



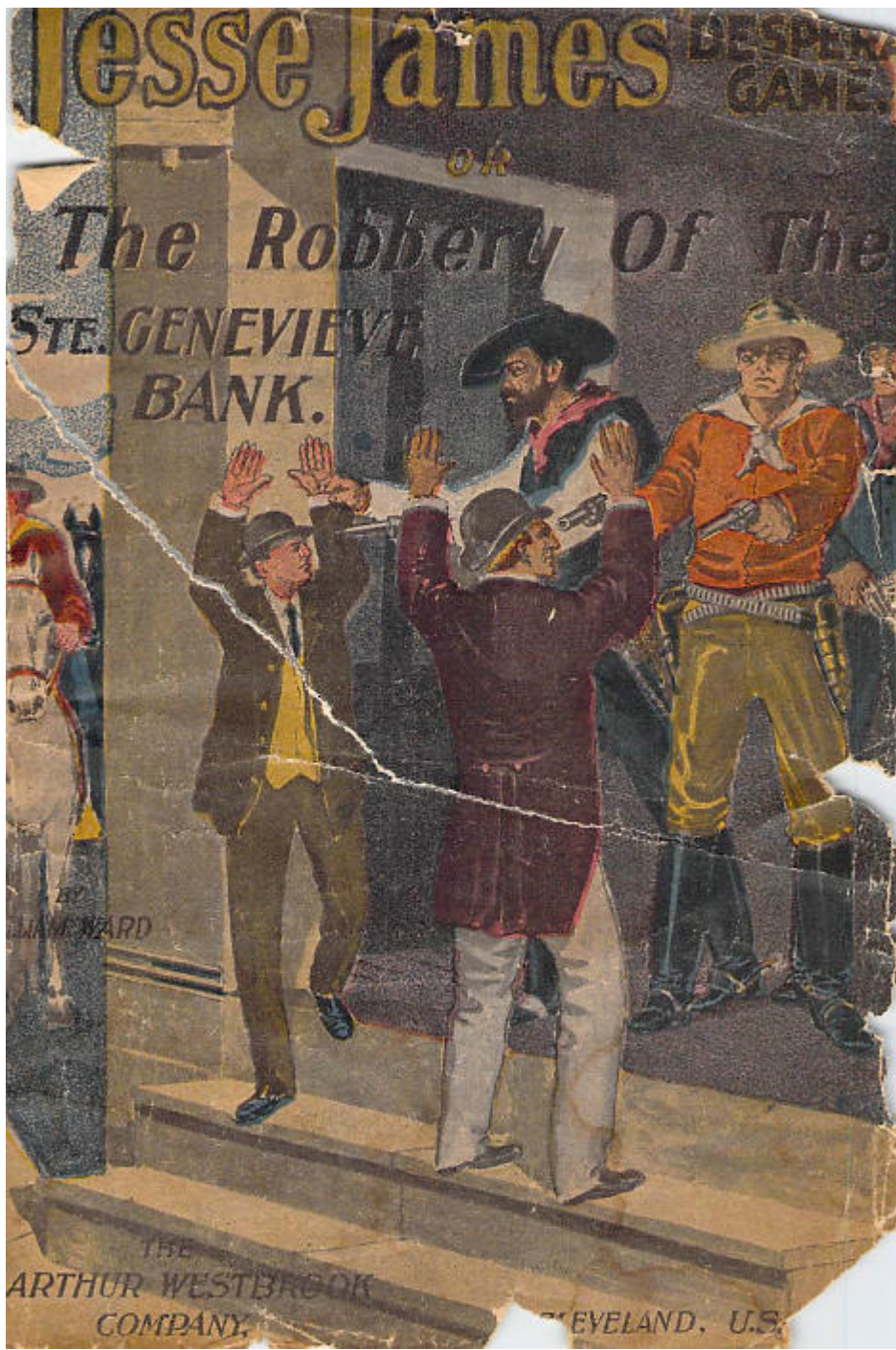
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With dare-devil recklessness the notorious bandit eludes a posse of detectives and, assisted by only three companions, steals \$10,000.



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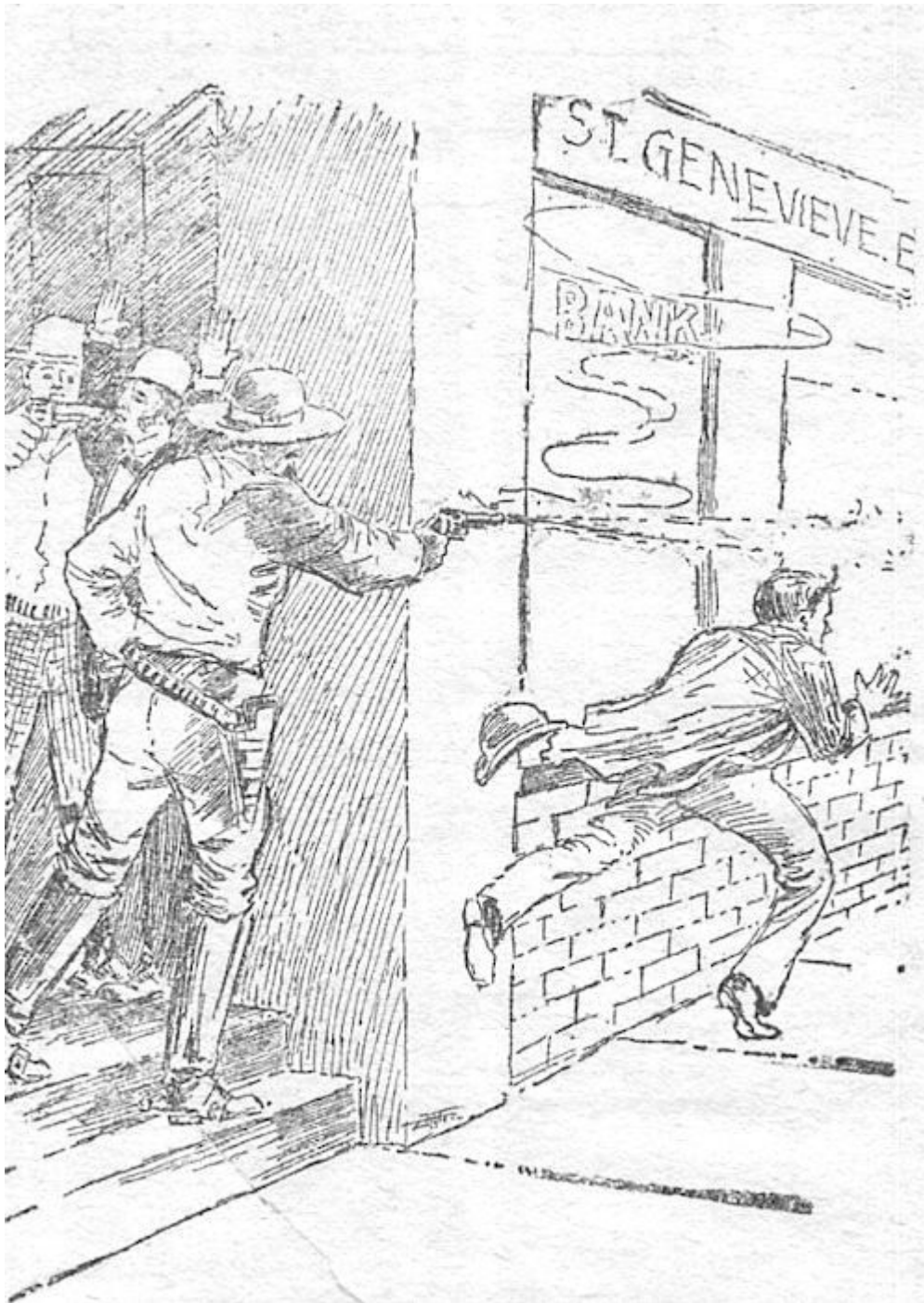
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THE HOLD-UP AT THE STE. GENEVIEVE BANK.

Jesse James' Desperate Game

OR

THE ROBBERY OF THE STE. GENEVIEVE BANK

With dare-devil recklessness the notorious bandit eludes a posse of
detectives and, assisted by only three companions, steals \$10,000.

BY
WILLIAM WARD

Adventure Series No. 18

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Jesse James' Desperate Game

OR

The Robbery of the Ste. Genevieve Bank.

Chapter I.

A THRILLING RESCUE.

The population of Monegaw Springs was transitory. Situated in the central part of St. Clair county, in Missouri, the town was famed far and wide for the medicinal qualities of its waters. And when the war of the rebellion came to an end and the countryfolk could once more live without fear of a raid by Federal troops or guerrillas, they flocked thither from far and near.

No luxurious hotels were there, as in present-day health resorts, with maws agape for money of their patrons; those who were early on the ground secured board and lodging in the few houses of the hamlet, while those who arrived later were forced to be satisfied with tents.

But the life of the place was not impaired by the lack of accommodations or conveniences. Rather was it enhanced.

Convention was thrown to the winds. Campers, whose tents were near together, spoke without waiting the formality of introductions; mothers exchanged confidences, knitting and gossiping; fathers swapped yarns and played cards together, while their children, both young and grown-up, indulged in the pastimes of wide awake, red-blooded youth. About the Springs all sorts and conditions of men were to be seen; army officers, still believing in the subtle powers of their faded uniforms, vied with civilians for the favour of the vivacious, rosy-cheeked belles; men who lived by their wits hobnobbed with men who possessed substantial incomes; churchmen rubbed elbows with criminals—and never a question was asked.

Not a night passed without some excitement; often the silence that fell only with the early hours of the morning was rent by the crack of a pistol; men, their blood heated with copious draughts of the "stuff that cheers," wrangled over the merits of their horses or families, settling the former by quickly organized races and the latter by recourse to fists or shooting-irons.

For those who wished to toy with fortune, there were always games of poker and faro in the shanties that served as saloons; and far from these bacchanalian orgies, on canvasses spread over the fragrant needles in the pine groves, through whose boughs the moonlight glinted, youths and maidens danced to the lively melodies of banjos and guitars, played by grinning darkies.

Now and then, the rivals for the favour of some sloe-eyed beauty clashed, there were a few excited, whispered words, giving and accepting a challenge for a fight to the death on the morrow, and the frolic was resumed.

And from sunrise to sunrise, the Springs throbbed with the emotions and passions of the shifting, cosmopolitan throng.

In this Mecca of license uncontrolled, the world-famous Jesse James had bidden his men join him. In the complexities of its life, he knew they would be able to forget the godless act of the killing of Daniel Askew, a murder that baffled police and public alike. Secure in its very openness, they could laugh at the futile attempts to corral those members of their gang who had raided the town of Chouteau, in the Indian Territory, so effectually freeing the desperadoes from suspicion of complicity in the act of cowardly assassination.

And little did the patrons of the Springs think, as they watched the arrival, one beautiful spring afternoon, of three well-dressed, bearded men, whose dash and debonair appearance sent many a maiden's heart aflutter, that they were gazing upon three of the most desperate men the world has ever produced, for whose corpses, even, the police and railroad officials would pay thousands upon thousands of dollars.

For Jesse had not ridden to Monegaw Springs with Clell Miller and his brother, Frank, in the garb of woolen shirts, "chaps," high boots, black slouch hats, with knives and guns bristling from their belts, in which alone the public fancy seemed able to picture them, but clad in the height of the fashion of the day.

Guns they had—and cartridges and knives—but so cleverly were they carried in their pockets that the presence of the death-dealing weapons would escape even the most suspicious eye.

Reining in their mettlesome thoroughbreds, the outlaws dismounted in front of one of the stores and passed inside to purchase tents and such other things as they might need.

Those who had seen them eagerly asked who the new arrivals were, attracted by their confident bearing and well put-up figures.

But none could answer and when they reappeared from the store, they were followed by a curious coterie of idlers who watched them select a place and pitch their tents, at the extreme southwestern corner of the grove that had been set apart for the campers.

This very necessary work completed, the bandits had remounted and were riding through the camp on a tour of reconnaissance to learn if any of their enemies, the detectives and

sheriffs, were among the sojourners at the Springs when they were startled by a frenzied cry of warning that swelled to a hoarse roar as throat after throat took it up.

Turning in their saddles as they heard the inarticulate shouts, the three desperadoes dropped their hands to the pockets in which they carried their shooting-irons.

With hundreds of man-hunters on their trail, whenever a hue and cry was raised, the outlaws naturally believed themselves to be the cause.

"It may be Cole and Texas in from Chouteau with a pack of devils at their heels," exclaimed Clell in a low voice.

But the next instant their apprehension was banished.

With frantic haste, the throng that had raised the alarm parted, shoving and pushing those behind them in their effort to break through to places of safety.

And tearing along the lane thus opened, the outlaws beheld a runaway horse, nostrils distended, eyes wild, ears laid back, a young girl clinging with the desperation of terror to its mane.

Maddened by the shouts of the people, the animal leaped from side to side of its narrow path.

"Pull your foot out of the stirrup and slide off!" cried a score of voices.

And as the silence of fear fell over the throng, the terrified voice of the girl responded:

"I can't! It's caught!"

With a gasp of horror, the crowd heard.

Several men leaped for the bridle, but the infuriated horse dodged them or shook them off.

Straight for the gate of a corral, less than two hundred yards away, was the animal rushing.

The opening had been cut in a solid wall and the lintel was so low that it would barely clear the saddle pommel.

If the horse were not stopped, it would dash inside.

Unable to release her foot, the girl would be knocked from her seat and horribly crushed, if her leg were not torn from her body.

"Shut the gate!" yelled somebody.

A score of men sprang forward, but the distance was too great.

With a groan the spectators realized it. Women turned away their heads that they might not see the awful sight, men nerved themselves for the crash of the impact.

Suddenly through the lane dashed a young fellow, his coarse, sensual face white with terror.

Seeing him, the crowd took hope.

"Ride, Consollas! Hurry, man! Use your spurs! Head him off!" rose from an hundred throats.

Yet it did not take the anxious men and women long to realize that the youth was too scared to be of service in the emergency and once again despair seized them.

Engrossed in following the runaway, the people had not seen three horsemen riding like the wind toward the helpless girl and it was not till a sharp command, "make way!" rang in their ears that they were aware of their existence, turning to see the handsome, bearded strangers, whose advent had aroused so much speculation, bearing down on them.

Their surprise did not paralyze their limbs, however, and, as if by magic, the dense throng parted and Jesse, Clell and Frank dashed between them.

Fully an eighth of a mile away had the outlaws been when the shouts had come to them, but the instant they had discovered their cause, they raced to the rescue.

Skilled in the art of short dashes, they worked their thoroughbreds to wonderful speed.

Not fifty yards from the corral was the runaway when the bandits swept between the spectators. And all of twenty yards behind were they.

Their quick eyes noted the horrible fate that awaited the girl should they fail to help her.

Caring not who might see, Jesse jerked his bowie-knife from its place of concealment and jabbed it into the flank of his mount.

Unaccustomed to such treatment and terrified by the pain, the animal leaped forward.

The burst of speed won cheers from the crowd, while cries of "go it! good man!" broke from many lips.

Emulating their leader, Clell and Frank, knifed their horses.

As though the runaway were standing still did the outlaws gain on it.

Hearing the shouts and the thunder of hoofs behind her, the girl looked back.

"Keep your nerve! We'll save you!" yelled the famous desperado while the crowd howled its approval.

The boy who had been addressed as Consollas was far behind. Less than twenty yards away was the corral and two yards separated the bandits from the runaway.

Yet though they rode for all they knew, only inches, it seemed, could they cut this distance down.

With wicked jabs, the knives laid bare the flesh of the thoroughbreds.

Neck and neck the three horses were running.

"Spread out!" snapped Jesse. "When we get to the horse, reach over and cut the saddle-girth, Clell. Frank, you ride him off. Wake up! We mustn't fail now we're so near!"

In amazement, the spectators beheld the three riders separate, two bearing to the right, the brown bearded man to the left.

"They're gaining! They're gaining!" shouted the crowd, then held their breath the next instant.

As though they were pieces of a machine, worked by the same power, Clell and his leader closed in simultaneously on both sides of the runaway.

"Now!" cried the latter.

As they dropped their reins, Jesse leaned far from his saddle and seized the terror-paralyzed girl about the waist.

Failing to comprehend the movement men and women stared, believing that precious moments were being lost, then some of them roared:

"Ride the horse off! Her foot's caught in the stirrup!"

But at the very instant, Clell slashed with all his might at the saddle-girth.

True was his hand. The leather parted and before the spectators could realize how it happened, the great outlaw jerked the girl, the saddle hanging to her foot, from her horse, swayed a moment as he regained his balance, then swung her in front of him.

Salvos of applause broke from the throng of men and women.

But the spectacular work was not yet ended.

So close were the outlaws to the corral when the sensational rescue was effected that it seemed that they must crash into it.

Once more the crowd grew silent as it realized the new danger.

Yet even as the hush fell, Frank swerved his horse, riding straight at Clell's.

There was the rubbing of saddle leather, an awful instant of suspense as the colliding animals struggled to keep their feet, then both, weathering the impact, bore down onto Jesse and his burden.

"They'll go down! They'll be crushed!" gasped the spectators.

But the famous desperado had anticipated the danger.

The instant he had set the girl in front of him, he had pulled on his reins with his right hand, changing the course of his mount to such an extent that when the other two rode into him, his horse only turned more quickly, and shoulder to shoulder the three animals galloped along the side of the enclosure.

Yet so narrow was the margin by which the rescue was accomplished that as they swept up the length of the corral, Frank was forced to throw his left leg over the pommel of his saddle to keep it from being scraped and crushed against the rough boards.

A trice the crowd stood motionless, then with thunderous cheers swarmed round the outlaws and the girl they had rescued.

Chapter II.

CONSOLLAS' ACCUSATION.

Bringing his thoroughbred to a stop as quickly as he could, Jesse shook his feet clear of the stirrups, swung one leg over the saddle pommel and slid to the ground, placing the limp form of the girl tenderly on the grass.

In the belief that nothing could save her, the maiden had closed her eyes to shut out the low gate that seemed to grin at her like some hideous monster gloating over its victim. As she felt the strong arm clasp her waist, then lift her in the air, the relief was more than her overwrought nerves could bear and she had fainted.

Kneeling beside her, the great outlaw wet his kerchief with brandy from his flask, moistened her lips and bathed her forehead.

"Don't let them crowd round her," he said to his companions as, looking up, he caught sight of the excited crowd of men and women surging toward them.

In obedience, Clell and Frank faced about, shouting:

"Keep back! Keep back! The girl wants air!"

But as well might they have commanded the sun to stand still for all the effect their words had.

"*Make 'em stand back!*" snapped the bandit-chief.

The meaning of his tone was obvious and, whipping out their guns, the two desperadoes pointed them menacingly at the mob, crying:

"The girl *must* have air! Stop where you are!"

Their respect for the business-like muzzles of the four guns, backed by men whose faces were so calm and determined, was greater than their curiosity and the crowd paused in their tracks.

One man, stout of figure, well-groomed and well-fed, with every appearance of affluence, did not stop, however.

Ominously, the hammers of the pistols clicked.

"Don't shoot! Don't shoot! I'm her father, Forman A. Rozier, of Ste. Genevieve!" he gasped.

Recognizing his right, Clell and Frank bade him approach.

Arrived at the girl's side, the father dropped to his knees, seized her in his arms and clutched her to his breast.

"Sally, my child, my darling! Are you hurt?" he asked, holding back her head and looking at her ashen cheeks.

"I think she's only swooned," replied her rescuer. "If you'll force some of this brandy down her throat, I fancy it'll revive her," and he extended his flask.

But as her parent reached out his hand to take it, the girl opened her eyes.

"Daddy! Daddy!" she murmured as she beheld her father's face, then, turning her head, asked: "Where is the gentleman who saved my life?"

Before he could reply, however, his daughter had freed herself from his embrace and, springing lightly to her feet, rushed to Jesse, taking both his hands in hers, impulsively, while she exclaimed:

"How can I *ever* thank you? If it hadn't been for you—ugh!" and she shuddered, turning her head away that she might not see the low lintelled gate that had come so near being her execution block.

As the bandit-chieftain had felt the touch of her hands, a thrill ran through him and looking closely at her, he discovered that her face was of unusual beauty.

Her skin was as the olive, the bloom of the rose glowed in her cheeks; deep and limpid, black bottomless wells of love-joy were her eyes; her lips seemed crimson Cupid's bows and in unruly ringlets, her wavy, raven black hair fell about her full throat and shell-like ears.

"It is *I* who should thank you for allowing me to save your life," returned Jesse in a low voice, his eyes uttering the admiration he would not let his tongue.

Blushing at what she read in them, the girl's embarrassment was relieved by her father, who approached, holding out his hand to the outlaw.

"Whatever reward you wish for the great service you have rendered me in snatching my child from death, you may ask. I am Forman A. Rozier, president of the Savings Association Bank of Ste. Genevieve, and I can afford to be gen—"

But the insulting sentence was never finished.

Drawing himself proudly to his full stature, the world-famous desperado's eyes shone with the look his men had learned to fear and his voice was cold and incisive as he snapped:

"Sirrah!"

While his daughter gasped, in amazement:

"Father!"

Staring from one to another, the banker, who worshipped money and felt that his offer of reward was more than magnanimous, flushed hotly, mumbling:

"No offence was intended. Come Sally, your mother will be frantic till she sees you," and turned on his heel.

"*Please* don't feel hurt," whispered the girl, "*he* thinks money is everything and he meant it to thank you."

"Don't men—" began Jesse.

But the girl interrupted:

"When we see each other again I can thank you better—I'm so upset now."

Noting that his daughter was not at his side, Mr. Rozier called, peremptorily:

"Come this instant, Sally!"

Grabbing the skirt of her riding-habit, the girl breathed an *au revoir* to the bandit-chieftain and ran to her father.

As he followed her lithesome figure with his eyes, Jesse beheld the pompous banker scowling at him, his expression indicating that he was angry at the very natural gratitude his daughter evinced toward her handsome rescuer.

And as he returned the stare, with interest, there flashed through Jesse's mind an idea that would give him ample revenge for the public insult.

By his arrogance, Banker Rozier had made a terrible enemy.

But though the contretemps would be food delicious for the gossip-mongers who had witnessed it, there were men and women in the crowd who were ashamed of the humiliating return for an act so brave, and, in the endeavour to wipe out the unpleasant memory, they surged about the three outlaws, expressing their admiration of their bravery and congratulating them upon their horsemanship.

Stung to the quick by the undeserved treatment, however, the bandits replied only in monosyllables, devoting their attention to staunching the flow of blood from the gashes they had inflicted on their horses.

"We'll lead them to our tent," declared the great outlaw, "we can't attend to them properly here." And quickly the heroes took their departure.

Their advances repulsed, the spectators fell to discussing the incident when suddenly they remembered that they had not learned the strangers' names.

Quickly were husbands, brothers and sons commissioned to learn them and eagerly they set out to the errand.

Arriving at the bandits' tents, they assisted in caring for the thoroughbreds, adroitly interspersing their aid with questions to which Jesse replied, goodnaturedly, endowing

Clell with the alias of Hal Prentiss, Frank with Sam Sloan and himself with Tom Howard, volunteering that they were miners who had struck it rich in Colorado and were on their way to New York to raise more capital to purchase some valuable ore lands.

Like wild-fire the news was spread through the Springs and before evening the three desperadoes were surrounded with the glamour of fabulous wealth, in addition to their bravery.

One there was, however, among those who heard the imaginative rumors who gnashed his teeth—the coarse, sensual-faced boy who had been hailed by the crowd as Consollas when he had made his futile attempt to overtake the runaway horse.

Only son of one of the shopkeepers at the Springs, the youth had taken advantage of a business acquaintance between his father and Banker Rozier to secure an introduction to the exquisite Sally—and with him to see had been to love.

