good boy, Bill. Got the treasure aboard safe?"

Bill nodded.

Paul flourished his shot gun.

Buck Cooper pulled his big revolver.

"Yip! Yip! Yip!" he shrieked in true cow-boy fashion. "I'm going to tarn loose."

He did turn loose, all right.

His weapon flashed and banged away like a roaring war-ship.

"Judge Lynch" now back to the world under his usual name of "Mexican Bill" Lane, also drew his "weepin" and added to the din.

The example of these two leaders of Fort Rupert's high-brow thought communicated itself to the other members of the male population of the hamlet.

Every man had a gun.

Every man shot one off.

Every boy large enough to have a gun shot one off also.

And all the women, who didn't carry guns, and all the small boys too small to carry them—and they were pretty small at that—shrieked in unison.

Thus the entry of Stage Coach Bill and Paul Cassel into Fort Rupert in a mild way was quite as effectual as any "triumph" arranged for the vanity of any Roman Emperor.

"Well Bill," cried Karl Thurlaw, when that worthy jumped from his coach to fold his lovely daughter in his arms.

"Hello Karl," cried Bill.

"Say dad," shyly put in Minnie, "just shake hands here with Mr. Karl Thurlaw, your future son-in-law."

"What?"

Bill's face grew red. His eyes were like young onions.

"You see, good folks," he remarked, "I ain't myself to-day. I have escaped a lot of outlaws. I have become a millionaire, and I've got a son-in-law a comin' to me all in one day. Seems to me I'm getting my honors rather fast."

"Dad," cried Minnie. "The outlaws have been judged and executed by Judge Lynch."

"Well, he is smart at judgin' when he gets goin'. I didn't think he would get going ever at Pol Delgada and his gang."

Then Bill told his story of the millions of gems that he and Paul had discovered.

"Congratulations!" shouted Karl. "Isn't it great! Say Minnie, how about my luck in marrying an heiress?"

"Well, when you decided to marry me you thought I was only a poor stage-coach driver's daughter so no one can accuse you of being a fortune hunter," returned the girl with a charming smile.

"But how about your father's ghost?" added Karl.

"Ghost!" cried Paul. "Bill's a pretty healthy ghost."

Stage Coach Bill and Minnie exchanged glances.

"Shall I tell them?" flashed Minnie to her father.

Bill nodded.

"You see, Karl and Paul, it all came about this way," went on the girl. "Father and I knew that those dreadful outlaws were after us. We knew that they had sworn to kill us. So, we fixed up a figure that looked like father and we reckoned on the superstition that lays deep in every Indian heart and in every outlaw heart to scare off the outlaws."

"But I saw your dad's face," ventured Karl.

"That was a wax face made in exact likeness of dad."

"But he was smoking a pipe?"

"That was a real pipe but the smoke was all in your imagination."

"Then all I saw was a painted, wigged, wax figure of your dad?" earnestly said Karl.

"That was all there was of the ghost of dad. It worked too. Do you remember how the outlaws fled before it when I put it up in the window just as they charged?"

"You mean when I was up in that stuffy garret, and the outlaws charged but ran away almost immediately after yelling 'ghost'?" queried Karl.

Minnie merrily nodded.

"Oh, ho! Why didn't you tell me of your fake ghost then?"

"It isn't wise, Karl, to tell all you know."

The party laughed at this remark.

"Put that treasure and those gems in the vault for safe keeping," then cried Bill. "Say is supper ready? I'm starved. This millionaire, Bill Becker, and his other millionaire friend, Paul Cassel, will now enter the palatial dining room. *Stage Coach Bill has taken his last ride.*"

"And this millionaire will take his fortune right by its arm, for in my estimation, I, Karl Thurlaw, after all have secured the most valuable thing in all this story of millions; a good girl's affection."

"You always did say the sweetest things," cried Minnie as she and Karl Thurlaw followed the two millionaires, her father, Stage Coach Bill and Paul Cassel into the brilliantly lighted dining-room of Fort Rupert, where a great table groaned with good things to eat.

THE END.

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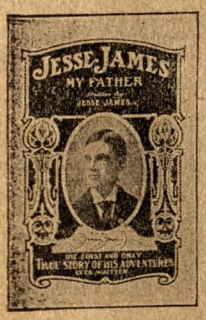

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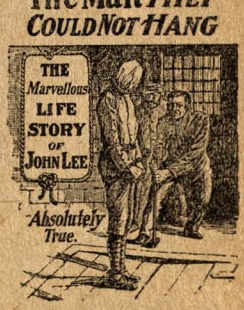

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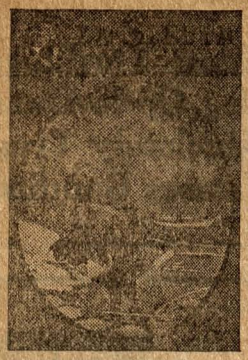

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