Morning, noon and night he pressed his suit, impervious to hints and snubs alike.

In his turgid brain he had conceived the notion that he would marry the beauty and when he suggested the plan to his father, the elder Consollas, keenly alive to the benefits that would accrue from such an alliance with a family both wealthy and of established social position, bade him godspeed, offering to help him in any way that lay in his power.

Sally loathed the man's repulsive appearance, only forcing herself to treat the fellow, whom she dubbed "the toad," civilly because her father had ordered her to do so to protect his business relations.

As her train of admirers increased day by day, Consollas became sulky and morose, his churlishness casting a damper on the mirth of the young people. But the lad continued to haunt the dainty creature, seldom uttering a word, content to devour her with his eyes.

Finding it impossible to drive the boor away, the coterie of young folks finally accepted his presence as a necessary evil and ignored him altogether—a course that was much more to the liking of the dull-witted youth than the thrusts and jests he had been too slow to parry or return.

When the alarm had been raised, young Consollas' pony was tied to the rail in front of his father's store.

Immediately upon learning its cause, the latter had whispered eagerly to his son:

"Lively, Fred, onto your horse and stop the runaway! You'll never have another such opportunity! You'll save her life, boy, and she'll be grateful."

Slow of comprehension usually, in this instance the fellow was quick to see the point and vaulted into the saddle—with what result the reader already knows.

As he beheld the girl snatched from a terrible death by the hands of another, a great rage burned in his heart. In his ears, the words of his father, "you'll save her life and she'll be grateful" kept ringing. But instead of being grateful to him she would be grateful to the handsome stranger and his jealousy pictured the rest.

No incident of the scene between the rescued girl, her father and the rescuers had escaped his eye. As he heard the banker's offer and the stranger's retort, a malignant grin overspread his ugly countenance, only to disappear the next instant at the expression on Sally's face as she ran to join her father.

With a savage oath, Consollas wheeled his pony, rowelling the animal viciously with his spurs, and dashed off to the store.

But his father had witnessed the abortive attempt of his son and when the latter burst into his private office, he checked his wild words, waving him to a chair.

"It's too bad, Fred, you didn't do better," he began, but the lad blurted:

"Too bad? I'll be the laughing stock of the Springs and it'll be your fault because you told me to get on my pony. The people have gone crazy over those strangers."

Surprised at the vicious ring in his son's voice, the elder Consollas watched him a few minutes before continuing:

"What I was going to say was that while it was too bad you couldn't have saved the girl yourself, we can take the wind out of those men's sails."

"How?" snapped the fellow, his dull eyes brightening.

"Just close the transom over my door and I'll tell you. That's it, now draw your chair up closer to mine. What I'm going to say is for your ears alone."

Wondering what scheme had been evolved in his father's brain, the youth obeyed.

"Did you notice anything about the horse that brown bearded man rode?" whispered the storekeeper.

"No," returned Fred, more mystified than ever.

"Where are your eyes, boy? *That horse is the living image of my roan mare, Betty!*"

As the elder Consollas breathed the significant words, he scanned the face of his son for some gleam of intelligence.

Several moments the youth blinked his eyes, then slowly they shone with the light of understanding and excitedly he exclaimed:

"They stole the horse, you mean?"

"Good boy. We'll raise the cry that my mare has disappeared. While you're riding to the pasture to drive Betty into the woods, I'll drop down to the tent where the strangers are, look at their ponies and swear that the roan is mine.

"The people will do the rest. There's only one end for horse thieves and that's the hangman's noose.

"The rescue will be forgotten when your rival is dangling from a tree."

The plot met with the unqualified approval of the lad and his toad-like body quivered with excitement.

"Now be off to the pasture," commanded his father. And as Fred galloped away to drive the mare into the woods, the storekeeper picked up his hat and set forth to attend to his part of the dirty business.

Around the unsuspecting outlaws was an admiring gallery of men and women, the latter predominating.

Forcing his way through them till he reached the horses, the elder Consollas approached Jesse's, eyeing the splendid creature critically.

Several acquaintances spoke to him, but without noticing them, he opened the mare's mouth and looked at her teeth.

Summoning an angry expression, the storekeeper turned to the bandits and demanded:

"Where did you get that roan?"

Taken aback by the abruptness of the question, the great outlaw stared at his interrogator blankly.

"Afraid to tell, eh?" snarled the storekeeper. "I don't wonder."

Amazed at the words, three or four of the onlookers asked:

"What's the trouble? Anything wrong?"

"*Wrong?* Well, rather. That's my roan mare, Betty! She was stolen from my pasture last night!"

Chapter III.

THE PLOT PROVES A BOOMERANG.

No greater consternation could have been caused among the witnesses to the accusation had a bomb exploded in their midst.

Aghast at the seriousness of the charge, the men and women fell back, glancing from the outlaws to Consollas. Then angry murmurs rose from their throats and several of the men stepped forward, menacingly, while from those at the rear of the crowd broke the cry:

"Horse thieves! Horse thieves!"

In a twinkling, the shout was taken up by those passing till it echoed from one end of the campground to the other.

Seizing ropes and guns, men rushed from their tents, eager to take a hand in the execution of the miscreants.

And in less time than it takes to tell it, the outlaws were surrounded by a hostile, threatening mob.

Realizing that the moments were crucial, Jesse sprang at his accuser, clutching him by the throat and shook him as a terrier does a rat.

"You lie—and you know you lie!" he thundered. "That mare was bought in Kansas City and I can prove it.

"What your reason is for accusing me, I don't know. But I *do* know you've got to tell these people you lied when you said the mare was yours! Now speak up lively!" And with a parting shake, he released Consollas' throat that he might obey.

But instead, the moment the storekeeper felt the terrible grip about his neck relax, he yelled:

"Help! Help! It's my m—"

With a look of terrible fury as he heard the words, the famous desperado's powerful right shot out, driving the false utterance back into Consollas' mouth as it struck him full in the face, and sent him to the ground like a log.

"Seize him! Seize him!" yelled the mob, surging forward as the merchant fell.

But the great outlaw was ready for them.

Whipping out his trusty "Colts," he cried:

"The first man who steps into this clearing about me will pay for his rashness with his life!"

The situation was grave.

The storekeeper had a reputation for probity and many an one of the sojourners at the Springs knew that he possessed a roan mare.

Furthermore, no one knew the three strangers, whence they came or what was their business, save the meagre information vouchsafed by the bandit-chieftain, and horse-thieves were not confined to any one class. The fact that the outlaws were armed with knives as well as shooting-irons and were so perfectly at ease in their use had not failed to impress the patrons of the resort and free were their comments.

On the other hand, the men bore themselves with confidence and assurance, characteristics that the popular mind did not associate with horse-thieves. Their clothes were of the finest quality, and they had the appearance of men of means.

But Consollas' accusation had been direct and unequivocal.

In the crowd he had many friends and these, when they saw the merchant felled, clamoured for the capture of the outlaws.

Yet no one was eager to make the attempt for Frank and Clell had placed themselves back to back against their leader, keeping the mob at bay in the other directions.

Smiling at the respect for their weapons, Jesse determined to make the most of his enemy's silence.

"Do we look like men who would steal horses?" he demanded, appealing to the crowd. "We can buy all we want and—"

"Prove it!" cried a voice.

"With pleasure," laughed the great outlaw and slipping one of his revolvers in a pocket he drew from another a fat roll of bills and peeled off several of large denomination, waving them about him. "And my friends are equally well supplied."

Acting on the hint, his two companions displayed their money.

The effect was instantaneous.

It seemed preposterous that men so amply supplied with funds would run the risk incurred in stealing horses and several in the crowd were not slow to say so.

Quick to take advantage of the reaction of feeling, Jesse continued:

"Do we look like fools enough to steal a horse belonging to an inhabitant of Monegaw Springs and then pitch our tent right here where any who pass can see our animals?"

"No, you don't," chorused several.

"I hope not," grinned the famous desperado. "Another point, you'll notice this man, whoever he is—"

"Consollas," prompted one of the crowd.

"This Consollas only laid claim to *one* of our horses," continued the bandit-chieftain. "If *I* appropriated one of his ponies, why didn't my companions help themselves?"

The argument caught the people and, to make his vindication convincing, Jesse cried:

"If this man *has* lost a horse by thieves, I'm willing to lead a posse to hunt them."

"Good man! I'll go with you! That's the stuff! You're all right!" came from many throats, and leaving the still unconscious storekeeper where he lay, the crowd trooped off, the bandits at their head, to secure their mounts.

Unwilling to use their thoroughbreds in the condition in which they were after the harsh treatment to which they had been subjected, the three desperadoes asked for other horses and the very men who had been most eager to hang them were the most importunate in urging them to accept some of theirs.

"You won't accuse us of stealing 'em if we ride 'em, will you?" grinned Frank.

The thrust took with the crowd, putting them in rare good humour and, laughing and chatting, they rode forth to hunt the thieves.

By tacit agreement, the leadership of the posse was yielded to the world-famous desperado.

"Which way do we take to get to Consollas' farms?" he asked as they gained the highway.

"To the right," came the answer while others protested that it would be only a waste of time to go there.

But Jesse insisted that he wished to question the farm hands to get a description of the thieves and to learn the time when the mare had been missed and where she was when last seen and the others withdrew their objections.

Setting a smart pace, the bandit-chieftain, his pals on each side, and the posse were "burning up" the road when they beheld a cloud of dust ahead of them from which, as it drew nearer, emerged a horseman.

"Halt! We'll see who is it who's in such a hurry," commanded the great outlaw.

Drawing rein, the posse spread out across the highway, eagerly watching the approaching rider.

Suddenly one of the men in front ejaculated:

"Why, it's Fred Consollas!"

Apparently at the same time, the son of the storekeeper had recognized the form of his hated rival for he pulled his pony to its haunches, then whirled it and started back over the way he had come.

The action mystified the members of the posse and they shouted to the fellow to stop.

But the only effect of their words was to make Fred ride the faster.

"There's some crooked business about this," snapped Clell.

Impressed with the idea, Jesse rose in his stirrups and fired a bullet over the youth's head, shouting:

"If you don't stop, the next one will knock you out of your saddle."

A craven at heart, Fred Consollas thought more of saving his skin than of the danger of the discovery of the plot and quickly reined in.

"What are you doing here?" demanded the leader of the bandits as he and his posse overtook the fear-trembling lad.

His voice was stern and he bit off his words ominously.

Vainly searching the faces surrounding him, Fred stammered:

"I was I-looking for the mare."

"The roan your father said was stolen?" pursued the bandit-chieftain.

"U-huh."

"Then why were you going back to the Springs?"

"To see father."

"Did you learn anything about the thieves?"

"No."

"What's the use of wasting time over the boy?" snapped Frank. "He doesn't look as though he knew enough to tell whether the mare was stolen or not. Let him go on his way."

"Not much," returned Jesse, noting the look of relief that had appeared in Fred's eyes at his brother's words. "We'll take him with us."

"Take your place beside me, boy. All ready, men."

Three or four miles the posse rode in silence, then, rounding a turn in the highway, they caught sight of a farmhouse and buildings which the supposed miners were told were Consollas'.

Increasing their speed, the posse galloped along when all at once a shrill neigh sounded from the woods beside them and directly a horse broke through the underbrush and stopped with its head over the fence.

"That's the roan! That's Consollas' mare!" cried several voices at once.

Amazed, the great outlaw ordered a halt, then demanded:

"Are you sure?"

"Positive. I'd know her anywhere," chorused several of the surprised members of the posse.

For a moment Jesse looked at the animal intently. In general form and colour she resembled his own, back at the camp-ground, but none of the fine points of the thoroughbred did she possess.

Turning full upon the ashen-hued youth, the world-famous bandit snarled, with a blood-curdling oath:

"Is that the mare your father accused me of stealing?"

Too terrified at the demeanor of the wrathful man before him to realize the pitfall in the question, Consollas blurted:

"Yes."

A buzz of amazed exchange of opinions had broken from the men in the party at the unexpected appearance of the roan, but at Jesse's question they grew silent.

"When did you leave the Springs?"

"About an hour and a half ago."

"Then you couldn't have heard your father claim my mare as his."

The utterance produced a sensation among the posse. But ere they could recover from it, the inquisitor roared:

"If you weren't at the camp ground, how did you know your father accused me?"

"I didn't," growled the boy.

"But you just said you did. When I asked you if that mare by the fence was the one your father charged me with stealing, you said 'yes.' *Now, how did you know if you weren't at the camp ground?*"

Realizing when it was too late, that he had been trapped, the fellow maintained a sullen silence.

"Answer me!" bellowed Jesse.

But the lad only cowered in his saddle.

"There's dirty work somewhere," declared Jesse, addressing his companions, "and I intend to find out *where*."

"Now, sirrah, will you answer me?" and he thrust the muzzle of his six-shooter against the youth's head.

"Don't kill him! He's foolish!" cried a voice.

"Then let him answer," retorted the great outlaw. "No one can accuse me of being a horse thief and get away with it when the stolen nag is in her own pasture all the time."

"There's something at the bottom of all this and I intend to find it out!"

Acquiescing in the justice of Jesse's stand, the others stared at the quaking boy.

"You'd best make a clean breast of it," counselled the bandit-chieftain, "you won't get any aid from these gentlemen."

"Just tell me how you knew I was to be accused."

An instant the helpless conspirator said nothing.

With a wink at the members of the posse, Jesse clicked the hammer of his "Colt."

"Spare me! Spare me!" groaned Fred. "I'll tell. I'll tell." And hurriedly he blurted the details of the plot to discredit the rescuers.

Incredulous, the men stared at one another as the story was told.

Unwilling to believe that the merchant would stoop to such an act, they examined the boy with a merciless fire of cross-questions.

But the lad doggedly maintained he was telling the truth and when at last the members of the posse were reluctantly forced to believe, their anger at the dastardly plot knew no bounds.

"Lynch him! Shoot him!" rang from many a throat as the men urged their horses forward that they might lay hands on the wretch.

Enraged as he was, the great bandit cried:

"Steady, men, steady! The lad isn't so much to blame as his father."

Realizing the truth of the words, the thief-hunters dropped back, waiting for their orders, muttering angry threats against the plotters.

Strange indeed was the caprice of fate that had made the man he had striven to wrong so grievously his defender, yet such had the brown bearded desperado become.

Terrified by the black looks about him, Fred moved closer to his protector's side.

After a short interval, during which Jesse had consulted with Clell and Frank, the men grew restless, demanding that the lad be given to them.

The world-famous desperado, however, had other plans.

"Some of you ride back to the Springs and get Consollas. Get some tar and feathers and a big kettle at the same time.

"We'll give the precious pair a lesson they won't forget right away."

The suggestion met with noisy approval and quickly a score or more of the posse dashed off to find the merchant and the stuff necessary for the torture while the others set about erecting a tripod for the kettle and gathering firewood.

Consollas' plot had proved a boomerang.

Chapter IV.

YOUNG ROZIER MAKES A STARTLING DISCOVERY.

As the members of the posse who had been sent back to the Springs neared the village the clouds of dust kicked up by their horses were seen.

"Here they come! They've got the thieves!" shouted several of the more excitable loungers.

From lip to lip, the word was passed along that the posse was returning with the miscreants who had stolen Consollas' roan and when the horsemen drew rein in front of the merchant's store they were greeted by every man, woman and child who was able to get to the square, on which all the shops were located.

Throwing their reins over their ponies' heads, the volunteers leaped to the ground and ran into Consollas' place of business, never pausing to answer the bombardment of questions hurled at them by the crowd when it was discovered that only part of the posse had returned and without any prisoners.

But the merchant was not in his shop.

"Where's your boss?" snapped one of the men of the frightened clerks who were gathered in one corner, watching the search of the intruders.

"He hasn't been here for two hours or more," responded one of them.

"Don't lie!"

"That's the solemn truth," asserted another. "He has not come back since he left just after Fred."

Satisfied that the employes were not deceiving them, the spokesman of the posse ordered four of his men to remain in the store, against the return of the elder Consollas, telling the others to follow him to the tent where the merchant had made his accusation and had been knocked unconscious by Jesse's terrific blow.

Mystified by the actions of the men who had set out to apprehend the supposed horse thieves, the crowd surged about them as they emerged from the store, demanding enlightenment.

An effective barrier between the posse and their ponies, they resisted the attempts of the men to force their way through.

Flushing with anger, fearing that should he tell them the facts some of the shopkeeper's friends might warn him, giving him the chance to escape, the spokesman consulted with his fellows before replying:

"When we get Consollas we'll tell you everything. The sooner we lay hands on him, the sooner you'll know."

By making the one contingent upon the other, the leader of the posse had still further roused the curiosity of the sojourners at the Springs.

And the shrewdness of the move was quickly apparent.

"Everybody hunt for Consollas," cried a voice from the crowd.

Instantly men, women and children turned and scurried in all directions, bent on locating the storekeeper while the horsemen vaulted into their saddles and dashed for the campground.

But when they arrived at the spot where they had left the unconscious merchant he was nowhere to be seen.

With ejaculations of disappointment they began to question the occupants of the nearby tents.

One after another declared that they had not seen Consollas, explaining that they had either followed the crowd to see the posse start and had only just returned or had been too busy to notice.

In despair, the searchers gave up the task, going back to where they had left their mounts when a little girl ran up.

"I seen the man," she piped in her excited, childish voice, "he got up jes' as the mens rode away. He looked roun' 's though he was lost an' rubbed his head an' felt of his nose. He said an awful word an' got up. I was standin' watchin' him an' when he seen me, he asked what had happened. When I tole him he said some more bad words an' runned into the woods."

By the time the little girl had finished her story she was the centre of an excited throng.

"That settles all chance of getting the sneak for the present," declared the leader of the squad of man-hunters. "All we can do is to wait till he comes back—if he ever does, which I doubt."

"What's the trouble? Tell us what he did!" clamoured the crowd.

"You might as well, Jeff," chorused several of the posse.

Mounting his horse, that he might the better be heard, the man quickly narrated the meeting with the vanished merchant's son, his actions, the appearance of the roan and Fred's confession.

As each amazing statement in the story was made, the people expressed their opinions in no uncertain terms, breaking out into cries for vengeance at its completion.

"Let's sack the shop!" suggested some one.

Eagerly was the idea seized and with angry murmurings, like the growls of some gigantic beast of prey enraged, the crowd started toward the store.

"Hold on!" yelled the spokesman. "Don't do that! We're going to tar and feather Fred and old Consollas—if we can catch him! If you want to do anything, get feathers. We'll take out the tar and a cauldron."

Few of the men and women had ever witnessed such a punishment, and, inspired with the desire to be present, they rushed in all directions, some to get horses and teams to carry them to where the strangers with their prisoner were waiting, others to get feathers, but most of them to strike a short cut to the pasture.

Only one of the Roziers, the son, who bore the same name as his father, a chap about twenty years of age, swelled with the wealth and prestige of his family, had been in the crowd.

As it dispersed, he rushed to acquaint the others with the startling information of the plot and the penalty that was to be inflicted.

With characteristic assumption of prescience, the banker declared that he had always suspected there was a yellow streak in the merchant and set out to find a lawyer that he

might attach the goods in the store immediately to protect some notes of Consollas that his bank held.

But to the dainty Sally, the punishment seemed cruel and unmerited.

"I'm going out to see if I can't save Fred," she announced, springing to her feet and arranging the habit she still wore, after which she gave a few deft touches to her hair.

"You'll do nothing of the sort," contradicted her mother, sharply. "The idea of the presumptuous clout thinking you would marry him!" And she gave a sniff more eloquent than words.

"That's just why I'm going. The poor fellow isn't all there in his head or he would never have thought of such a thing and it isn't right to do such dreadful things to a half-witted creature."

Mrs. Rozier, however, was firm in her refusal to allow her daughter to interfere in the business and her stand was endorsed by her son who protested that Fred had brought ridicule enough on the family without Sally's adding to it by interceding for him.

"Then if I can't go, I'll send a note to Mr. Howard. I don't think he'll refuse my request," she flashed, and, before either her mother or brother could prevent, darted from the house which they had rented in a location close to the square.

"You must go after her, Forman. I never heard of such a thing. If you don't catch her, ride out to where this horrible business is to take place. You can stand beside Mr. Howard and if anyone tries to give him Sally's note you can take it, telling him that it was written in a burst of impulse and that now Sally regrets it and wishes it back unread."

Bidding his mother not to worry, that he would intercept the missive, young Rozier ran to the barn to get his pony and was soon riding hard in the direction of the farm.

Rushing into a store, his sister had begged some paper, ink and an envelope and hurriedly wrote:

"My dear Mr. Howard:

A man so brave as you can afford to be generous to his enemies. Fred is only half-witted and isn't as much to blame as his father.

Won't you *please*, at the request of the girl whose life you saved, spare the poor fellow the awful punishment?

I'll do anything you ask in return.

Anxiously and gratefully,
Sally Rozier."

Little realizing the rash length to which her sympathetic nature had led her, the girl sealed the envelope, addressed it and darting onto the street, gave it to a man she knew, who was passing, with the request that he give it with his own hands as soon as possible to Mr. Thomas Howard.

Surprised at the entreaty, her acquaintance, nevertheless, promised to deliver it and urged his horse into a fast gallop.

Intent upon recovering the note, young Rozier asked every one whom he overtook if they bore a letter from his sister to Mr. Howard, apparently forgetting that by so doing he was but increasing the scandal he wished to avoid by making the existence of such a communication known.

Those to whom he put the surprising question could truthfully deny all knowledge of the note, which they did, for the messenger was behind the banker's son, and as he rode on, they discussed the latest development with their companions with great gusto.

Arrived at the scene of preparations, young Rozier quickly tied his pony and then took his place by the side of the world-famous outlaw masquerading as Tom Howard.

The members of the posse had returned with the cauldron and tar and each arrival seemed to be provided with a bag of feathers, so rapidly did the pile accumulate.

Standing by the tripod from which the kettle was suspended, Jesse and Frank superintended the melting of the tar while Clell stood guard over the sobbing victim in some underbrush where the bandit-chieftain had sent him that he might be spared the stares and comments of the crowd.

As those whom the banker's son had asked about the note arrived, they quickly informed the others already on the ground, embellishing the news as they saw fit and soon everyone was aware that some communication of importance was on the way concerning Fred Consollas.

Finding the time required for the heating of the tar irksome, the crowd fell to speculating on the contents of the mysterious letter. Some declared it was a plea for mercy, others that it advocated more drastic punishment. The adherents of the former idea offered to back their opinions with coin of the realm and those of the latter persuasion snapped up the money, announcing their willingness to wager more that, if it should prove to be a request for clemency, Howard would not heed it.

So excited did the factions become that they failed to see the messenger approach the outlaw and the banker's son and it was not till they heard the angry voice of the latter exclaim:

"As a member of the family I demand that note before you open it!" that they knew the document had arrived.

Instantly a hush fell on the assemblage and they craned their necks the better to hear and see all that transpired.

Jesse, Frank, the messenger and young Rozier were beside the smoking kettle.

The bearer of the note held it firmly in his hand, resisting the effort of the writer's brother to secure it.

"It was given to me to deliver to Mr. Howard and I shall do so unless he orders otherwise," declared the former.

"Tell him to give it to me," cried young Rozier. "Can't you understand it will com—"

"You'll do more harm by talking than by letting me receive it," interrupted the bandit-chieftain. "You've got everybody listening and watching now."

"I don't care. I *will* have that letter!" stormed the banker's son.

Angered at the tone of the remonstrant, Jesse quickly put an end to the wrangle by seizing him by the shoulder and sending him spinning into the bushes while with his other hand he took the note from the messenger.

Murmurs of excitement rose from the crowd but they died away as the famous desperado tore open the flap of the envelope.

Taking out the enclosure, Jesse read it carefully, refolded it, put it back in the envelope and placed both in the inside pocket of his waistcoat.

Breathlessly the throng watched Frank approach.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Nothing," returned his brother, with a slight quiver of his left eyelid that only Frank could see.

Young Rozier had been within earshot and as the stranger had made his reply, he shook with anger.

He had thought only of the ridicule to which his family would be subjected because of his sister's intercession, but that her appeal should be treated so lightly wounded his pride.

But this pride was destined to a more severe shock when Jesse called:

"Bring up Consollas. The tar's ready!"

"You mean that *you* refuse a Rozier's request?" snarled the fellow, his rage overcoming his discretion.

"Keep your tongue in your head or I'll give you a coat of feathers, too," snapped the great outlaw. And the expression on his face told the banker's son that he meant what he said and the youth subsided.

In such a state of terror that he could not walk, the victim was dragged to the cauldron by Clell.

The sharp breathing of the spectators proved intense excitement.

Looking over the crowd, Jesse frowned.

"There are so many women 'round that we can't strip him," he exclaimed as he took Consollas by the collar of his coat and swung him to the side of the kettle. "We'll give him a thin coat next his skin and lay it on thick over his clothes. Loosen 'em, Sam; Hal, get some feathers."

Quickly were his commands obeyed.

When all was ready, the world famous desperado, masquerading as Tom Howard, mine owner, reached out his right hand and lifted a ladle full of the redolent tar from the cauldron.

Barely melted, it was not hot enough to more than sting as it touched the skin.

But as Fred saw the black liquid thrust toward his shirt whose collar Clell held open, his terror lent him the strength of a wild man.

Twisting and squirming, he made a grab for Jesse's beard.

With a furious oath, the great outlaw let go the lad's collar and struck him a blow in the face that sent him sprawling into the embers of the fire beneath the kettle.

A gasp of dismay broke from the crowd.

But in a trice Jesse had his victim out of the coals and again brought the ladle to his neck.

Fearing a repetition of his struggle, Frank held him tight.

Quickly the bandit-chieftain poured the molten tar inside his clothes, repeating the movement three times.

Yelling at the top of his lungs, Consollas writhed.

"Close his mouth with feathers, then jam some down into the tar," snapped Jesse.

Quickly, Clell obeyed.

Fred's contortions redoubled. The soft fluffy things got down his throat and he spluttered frantically.

Again was the ladle thrust into the cauldron and the contents thrown on his clothes.

The writhings of the luckless youth amused the crowd and they howled and chuckled with glee.

"Duck him in the kettle," cried a score of voices.

Acting on the suggestion, the famous desperado lifted his victim from the ground and doused him in the tar.

But as he was thrust down into the cauldron, Consollas made a ferocious grab for his tormentor.

And this time his fingers clutched the hair in Jesse's false beard.

Releasing his hold of his coat, the bandit-chieftain seized his wrists in such a terrible grip, boring his spike like thumbs between the cords, that the lad let go with a shriek of agony.

The wires by which the whiskers were attached had held yet the sudden yank had drawn the beard from Jesse's face for an instant before he could bend forward and end the

strain.

"A—ha!" exclaimed a voice, amazed and gloating, behind him.

Only Frank and Clell were close to him and the ejaculation made Jesse start.

With a suppressed oath, he whirled to see who had uttered it.

But no one was in sight.

Yet had the outlaws rushed into the bushes, they would have seen young Rozier stealthily working his way through them till he reached the spot where he had left his pony, then hastily untie it, mount and dash away for the Springs.

Chapter V.

GATHERING CLOUDS.

More wrought up by the incident than he cared to let even Frank and Clell see, Jesse cursed savagely to himself as he turned his attention again to his victim in the tar kettle.

The buzz that rose from the assemblage told him that the men and women were aware that something had happened though their ignorance of exactly what was disclosed by cries of "Did he hurt you? Did he knife you?" that came from all directions.

"Thank goodness, they're not next," breathed Clell while his chief, straightening as though a weight had been lifted from his shoulders, responded: "He only pulled out a few whiskers."

Assured that their hero had received no injury, the crowd considered the matter a huge joke and laughed boisterously, offering all sorts of advice for the restoration of the beard.

But the great outlaw was in no mood for jesting. That someone had discovered that his whiskers were false the exclamation disclosed and the consequences might be far-reaching, especially as both he and his pals were ignorant of who had uttered it.

Consollas had ceased to struggle and was watching his tormentors with fascinated eyes.

"Give a hand here, boys," commanded Jesse. "We'll get this business through and go back to camp as soon as we can."

"Dump the feathers in a pile and we'll chuck the runt into them."

Quickly Clell sprang to the heap of bags, emptying them of their contents, while Frank laid hold of one shoulder of Fred's coat.

"Lift," exclaimed the bandit-chieftain.

With all their strength, the two outlaws pulled at the boy. For a moment he did not move, held fast by the cooling tar, then the strain told, and, with a loud sucking noise,

he was hauled from the kettle.

A moment the desperadoes held him in the air that the crowd might see the unfortunate lad.

Covered with the shiny, glistening tar from his neck to the soles of his shoes, with generous daubs on his cheeks and in his hair, his appearance was ludicrous.

Howls of delight broke from the throats of the men and women and even Jesse was forced to smile at the forlorn sight.

"Get a firm hold so we can swing him," he directed his brother then raising his voice, addressed his victim: "I'm sorry we haven't got your father as well as you. Let this be a lesson to you. The next time you think of charging respectable strangers with stealing horses, don't do it. You may not get off so easily."

And while the people laughed at the advice, the great outlaw nodded to Frank, they swung Consollas back and forth several times to gain momentum, then sent him swirling, head over heels, into the stack of feathers.

As the fluffy things closed over him, the crowd cheered, rushing forward to join in the fun of rolling the lad about in them.

Struggling to his feet, Fred screamed and tore at the mass of tar and feathers, looking for all the world like some monster fledgling.

But his breathing spell was short. Grasping him by the heels, the men tumbled him into the heap again, repeating the performance as fast as he could scramble out.

"This'll be a good time to break away," suggested the brother of the bandit-chieftain as he watched the wild frolic.

"Right," returned Jesse and, without attracting attention to themselves, the three outlaws went to their horses, mounted and headed for the Springs.

Riding for a while in silence, when they were out of sight of the pasture Frank demanded:

"What was in that note?"

"A request from Miss Rozier," replied his brother and, taking the note from his pocket, he read it.

"Phew!" ejaculated Clell, "so she's sweet on the booby, eh? I'll bet old Rozier 'll try to make trouble for us for paying no attention to the appeal. He seems to think he's 'it' with a big I."

"Let him if he wants to. I've got a scheme to fix him all right, all right. What's worrying me at the present moment is who the person was who cried out when Consollas pulled my beard."

The matter that was uppermost in the minds of each thus broached, the trio discussed it from all sides. Well were they aware that if the unknown had really noticed the whiskers move from Jesse's face, their positions would be like that of men living among buried

powder mines whose exact location they did not know—an explosion might come at any time.

The opinion that the exclamation was but the utterance of some overwrought spectator was hazarded. But the great outlaw disposed of it by asserting that the tone was that of some enemy gloating over an important discovery and his pals accepted his view.

"I don't like it," declared Frank at last. "If you take my advice, Jess, you'll break camp tonight. We've got trouble enough without exposing ourselves to hidden danger."

"I know that," returned his brother, "but to go away now would be the worst possible move. If the people of the Springs should wake up in the morning and find that we were missing, they would immediately become suspicious. Whoever it was who saw my beard move, if anyone did, would jump to the conclusion that we got frightened. He would spread the story, people would get to discussing it, some one would think of us and before you could say 'Jack Robinson' the alarm would be sent broadcast that Jesse James and his men were in the neighborhood and we'd have another game of hide and seek on our hands which I don't want, at least not till Cole and Texas show up.

"We'll just lay low and keep our ears open. We—"

"By thunder! you don't suppose it was young Rozier, do you?" asked Clell, interrupting his leader as the thought came to him.

"Ha! I hadn't thought of him," returned the bandit-chieftain. "If it were he, we shall know it and mighty soon. Mad as he and his father will be at my refusal to heed the request of Miss Rozier, they'll soon show their hands if they have such information.

"When they do, we can act."

Never had the great outlaw spoken truer words. The banker and his son, their family pride incensed, showed their hands with a vengeance and in a manner so unexpected that when the outlaws woke to the reality, there was time for only the most desperate acts!

But all unconscious of the impending danger, the three desperadoes rode into the campground, made their way to their tent, prepared their supper, ate it and set out to return their borrowed horses.

His mind inflamed with the slight put upon his sister by the ignoring of her intercession on behalf of Fred, young Rozier rode his pony like mad to report the insult to his father that methods might be devised for the atonement.

Clattering into the barn, he left his lather-dripping pony to the care of a groom and burst into the banker's study.

In no pleasant frame of mind at the disappearance of the merchant whose notes he had guaranteed, the president of the savings institution was thrown into a violent rage when his wife had informed him of their daughter's indiscretion.

With instructions that his son be sent to him instantly upon his return, he retired to his den.

As the sound of the rapid hoof-beats rang in the yard, he sprang to his feet and was pacing to and fro, like a caged lion, when the lad entered.

Pausing when the boy closed the door behind him, he snarled:

"Did you get it?"

"No."

So furious at the failure that, for a moment, he could only gurgle, the banker finally blurted:

"Why not?"

Abashed at his father's wrath, the heir to the Rozier wealth shifted uneasily from one foot to the other.

"Speak, you fool!" roared his sire. "I'll wager you botched it—as you do everything. Take that chair by my desk and tell me why you didn't recover the note—if you can." And dropping into his leather-upholstered chair, he glowered at his son.

Stung to the quick by the sneer in his parent's tone, young Rozier forgot his fear of the man staring at him and graphically and concisely related all that had occurred from the time his mother had sent him on his mission.

With beetling brows and frequent outbursts of profanity, the banker listened to the description of the manner in which the supposed miner had refused to give up the note and his pride-wounding comment that its contents were of no importance.

"He thinks the request of a Rozier is 'nothing,' does he?" he snarled. "I'll teach him it is very much of a something."

But his rage was forgotten when his offspring told of Fred's struggle with his tormentor and the startling incident of the beard.

"Are you positive that you saw the whiskers clear of his face?" he demanded. "It might have seemed that way if Consollas pulled out a handful of hairs."

"I'm willing to take my oath that the beard is false, sir," returned the young man.

From under his bushy brows the banker scrutinized his son's face, thrumming on his desk the while.

What he saw made him believe that the boy was telling the truth to the best of his knowledge and at last he observed:

"I'm not surprised. I'm not surprised. I didn't like the man's looks from the first. He was too impudent when I offered to pay him for saving Sally, altogether too impudent."

"Well, you're so much in," rejoined his son, aware of his sire's weakness. "He might have asked you twenty-five thousand for doing it. You're lucky to get off so easy."

"So I am, so I am," repeated the elder man, but his voice sounded far away and from long experience the heir to his property knew that he was thinking deeply.

While the hands of the old-fashioned clock, that stood in one corner of the study, ticked off a quarter of an hour, the two sat in silence.

"Have you heard anything about these men being mine owners on their way to New York to raise capital?" inquired his father at last.

"Yes. They've told all 'round that they struck it rich in Colorado."

"They flashed a big roll of bills?"

"So I hear."

"Then that's why they're disguised," announced the banker with characteristic positiveness. "You mark my words, Forman, if these men have any mines, they obtained them by fraud or perhaps by even killing the rightful owners.

"By bringing them to book, we'll get revenge for their insults to our family."

"How?" inquired the boy, his eyes big with excitement at the prospect of proving the strangers criminals.

But his father was too busy writing to answer him and when he finished, he exclaimed:

"Take this message to the telegraph office and have it rushed. Stay there till you see the operator send it, then come back to me and I'll tell you my plan, for I'm going to use you as the decoy to lure our birds to their destruction."

Afire with curiosity, nevertheless young Rozier knew his father too well to linger and hurried to the telegraph office.

Entering the room, he unfolded the message to read it before giving it to the sender and as his eyes ran through the lines, he quivered with amazement.

"Monegaw Springs, Mo.

Pinkerton Detective Agency,
Kansas City, Mo.

Send six of your best men to me here immediately. Wire train they leave on.

Forman A Rozier."

Obedient to his orders, the young aristocrat waited till the portentous despatch had been sent, then hurried to his home, eager to learn the details of the part he was to play.

Finding his father at supper upon his return, the youth was forced to curb his curiosity as best he might till the meal, which was served with pomp and ceremony ill-befitting the country village in which they were, was at an end.

Sally, her face and eyes showing traces of weeping, though whether from the scolding of her mother or the refusal of "Mr. Howard" to heed her appeal only she could tell, ate in silence, answering the few remarks addressed to her in monosyllables.

Usually the life of elaborate meals, with her caustic comments on her companions and merry prattle, her reticence cast a gloom over the others and they finished the repast as soon as possible.

"Sally is not to go to the hop tonight," declared the banker to his wife as he rose from the table. "If anyone calls to see me, I am engaged, but be sure they leave their names. Come, Forman." And he led the way to his study, locking the doors and stuffing the key holes with paper.

Surprised at the unusual precautions, the boy looked at his father.

"You never can be too careful about the servants," observed the latter, interpreting the unasked question.

"If our talk should be overheard, it might defeat my plans."

If anything were needed to strain the boy's wonder to the breaking point, the mysterious words and actions furnished it and eagerly he demanded:

"Why have you sent for detectives?"

"Ah, you read my message," smiled his father. "Well, I suppose it's natural. I sent for them because I want to use them in the role of friends of mine of great wealth."

"Then where do I come in?"

"Just have patience and I'll tell you," returned the banker, lighting a cigar.

"Now listen attentively. If there's anything that isn't clear to you, ask about it. I've time to explain now, and later I might not have.

"In the morning you are to drop around to this 'Howard's' tent. I don't believe that's his right name, but never mind. You are to forget all unpleasantness and to act as though you wished to be friendly with him.

"During the course of your conversation you can mention that you have heard that he and his companions have some rich mines in Colorado. Ask him where they are and get him to talk about them as much as he will.

"And be sure you remember where he says they are."

"But suppose he won't talk?"

"Then you are to say that you have some money you want to invest and that when you heard he was on his way to New York to raise money to buy some more mines you spoke to me about it and that I told you if Mr. Howard could prove that the mines were all right, show us his maps, and by the way, make a special point of that, I would let you put in your money and might interest some of my friends.

"In this way, we can find out where the supposed mines are and wire out there to see if anyone by the name of Howard is known."

"But if they are swindlers won't they get wise and jump before you can receive a reply?"

"Not if I know it. That's where the detectives will come in.

"When they get here, I shall let it be known that they are capitalists come to arrange some deals with me. When I have laid the case before them, we'll call on this Howard, giving as an excuse my supposed friends' desire to get a chance at the mines.

"When the detectives have seen the strangers, some of them will keep them under surveillance all the time.

"If you do your part and find out where the properties are, one of them will be stationed at the telegraph office to await the reply.

"Should they take alarm and try to get away, it will be evidence that they are guilty of fraud and we'll arrest them on the spot. If the answer proves that the men are what they pretend to be and that the mines really exist, no one will be the wiser. The detectives can say they have decided to put their money nearer home and go back to Kansas City.

"But I don't believe the answer will say they are known!"

"Now, is what you are to do clear in your mind?"

Ere his son could reply, however, there was a knock on the door and a servant announced that a telegram had arrived for Mr. Rozier.

Noiselessly removing the paper from the keyhole and unlocking the door, the banker took the despatch.

"The messenger boy wants to know if there's any answer," said the maid.

Hastily tearing open the envelope, the president of the savings institution glanced at the contents, then replied:

"Tell him 'no.'"

When the retreating footsteps of the servant sounded on the hardwood floor of the hall, the banker turned to his son.

"It's all right. The message says the men will leave tonight and arrive about seven in the morning.

"Now leave me. I have some other matters to attend to. Don't stay out late to-night for you'll need a clear head and all your wits about you in the morning.

"The unmasking of the scoundrels and the revenge for the insults to our family rest practically on you."

Clouds were gathering about the heads of the bandits of which they were unwitting.

Chapter VI.

THE BATTLE OF WITS.

Declining the invitations to tarry a while of the men who had loaned them their ponies, the outlaws were returning to their tents when they heard the whistle of an engine.

"I'll bet that's the evening train," declared Frank. "Let's go down to the station. Cole and Texas ought to be showing up soon and if they should, it might mix things up badly if they started to ask questions in order to find us."

"Good idea," assented his brother and accordingly the trio turned their footsteps toward the station.

The train had brought its usual influx of people come to try the medicinal waters of the Springs and they were thronging into the town, some in carriages, others on foot, as the desperadoes turned into the street that led to the depot.

Walking slowly, they scanned the faces of the new arrivals.

At last the rush was over and the forms of only a few belated stragglers were visible.

"Guess the boys didn't come," observed Clell.

"It doesn't seem—hello, there they are," murmured Jesse hurriedly as he espied the broad shoulders and familiar, swinging gait of his pals.

The recognition had been mutual and quickening their steps, Cole and Texas Jack were soon grasping the hands of their leader.

Without returning their greetings the famous outlaw whispered:

"Cole, your name for the present will be Ted Bemis; Jack, yours will be Ned Haskell." And he told them the aliases with which he had endowed Frank and Clell and himself, adding, "we're miners from Colorado on the way to New York to raise the wind to buy more mines."

These important instructions delivered, the bandit-chieftain, with Cole at his side, led the way back to their tent, avoiding the square.

During the walk, the new arrivals were briefly made aware of the incidents of the day, especially of the exclamation as Jesse's beard was started from its place that caused them so much anxiety.

"At a rough guess, I should say it was young what's-his-name," vouchsafed Cole.

"Young Rozier, you mean," interposed Clell. "That's my idea, too."

"Time will tell," said the bandit-chieftain, irritably, for the annoying lack of positive assurance was getting on his nerves. "But there's one thing sure and that is the sooner we drop the subject the better. Some one may overhear us."

So dark was it as they reached the camp-ground that they easily gained their tent by skirting the park without being seen.

Cole and Texas had taken their supper on the train so there was no need of rekindling a fire and the reunited bandits stretched out on blankets like the spokes of a wheel, their

heads forming the hub that they might be near enough together to converse in low tones.

When the shooting up of Chouteau and their uneventful journey from there to the Springs had been narrated, the men fell to discussing their next move.

That the health resort was none too safe a place for them, all were agreed but that was the only point on which they did agree.

Frank was for striking to the north, into regions unknown to them and where, in consequence, there would be less chance of their being recognized.

To the others, save the world-famous desperado, the suggestion seemed a good one. But Jesse pointed out that their escapes from capture, narrow as many of them had been, were due to the fact that their knowledge of the country in which they had operated was so intimate that they had been able to give their pursuers the slip, an advantage they would forfeit should they strike into a section with whose highways and byways they were unfamiliar.

"Well, what do you propose instead?" demanded his brother, realizing from long association with him, that his opposition to the suggestion was largely because he had already made his plans.

"I'm not ready to say, just yet. It depends upon what to-morrow brings forth," returned Jesse. "There's a rich bank in Ste. Genevieve. This man, Rozier, and his dandified son stick in my crop and I intend to be quits with him before I do anything else."

"I should think you were already," grinned Frank. "You've saved his daughter, called him down for offering you money and refused the girl's request to let her sweetheart off from the tar and feathering.

"I don't know what more you want.

"If you take my advice, you'll let well enough alone and duck out of here while we have the chance. I've got a hunch that if we stay here we're going to get into trouble!"

With a superstitious respect for his brother's intuitions, the great outlaw puffed at his pipe in silence for several minutes.

"I have no right to insist on your remaining here when it's only a private grudge to be settled," said he at last. "If you boys want to go into Nebraska, Iowa or even farther north, you may. But mind you, you are only going to look over the ground, get acquainted with the lay of the land and find out some likely places to raid. *There's to be no work done till I join you.*

"If you can find Bill Chadwell, take him along. He knows every hog path in that country."

With their customary desire to be with their idol day and night when possible, Clell and Cole announced their determination to remain with him.

"I'd like to stay and I'd like to go," observed the man from the Lone Star State. "I've never been so far up north and I've always wanted to."

"Then go, by all means," assented the bandit-chieftain. "I don't want Frank to go alone, in case of accident. But the two of you ought to be able to take care of yourselves."

The matter thus settled, it was decided that the sooner the scouts started the better. And accordingly they saddled two of the horses, leaving the roan which had caused so much trouble, and made ready their clothes.

"Won't it make the people here ask questions if two men come and two go at night?" inquired Cole.

"Oh, I'll take care of that," returned his leader. "You boys keep your wits about you. We'll meet at the cave at Sni Mills in five weeks. Mind the time.

"Good bye and good luck."

And watching his pals until they disappeared in the woods, Jesse pegged down the flap of the tent, buttoned it and prepared for turning in.

At the saloons and in the gambling dens, the bandits were the chief topic of conversation. The wildest fabrications of imagination found ready believers. Some of those more under the influence of liquor than others asserted they had known the rich miners when they were grub-staking and prospecting in the mountains.

Every time the doors of the entrance swung open, an expectant hush fell on the inmates as they turned toward them to see if the arrivals should be the men about whom they were talking, only to be disappointed. Wondrous tales of their drinking and gambling abilities were told by their self-styled acquaintances and confidently these promised their fellows that before the night was out they would see goings on that would open their eyes. But as midnight came without any signs of the subjects of the stories, those who had swallowed the yarns began to grow skeptical and many a fight was the result of their freely expressed doubts.

Those who thronged to the dancing pavilion in the hope that they might see the heroes of the rescue at close range, perhaps even manage to secure them as partners, were likewise disappointed at the failure of the outlaws to show themselves. Many a maiden who had made her toilet with elaborate care that it might attract the attention of the rumor-created millionaires vented her vexation on her favourite swain, causing the latter to leave in a huff. And because of these lover's tiffs, the young people forsook the canvas at an unusually early hour.

But the disappointment of the evening was forgotten in the excitement of the morning!

Early risers had discovered that of the thoroughbreds two were missing.

Jumping to the conclusion that their disappearance was the work of some of Consollas' friends, these men had rushed to Jesse's tent, yelling for him to come out only to have their, as they supposed, startling information driven from their minds by the astonishment at seeing the strange face of Cole and the absence of Frank.

"What's the row?" asked the great outlaw, gazing from one to another of the bewildered faces before him, though he was well aware that the missing thoroughbreds were the cause.

"Y—your horses, t—two of them are g—gone," stammered someone.

"I know it," returned Jesse in a quiet tone.

For a moment, he was tempted to offer no explanation, then deeming it unwise to leave the mystery unsolved, added:

"I was obliged to send out two messengers in the night."

The provokingly matter of fact way in which he made his statement perplexed the hearers all the more.

Only one of his companions of the day before, known to them as Sam Sloan, did they miss, yet he had said that he had despatched two men, and in his place was a new face.

As they tried to reconcile these facts, it suddenly dawned on them that events had transpired during the night of which they were in ignorance. Startled by the thought, with one accord they hurried away without making excuses, eager to circulate the latest news about the interesting strangers.

His face breaking into a smile as he watched their unceremonious departure, the bandit-chieftain chuckled.

"There'll be lots of folks in this burg that won't wait to eat their usual breakfasts in their haste to get to this tent to see for themselves. Cole, I've a good mind to tie you inside and charge admission for a look at you." Then dropping his banter, he continued: "Before they come, and while we have the chance, we'll look to our shooting-irons. There's no telling how far a calf can jump by looking at him, and the situation may get beyond our control at any moment."

Thus recalled to the smoldering volcano of suspicious curiosity on which they were standing, Clell and Cole inspected their guns carefully, put new cartridges in the chambers and a plentiful supply in their pockets.

Scarcely had they completed the task when the first of the inquisitive crowd arrived, their number increasing each minute.

As people watch a sleeping animal in a menagerie, hoping that it may rouse itself and do something, so the throng watched the closed flap of the supposed miners' tent after having hurriedly verified the fact that only the roan mare was left where the three horses had been at twilight.

One family at the resort there was, however, who were ignorant of the change in the personnel of occupiers of the tent—the Roziers.

Agog over the coming of the detectives and the events the day would disclose, the banker and his son had got up at an hour unheard of for them and driven to the station in two carriages that they might get the sleuths from the depot to their house in the least possible time and with the least possible publicity.

Surprise at their appearance was forgotten by the regular hack and 'bus drivers in their eagerness to secure fares from the arrivals by the train and when they did remember them the Rozier turnouts were nowhere to be seen.

With little difficulty, the president of the savings institution had picked out the detectives. Quickly assuring himself that he was right, he bundled them into the carriages and drove them rapidly to his home.

Declining to broach the reason for their summons till the men had breakfasted, the banker took them to his den as soon as the meal was finished.

Employing the same precautions against eavesdroppers that he had when talking with his son, Mr. Rozier motioned them to chairs, offered them cigars and, taking his place at his desk, laid the case before them.

"Allow me to compliment you, sir, on your lucid exposition of the facts," remarked the man in charge of the detectives, patronizingly, as the banker concluded. "If I had been directing the case myself I couldn't have done it better.

"May I suggest that young Mr. Rozier be sent on his mission at once? The sooner he makes a report on the case, the sooner shall we be able to get to work."

Acquiescing readily, the bank president ordered his son to start, with the injunction to keep his head about him.

Astonished at the crowd surrounding his destination so early, young Rozier quickly learned its cause.

Perplexed by the information, he nevertheless elbowed his way to the still closed tent flap.

After vainly trying to attract the attention of the inmates by scratching on the canvas, he called:

"I say, Mr. Howard, let a fellow in, won't you? I'm Rozier, Forman A. Rozier, Jr."

Although the outlaws had heard the first tampering with the tent, they made no move till the request was uttered.

"The fun's begun," breathed Jesse to his chums as he got up from his camp stool and unbuttoned the flap.

Inwardly glad that it was the boy instead of his father against whom he was to match his brains, for that the visit would develop into a battle of wits he had no doubt, the world-famous bandit threw open the canvas, exclaiming blandly:

"This is an unexpected pleasure! Come in, won't you? Because your fellow townsmen persist in treating us as though we were animals on exhibition we are obliged to keep the flap down."

Jumping to the conclusion that his task was already as good as done because of the cordiality of the greeting when he had anticipated a brusqueness that would tax his diplomacy to overcome, the boy entered while his host once more closed and buttoned the canvass.

Yet could he have seen the wink that Jesse sent to his pals from behind his back, the youth would have lost his confidence.

His work which had taken but a few seconds, ended, the great outlaw turned to his guest.

"This is Mr. Prentiss, Mr. Rozier and this is Mr. Bemis," he said introducing Clell and Cole. "Take a camp stool, won't you? I can't offer you a chair."

Now that he was in the presence of the men he hoped to unmask and brand as villains, the banker's son was at a loss how to proceed and sat in embarrassed silence after acknowledging the introductions.

Determined to leave the opening of the conversation to their caller, Jesse held his peace, enjoying the lad's increasing discomfiture.

Taking their cues from their leader, Clell and Cole said nothing.

The pause was awkward and each moment made it more so—for young Rozier.

Try as he would, however, the lad could think of no way to make an opening for his questions. Obviously it would not do to ask about the mines abruptly.

Finally, getting desperate, he took out his cigar case, stammering:

"Have a—have a cigar?"

"No thank you," responded Jesse. "My partner, Mr. Bemis, brought on a supply of a special kind we have made for us from Mexican tobacco and I prefer those." But despite his words, the bandit-chieftain made no move to get any.

Nettled by the refusal, for he realized that it meant that the men before him would accept nothing, not even a smoke, from his hands, the banker's son summoned all his courage and asked:

"Mr. Bemis wasn't here yesterday when you made your wonderful rescue of my sister, was he?"

"No, he was not," returned the great outlaw.

"I heard that some friends of yours had come—and gone—" he emphasized, "in the night. You should have got here before, Mr. Bemis. I never saw such remarkable nerve in my life."

Ere Cole could reply, however, Jesse interposed:

"By the way, your recalling the incident makes me think. Were you anywhere near me when we were punishing Consollas?"

Unable to understand at what his questioner was driving when he knew that the latter must remember the quarrel over his sister's note, young Rozier replied, significantly:

"I was at your elbow."

"Oh, were you? There were so many strange faces I failed to recall yours."

"He's trying to wriggle out of refusing Sally's request by pretending he didn't recognize me," thought the boy to himself and vowing not to let him, he was racking his brains for some way to block him when Jesse continued:

"I'm glad. You may be able to help me.

"While the little wretch was struggling to prevent my putting him in the kettle, I lost a watch charm, a gold nugget, that I wouldn't part with for ten—no, nor for twenty—thousand dollars.

"Did you see any one near me who might have picked it up, unnoticed in the excitement?"

The question was asked quietly, with no unusual emphasis. But it was loaded!

By it the great bandit sought to learn whether or not the banker's son was the person who had uttered the exclamation as his beard was pulled from his face.

Its answer would tell if the call of young Rozier was an act of friendliness or of hostility.

The unsuspecting lad, however, accepted it at its face value, responding:

"There was no one near you but Mr. Sloan and myself. If I had seen it, I should have called your attention to it. Probably it was trampled in the dirt."

As he heard the admission, Jesse's eyes grew steely.

There was no longer any doubt in his mind that his caller had discovered his disguise. Yet it was necessary to learn the plans and purpose of the banker before acting.

The battle of wits was on!

Instinctively the occupants of the tent realized that the apparently harmless question and answer had changed their relations.

Not clever enough to understand that his guns had been spiked, the banker's son, considering it an unhopd-for opportunity, prattled on:

"I suppose it was associated with some of your early diggings."

Unwilling to commit himself, the bandit-chieftain made no comment, an omission, the youth decided, that showed his reluctance to speak about his mines and the more eagerly he determined to make him.

"I hear you have some very valuable mines," he continued, apparently ignoring "Howard's" silence.

"Who told you?" demanded Jesse.

"Oh, it's common talk. They say you're on your way to New York to raise funds to buy others. If you don't mind my saying so, I think you, or your—friends, ought to be more close mouthed. Still, for my part I'm glad you weren't. I've some money to invest and I want to talk about going in with you."

The ice broken, young Rozier no longer found difficulty in playing his part and rattled on glibly.

"I asked father about it and he said he would consider it if he could be convinced that they were good mines. You know there are so many swindling schemes," he added maliciously.

Had he been older or more accustomed to reading men, he would have understood from the expression in the bandit-chieftain's eyes that he had overshot his mark. But in the blind confidence of his youth, he rushed out the questions uppermost in his mind.

"Of course, Mr. Howard, father doesn't mean that your mines aren't all right. What he wants to know is where they are.

"Have you any map of them or, rather, as of course you have one to show in New York, will you let me take it and show it to father?"

"He has some capitalists consulting with him at the house now and he might be able to interest them so that it would not be necessary for you to go to New York for the money."

The purpose to unmask him through the mines he, himself, had said he owned was as clear to the great desperado as though he had been in the banker's study the previous evening when the plan was unfolded.

Remembering the old adage "forewarned is forearmed," Jesse determined to balk the attempt to catch him in the lie, yet not so bluntly as to let the bank president know that he had discovered his purpose.

"I am deeply obliged for your father's interest," he dissembled, "but I do not need any outside assistance. Mr. Bemis brought a gentleman here last night who has arranged for the money and Mr. Sloan went away with him to pass the papers.

"And now, if you'll excuse us, we have some business to discuss. Mr. Prentiss is returning to the mines in a day or so."

Bewildered by the dashing of his hopes, young Rozier allowed himself to be bowed from the tent.

As he stood on the other side of the canvass, Jesse's mocking laugh reached him.

With a start, the banker's son realized that he had done all talking, had shown his hand and learned nothing in return.

Flushing with rage, he scowled blackly at the tent, hissing:

"Wait! Just wait!" and hurried to rejoin his father and the detectives.

Chapter VII.

JESSE BESTS THE DETECTIVES AT THEIR OWN GAME.

Reading failure in the dejected expression on his son's countenance as he entered the study, Mr. Rozier waved his hand toward a chair.

"There's no use telling us you haven't succeeded, your face shows it all too plainly," he said as the boy sat down. "All we want to know is *how* it happened. Begin at the beginning and don't omit anything."

"Not even the slightest detail," added one of the detectives. "What might seem trivial to you may be of the utmost importance to us."

Desirous of getting through the ordeal as soon as possible, young Rozier related all that had occurred from the moment he had reached the crowd about the tent till he had been given his dismissal, even to the words he hurled at the canvas when he heard the gloating laugh.

With many wise nods of their heads and frequent ejaculations, the man-hunters listened to the narrative.

"You're quite right, my boy, only wait," exclaimed their leader as the story was concluded. "They were too smart for you, but they may not get off so easily when we tackle them." Then turning to the bank president he went on:

"You did well, Mr. Rozier, in sending for us. The way this Howard evaded all your son's questions proves that he is a slick article, one that isn't easily to be trapped. However, I think we will succeed in landing him and his two confederates."

Disgusted at the conceit of the man, the bank president waited a few moments to see if the sleuth would suggest any line of action and finding that he did not, snapped:

"That remains to be seen. I've found, in my experience in the world, that it's best to act first and talk afterward.

"What do you propose to do?"

Disconcerted by the putting into words of the very question that was puzzling him, the detective replied:

"Why, go 'round to see them."

"And talk about the mines again, eh?" interrupted Mr. Rozier. "Stuff and nonsense! You might just as well say we're detectives and we're trying to find some grounds for arresting you."

"Well, what do *you* suggest?" asked the man, nettled at the speech and manner of the banker.

With the burden of the responsibility for the success or failure of their purpose thus shifted to his shoulders, Mr. Rozier thrummed on his desk, scowling.

"I should say the thing for you to do was to mingle with the crowd that's watching them, if there is any now, so that if they come out you can shadow them, that's the word you detectives use, isn't it? If they try to get away, stop them."

"How? We've no right to interfere with a man's movements unless we can make some specific charge against him. If we did, he'd have an action at law against us. They're not vagrants because they have money and if we should arrest them as suspicious characters what could we prove?"

"Could you get at them, or Howard at any rate, for wearing false whiskers?" inquired young Rozier.

"There's no law against that, of which I'm aware," qualified the man-hunter, "but you've given me an idea.

"We might hire some tough to pick a row with them and snatch off the beard."

"After the experience with young Consollas I fancy no one could get near enough to them," observed the banker.

"True," admitted the detective, reluctantly. Then his face brightened:

"You don't suppose your daughter could cozen Howard into talking about his mines, do you?"

His face livid with rage, the president of the savings institution brought his fist down on his desk with a bang, thundering:

"No sir, I don't! And what's more, Miss Rozier is not to be brought into our conversation again, just understand that. The quicker you do the better. If you can't devise any plan of getting around these men by yourselves or with my son's or my assistance just say so and I'll pay your bill and you can go back to Kansas City."

Alarmed at the fervor of the outburst, the man-hunter set himself about making reparation for his unlucky suggestion and finally succeeded in pacifying the enraged banker.

But when this had been accomplished, they were no nearer the solution of their problem than before.

One by one, various plans were proposed, discussed and rejected.

"There's one thing we can do," remarked a sleuth who had taken no previous part in the debate.

Expectantly the others looked at him.

"Out with it, man!" commanded the banker. "If you've got an idea, for goodness' sake let's hear it."

"What I was going to say was that we could wait till night and when they are asleep go through their clothes and luggage."

"But they may leave the Springs before dark or just after," objected Forman, Jr.

The new line of thought roused by the proposition, however, bore fruit.

"I have it!" exclaimed the banker, all of a tremble. "We'll drug 'em! I'll send 'round a couple of bottles of doctored wine. If they're miners, they drink—it's a safe bet they do, anyway. They'll take the stuff and then when they're under, you men can go into the tent and ransack it to your hearts' content."

"But they won't accept anything coming from us," protested his namesake. "If they wouldn't take a cigar from me, they won't a bottle of wine from you."

The objection was easily overridden, however, by the suggestion that the gift could be sent anonymously, with a note simply saying that it was from a friend.

This point decided, there only remained the procuring of the drug with which to doctor the wine.

In utter ignorance of what to use, the banker inquired of the detectives.

The question caused an argument among them as to the most efficacious kind of dope, the decision finally falling upon chloral as the one that would act upon the victim the quickest and the most powerfully.

Realizing that it would be no easy matter to obtain the drug, Mr. Rozier announced his willingness to get it and went to the apothecary shop. Yet before he secured it, he was obliged to use all the influence of his wealth and position. But at last, upon his solemn assurance that it was to be used for no improper purpose, the pharmacist gave some of the poison to him and he hurried back to his home.

Ordering two bottles of some rare old Madeira to be brought from his wine cellar, the banker and the man-hunters set about putting in the drug as soon as they were placed upon the desk by the servant.

Yet the task was no easy one. Should the recipients of the gift discover that the corks had been tampered with, they would, of course, become suspicious of them instantly.

With much care and many expletives, the elder Rozier finally succeeded in pushing to one side, unbroken, the age-rusted wires that held the corks intact and gradually worked the stoppers out.

This done, the requisite number of drops were put in each bottle, the corks were driven back in and the wires readjusted in their proper places.

The dust and cobwebs, so dear to the eye of the connoisseur of old vintages, had been sadly brushed off and torn in the operation, however.

After vainly trying to attach substitutes, the difficulty was finally solved by wiping them all off entirely.

When the bottles had been wrapped in heavy paper, one of the man-hunters addressed the package to "Mr. Thomas Howard, with the best wishes of an admirer."

Satisfied with their work, it was decided that the banker's son should accompany one of the detectives to the tent of their intended victims, while the others followed at a distance that would not attract attention, and that when they reached their destination, young Rozier should conceal himself, allowing the sleuth to deliver the package alone. In

the event of the absence of the miners, the package was to be put inside the tent and the detective was to find some place from which he could watch their return.

Confident of their ultimate success, the conspirators set out.

Had they had any inkling that the men they planned to trap were the terrible outlaws who had played so fast and loose with them in Kansas City, when they escaped from their clutches with the daughter of Banker Ormsby, their assurance would doubtless have been less great.

But in blissful ignorance of the fact, they descended upon the tent.

In the time consumed by these preparations the outlaws, themselves, had not been idle.

As soon as their caller had taken his departure, they put their heads together to decide upon their best move.

All doubt as to who had seen the incident of the beard-snatching removed by young Rozier's own words, and his purpose in calling evident in his questions regarding the mines, even Jesse was compelled to admit that nothing was to be gained, while everything might be lost, by a longer sojourn at the Springs.

When the method of their going was broached, the great outlaw declared that it must be on horseback, for to depart by train and leave the roan would be tacit admission that they had been driven to flight.

And accordingly they went out to purchase two horses and the necessary saddles and bridles.

As they emerged from their tent, they were agreeably surprised to find that the crowd had dispersed.

Picking their way among the outlying avenues of canvas, the bandits were able to reach the square almost unnoticed but immediately upon their arrival in the business part of the town they became the center of all eyes.

Smiling at the freely expressed comments upon their appearance, Jesse led the way into a harness shop and made his wants known.

Visions of exorbitant prices for his best saddles in his mind, the proprietor declared he could take them to the best animals in the Springs and, glancing proudly upon his friends and neighbours as he emerged from his store at the side of "Mr. Howard," he conducted the outlaws to where the horses were.

Apprised of the strangers' purpose, the owner brought out two splendid creatures from his stable and quickly the bargain was struck, though to the detriment of the bandits' bank rolls.

With instructions that the animals be fitted with saddles and bridles and delivered at their tent, they thanked the harness maker, paid him liberally and set out upon their return, arriving in their corner of the grove just in time to see young Rozier point out their camp to the detective and disappear.

"What do you suppose that means?" asked Cole.

But the actions of the man-hunter were his answer.

Approaching the tent, he shook the flap and, receiving no response, raised one corner, thrusting the package of doped wine underneath.

Their suspicions excited, especially as the intruder taking advantage of their absence to peer at everything he could see of their belongings, Jesse yelled:

"Hi there! Get out of that tent! What are you up to, anyhow?"

Springing back at the unexpected challenge the man-hunter turned to see who had hailed him.

"Dillaby, the Pinkerton superintendent in Kansas City, as I live," breathed the bandit-chieftain to his pals. "This *is* getting hot. Come on till we see what he's up to. If he tries to get away draw your guns." Then, raising his voice he cried:

"What are you doing, down on your hands and knees, spying into my camp?"

The shouts of the world-famous desperado quickly drew a crowd to the spot.

Turning to them, he complained bitterly:

"It seems strange that three gentlemen can't come to Monegaw Springs and live in quiet, without you all haunting them day and night and gawping at them. Why, we can't even leave our tent without some one trying to enter it.

"This man, here," and he pointed to the detective, "was just crawling in when we happened to come along and saw him."

"That's not so," protested Dillaby, realizing that his position was becoming uncomfortable.

"Then what were you doing? Are you in the habit of going 'round sticking your head into every camp you see?"

"I was merely delivering a package."

"That's a likely story."

"You can see for yourself by looking in. As I found no one at home, I stooped to place it under the canvas and—"

"Staid to see what you could see," interrupted Jesse. "Ted," looking at Cole, "find out if there is any bundle inside."

Eagerly the crowd awaited his reply.

"Yes, there is one," he called.

"Now will you believe me?" demanded the man-hunter, anxious to escape from his inquisitors.

"Not yet. That may be just a blind to be used in case we were at home or you were caught sneaking in, as you were.

"It's my opinion you are a thief!"

Crimsoning at the charge, Dillaby looked about him helplessly. No suspicion was there in his mind as to the true identity of the man before him. That he was the Mr. Howard he had no doubt from the clever manner in which the outlaw had twisted appearances against him and so serious was his predicament that he feared it would be necessary to call upon Mr. Rozier to extricate him—an event that would lay bare the whole plot.

Enjoying the man's misery, the world famous desperado determined to make him disclose his purpose.

"Do you know what's in the package?" he asked.

"I do."

"What?"

"Wine."

"There's some writing on the wrapper," interrupted Cole. "It says 'for Mr. Thomas Howard, with best wishes from an admirer.'"

"Ah! how romantic," grinned Jesse. "Can it be, sir, that you are the one who sent me the wine?"

The detective had gone too far to falter now and he replied:

"Yes."

"I don't seem to remember your face," purred the bandit-chieftain, "when did I ever see you before?"

"We have never met, but I saw your magnificent work yesterday afternoon and wished to show you my appreciation."

"Rubbish!" snapped Jesse. "I don't believe you were ever in Monegaw Springs in your life before this morning." Then turning again to the astounded onlookers, he asked: "Do any of you know this man? Have you ever seen him before?"

But nobody had and they said so in no uncertain terms.

"You hear what these gentlemen and ladies say," observed the bandit-chieftain. "None of them have ever laid eyes on you till just now.

"You're a slick talker, but you can't fool *me*. I owe it to the other sojourners at the Springs to see that you're taken care of so you can't try to work the gag on them.

"Will some of you gentlemen kindly send for the constable? I wish to have this man locked up as a thief. If he can establish his innocence, the judge will give him the opportunity."

The look of malignant hatred that Dillaby bestowed upon his tormentor as he heard the request made Jesse grin and he watched him with keen enjoyment as several of the men rushed off to summon a guardian of the law.

Standing On the edge of the crowd, young Rozier had been an indignant witness of all that had transpired.

Realizing that the tracing of the wine to his father would spell defeat for their second plan, he had held his tongue. But when he heard his foe's call for a constable and saw people start to get one, he could contain himself no longer.

Pushing his way to the side of the man-hunter, he exclaimed:

"I can vouch for this man, Mr. Howard. This is an outrage to treat him so."

"Is this one of your father's guests, the capitalists?" asked the great outlaw, innocently.

"Yes."

"Then why didn't you interfere before the matter had gone so far?"

"Because I only just got here."

"Where have you been since you pointed my tent out to your friend?"

This question was uttered in a voice inaudible to any save the banker's son and the man-hunter. But it told them that their connection had been known from the first and that the by-play had been indulged in merely for the purpose of compelling them to acknowledge it publicly.

Ere either could recover from the shock of the discovery, Jessie was saying to the crowd:

"Mr. Rosier says that a cruel mistake has been made and that the man I thought was a thief is in reality a special friend of his father—a capitalist, who is his house guest."

And then to their amazement, instead of apologizing to the stranger, he continued:

"I beg your pardon for having sent any of you after the constable. But there is so little difference between some men of wealth and thieves that my mistake is not unnatural."

With this parting shot, whose meaning there was no mistaking, the world-famous desperado turned his back on the banker's son and the detective who posed as a capitalist, motioned to Clell and Cole to enter the tent and followed, taking the wine from the latter, while the crowd gasped at the public affront and the startling innuendo.

For the second time Jesse had outwitted the banker. But he was playing a desperate game. And danger, of which he never dreamed, looming dark and terrible, was closing in on him even in the moment of his triumph!

Chapter VIII.

AN UNEXPECTED COMPLICATION.

Protected by the heavy canvas from the impertinent stares of the patrons of the medicinal waters, the three outlaws looked at one another and then at the package presented to them in silence.

"Jess, you sure are a corker," exclaimed Clell in undisguised admiration. "Whatever put it into your head to charge Dillaby with being a thief?"

Smiling at the tribute to his cleverness, the great outlaw replied:

"I wanted to find out whether he was acting in conjunction with the Roziers or whether he had traced us here in some way and merely chanced to hit upon the banker's son when he sought to learn where our camp was."

"Well, you found out all right, all right," commented Cole.

"I certainly did," chuckled his leader.

"I'd give a good deal to hear what Dillaby says when he reports to the old man. They'll go almost nutty in trying to decide if we are on to the fact that his friends the capitalists are really detectives."

"And while they're puzzling over it, why wouldn't it be the wisest move for us to vamoose?" inquired Clell.

"Did you ever know me to run away under fire?" retorted his leader, answering one question with another.

"That's all right, but there's such a thing as going too far. 'Three times and out,' you know. You may have got the best of them twice, but will you come off so well the third time?"

"You forget that we have one great advantage; we know exactly who they are while they are all up in the air as to our identities.

"I'm going to fight old Rozier to the last ditch!"

But within three short hours Jesse was destined bitterly to repent his decision and to regret that he had not followed his chum's advice.

No premonition did they have of the storm that was about to break around their heads, however, and, flushed with their success in the two encounters they had had with their enemies, the bandits prepared for a master stroke.

Springing to his feet as an idea flashed into his mind, the great outlaw seized the package and opened it.

Picking up one of the bottles, he turned it round and round in his hand, gazing intently at the cork.

"Ha! Look here," he exclaimed, all of a sudden.

As his pals examined the bottle, he went on, excitedly:

"I've got old Rozier where I want him! This cork has been drawn out and put back! You can see beside the wires, there, where it's been cut."

"You mean the stuff's been doped?" asked Clell and Cole, almost in the same breath as they inspected the spot their leader indicated on the stopper and realized its significance.

"You're on. A—ah! I thought so. Taste of it and then tell me what you think."

During the brief interval following the discovery that the bottle had been tampered with, the bandit-chieftain had hurriedly pulled off the wires, yanked out the cork and raised the snout to his lips.

"It's sure got a peculiar flavour," declared the eldest of the Younger brothers as he passed the bottle to his companion. "Tastes bitter."

As soon as the wine had touched Clell's tongue, he confirmed their suspicions.

"I was knocked out once with 'peter' drops and I'd know the taste of the poison any time. You can stake your bottom dollar that there's a liberal dose of chloral in that bottle."

"That's all I want to know," chuckled Jesse. "Old money bags, you've got yourself into a mess that'll make you open your purse-strings before you see the end of it."

"Cole, go up to the square and get a lawyer. I'm going to have Rozier arrested if there's anything in the law against trying to drug a person."

Too amazed at the purpose of their chief to speak, the outlaws glanced at one another and then at him, their lips puckered as though they would whistle.

"It's nothing to get so stirred up about," continued the famous desperado, noting the effect his words produced. "If it is a crime, I'll swear out the warrant. We'll turn these bottles over to the police through the lawyer and while the Springs are convulsed with the arrest of the banker, we'll slip out unnoticed. There's evidence enough in these bottles to convict him without our presence and, from the crowd who heard Dillaby say he sent the stuff, witnesses can be found who will establish the connection between the 'fly mug,' the wine and both young and old Rozier."

Elated at the prospect, the eldest of the Younger brothers picked up his hat and hurried from the tent to summon a member of the legal profession.

But he never reached his destination!

As he wound in and out among the side streets, the whistle of the noonday train rang loud and shrill. Slowing up that he might not run into the crowd of arrivals, he so timed his gait that he reached the intersecting road just as the last of them seemed to have passed.

At the corner of the two streets, on the side on which he was walking, a hedge obstructed his view, however. Yet as he had seen no one cross the road, he deemed it safe for him to increase his pace.

Scarce three feet away from the sidewalk up which he intended to turn was he, when suddenly a black-garbed young woman, struggling along with a heavy satchel, appeared from behind the hedge.

Hearing the sound of footsteps so close to her, she turned her head toward them to see who was coming.

As Cole beheld the rosy-cheeked face he with difficulty suppressed an exclamation.

He knew the girl!

Recovering quickly from his surprise he bowed, saying at the same time:

"Let me carry your bag for you?" And he extended his hand to take it.

But no sooner did she hear the voice, than the young woman shot a quick glance across the street, then hastened her steps without heeding the offer.

Unable to fathom such treatment, the outlaw looked in the same direction the black gowned girl had.

Scrutinizing him with undisguised interest were two men. Yet though they watched him closely, they never paused and continued up the opposite sidewalk from that occupied by the young woman, keeping a couple of yards behind her.

Cole's first impulse was to turn on his heel and run to the tent to bear the startling news to his chief. But he resisted it, entering the street from the station which he followed till he came to the next block, dividing his attention between the girl and the men.

Twice the latter looked over their shoulders as the bandit trailed them.

"Those are detectives or I don't know one," mused the eldest of the Younger brothers. "I guess the lawyer business can wait."

Never had a block seemed so long to the outlaw, who was impatient to announce to his pals the unexpected complication that confronted them, as did the one between where he had met the young woman and the next.

But at last he turned into the side street and without a glance in the direction of the persons whose appearance had so upset him, Cole continued his leisurely gait till he felt that he was beyond their sight, then quickly lengthened his stride.

Approaching the tent, he noticed, with a feeling of relief, that the horses they had purchased had been delivered.

"Thank goodness they're here," he muttered, then as he arrived at the flap cried in a low voice, "let me in, quick!"

Realizing from the excitement in the tone that something untoward had happened, Jesse hurriedly admitted his chum.

"What is it?" he demanded, noticing the worried look in the latter's eyes.

Thrusting his head from the flap to be certain that no eavesdroppers were about, Cole withdrew it hastily, exclaiming:

"Sue's come!"

"Susie, my sister, in Monegaw Springs?" gasped the great outlaw in amazement.

"Sure's you're standing in front of me. And that isn't the worst. *Two man-hunters are shadowing her!*"

In blank dismay, the bandit-chieftain looked from one to another of his chums, then snapped:

"Tell us about it, man."

With no unnecessary words, Cole complied.

"This knocks *my* plans galley west," commented the famous desperado at the conclusion of the story of the meeting.

"I wonder what on earth brought Sue down here. She evidently knows she's being trailed from the way she refused to answer you and looked across at the detectives.

"Blast the luck, anyhow. If she'd only kept away till tomorrow, or even tonight, we'd have had old Rozier in the toils. But now we've got to chuck the whole business and light out. We can only strike him through his bank.

"It won't be long before Dillaby and his men run into these other man-hunters and when they do, it won't take even them long to come to the conclusion that we're the men they want.

"For concocting theories, you can't beat a detective. It's when they try to reconcile them with facts that they get balled up. But in this case, they won't have much trouble.

"Saddle up while I gather our duds together."

This sudden change of front in their leader recalled to his pals his recent observation about running away under fire, but they knew him too well to taunt him with it. His bravery and recklessness needed no proof; they had witnessed both too many times and they realized fully the desperateness of their situation.

With the rapidity that characterized all the movements of the notorious band when once they were in action, the horses were made ready and as Clell and Cole led them to the tent, Jesse emerged with their saddle bags which were hurriedly adjusted.

Fortunately for the bandits, their neighbors were engaged in eating their dinners and no inquisitive eyes spied on their departure.

"Into the woods!" commanded the world-famous desperado as his chums mounted.

Thanking their leader's foresight for pitching their tent on the edge of the grove, they obeyed and soon were out of sight of the camp ground.

"Whereaway?" asked the eldest of the Younger brothers as Jesse now and then changed the direction of their course, indicating that he had a definite objective point in view.

"To see Sue, of course, and find out why she came here."

"But Cole didn't follow her. How do you know where to look?" asked Clell.

"We've only got one family who are 'true blue' here, the Priors," returned his leader, "and I'm going to see them. If she isn't there or they can't locate her, I shan't try.

"I didn't want to go near 'em while we were at the Springs: 'What people don't know won't hurt 'em.' But Sue's coming makes a difference."

And it didn't take long for the outlaws to learn that the arrival of the sister of the notorious Jesse did, indeed, make a vast difference!

When the altercation between Dillaby and the supposed miner had reached the point where the latter sent for the constables, the rest of the Pinkertons, who had been trailing behind their superintendent, scurried in all directions, some to reach the chief of police in time to make themselves known and get him to countermand the order, others to report the failure, with its unforeseen result, to the banker.

Upon young Rozier's intercession, however, the former dropped the idea of calling on the head of the police department though they continued to the heart of the village.

As they were walking about, looking at the people and the stores, one of them suddenly espied the two men trailing Susie.

"There's Jones and Higgins," he gasped in surprise. "What are they doing here?"

No satisfactory answer occurring to any of them, they decided to speak to their fellow sleuths.

The surprise of Jones and Higgins as they were accosted was no less than that of the others had been at seeing them.

Questions flew thick and fast.

The man-hunters who had been summoned by the bank president gave a hurried *resumé* of their case.

"Where are these fellows?" asked Higgins, when the story was finished.

"In their tent, I suppose. Why?"

"Because I want to look at them. We're down here trailing Susie James. She probably expects to meet her brothers here and from what you tell me, these miners may be our birds."

"You don't mean you think they're Jesse and some of his men?" gasped one of the "capitalists."

"I sure do. It's worth trying anyhow. You all round up Dillaby and the others and when we've tracked Susie to where she's going, we'll come back and meet you here in the

square. Mum's the word."

And the two latest arrivals of the celebrated Pinkerton force hastened after the girl whom they had watched, as she continued up the street, while talking to their fellows.

Jones and Higgins were two of the detectives assigned to keep the Samuel's homestead, in Kearney, under constant vigil, following the inmates on their travels, which were few and far between, whenever it seemed advisable.

Knowing these facts, the others acquiesced in their leadership and, excited at the thought that the much wanted desperado might be the mysterious Mr. Howard who had made them so ridiculous, they hurried to acquaint Dillaby and Mr. Rozier with the startling development.

As the suggestion was made that the miner was no other than Jesse James, the banker grew deathly pale.

"You can't mean it!" he murmured.

"But we *do*," returned one of the detectives. "Won't it be great if he is?" continued the fellow, enthusiastically.

"*No it won't*," snapped Mr. Rozier. "Oh! why did I ever get you down here, anyway? I'll give you a hundred dollars apiece to drop the matter and go back to Kansas City on the next train!"

Amazed at the sudden change in the man who had employed them, the detectives gazed at one another in bewilderment.

"We can't do that," returned Dillaby, at last. "If your men should turn out to be the bandits, the chief'll be so tickled he won't charge you a cent. We'll let you know how things come out."

"But I engaged you. If I order you to go back, why shouldn't you go?" fumed the banker.

"Because if the miners and the outlaws are one and the same, Jones and Higgins will need help in landing them and the men on the trail of Jesse James can press all the other Pinkertons into service they want.

"I don't see, sir, however, why, when you were so keen to prove the strangers frauds, you developed such an aversion to the idea when the trail may lead to the desperadoes?"

"You don't, eh?" returned Mr. Rozier. "Well, if you were the president of a bank you would! Here I've been insulting and hounding Jesse James, if it is really he. Oh! What a fool I've been. *He'll get even with me some way!*"

"There's no need of getting so unnerved, sir," rejoined Dillaby. "If he prove the man we want, his capture will remove all danger from you."

"If you could catch him, yes. But you haven't done it yet—and you won't either. A man who can make a monkey of you the way this 'Howard' did, won't be caught easily. He knows you are detectives. If he's Jesse, I'll wager he isn't in his tent now!"

"Forman," the president of the savings institution exclaimed, as he looked at his watch, "you've got just time to catch the train north. Don't stop to get a bag. I want you to go to Ste. Genevieve at once and warn Harris to send out our funds to Kansas City on the first train, keeping only ten thousand dollars on hand.

"Jesse James, if he and 'Howard' are one, may raid my bank!"

Chapter IX.

THE STORM BREAKS.

Angered by the lack of confidence in their shrewdness and ability the banker's words and actions disclosed, Dillaby rose from his chair, bowed stiffly and said:

"You'll think differently, sir, within twenty-four hours. Come, boys."

But Mr. Rozier's response was a snort of disgust that further enraged the man-hunters.

"The old mutton-head! I wish Jesse *would* rob his bank! It would serve him right!" snapped one of them.

No comment, however, did his comrades vouchsafe. Each was occupied with his own thoughts and chief among these thoughts was a grim determination to prove to the banker that his opinion of them was erroneous.

Arrived at the rendezvous in the square, Dillaby and his men were forced to wait some minutes before they beheld their fellows hurrying to join them.

Without wasting any time, the eight men, with Higgins and the superintendent of the Kansas City office in lead, set out for the campground.

Nearing the place, Jones said:

"When we get to the tent, the rest of you surround it. Higgins and I will go inside and interview the miners."

"But there are three of them," protested Dillaby.

"What if there are? We can call for help if we need any."

As the reader knows, there was no need.

When the detectives had reached a point from which the camp the suspects had occupied could be seen, they instantly noticed that the roan mare was gone. Ordering a double-quick as the information was imparted to him, Higgins dashed up to the tent.

A glance at the overturned chairs and tables inside told of the haste of the supposed miners' departure.

"Ha! they opened your package of wine, Dillaby," cried Jones when he and his side partner had vented their disappointment at finding the men had taken alarm and vanished.

"If we could only trail 'em we could examine them at our leisure. There's enough dope in that Madeira to knock 'em out for hours, if it doesn't put 'em out of the way altogether."

"There's no use in going 'ifs' and 'buts' when you're working against Jesse James," snapped Higgins. "The fact that the three lit out so soon after the shindy over the wine makes me almost certain the 'miners' are, in reality, the bandits. They realized they were attracting too much attention and made their get-away while they had a chance.

"We've got just one recourse left—to watch Susie. The sooner we get back to the house where she is, the sooner we'll know whether or not it amounts to anything.

"If the girl came down here to meet her brothers, and the miners *are* the outlaws, they won't leave the Springs till they've seen her!"

And without more ado, the man-hunters hastened to the farmhouse where Higgins and Jones had followed Susie, having learned by inquiring of a neighbour that it belonged to the Priors.

But the sister of the notorious James' boys had left the homestead in Kearney with no such purpose in view.

Tiring of the long promised, but never given, consent to her marriage to Tim Mason, the telegraph operator at Kearney who had served the desperadoes so well in times gone by, the lovers had put their heads together and decided to take matters into their own hands and elope.

After considering many places, they finally decided upon Monegaw Springs as the one where their marriage would attract the least notice because of the constantly changing population.

With many misgivings, Susie had sought her mother's permission to pay a visit to the Priors, permission which was eventually granted.

The matter of leaving her home without occasioning embarrassing inquiries thus settled, the young people selected the day and made the final arrangements.

The girl was to leave Kearney on the morning train and her sweetheart at noon.

Both were aware that man-hunters would doubtless follow the sister of the desperadoes but they knew they could only look on, and many a laugh the lovers had over the surprise of the sleuths when they discovered they had trailed the girl to an elopement instead of to a meeting with her brothers.

But fate plays strange pranks.

The appointed day came, the departure from Kearney was accomplished without misadventure, though the presence of the detectives was soon made evident to the prospective bride, and in due course the train arrived at Monegaw Springs.

Happy in the thought that she could buy some little kitchen utensil for their home, her home and Jim's, with the money that it would cost to take a carriage from the station to the Priors, she resolutely set out to walk the distance.

For once, Susie had no thought for Jesse, Frank or their men as she advanced along the sidewalk. Her bag was heavy but even its weight was forgotten in the dream pictures of the future she conjured in her mind.

Yet as she emerged from behind the hedge, caught sight of the tall, bearded man who was coming up the street, saw him bow politely and heard his voice, her love-creations tumbled about her head, shattered!

Susie had recognized Cole!

His presence in the Springs bespoke the presence of her brothers, or their expected arrival. In either case, Jesse and Frank would seek to learn the cause of her being in the town and the detectives who were shadowing her would see them.

These and many other thoughts flashed through her brain as she pulled herself together after the shock of the unexpected and unwelcome meeting.

Many a woman would have betrayed the outlaw to the man-hunters, inadvertently.

But Susie had been trained in a school of terrible emergencies and ere the detectives could become suspicious, she had glanced in their direction to disclose their presence to Cole and continued on her way as though she merely repulsed the advances of some "masher."

Yet how heavy her bag grew as she hurried along!

All the ruins of her shattered hopes, apparently, were clinging to it, making it seem to weigh a ton!

Scarce seeing where she stepped, the girl hurried toward the home of her friends. Once the idea occurred to her that she would not go to the Priors, but, taking a room at the hotel, wait till Tim arrived on the evening train, meet him at the station and be married without delay.

Fear of Jesse, however, deterred her.

She knew that as soon as he had heard of her arrival from Cole, he would seek her at the Priors and, should he not find her, would search the town, subjecting himself to danger of capture by the detectives who had followed her.

Were her brothers to be discovered through her, she knew she could never forgive herself.

The only thing to do, she decided, was to meet Jesse. And as she trudged along, a little voice whispered:

"Perhaps you can persuade him to allow the wedding."

Her spirits buoyed by this thought, Susie responded lightly to the surprised, but hearty, greetings of the Priors.

During the dinner, to which the family was just sitting down when she arrived, her friends regaled her with the account of the doings of the mysterious strangers, whose wealth, bravery and deeds were the wonder of the Springs.

Smiling at the romance woven around her brother, Susie was on the point of enlightening them, when the pounding of hoofs was heard in the yard and looking from the window, Mr. Prior gasped:

"Wal, I swan! 'Speak of the devil and he's sure to appear.' Here they be, now. What on airth kin they want here?"

With the arrival of the outlaws, the girl's fears for their safety drove all else from her mind, yet before she could act, the farmer had risen from the table and opened the door, calling, cordially:

"Jest hitch your horses and come in, won't yeh? We're finishin' dinner but thar's plenty left, I reckon."

The reply to the invitation, delivered with all the hospitality of the South, was awaited with fluttering hearts by the daughters of the house of Prior, Helen and Marjorie, two comely lasses.

Afraid that the disclosure of their identity out of doors might lead their friend to exclamations that would excite any watching man-hunter, the world-famous desperado replied:

"Thank you, we'll come in. We came to see about buying some of your horses."

And without delay the trio made fast their animals and passed in through the door.

But their entrance was easier than their exit!

"Ma, this is Mr.—" began the farmer awkwardly, then paused in amazement.

No sooner was the door shut behind them, than Jesse had rushed to his sister and kissed her while the others stared in open mouthed bewilderment.

"There's nothing improper," laughed the bandit-chieftain as he beheld the blank amazement on the faces of his friends. "Your mysterious 'Mr. Howard' is only Sue's brother, Jesse."

The announcement, however, astounded the Priors even more than the episode of the kissing.

"I might have known it," pouted Helen. "If I had, I should have made you take me to the hop last night and turned everybody green with envy, Jesse. Oh, why didn't you tell us?"

Making his peace as best he could, the great outlaw lost no time in demanding of his sister what had brought her to the Springs.

Ever since the arrival of her brother, Susie had been preparing herself to meet the question. Having come to no satisfactory decision, when it finally was put she evaded it by turning attention from herself to the detectives who had followed her.

"We can talk any time, Jess," she rejoined, "Wouldn't it be best to put your horses in the barn before they're seen and recognized?"

"I guess you're right, Sis," acquiesced the bandit-chieftain. "All these man-hunters, together, may drop to the fact that we're who we are."

"Harry and I'll take care of 'em," announced the farmer. "The less you show yourself, the better, I reckon." And, nodding to his son, Mr. Prior went out to where the horses were tied.

Yet he was not soon enough!

The yard and barns of the Prior buildings were on the side of the house toward the business centre of the town, clearly visible to any and all coming from that direction.

Intent only upon getting the animals out of sight, neither the farmer nor his son saw the eight men walking rapidly along the sidewalk toward them.

"Better put 'em in the lower barn, hadn't we, Jeff," said his father. "I'll lead two on 'em, you take the roan."

But as Farmer Prior's son put out his hand to unhitch Jesse's mare, a cry rang out:

"You leave those horses alone!"

Startled at the command, the two men turned to see who had uttered it and for the first time beheld the detectives, who, after the sharp order, had broken into a run.

The shout had also been heard by those inside the house, though because of the closed doors and windows the words were indistinguishable.

Springing to the window, Jesse peered out just long enough to catch sight of the men bearing down on them, then turned to his terror-stricken friends.

"It's the man-hunters!" he gasped. "I didn't expect 'em so soon. Take us up into the attic or anywhere we can hide without being seen, Marjorie."

"The rest of you stay here. Mrs. Prior, go to the door and ask what the trouble is. Tell 'em your husband bought the horses from the miners at the station just an hour or so ago. Delay 'em as long as you can, though you'll be obliged to let 'em search the house before they'll go."

Scarce a second did it take to deliver these instructions and even before he had concluded them the bandit-chieftain was following the girl, whom he had entrusted with the task of hiding them, from the room, Cole and Clell at his heels.

Gliding through the parlour and out into the hall, avoiding that side of the house visible from the yard or sidewalk, they mounted the stairs, three at a time.

"What is there to hide us up in the attic?" demanded Jesse of his guide.

"Ma's clothes press, piles of quilts and old feather beds."

"Nothing else?"

"No. Won't they do?" asked Marjorie, crestfallen.

"Not for a minute. The detectives will go for them the first thing."

"Oh dear! I don't know where else to take you except in some of our closets," groaned the girl.

"Which they'll likewise examine carefully. Can't we crawl up one of the fireplaces? Are the flues big enough? That's the kind of place we want to find."

Apprised of the sort of refuge the outlaws desired, Marjorie thought rapidly.

"There's only one fireplace where the flue's big enough and that's in the sitting room. But you couldn't get up it without being seen from the yard. And for the same reason you couldn't get into the oven. Oh—what can you—wait. I have it. You can get down into the little brick room where mother smokes the hams! Quick! It's 'round by the back stairs."

Familiar with the chambers, about four feet by six, built in the chimneys where the countryfolk used to cure their delicious hams, the bandit-chieftain rejoined:

"That'll be just the place. Get us to it as soon as you can. Any hams in it now?"

"Drat it, yes! I'd forgotten. Mother put some in yesterday." And the girl stopped, looking at the outlaws in dismay.

"Never mind. They'll help to hide us," assured Jesse.

"But the smoke and the odour, it's fearful," protested Marjorie.

Quickly the great desperado allayed her misgivings by telling her that they could stand them and without further parley, she guided them to the eighteen-inch door in the side of the stairway that opened into the smoking-chamber.

As she drew it back, the pungent fumes of the curing hams rushed out, mingled with smoke.

"Jicky, but it *is* strong," gasped Clell.

"We've got to stand it, so crawl inside, lively," snapped his leader. "The longer you stand here with that door open, the more the odour'll get into the house, and the greater chance there'll be of the man-hunters getting wise."

All remonstrance squelched by his statement, his two companions wriggled through the small aperture, Jesse followed and Marjorie refastened the door.

By the aid of matches, the desperadoes were able to make their way among the redolent hams to the corners farthest from the stairs.

But the smoke coming through the bricks from the flue of the kitchen stove and the fumes were powerful.

"If we have to stay here long, we'll suffocate," growled Cole.

"Shut up! We've got to stand it. Don't move 'round," snapped his leader, and, resigning themselves to the ordeal, they subsided into silence.

All this time, down in the yard, Mrs. Prior and the others had been sparring for time, and it was with relief they beheld Marjorie rejoin them, for her coming told that the outlaws were hidden.

Grasping the purpose of Jesse's instructions, the wife of the farmer had opened the door, demanding of her bewildered husband:

"What's the trouble, Ephraim? What are those men running for?"

"We want the men who rode those horses here," panted Higgins as he reached the animals.

"What men?" protested Mrs. Prior. "Tell 'em they must have made a mistake, Ephraim. When they know you bought the critturs from those miners down at the train they'll come to their senses, maybe."

The effort to give the farmer his cue was futile.

Looking at his wife as though he thought she had gone crazy, Ephraim Prior said nothing.

But Higgins was not so dull.

Divining that the words had been inspired by the man they sought, his doubt as to who 'Howard' was vanished instantly and he coolly retorted:

"If your husband were as clever as you, Mrs. Prior, your bluff might have worked. But he isn't, so you might as well let us search your house.

"We know Jesse James is inside it and we're going to find him!"

Feigning amazement at the declaration, the woman brought all her resourcefulness to bear to gain time till her daughter's return should announce that the outlaws were concealed, demanding his grounds for his suspicions and pronouncing it an outrage that Susie could not make a visit without being suspected of coming to meet her wicked brothers.

But her persistency only confirmed the detectives' belief that their quarry was scurrying to cover in the house.

With a clever change in tactics, Jones purred:

"Why don't you let us search the house, Mrs. Prior, and satisfy ourselves? We don't like to doubt your assertion that the notorious cut-throat isn't here, but Jesse has so many friends who are willing to swear that black is white for his sake that our doubt is only natural. But if we are wrong, we'll apologize and humbly."

As the suggestion she had dreaded was put into words, Mrs. Prior turned to look into the kitchen, just as Marjorie entered it.

The sight causing her untold relief, the woman responded:

"I suppose that *would* be the quickest way to get rid of you, though I must say I don't think much of having eight strange men ransacking my house."

"But only four of us will do the searching," returned Higgins. "The others 'll wait outside to see that Jesse and his pals don't skip out."

"How can he, when he isn't here?" retorted Mrs. Prior, stepping back to admit Jones, Dillaby and two other man-hunters, who made no reply.

Once inside the kitchen, however, the former said:

"And now if you'll give us lanterns, we'll begin."

"Well, we *won't*," snarled the woman. "You'll have to get along as best you can and what's more you can't go through my house alone, either. Ephraim, you and Jeff take your shot guns and follow 'em. If you see 'em steal anything, shoot 'em. I've heard of robbers trying such tricks to get into a house before."

Realizing, that further protest would be of no avail, though the words stung, the detectives started on their quest followed by the farmer and his son with their guns.

But as Jones placed his hand on the latch leading into the hall there sounded a stifled cough!

Chapter X.

THE DASH FOR LIBERTY.

With a look of gloating, Jones turned toward Mrs. Prior, his lips parted to speak.

Yet he uttered no sound.

Every member of the Prior family was grinning. Why, none of them could have told had their lives depended on it. Possibly their very anxiety was the cause. But whatever produced the emotion, its effect upon the detectives was instantaneous.

"That was a signal," hissed one of them. "Be careful about opening the door; our men may be ambushing us."

The idea of an ambush inside a house was novel, yet the suggestion appealed to the man-hunters and their leader determined to take no risks.

"Some of you, who know the way, go first," commanded Jones.

"Don't you do it," retorted Mrs. Prior. "It's an outrage to search this house, anyway, but if these men insist, let 'em go where they please and then they can't say we didn't give 'em a free hand."

Realizing the woman was a Tartar, the man in charge of the searching party turned to his fellows.

"Have your guns ready. These people evidently intend to do all they can to block us, but we'll show 'em we can find Jesse James without their help and in spite of them.

"If you hear any suspicious noise, shoot. The cut-throats won't hesitate to kill us in their efforts to escape!"

The bitterness with which Jones snapped out his words was apparently lost on the friends of the outlaws, for they made no response, but in their hearts they made silent vows that if they could do anything to prevent the discovery of the world-famous desperadoes they would. And with sullen, defiant looks they watched the four men.

In evident fear that his appearance in the doorway would be greeted with a rain of bullets, Jones lifted the latch and pulled open the door, jumping back as he did so.

As no sign of the bandits was disclosed, the man-hunters took courage and rushed into the parlour with Jeff and Farmer Prior, shot-guns in their hands, at their heels.

Room after room was ransacked with a thoroughness that consumed much time. Beds were moved, clothes and mattresses searched; every piece of furniture that was large enough to shield a man was hauled from its place and the closets were emptied of their contents. The remotest corners of the attic were explored with the aid of matches.

Yet the failure to locate their quarry only made the man-hunters the more determined.

Leaving his men to go over the ground again, Jones descended and went out into the yard to consult with Higgins and the others.

Their curiosity aroused by the sight of the strange men guarding the farmhouse, the neighbours flocked to learn the reason, some going inside to talk with the family, others trying to wrest their information from the close-mouthed man-hunters.

The sleuths, however, were unwilling to announce that they were searching for the notorious Jesse lest it should not prove he after all, for they feared the taunts and jeers such a mistake would bring upon them.

No reluctance did Mrs. Prior have, however, and loudly she bemoaned the insult of the action, proclaiming in no uncertain terms that she would have redress if it were possible.

As word flew about that the miners were none other than the notorious bandits, the people were amazed. But with a wholesome regard for their own skins, they fell back to a safe distance and watched the house open-mouthed, their numbers increasing constantly.

"I'll go back with you," declared Higgins when his side partner had reported the fruitlessness of the first search. "We'll try the chimneys. If you could hear the cough, it must have come from them. Did you try the fireplaces?"

"By Jove! I never thought of them."

And eagerly Jones followed his co-worker back into the house.

Summoning their men from the upper chambers, the two set at work to remove the large fireboard in the parlour.

But the task was no easy one, for it hadn't been disturbed for years. Though to some of them this fact indicated that their quarry had not hidden behind it, Jones suggested that they might have dropped down into the opening from above and they continued their efforts.

In the ham chamber, Jesse and his companions were cursing the persistence of the detectives whose actions and words reached them through the flue from the parlour.

The smoke and fumes from the curing hams made their eyes water and parched their lungs, till it seemed to them that it would be preferable to run the risk of an encounter with the man-hunters than to be slowly smothered to death.

Warned by the cough that had escaped from Cole, which Jones had heard, the outlaws sat with handkerchiefs in their mouths both to keep out some of the smoke and to stifle any choking or sneeze.

With feelings of dismay they had caught the sound of the work on the fireboard and scarce daring to breathe they listened, their six-shooters ready for instant use.

At last the chimney board yielded to the efforts to remove it and with a cry of triumph, Jones and Higgins crawled into the fireplace, peering up the flue.

Yet there was nothing to be seen.

Chagrined, the detectives rose to their feet.

"Let's start a smudge," proposed Dillaby. "Maybe they're higher up the chimney and if they are, we can smoke 'em out."

As they heard the plan, the farmer and his son exchanged glances. The building of a fire would send the smoke into the ham room in such quantities that it would force the outlaws to leave it, yet they dared not protest and stared blankly at one another.

"I guess we've hit on the right place," chuckled Higgins as he noticed the woe-begone expressions on the faces of the two men. "Hurry and get kindling, some of you. Tell the boys outside to watch the top of the chimney and to send me word when they see a head appear.

"Jesse's bottled himself up good and tight this time!"

With their usual haste, the detectives were counting their eggs before they were hatched!

And with delightful forgetfulness of the many times gone by when they thought they had captured the desperado only to find that they hadn't, Dillaby and Jones rushed to get the stuff to start the smudge.

"Found 'em?" grunted Mrs. Prior, as the detectives burst into the kitchen in which all the intimate friends of the family were excitedly discussing the sensational turn in events.

"We think—we hope so," rejoined Dillaby.

Surprised at the confidence in the man's tone, the housewife shot a keen glance from under her eyebrows and there was a suspicious eagerness in her voice as she asked:

"Where are they?"

"You'll see fast enough when we smoke 'em out," snapped the sleuth and without stopping to explain, he went into the shed, quickly returning with a basket of chips and bark.

Watching the detectives as they passed into the parlour, Mrs. Prior slammed the door after them and placed her plump body against it, at the same time beckoning to Marjorie and Susie.

"Go upstairs just as quick as you can. Get some towels and a pitcher of water and hand it to Jess.

"He and the boys'll suffocate in the ham-chamber if you don't.

"I'll stand guard down here. You'd best take off your shoes so the men in the parlour won't hear you walking about."

Deftly removing their footwear, the two girls stole up the back stairs that led from the kitchen and hurried to get the relief to the suffering bandits.

The pitcher of water and the towels were secured without delay, but it was a different matter to give them to the outlaws without discovery.

Taking their places on the stairs, Marjorie cautiously removed the little door.

Startled by the unexpected move, Jesse and his men trained their revolvers on the opening, wondering in their hearts how their retreat had been located.

The position of the girls was dangerous in the extreme. Yet not till they caught sight of a pistol barrel did they realize it.

Quickly recovering, however, Susie said in a voice loud enough for her brother to hear:

"Put the towels in first, Marjorie. They'll deaden the touching on the bricks of the pitcher."

Recognizing the voice of his sister, the world-famous desperado lowered his weapon and crept toward the cubby-hole.

"Have Jeff get horses for us and hold 'em in front of the next house. We can't stay here any longer, we'll die.

"When the nags are ready come and open this door. We'll leave our beards here.

"Now, hurry!"

Not pausing to argue, though they deemed the risk of the dash for liberty Jesse's words disclosed as his plan, foolhardy, the girls hurriedly replaced the little door and went down to the kitchen.

"Don't call Jeff," exclaimed Mrs. Prior when she had been apprised of the orders of the bandit-chieftain. "Helen will do it a good deal better.

"Just go out to the barn and turn all the horses loose. Bridle three of them and drive the whole lot into the street. If you should take only three, the men on the outside would get suspicious. The boys—"

But her words were interrupted by Jeff who burst into the kitchen, crying:

"The chimney's afire! The chimney's afire!"

In despair, the housewife looked at Susie, Marjorie and Helen.

There was no use in getting out the horses. There would be too many people both inside and out for the outlaws to have a chance of getting away.

Already the column of smoke pouring from the chimney, and the tongue of flame that now and then darted from its top, had attracted the attention of the crowd in the street.

The dread word "fire" was shouted from all sides and men came rushing into the kitchen to assist in removing the household goods.

"Don't touch anything! It's only the chimney burning out!" shrilled Mrs. Prior. "Get some salt! Get some salt!"

And rushing to the cupboard she grabbed a box of the condiment, then ran into the parlour.

With no intention of setting the accretion of soot in the flue to burning, the detectives were, however, far from sorry as they heard the roar of the flames in the chimney and, their faces wreathed in broad smiles, they laughed and talked together.

"That'll drive 'em out, I reckon," chuckled Dillaby just at the moment the farmer's wife entered the room.

"You won't feel so funny, you grinning monkeys, if this house burns down!" she snapped.

If it does, you'll pay for it—and well, too.

"Helen, run down to the square and ask lawyer Perkins to come up here just as fast as he can. I'll see if there isn't some way to prevent these men from outraging us any more.

"Jeff Prior, you keep 'em covered in that corner with your shot gun and don't let 'em leave this room. Ephraim, you help me throw this salt into the chimney."

Neighbours had thronged into the room during the speech and while some of them assisted in putting the salt onto the fire, that its fumes might be drawn upward and stifle the blazing soot, others ranged themselves about the man-hunters, freely expressing their opinions of the men who had invaded the sacred privacy of the Prior home.

And never was there a more disgruntled looking set of detectives.

Aware that they had carried matters with a high hand, they had, nevertheless, trusted to the inherent awe of one of their kind, present in every breast, to still any violent opposition to their actions, even to the burning out of the chimney.

But when they heard Mrs. Prior's command to her daughter to summon the family legal adviser, they realized that they had overshot their mark and their one thought was to get out of the house before the counsellor should arrive.

But when Higgins started to move he was brought up short.

"Stay whar you be!" growled Jeff. "You ain't any on you goin' to leave this house till lawyer Perkins says you can."

Protesting against such treatment the man-hunters were, however, obliged to submit to it, their decision accelerated by the townfolk who rallied to the young farmer's support.

For even in those days, detectives were looked down upon and despised.

With the aid of the salt, the fire was soon under control and the men and women impatiently awaited the arrival of the member of the legal profession, filling in the time by suggesting all the dire things they would do to the detectives if they were the Priors.

Expostulation and diplomacy on the part of the man-hunters who had deserted their posts outside, when they were told of the predicament of their fellows, were alike unavailing and to such vigorous tongue-lashings were they subjected by the irate townspeople that they were glad enough to return to their guard duties at Higgins' command.

At last Squire Perkins arrived, the fact being announced by those in the yard, followed as soon as possible by his appearance in the parlour.

A tall man, with white hair and beard, his piercing eyes made still more formidable by the bushy brows from beneath which they flashed, his frock coat hanging loosely from his shoulders, a pair of eye-glasses tucked between the top buttons of his waistcoat, an ebony cane with a gold, monogrammed head in his hand, Mr. Perkins presented the appearance of a typical member of the profession of olden times.

Taking a cursory glance at the room and its occupants, though there was probably nothing about any of them that escaped his eagle eyes, Mr. Perkins turned to the flushed housewife.

"What's the trouble, Mrs. Prior?" he asked in a deep, powerful voice.

With a torrent of words, the woman poured out her tale of outraged dignity.

Several times, Higgins, Jones and Dillaby sought to interrupt but a peremptory "wait until you're spoken to," accompanied by a savage scowl, from the barrister was sufficient to silence them and they subsided.

As the woman paused there was a hush while all eyes were focused upon the lawyer.

Conscious of the attention, Squire Perkins threw back his shoulders, gave a sharp tap with his cane and looking full at the detectives declared:

"Your great mistake, Mrs. Prior, was in allowing these men to enter your home in the first place. 'A man's house is his castle.' That always has been the law and I believe it still is, unless it's been changed since I left my office.

"These men had no business to search your house without a search warrant. And they know it as well as I do.

"You can recover damages from them and I believe that an action will lie against them for the shock and humiliation to which their high-handed goings-on have subjected you.

"If you wish, I will draw the papers. In the mean time, as a justice of the peace, I will grant you warrants for their arrest on the ground of trespass.

"Jefferson, by virtue of my powers, I appoint you a special officer to conduct these men to my office.

"And you, men, let me advise you to obey quietly—or it will go all the harder with you.

"Lead the way, Jefferson. I'll watch them from behind."

Their breath taken away by the sudden change in affairs, the man-hunters moved forward, when there was a crash overhead.

In amazement, everyone looked at the ceilings, but the next moment there came sounds of hurried feet on the back stairs.

"There they are! Let us go! It's Jesse James!" shouted Higgins, making a spring for the hallway, only to find himself headed off by the rush of men and women.

Driven almost distracted by the suffocating influx of smoke and later by the fumes from the salt, the desperadoes had stood it till they heard the arrival of the lawyer.

Believing that in the resulting confusion, they would be able to get away, or at least out of the house, the bandit-chieftain had whispered his intentions to his pals.

When he tried the little door, however, he had found that he could not open it from the inside.

Muttering that he would rather die in an open fight than be choked to death, he struck it a blow with his pistol butt, sending it clattering to the stairs.

Realizing that the racket would attract attention, he snapped:

"Be ready to shoot our way out," and crawled from the ham chamber.

As quickly as possible Cole followed. When all three were on the stairs, Jesse raised his six-shooters and dashed down them.

Only a couple of women, who had been unable to force their way into the parlour, were in the kitchen and as they beheld the three wild-eyed, pistol-waving men leap into the room, they screamed and promptly fainted.

Two windows were behind them.

"You-all take the left hand one," commanded the world-famous desperado.

The commotion inside had been heard by the detectives on guard out of doors and they rushed toward the kitchen.

In the parlour, men and women were struggling to get into the hallway, effectually blocking off Higgins and his fellows.

Seizing a knife from the table, Jesse slammed the door at the kitchen end of the hallway, jammed the knife in such a way over the latch that it would hold it down, then shut and bolted the door leading into the yard.

"Round the house to the back side!" yelled someone who had seen Cole and Clell throw up the window-sashes while their chief was closing the doors.

Pausing at the cry, the detectives turned and raced back, thinking to get a shot at the outlaws as they leaped from the windows.

Followed by the townfolk they ran, leaving the yard practically empty.

Where the bandits had tied them stood the three horses.

"Quick! This way, boys!" cried the great outlaw. "We can gain our horses! 'Don't shoot unless you have to!'"

As he had uttered his change of plans, Jesse had unbolted the door and when his companions were at his side, he threw it open and rushed to the ponies.

Cutting the reins with their knives, the three desperadoes vaulted into the saddles.

"Down behind the barn," whispered the great outlaw.

And digging the rowels of their spurs into the horses' flanks, the outlaws dashed off for the woods they could see at the back of the out-buildings.

But just as the outlaws thought they had made their escape unnoticed, a rifle cracked and Clell threw his arms over his head and swayed in his saddle, being prevented from falling by Jesse, who seized him about the waist.

Chapter XI.

CLELL IS WOUNDED.

Made overconfident in the success of their "getaway" because of the lack of opposition they had encountered in their dash for liberty, the outlaws had neglected to hide behind the bodies of their ponies when they galloped from the yard, as they would have had they been expecting a fusilade of bullets, and the wounding of Clell was the result.

Whirling in his saddle as he heard the report of the rifle, the world-famous desperado looked to see who had fired it.

Resting across the top of a fence at the house below, he beheld the blue barrel of the Winchester and, bent down to sight it, the head of a man.

One glance was enough to tell the bandit-chieftain who it was who had balked their clear escape.

"It's old Rozier!" snorted Jesse, ripping out a terrible oath. "That settles him! If I never live to do another thing, I'll raid his bank! It will hurt the old cuss more to lose his money than it would if I should kill his son or run off with his daughter!"

And in the fury of his rage, the great outlaw shook his unoccupied hand defiantly at the banker.

So carried away had Jesse been with wrath at the discovery of the identity of the man behind the gun that he seemed oblivious to the fact that man-hunters and citizens of the Springs alike, yelling with excitement and anger at the escape, were swarming from the doors and windows of the farmhouse and around the side of the building, attracted by the bark of the rifle.

A dozen pistols were popping but the distance between their firers and the horsemen was too great for the bullets to have effect and Jesse laughed at their abortive attempts to hit him, his contempt enraging them the more.

But Cole was watching the banker. Suddenly he saw him shift the muzzle of the Winchester till it pointed full at his chief.

"Duck, Jess, duck!" cried his chum.

Mechanically the famous desperado obeyed. And not a moment too soon!

Not a foot above the seat of the saddle where the bandit-chieftain had sat an instant before sped the death-bearing slug of lead, burying itself behind the ear of the horse on which Clell reeled, dropping the animal to the ground.

An exultant cheer rose from the crowd as the horse fell.

"Charge 'em! Rush 'em!" shouted excited men. "They haven't any guns! We can beat 'em down!"

To the townsfolk who had always thought of the terrible James gang as shooting and howling fiends, the abstinence of the three men from returning the shots sent at them suggested but one thing, that the desperadoes were unarmed. Even Higgins, Dillaby and their men were unable to understand the silence of the trio's guns.

But Jesse had not drawn his weapons for the best of reasons—the crowd of would-be capturers was out of range of his "Colts."

With the loss of Clell's horse, he suddenly awoke to the extreme danger of his position.

"Keep your eye on Rozier," he snapped to Cole, even as he spoke, leaning from his saddle and dragging his wounded pal from the prostrate beast.

"Here come some more men with Winchesters," gasped the eldest of the Younger brothers as he descried several coatless and hatless farmers line up at the fence beside the banker and rest the muzzles of their rifles on the railing.

"Get on the other side of me, so your body'll be covered by your horse, grab mine by the bits and ride. I can't guide him and hold Clell too. Make for the woods!"

Convinced that the men whom they had believed wealthy miners were in reality the terrible bandits, the men and women who had gathered to condone with the Priors had experienced a change of feeling and were yelling and shouting for the capture of the men who had defied the law so many times and with such success.

As they heard the angry cries, Susie and the Prior girls trembled with fear.

"They'll be caught! They'll be caught!" moaned Helen, wringing her hands. "Why don't they fire back?"

From the windows they had seen the wounding of Clell and the killing of his horse under him and believing that it was the beginning of the end, they buried their heads on each other's shoulders, unwilling to see the capture of their brother and heroes, and sobbed.

Yet as they waited for the shouts of triumph that would announce the fact, they were surprised to hear the shout:

"Get horses! Get horses! Ring the church bells! Summon every man in town! We'll surround the woods!"

Doubting their ears, they raised their heads and peered from the windows.

There lay the dead horse, but no sign could they see of Jesse and his chums.

"Thank goodness, they got away!" murmured Marjorie.

"Amen to that," exclaimed a voice behind them.

Startled by its nearness, the girls turned and beheld Lawyer Perkins, a merry twinkle in his eyes.

"I used to do his father's business when the Rev. James lived in these parts," he explained, in response to the looks of amazement on the fair young faces gazing at him. "If people had given Jesse and Frank a fair show after the war, they'd never have taken to their life of outlawry. And if they ever are caught, which I don't believe they will be, I hope I may be one of the men to defend them. I can tell a great many things that were done to hound them from home that would open peoples' eyes!"

"But now that they've gone, my girl," he continued, patting Susie on the shoulder, "I think it is best for you to leave town as soon as possible. The people may seek to vent their disappointment at Jesse's escape on his sister. I know the nature of the Springites all too well."

"But there's no train till night," protested Marjorie.

"True, but Susie can come to my office and—hark! What's that cry?"

From a dozen throats rose the shout:

"Seize the girls! We'll have them, anyhow! They helped Jesse to get away!"

"What did I tell you," muttered Lawyer Perkins, his face blanching at the sinister cry. "Come, there isn't a moment to lose. Helen, you won't be safe after summoning me. We'll go out by the front door while they're trying to get in here."

With an agility surprising in one of his years, the barrister sprang to the kitchen door, shut it and bolted it, then followed his frightened charges into the parlour.

Only a few stragglers were there in the front of the farmhouse, the rest of the crowd having swarmed into the yard in the wake of the man-hunters, and when they saw the girls and the barrister emerge from the front door they gave no heed, having been unable to patch the words of the latest shout.

Hurriedly crossing to the house opposite, the lawyer led his charges by a roundabout course, which showed surprising familiarity with the back-yards of his fellow citizens, to his own home and hastily secreted them in one of his chambers, telling them that he would arrange for their departure from the Springs as soon as it should be safe, then went out to mingle with the man-hunters and the excited populace again that he might keep in touch with any changes in the situation.

The town was in a turmoil of excitement when he reappeared upon the main street.

Church bells were clanging out a call to all who could move to leave their homes or fields; mounted men were riding back and forth, rounding up men and youths, yelling to them to bring rifles and shot guns and to gather at the Prior homestead. And everywhere women were adding to the excitement by screaming:

"Death to the bandits! Shoot 'em! Lynch 'em!"

But the confusion incident to the gathering of the posse of citizens acted in favour of Jesse and his pals.

Giving his sole attention to running his own horse and leading his chief's, Cole had left the watching of their pursuers to Jesse as he held Clell in his arms.

By a sharp change in direction, he had got out of range of the death-dealing rifles on the fence.

At the manoeuvre, a howl of baffled rage broke from the spectators who had expected to see the fugitives crushed beneath their mounts when the latter fell before the rain of lead.

Snatching their Winchesters from their supports, those who had them rushed to another place from which they could see the escaping bandits, but when they once more caught sight of them they were far across the field toward the woods.

Training their rifles upon the horses, whose rising and falling bodies presented difficult targets, the men fired. But their bullets were harmless and, though they discharged several volleys, they soon desisted.

"They're in a funk," announced Jesse, looking back toward where the crowd were rushing aimlessly to and fro. "Don't go into the woods. Keep along the edge. We can travel faster and if we're going to shake 'em it'll be before they get horses to chase us."

This statement, somewhat involved and incoherent because of the stress under which its utterer laboured, was understood by Cole, however, and once again he changed the direction of their course.

The significance of the move was apparent to Higgins and his fellows.

"We've got to wire to the next town and have them send out a posse to head 'em off," the former exclaimed. "Dillaby, I leave it to you to make the arrangements. Wire them at Kearney to watch out. So long as one of 'em's injured they may try to get him to Mrs. Samuels. The rest of you come with me to get horses."

But Jeff had anticipated such action and, under cover of the firing, had slipped to the barn and turned all the animals loose, throwing saddles into the grain chests and bridles upon the hay, getting away undetected.

In consequence, when the man-hunters reached the stable, they were dismayed to find them empty and nary a piece of equipment to be seen. And then it was that, in their rage, they raised the cry for the apprehension of the girls, believing them to be the ones who had liberated the horses, which was taken up by the crowd.

Precious minutes were wasted in breaking into and searching the house for the young women.

Realizing at last that they had been balked in all directions, the detectives turned their attention to organizing the horsemen who were arriving, after requisitioning enough of the animals to mount themselves.

When upwards of fifty men had gathered Jones rose in his stirrups.

"We'll ride out the road to head them off," he cried. "There's no use following through the fields. When we get sight of them, don't shoot till I give the word. When I do, make every bullet count! All ready? Forward, then."

Leaping the mettlesome mounts into the road, the posse thundered up the street, the cheers and shouts of the spectators ringing in their ears.

Eager to wipe out the disgrace of the escape of the notorious outlaws, the men rode like fiends.

Past the houses on the outskirts of the town they dashed, never heeding the questions of the people who were attracted by the rumble of the many hoof beats.

But as they gained the clear field beyond the village, they could see no sign of the men they were chasing.

"We've missed 'em again! We ought to have followed the woods. We could at least have seen where the devils entered," growled the disgusted members of the posse.

"Silence in the ranks!" snapped Jones, the criticism rankling. "They may have struck into the road. We can soon tell."

For once, the detective had anticipated the move of the world-famous desperado.

Noticing that the crowd was all up in the air as to what to do, Jesse had swung his injured pal across the saddle in front of him, getting back into the seat himself and ordering Cole to do the same.

"We've got a good lead," he chuckled. "And we can increase it by getting into the highway. We'll ride till we come to Jack Brett's woods and strike for his cabin. If Clell's too badly done up to go on, he'll be safe there."

The plan offering the shortest way out of their predicament, for both desperadoes were sufficiently versed in the ways of the detectives to know that they would wire to the surrounding towns for men to ride out to intercept them, they hurriedly struck toward the road where the hard footing enabled their mounts to increase their speed.

Thoroughly familiar with the lay of the land, they reeled off mile after mile, now and then looking back as they mounted a rise in the road.

"Here they come!" exclaimed Cole suddenly as he caught sight of the cloud of dust raised by the posse.

"Ha! I hadn't counted on their hitting the highway," growled his chief. "We'll strike into the woods as soon as we reach 'em."

Fully half a mile lay between the outlaws and the protecting shelter of the trees and in silence they rode for them.

Nearer and nearer came the whirlwind of dust and soon faint shouts told that the pursuers had sighted their quarry.

But the cries caused the bandits no concern. They knew there were several rises in the road that the posse must cover and timing their arrival at the woods for the interval when they would be hidden by one of them, Jesse swerved his mount into the underbrush.

And the howl of disappointment that broke on the air when the pursuers gained the top of the hill and found the fugitives had disappeared was sweet music to the ears of the bandits.

Again had the man-hunters been balked!

Chapter XII.

THE OUTLAWS AVOID A TRAP.

As Cole drew rein when they were out of sight from the roadway and prepared to dismount, his chief forbade him:

"We're not safe yet, boy," he cautioned. "Dillaby and his fellows will turn heaven and earth to find us. Our getting away from old man Prior's was pretty raw work for detectives who are supposed to be onto their jobs and rather than be hauled up on the carpet to explain to their superiors, they'll work as they never have before."

"I didn't even propose to stay at Brett's longer than to make an examination of Clell. Some of the posse must know him and they'll suggest it to the man-hunters and there'll be a merry old raid."

Yet even the bandit-chieftain was surprised at the suddenness with which his prophecy was fulfilled.

One of the men who was riding with Higgins did, indeed, know of the lonely cabin. Many a day he had passed beneath its thatched roof, waiting for the night to come that they might go out to shoot the deer, lured by the flaring torches, called "jacks" in hunter's parlance, they had placed nearby.

As he noted the section in which the fugitives had vanished, the hut immediately flashed into his mind and without delay he communicated his thought to the detectives.

"It's worth trying," cried the man-hunters, delightedly. "One of 'em is surely wounded and Jesse's probably making for the cabin either to leave him or wait for him to recover so they can go on. When—"

"Isn't there another trail by which we can reach the cabin?" interrupted Jones. "If we follow the one they took with so many horses they would be more than likely to hear us. But if we could arrive there first or from a different direction we'd stand a mighty good chance of getting them for keeps."

Others acquainted with the country were called into consultation as the fellow who had suggested the lonely cabin declared that he knew only the way the outlaws, had apparently taken.

"I don't know of no other trail," drawled an old, grizzled farmer, "but I *do* know a place whar we kin git within a few rods of Brett's an' by goin' through fields, too."

"Then take us there. A hundred dollars if we arrive before Jesse," returned Higgins.

"It's up to you," grinned the man. "If you kin ride, we'll git thar. It ain't no josh about the money, is it?" he added, with Yankee shrewdness seeking to make sure of the reward before he showed the way.

"No, sir," rejoined the Pinkerton. "All you've got to do is to get us there in a hurry and you'll earn the easiest hundred dollars you ever did."

"I reckon that's right," grinned the farmer. "Come on." And heading diagonally across the fields toward the woods, he raced along through the grass, taking the fences and stonewalls with an ease that would have put many a pink-coated, society huntsman to the blush.

So hot was the pace set by the guide that even those of the posse accustomed from childhood to the saddle were forced to exert themselves to keep up and the detectives were soon left straggling as best they could, barely managing to keep the others in sight.

"It looks as though you'd be out your hundred plunks," laughed Jones.

"It certainly does and I hope to goodness I am. You don't seem to grasp the fact that your 'Uncle Dudley' knew what he was doing when he made that proposition."

The questioning glances bestowed upon the detective by his comrades showed that they had not, indeed, suspected that there was a hidden meaning to the offer.

"If these Rubes do get there ahead of Jesse, they'll be obliged to fight or run. If they do the latter, I'll save my hundred; if they give battle, which from their state of mind I should think more likely, the whole thing'll be over before we arrive on the scene and there won't be any danger of our bodies offering a stopping place for any of the cut-throat's bullets."

The declaration was made with all the satisfaction of a man who had consummated a clever bargain and he looked from one to another of his fellows complacently.

None of them were loath to be saved from exposing themselves to the guns of Jesse and his pals and as they realised that the innocent proposition had obviated this danger, the spirits of the man-hunters rose rapidly and they laughed and joked as they rode along.

But in their glee, they forgot the old adage, "he who laughs last laughs best."

For the very eagerness of the grizzled farmer to win the hundred dollars defeated the detectives' purpose.

The distance to the cabin was almost a mile less by the short cut through the fields than by the path through the woods by which the desperadoes were advancing.

By hard riding, the posse gained the edge of the forest and, under the guidance of the old man, without much trouble made their way to the clearing in which Brett's hut stood.

No dogs, horses or men were in sight as the man-hunters cautiously peered from the underbrush before riding into the open.

"The devils either ain't got hyar yit or they're inside the cabin," declared the farmer.

"Thar's Brett's padlock on the door, so they ain't inside," asserted another.

"Hooray! I've won my hundred! Hey, you fellows, hurry up! I want my money!" shouted the guide, slapping his thighs in joyful anticipation of the reward.

In his excitement, the man had bellowed the words and his stentorian tone woke the echoes in the trees.

Blissfully ignorant of the change of course of their pursuers, the notorious bandits were picking their way along the trail when the shout rang through the woods.

Instantly Jesse and Cole drew rein, staring at one another.

"What does that mean?" asked the latter.

"You've got me," rejoined his chief. "I couldn't catch the words, but it behooves us to be careful."

And with eyes and ears alert, the outlaws again advanced. But their assurance was gone.

That something was transpiring of which they were ignorant, yet which vitally concerned them, each of them believed. So strong did this feeling become at last, that Cole bade

his chief wait in the forest while he went forward to reconnoitre.

At first, the world-famous desperado would not listen to the suggestion, declaring that if either of them went, he would. But his opposition was finally overcome by his chum's argument that it would be less disastrous for him to be captured than his chief and, picking out a thicket several rods from the trail they had been following, Jesse concealed himself to await the result of the scouting expedition.

Leaving his horse behind, the eldest of the Younger brothers glided away among the trees, now dodging from one trunk to another, now dropping to his knees, but ever with the silence and stealth of an Indian brave.

The roar of the guide had been heard by the detectives as well, and as it broke on the air, Higgins cursed the man roundly.

"He'd wake the dead," he growled. "If Jesse's in these woods, he'll get wise in a jiffy. Confound the idiot, anyhow."

"Don't fly off the handle so," soothed Jones. "The bandits probably know we're after them. They'll think the shout came from behind and ride all the faster to reach the cabin to get their nags hidden before we get there."

"Come on. I want to be in on some of the fun."

But when the detectives arrived at the edge of the woods, they were confronted by the fact that they were ignorant of the direction to take to reach the rest of the posse.

"Perhaps they'll shout again," hazarded one of their number. Yet, though they listened intently, no further sound came from either the posse or the winner of the hundred dollars.

At the end of five minutes, the detectives were unable longer to stand the suspense.

"Hey, some of you! Come and show us the way!" halloed Higgins.

Instead of obeying, however, the countryfolk yelled for them to ride in a straight line from a clump of beeches.

Unfamiliar with the different kinds of trees, the professional man-hunters were unable to recognize the beeches and quickly made the fact known, whereupon the grizzled farmer, who had acted as guide for the others, returned to them.

After separating from his chief, Cole had laid his course so that he would come out on a little rise in front of Brett's hut between it and the field in which the Pinkertons were.

Unaware of their presence, the outlaw was mounting the elevation when the cry from the detectives came to him.

Dropping flat on the instant, he listened for the response, peering about to see if he had run into an ambush.

But as the answer rang out from the opposite side, he realized that some of the men had reached the cabin.

Surprised at finding himself between them, in danger of discovery by one party or the other, Cole lost no time in wriggling down the little hill.

It was enough for him to know that some of the man-hunters had reached Brett's ahead of Jesse and himself and, without trying to ascertain how strong was their force, he bounded away to apprise the world-famous desperado of the situation.

"By thunder! It's a lucky thing you went ahead, boy," exclaimed the latter as his pal imparted the startling information.

"It would have been a pretty mess if we'd stumbled into the whole kit and boodle of 'em.

"We'd have had about as much show of getting out alive as a snowball has in the hot place.

"But we can't stay here. They'll get suspicious if we don't show up right soon and scour the woods for us. Besides, we've got to get Clell to some place where we can put him to bed. I looked at his wound while you were gone. It's a nasty one. His left shoulder's shattered. I don't believe he'll ever be able to use it again.

"The question is, where can we take him where he'll be safe?"

"The only place I know of is Uncle Snuffer's, over near Chalk Level," replied Cole after several moments' deliberation. "He'll be all right there for a couple of days and as soon as we know how he's coming out, Uncle Snuffer can move him, if you want."

Never having heard of the relative of his chum, the great outlaw asked as to the location of the house and if the man could be trusted.

"Theodoric Snuffer'll do anything for money," rejoined his nephew. "If you offer him ten dollars, with a promise of more if he takes care of Clell and a threat of killing him if he doesn't, he'll be mighty sure to try to earn the money."

"Then it's Snuffer's for us," returned Jesse, smiling at the uncomplimentary description of his uncle the eldest of the Younger brothers had portrayed.

The woods in which the bandits were, lay about half way between Monegaw Springs and Chalk Level and without more ado, they headed for the latter town, advancing as rapidly as they could.

During the wait for the return of his pal, after he had learned the extent of Clell's injury, the bandit-chieftain had dressed and bound the wound with some of the lotions and salves he had received from the mysterious woman of the cave on his last trip into Mexico, which he always carried in a little case in the bosom of his shirt, administering an opiate to relieve the pain when he had finished.

Warned by their narrow escape from the trap laid by the Pinkertons, the two desperadoes rode with eyes and ears open.

Without misadventure, they reached the one-storied house occupied by Cole's uncle when the outlaw again went ahead of his chief to see that no inquisitive neighbors were there.

As he stole up to the door, he was disappointed to hear the sound of voices from within yet, as he listened, his disappointment changed to delight.

The voices were those of his brothers Jim and John!

Quickly making his presence known, Cole waved aside their avalanche of questions by stating that Jesse, with the disabled Clell, was awaiting his return and without beating about the bush asked his uncle if he would shelter the wounded outlaw till they could find some other place for him.

His consent given, the oldest of the Younger brothers returned for his chief and soon they were in the house while their weary horses were contentedly munching bounteous feeds of corn and oats in the barn.

When Jesse had put Clell to bed and made pecuniary arrangements that were entirely satisfactory to the avaricious Snuffer, for his care, he rejoined Jim and John in the kitchen.

"This *is* luck, finding you boys here," he declared as he lighted his pipe. "Now we can carry out my plans without delay. I was afraid, after Clell was knocked out, that it might take some time to round any of you up. But your being here enables us to start to-night."

Delighted at the prospect of once again participating in the wild deeds of their idol, John and Jim eagerly asked his plans. But with a nod toward their uncle, the great outlaw bade them wait till they were on the way.

Realizing the wisdom of not letting the miser know too much, they fell to exchanging their experiences since they last had met, a diversion that kept them engaged during supper and till well into the evening.

Back in the woods around Brett's cabin, the man-hunters were riding hither, thither and yon, beating the underbrush for the outlaws who had escaped them and searching the ground for the hoof prints of their horses that they might learn in what direction their quarry had disappeared. But the falling twilight made the task fruitless.

When Higgins and his fellows had been guided to the hut, they hastily stationed the members of the posse in the woods surrounding the cabin that they might not be in sight as the expected bandits arrived, yet in such positions that they could pour a deadly hail of bullets into both them and their horses.

But before his neighbours scattered to take their places, the grizzled farmer exclaimed:

"I want my hundred. I got you hyar afore the outlaws an' I want it now so's I'll be sure to git it. You may not be alive to give it to me after they git hyar."

This none too cheerful suggestion did not make the offerer of the bonus any more eager to pay it, especially as the affair had not turned out in the manner he had outlined to his companions as they crossed the fields, and he tried to hedge.

But the guide was not to be denied.

"If you don't fork it over an' right off, I'll ride into the woods yellin' to Jesse James to look out," he threatened.

Confronted by such a contingency, Higgins had no recourse but to pay, which he did forthwith.

As minute after minute went by without either sight or sound of the desperadoes, the man-hunters in the underbrush began to grow restive and talked among themselves.

Freely was the opinion expressed by those of them who were old hunters that their quarry had either been scared off by the hails of the detectives or had never intended to hide in the lonely cabin.

Jones, however, insisted upon waiting, arguing that the bandits, believing themselves safe when they took to the forest, were only riding leisurely and would soon appear.

But when a half hour had passed without their showing up, even he was convinced that their plans had miscarried and ordered the posse to scour the woods.

And as they searched, the man who had won the hundred dollars was the only cheerful one among them though he wisely kept as far from the vicinity of the disgruntled Higgins as he could.

Not till it was so dark that the members of the posse had difficulty in distinguishing their fellows was the search given up, however.

Too crestfallen to speak, the detectives gave assent by their silence to the suggestion to return to the Springs and rode far behind the others, hoping against hope that some of the towns warned by Dillaby might have reported the capture of the world-famous desperado.

As the reader knows, no such announcement greeted them and in despair they wired to the office in Chicago.

The hours elapsing before the reply came were not made happy for the man-hunters by the townsfolk of the Springs and when their instructions read for them to remain in the village till the arrival of Captain Lull, who would take charge of the pursuit, their cup of bitterness was filled to the brim.

But almost at the very moment that the orders were received by the detectives, Jesse, Cole, John and Jim rode from the yard of Theodoric Snuffer.

Chapter XIII.

A MIDNIGHT RESCUE.

Suppressing their desire to know whither they were bound and upon what deed, Jim and John followed their brother and their chief, expecting the latter to disclose his plans as soon as they were out of hearing of their miserly uncle.

But the great outlaw was absorbed in his own thoughts, which were back in Monegaw Springs with his sister and friends who had stood by him so loyally and he wondered how they were faring, for he feared that either the townsfolk or the detectives, baffled in the attempt to catch him and his pals, might vent their spite on those who had made his escape possible.

And even when John begged him to keep his promise to tell them where they were bound, it was necessary for him to repeat his words before the bandit-chieftain heard them.

But when he did, he replied in grim tones:

"We're going to raid Forman A. Rozier's bank in Ste. Genevieve!" And he broke out into a fierce tirade against the banker, ending up with the subject about which he was thinking when interrupted.

Aware that his leader was deeply concerned about the welfare of Susie and the Priors, Cole sought to dispel his fears as best he could, yet, as he considered their position, he realized its dangers and soon lapsed into silence.

Trusting to the cover of night, the quartette rode along the highway which made a swing toward the health resort that had proved anything but healthy for them, as by doing so they could strike a road that would connect more directly with one running in the direction of Ste. Genevieve.

For now that he had made up his mind to loot his enemy's bank, he determined to travel by the most direct route to the town in which it was located. Yet before they arrived, it would be necessary for them to cross the State of Missouri, Ste. Genevieve being situated on the shore of the Mississippi river.

"It'll throw a shock into 'em to hear that we've raided old Rozier's shebang when they think we're hiding somewhere near the Springs," chuckled Jesse, all of a sudden.

"That it will," echoed Cole almost in the same breath and the latter continued: "They say it's a rich bank, too. Always has a hundred thousand or so in the vaults."

"So I understand," rejoined the great outlaw. "But it'll never have so much again. When we get through with it, people will be afraid to put their money in it. *I mean to leave word that I shall raid it every year!*

"Before I get through with that cur, Rozier, he'll be sorry he ever insulted me and then set detectives on my trail!"

The bitterness with which he uttered the words and the threat told how deeply the bank president's actions had cut the world-famous desperado. The disclosure so amazed his hearers that they were unable to make adequate comment and ere any occurred to them, their attention was distracted by the shrill neigh of a horse in front of them.

Not more than four miles from the Springs were the bandits when the startling sound broke on the air.

Visions of patrols and posses instantly flashed to their minds and they drew rein hurriedly.

"Into the bushes, lively! Everybody on the same side," snapped Jesse. "We'll just see who's riding so late at night."

But the desperadoes were entirely unprepared for the sight that met their eyes a few minutes after they had hidden themselves.

The spot Jesse had chosen from which to spy on the travellers was his favorite location for an ambush, a turn in the road.

As the dull pounding of the hoofs came nearer and nearer, the bandits peered eagerly from the protecting bushes, pistols in their hands for immediate use should their chief give the word.

But as they gazed at the highway, its white course seeming like some huge piece of ribbon stretched along the ground, they were amazed to see a girl and a man sweep around the bend, followed close by two more women.

Each of the three females was heavily veiled and wrapped in shawls that covered the saddles.

More than that the desperadoes could not see for the late riders were going at a fast gallop.

"Probably been to some party," commented Jim when they had disappeared up the road.

"They're mighty quiet if they have," declared John.

"Righto! They act more to me like people who are trying to escape from some one," interposed Jesse.

"Maybe they've heard we were in the neighbourhood and are keeping quiet so they won't attract us," suggested Cole.

"Non—" began his chief, then suddenly stopped, whistled low and gasped:

"By thunder! They may have been Sue and some of the Priors. Perhaps the people have made it so hot for them they've had to flee. Come on, we'll follow and find out!

"By the blood of my mother! If the citizens of the Springs have driven them out, we'll go back and shoot that burg up if we never do another thing!"

Yet before they could put the words into action they were treated to a second, and still greater, surprise.

The sound of fast running horses again fell on their ears from the direction whence the three women and man had come.

"Sit tight," whispered Jesse. "There's something in the wind. We'll follow when they get by."

Scarcely had the words left his lips than around the turn in the highway dashed six horsemen, rifles at a ready.

Fearful lest they hear the crackling of the bushes, the bandits waited till the hoof-beats were almost inaudible, then bounded into the roadway and gave chase.

Riding like fiends till they were within sight of the last group of equestrians, Jesse slowed down to a pace at which he could watch them from a safe distance.

For minutes, that seemed hours, the strange procession advanced, the first group in ignorance of the two behind it and the second unaware that it was followed.

Then, of a sudden, a voice from a horseman in the middle shouted:

"Halt, or we'll shoot!"

Rising in their stirrups the better to see, the desperadoes awaited the result of the command.

But instead of obeying, those in the lead only increased their speed.

There was a moment of intense silence.

Then a rifle cracked.

And before the report died away a woman's scream rang out.

"By the blood of my mother! That's Sue's voice!" gasped the world-famous outlaw. "After the devils, boys! We must get 'em before they can shoot again!"

"If they've hurt my sister or the girls with her, their life-blood will pay for it!"

Roused by the cowardly shot at the helpless women, the Younger brothers sprang their horses after their leader, ranging themselves at his side when they had, with difficulty, overtaken him.

Having been prevented from shooting at their pursuers when they made their dash for liberty from the Prior farm by their lack of rifles, Jesse had lost no time in supplying the want when he had discovered the small arsenal possessed by Theodoric Snuffer, though his eagerness to purchase them compelled him to pay an exorbitant price, and as they cut down the distance between the six horsemen and themselves, he ordered his companions to unsling the Winchesters from their shoulders.

The solitary shot, however, had been sufficient to cause the girls and their escort to draw rein.

"We've got to get 'em before they reach Sue and the others or we may hit them instead," hissed the great outlaw. "Rise in your stirrups! Ready; Fire!"

As the crash of the volley broke on the air, the six horsemen whirled in their saddles.

But before they could see whence the unexpected sound came, two of them toppled from their saddles while the horse of another fell in the roadway.

"Again!" yelled Jesse.

Yet in response to the second discharge of their rifles only one man fell.

"Steady, boys! Aim higher!" cautioned their chief. "One more volley and then we'll rush 'em!"

Recovering from the surprise of the attack, the remaining members of the middle group blazed away with their Winchesters.

"Out to the edge of the road!" commanded the bandit-chieftain, his voice sounding terrible in its fury.

Instantly his companions obeyed while the bullets whistled about them.

Though the move forced them to advance at a slower gait, it was a wise one, for their figures no longer loomed from the white roadbed, leaving their foes at a loss where to aim their rifles.

Incessantly the bandits pumped their rifles till only one of the six remained.

"Surrender, or we'll kill *you!*" shouted the world-famous desperado.

Unnerved by the slaughter of his comrades, the survivor gasped:

"All right. I do."

"Then drop your gun and throw up your hands," thundered the great outlaw and as the man obeyed, he burst into a laugh hideous in its uncanny hollowness.

Like a whirlwind, the bandits bore down upon the cowering creature.

"Keep him covered!" snapped the terrible desperado to his pals, then raising his voice yelled: "Don't be afraid Sue. It's only I."

As she heard her name, the girl scarcely believed her ears, then, urging her horse forward, she rode to meet her brother, crying:

"Oh, Jess! Is it *really* you!"

"Surest thing you know," returned the world-famous bandit. "Are you hurt, girlie? I heard your scream. That's how I recognized you."

"Not a scratch. It was the shock, I guess. It was so unexpected."

And unable to control her overwrought nerves she burst into tears.

"There, there, sis, don't cry. It's all right, so long as you're not hurt," soothed her brother, taking the trembling girl in his arms. "But it's a lucky thing. I happened to be in this vicinity."

Taking out his flask, Jesse ordered his sister to drink some of the brandy.

"It won't do any of the rest of you any harm to swallow some," he declared, turning to his sister's companions. "Who are you, anyhow?"

Forgetting her desire to faint in her eagerness to answer the question herself, Susie exclaimed:

"They're Marjorie and Helen—"

"And Jeff," hazarded the bandit-chieftain.

"No—o."

"Who, then?" demanded the great desperado, his voice harsh and stern.

"It's T—Tim."

"Tim Mason? What on earth's *he* doing here?"

"He—he came down to meet me," faltered his sister.

"Did your mother know he was coming down?"

But ere Susie could reply, Tim took the bull by the horns, exclaiming:

"She did *not*! But it's all right."

"Oh, is it? What would *you* think if your sis—"

"Wait till I finish," interrupted the fellow, hotly. "We came down here to be married."

The statement made, Tim rushed on, regardless of consequences: "We got tired of waiting for you to keep your promise of giving your consent to the wedding. And as Susie needs some one to protect her from the detectives who haunt the house because of your —"

"Take care," hissed Jesse. "I'm in no pleasant mood to-night." But as he caught the look of appeal cast him by his sister, his anger vanished and taking her head between his hands, he laughed: "So that was the cause of your coming to the Springs. Phew! An elopement!"

"Jicky, but it must have been an awful shock to you when you saw Cole.

"You stood by like a trump, though, when we were caught in the house and I guess you are entitled to a reward.

"Come here, Tim. Give me your hand—that's it. Now take Sue's. There you are. You may have her, boy, but if I ever hear a word of complaint of your treatment of her, well—you'd better light out for the tall timber before I can hit your trail."

The dramatic scene of the betrothal, a lonely spot in the country, the starless canopy of heaven above, the white road against which was silhouetted the figure of the prisoner, hands above his head, his captors covering him with their rifles, the huddled bodies of the dead men at his feet, with no sounds save the creaking of the saddle leather and their own breathing to break the awesome silence of the night, impressed the actors profoundly.

From one to another they looked, the expressions on their faces proclaiming they were aware that but for the timely interference, bloody and terrible as it was, of the dread bandits they might even at that moment be lying in the places of the lifeless forms.

"Come, this is time for mirth, not tears," rallied Jesse. "Boys, pull out your flasks. We'll drink to the health and happiness of the future Mrs. and Mr. Timothy Mason."

The tension broken, everybody talked at once as the flasks were passed from one to another.

Brought back to their normal selves, the great outlaw asked the meaning of the flight from the Springs, to learn of the crowd's cry for the capture of the girls, their escape with the aid of Lawyer Perkins, their hiding in his house, his going to the station to meet Susie's lover at her request, the return of the man-hunters and the decision of Tim and the barrister that it would be best for the girls to leave the town under cover of the night.

Apprised of these points, the bandit-chieftain turned his attention to his captive.

Striding so close that their bodies almost touched, he rasped:

"Why did you follow the girls? How did you know they were riding?"

"W—we thought they were going to meet you. We were going to make them lead us to you and—"

"So that's why you shot at them, knowing they were women?" burst in the terrible bandit.

"We only did it to frighten 'em."

"You certainly succeeded—and their screams brought death to your fellows.

"Who were they?"

Quickly the fellow reeled off some names that Marjorie and Helen declared belonged to none of whom they had ever heard.

"Who sent you, Dillaby or old Rozier?" thundered Jesse.

"Neither. We were going to join a posse to patrol the town when we saw them ride from Lawyer Perkins' house."

"You're lying. I can tell by the sound of your voice," interrupted the world-famous desperado. "But it doesn't make any difference.

"After we've taken your weapons away from you, I'm going to send you back to the Springs.

"Now listen carefully. I want you to tell the people how you shot at three defenceless women, how we surprised you and what we did to your women-shooting companions.

"Tell them that if they ever try to harm a hair on the head of Jesse James' sister, he'll hound them to hell!"

During the awful threat, Cole and his brothers had removed the pistols, knives and cartridges from the prisoner's clothes and as the famous outlaw saw they had finished the task, he roared:

"Now go, you cur! Ride for your life! If we can see you in two minutes, we'll open fire at you! *And don't forget to deliver my message!*"

Ere the last words had been uttered, however, the man, who believed himself literally returned from the dead, whirled his horse and dashed madly back toward the Springs.

And as he rode, the mocking laughter of Jesse rang in his ears.

Chapter XIV.

"PRINCE CHARMING."

"Can't we take a couple of shots at the guy?" implored John, casting yearning glances in the direction of the furiously riding horseman.

But before his chief could reply, Susie exclaimed:

"No, please say no, Jesse. We've—ugh!—seen enough shooting tonight," and she turned her large eyes, full of pleading, upon her brother.

"As you say, sis," returned he, good-naturedly. "The ladies are in command now, John, so I can't allow you to fire at the wretch, though it does seem a shame not to give him a couple of bullets to hurry him a bit."

Susie, however, was deaf to supplication and with a sigh the outlaws turned their backs upon the lone rider.

"Are you going to leave those—er—men?" inquired Marjorie, as Jesse and his companions dismounted to look to the cinches of their saddles.

"We are," returned the bandit-chieftain with an emphasis that warned the others that he had yielded to their demands as far as he would. "They'll serve as a warning that my family and friends are not to be trifled with."

Then dropping his harsh tone, he inquired: "Where were you-all bound for when this interruption occurred?"

"To my aunt, Mrs. Jarvis, in Deepwater," answered Tim.

"Good. The girls ought certainly to be secure from annoyance with any of your family, who'd never be suspected of harbouring the Jameses or their friends. I rather think you girls had better stay there for a few days till things get quieter. There's liable to be something happen in course of forty-eight hours or so."

"Oh, Jess, why can't you be satisfied with getting away?" besought his sister, only to be silenced by his retort:

"Just mind your own affairs, little girl. There are a good many things you don't understand so don't bother your head about them. You'll have enough to think of—and more—with silks and ribbons and all the rest. For now that you and Tim have tried to

steal a march on me once, the sooner you are married the less likely you'll be to attempt it again."

Their thoughts distracted from their nerve-racking experience through which they had passed by the reference to the nuptials, Susie and the girls, with women's interest in such events, fell to discussing the clothes that would be necessary and, smiling indulgently at their innocent prattle, the desperadoes ordered them to advance and rode along in their rear.

In apparent forgetfulness of the presence of the men who were so feared, Susie and her friends proceeded for miles before they noticed that they were following.

"Why, Jess," exclaimed Marjorie, happening to look back over her shoulder, "I didn't know you had come with us. Aren't we taking you out of your way?"

"Never mind about that," rejoined the world-famous desperado. "It's a good twenty miles from here to Deepwater and lots of things could happen before you got there, so many that I don't propose to risk your going alone. But if you want to do me a favour, will you ride faster and keep quiet? There's no telling who's abroad."

Recalled to the reality of the danger they were running in traveling at night when the whole section of the state was supposed to be searching high and low for the dread Jesse and his companions, the little troop rode on in silence.

As they approached a dark place in the highway the bandit-chieftain and John galloped ahead to draw the fire, in case any patrols were in ambush, while Cole and Jim guarded the rear. Villages and towns were given a wide berth, the cavalcade making a wide detour around them, even avoiding clusters of farm houses in their anxiety not to arouse any dogs which might give the alarm and enable the course of the fugitives to be traced.

At last, as the sky was growing green with the first tinge of the coming day, the spires of Deepwater came in sight, their white sides looking like spectres hovering between heaven and earth.

As they approached the town, the crowing of the cocks announced the wakening life.

"I don't believe we'll go any farther," declared Jesse, calling a halt on the outskirts of the village. "No one will interfere with you now and if any body should, you can say you're guests of Mrs. Jarvis out for an early ride. Tim knows how to work the bluff. I think you'd best get back to Kearney this morning, boy. You can explain to mother about Sue's trip to Monegaw Springs and tell her that it's all right for I've given my consent. When you've eased her mind, you come back here. Oh, you might tell her I'm going on a business trip to Ste. Genevieve and that I'll run in to see her on my way back. Say that Frank and Texas have gone north on a surveying expedition to be gone several weeks. If she, or any of you, have anything important to communicate to me, you can meet me in the old wood-chopper's camp at Sni Mills in five weeks.

"Take care of yourselves, now."

And touching his lips to his sister's forehead, the dare-devil bandit turned, caught Marjorie around the waist and planted a resounding smack on her luscious mouth, repeated the salute on Helen and cantered away, laughing gaily, before the blushing girls could remonstrate.

The deviation from his course across the state, necessitated by the escorting of his sister and friends to their destination, was little to the taste of the world-famous desperado, though he concealed his feelings from Susie and the girls.

But once clear of them, he rode like mad to recover the lost ground.

His hope of success in looting the bank lay in striking before the man-hunters should discover that he had left the region of Monegaw Springs and in his race against time, every hour was precious.

Keeping to the highway till it grew so light they feared discovery, the outlaws finally rode into the woods and when they reached a well-sheltered ravine, dismounted to rest their horses.

Though Cole and Jesse had left their false beards in the little ham-chamber in the chimney of the Prior house, where they had suffered such agony, they still wore their business suits they had donned in McAlester, in the Indian Territory, before going to the Springs.

John and Jim, however, were clad in the cowboy garb the bandits affected. "Wouldn't it be best for us to shift back into our 'Wild West' togs?" suggested the eldest of the Younger brothers as he noted the incongruity in the appearance of the company. "If anybody should see us, they'd sure be likely to notice us with two of us all rigged out to kill and the others not."

"I reckon it would be a good idea," returned his chief. "The people at the farmhouse didn't seem to notice that our faces were smooth, at least they didn't raise any yell about it, and they probably would have if they'd caught on to the fact, so we'll have a better chance of getting by in our usual costume."

Little time did it take the bandits to change but they carefully folded the suits they took off and put them into their saddle bags for future emergencies.

Their horses refreshed by the rest and the grass they had cropped, Jesse gave the word to re-saddle and mount and they resumed their cross-state ride.

Throughout the day they advanced, picking their course through the woods, till along toward dusk their hunger decided them to halt near a farmhouse where they determined to secure some food.

Leaving Cole with John to guard the horses, that the more experienced man might steady the lad and parry any pertinent questions should any inquisitive countryman stumble upon them, the bandit-chieftain and Jim started for the house.

Keeping under cover of the bushes till they reached the road, they scanned the buildings closely as they approached.

The unpainted boards, made grey by exposure to wind and rain, bespoke the occupants as not overburdened with worldly goods. The roof of a shed running from the house to the barn was sadly in the need of repair, giving evidence of being on the verge of collapsing, and as they turned into the yard a litter of pails, broken-down wagons and all sorts of old rubbish suggested that the inmates were shiftless as well as poor.

"Not very inviting," commented John, taking in the surroundings.

"You can't always judge by appearances," returned his chief.

And as the door was opened in response to his rap, his companion conceded that he was right.

Looking at them with frightened eyes was a girl of possibly twenty years, her beauty in startling contrast to the ragged calico wrapper in which she was clad.

A mass of Titian hair, glorious despite its disorder, crowned a face exquisite in its fine moulding and delicate colouring.

Her eyes, blue and innocent as a babe's, alone bore trace of the poverty and want her environment proclaimed.

Blushing at the frank admiration in the faces of the men before her, the girl seemed to realize the incongruity of her appearance and in a tone of resentment demanded:

"What do you want?"

"We should like to get something to eat, if you will sell it to us," replied the bandit-chieftain.

"Food? You come *here* for food?" exclaimed the creature, and then burst into a laugh, awful in its bitterness.

Surprised at her action, Jesse was about to speak when she went on:

"We haven't enough for ourselves, let alone strangers. There's nothing in the house but a little corn meal. Ma's in bed with a fever, baby's ailing and they took our cow away from us today."

Then, as though ashamed for her rancor, she added: "But if we *had* anything you'd be welcome."

His big heart ever warm for those in distress, as he heard of the tribulations besetting the fair girl and her family, the world-famous desperado became interested and when the loss of the cow was disclosed, he uttered an ejaculation of anger that anyone should be so cruel.

Something of what was passing through his mind showed in his eyes and instead of closing the door, as she started to do, the girl looked at him eagerly.

"Where are the men folks?" he asked.

Wincing as though she had been struck with a lash, the beauty drew back.

"I beg pardon," hastily continued Jesse. "I didn't mean to add to your anguish. I fancy I understand about them."

And the relief that his words brought to the blue eyes was ample reward to the bandit-chieftain and he continued: "How would it be if we should buy some food at the village, would you cook it for us? We'll pay you for your trouble."

Scarce believing her ears, the girl looked at the outlaws as though they were genii sprung from the earth, then exclaimed:

"I'll ask Ma. Won't you come in? You'll have to excuse the looks of the house but I haven't felt much like tidying up."

Accepting the invitation eagerly, in the hope that he might get a glimpse of the fever-stricken woman and the infant, Jesse entered.

But the sight that greeted his eyes made the yard seem clean and well-kept, in comparison.

On one side of the room, which served as kitchen and bed-chamber, stretched on a pallet of straw, lay a grey-haired woman, her thin face and flushed cheeks evidencing all too clearly the ravages of the malady with which she was afflicted.

And resting in the crook of an emaciated arm lay a baby, fussing and whimpering, now and then crying:

"Mik. I wan' my mik."

In his interest in the twain on the sorry bed, the world-famous desperado was oblivious to the rags, dishes, broken chairs and battered stove that formed the rest of the furnishings.

"These men want to know if I'll cook 'em something to eat if they'll buy it," announced the girl, dropping to her knees that she might speak in the woman's ear.

"Law, child, I don' believe the stove'll draw," replied her mother, when she understood the reason for the strangers' presence.

"Then we'll get food that won't need cooking," returned Jesse.

"You'll have to speak louder, Ma's deaf," declared her daughter.

"Well, you kin do as you please," rejoined the sick creature. "It may draw and it may not."

"We'll take the chance," asserted the bandit-chieftain. "Jim, you and Miss—"

"Shaw, Daisy Shaw," supplied the girl.

"You and Miss Shaw make out a list of what she needs at the store while I see if I can't make her mother a bit easier." And kneeling beside the bed of straw, he took out his medicine case with its wonderful salves and lotions.

In reply to his questions, the bandit-chieftain learned that the woman had been tossing with the fever for more than a week, though not till the desertion of her husband and son, two days before, had it become virulent.

The mention of the faithless scoundrel who had left her in want and misery threw her into wild ravings.

"Does she have these spells often?" asked the great outlaw as he hastily produced an opiate from his case.

"Most of the time. Oh, she takes on awful!" returned the girl whose status as wife of the runaway son or sister, the bandits had not yet ascertained.

But it was one thing to prepare the narcotic and another to administer it.

At first the woman would not listen to the suggestion, protesting that Jesse was but some miserable tool of her husband, sent by him to poison her. And it required the combined efforts of the three to reassure her. So weak was she from lack of nourishment and the ravages of the fever that when she did swallow it the effect was almost instantaneous, however.

By the time her mother was wrapped in the first sleep since her abandonment by her husband, Daisy and Jim had completed the list.

"Have you thought of everything?" smiled Jesse as he noted the look of fearsome eagerness on her face as she handed him the slip.

"That will do for the present," she replied, relieved that the number of the wants had not appalled their benefactor.

"But there's not enough to last two days," protested the famous desperado, glancing through the items. "Jim, go to the store—Miss Shaw will direct you how to reach it, and order three times the amount she's put down. Get a barrel of flour and a barrel of sugar, too. Have someone drive the stuff back with you. Now hurry, I'm hungry."

As his chum picked up his hat and departed, after receiving the necessary instructions to reach the store. Daisy tried to thank the generous stranger, but with a laugh, Jesse begged her not to mention it and distracted her attention from his largess by suggesting that she bathe her mother in a lotion he took from his medicine case.

"She isn't my real mother," confided the girl, "only my mother-in-law. I married Tom in New Orleans. He was a horse jockey at the time. But he got to drinking, lost his job and we drifted up here—and now he's left me."

"Good riddance, I should say," snapped Jesse. And by dint of clever questioning, he drew from the girl the whole sad story of deception and disgrace to which she and the sick woman had been brought by the worthless father and son whose disappearance was due to some transgression of the law.

His sympathy aroused, the famous desperado asked about the cow, learning that she had been taken for a mortgage which was not due for three days. Having a chance to sell her and believing that the deserted woman could never raise the amount loaned, the hardhearted farmer had driven the animal away.

Boiling with indignation at the injustice, Jesse demanded the man's name.

"He's Hiram Rozier and he's awful rich," answered Daisy.

"I wonder if he is any relation to the Roziers in Ste. Genevieve?" hazarded the bandit-chieftain.

"He has a brother who's president of or owns a bank."

"Ha! He *is* one of that tribe, eh?" hissed Jesse.

"I'll pay him a visit before I leave this town. You'll either have your cow back or another in its place."

Something in the tone in which her "Prince Charming" uttered the promise made Daisy look at him and the expression she saw on his face caused her to shrink from him in terror.

But his paroxysm of rage lasted only a moment and when Jim returned with the groceries and provisions half an hour later, they were laughing and joking as they struggled to make the battered stove do its duty.

When the supplies had been transferred from the wagon to the house, Jesse bade his chum wait upon the girl while he transacted a little business and without giving either Daisy or Jim a chance to object, went from the house, jumping up beside the driver of the grocery wagon whom he ordered to drive as fast as he could to the home of Hiram Rozier.

The curiosity of the villager excited by the unheard-of order for provisions for the Shaws, the fellow sought to learn Jesse's relation to the family who were sneeringly alluded to as "poor white trash" by their more prosperous neighbours.

Deeming it advisable to offer some explanation, the world-famous desperado amused himself during the drive by unfolding a wondrous tale of a long-lost sister, stolen by gypsies when she was a tot, found in the person of Daisy Shaw.

"Here we be to Hiram's," announced the fellow, as he pulled up in front of a big white house, the blinds on the front of which were all shut tight. "Shall you want me any more?"

In the tone was a mixture of desire to impart the choice bit of gossip of the returned brother to his cronies at the store and reluctance to leave the stranger lest he miss something.

Smiling at it, Jesse replied:

"If you can, I should be obliged if you would listen to my conversation with Mr. Rozier. I may want a witness."

Here was mystery indeed—the long-lost brother of Daisy Shaw desiring a witness to a conversation with the richest man in town! And in his haste to descend from the wagon, the clerk caught his foot in the reins and would have fallen had not the bandit-chieftain caught him.

Going boldly up to the front door, his companion following at a safe distance, Jesse lifted the old fashioned brass knocker and let it fall with a resounding rap.

In a few moments shuffling steps sounded and a man, whose face, though older and topped with white locks, was a counterpart of the banker's at Monegaw Springs, opened the door, demanding gruffly:

"What do you want?"

"Is this Mr. Hiram Rozier?" asked the famous desperado.

"It is."

Assured on this point, Jesse went to the point without any preliminaries:

"You stole Mrs. Thomas Shaw's cow from her today, didn't you?"

"Stole her cow? No, sir! How dare you say such a thing?" thundered the infuriated man.

"Don't raise your voice—unless you want your neighbors to hear," retorted his interrogator, coolly. "You did steal it *and you know you did!* There was a mortgage on it but it wasn't due till day after tomorrow.

"I've come to take back that cow!"

Dropping his bombastic manner, Hiram Rosier whined:

"I got it in a business way. I had a chance to sell her. Mrs. Shaw couldn't pay the money even if it isn't due for three days. There's nothing wrong about the transaction. I can't afford to lose fifteen dollars and sixty cents when I—"

"Rubbish!" snapped Jesse. "Mrs. Shaw *can* pay the money. See, here's a twenty-dollar bill. But she *won't*—with my permission.

"How much did you get for the cow?"

Too amazed by such treatment to think of refusing to reply, the old man stammered:

"Forty dollars."

"Giving you a profit of practically twenty-five dollars, eh? Is that the way you made all your money, stealing food from the mouths of helpless women and children?"

"I won't listen to such abuse!" roared Hiram Rozier and he started to shut the door in the great outlaw's face.

The latter had been expecting such a move, however, and quickly reaching out his powerful right arm, seized the old man and yanked him on to the porch, hissing:

"Oh, yes you will—and more too. I want you to get on this wagon and drive with me to the man to whom you sold Mrs. Shaw's cow."

"And if I refuse?"

"I'll have you arrested for selling stolen property."

The humiliation and disgrace such a proceeding would bring upon the name of Rozier decided the old man and he rejoined:

"Wait till I get my hat."

"Oh, no you don't. Do I look like a fool enough to let you go back into the house? You put my hat on your head and come along."

Before the other could remonstrate, the world-famous desperado had jammed his sombrero upon the white locks and was dragging the old man toward the wagon.

Pinching himself to see if he were awake, the clerk followed and, when all were on the seat, drove to the house named by Mr. Rozier.

Arrived, Jesse accompanied the unwilling moneylender to the door.

When the purpose of the visit was made known, the purchaser of the cow at first refused to surrender her in return for the money he had paid, finally declaring, however, that he would part with her for fifty dollars.

Threatening to expose him should he decline to give the extra ten dollars, Jesse forced the brother of the banker to pay it and with the cow tied to the wagon, they drove back to his house.

The loss of the money rankling in his breast, as the team stopped in front of his gate, Mr. Rozier exclaimed:

"If you'll give me the amount of the mortgage, I'll have it cancelled."

"Not much," retorted the bandit-chieftain. "You'll send the paper, marked 'satisfied in full of all demands' 'round to Mrs. Shaw's tonight before nine o'clock or she'll swear out a warrant against you!"

And without giving the terrified old man the opportunity to reply, Jesse ordered the dumbfounded grocery clerk to drive on.

Chapter XV.

JESSE GETS HIS REVENGE.

Dismissing the clerk with a generous tip when they had returned to the Shaw house, Jesse jumped from the wagon, untied the cow and intended to wait till the fellow had driven away before calling to Daisy to come out.

But the rattle of the wheels had been heard by the girl and Jim, and they rushed to the door to learn who had arrived.

"Is that you, chief?" called the member of the Younger family, unable to see in the darkness after leaving the lighted room.

Ere the great outlaw could reply, however, the cow gave a low "moo," evidently glad to be home, and with a gasp of incredulous delight, Daisy darted to the animal, threw her arms around its neck and murmured:

"Is it really you, Topsey? How can we ever thank you, sir. Little Tom will have his milk now—unless—unless—" and she stopped abruptly.

"Unless what, Miss Shaw?" inquired the bandit-chieftain.

"Unless Mr. Rozier only let her come back for the three days."

"Don't worry about that. Topsey, if that's her name, is yours for good and all. Hiram Rozier will never trouble you about her."

Yet though the girl pressed him, he would say nothing about the manner in which the animal had been recovered.

Leading the cow to her shed, Daisy bade Jim fetch a milk pail, announcing that supper would be ready as soon as she had finished the task.

But Jesse realized that Cole and John would be worried at the length of time he and his companion were absent and, going into the house, he helped himself to such articles of food as he thought his pals would relish, then set out to rejoin them.

Their anxiety relieved by the return of their chief, the Youngers listened interestedly to his account of the occurrences during his absence, both of them stripping a bill from their rolls and asking him to give them to the stricken family.

"Saddle the horses at nine o'clock," Jesse remarked after thanking them for their contributions. "Jim and I'll be back as soon as we see whether that brute Hiram sends the cancelled mortgage or not."

"Sit tight and don't take any chances."

Daisy and her companion had not been in the house long when the world-famous desperado returned.

To his delight, the girl asked no embarrassing questions about his absence, apparently considering it but natural that he should look around, and no mention did she make of the missing edibles.

With a joy that was reward sufficient in itself, the baby took his milk, being indulged with a double allowance in honour of the visit of "Santa Claus" as Daisy called her benefactor.

On the pallet, Mrs. Shaw was sleeping peacefully.

Sitting down to the rickety table, the outlaws ate ravenously, for they had been more than twenty-four hours without food.

Their hunger, appeased, Jesse suggested that on the morrow the girl look for some cosy, clean rooms with a farmer who would keep Topsey, leaving the ramshackle hovel for good and all.

The plan met with Daisy's approval till she remembered that such comfort would cost money, but her disappointment was quickly alleviated by the great outlaw.

"With proper care, I think Mrs. Shaw will throw off the fever," said he, encouragingly. "You must have a doctor and give her and yourself and the baby, too, plenty of

nourishing food. Then, as soon as your mother-in-law is able to travel, I think it would be a good plan for you all to go down to your people, if you care to, in New Orleans. If you don't I'll try to find a place for you somewhere. I'll make it a point to come back and look you up in a couple of weeks, anyhow. And in the meantime, if you'll accept a little present from me, it'll keep you going till I see you again."

And as he concluded his speech, Jesse placed several crisp bank notes on the table in front of the girl.

Fascinated by the sight of so much money, Daisy gazed at it for several minutes, then with a little sigh, took one bill and pushed the rest toward her "Prince Charming," murmuring:

"You're so good. I'll take this twenty dollars because it'll help pay the doctor and feed little Tom. But I can't accept the rest. It wouldn't be right. Why, look at all you've done for us, buying provisions and getting back Topsey, and I don't even know your name."

"Never mind about that now," returned the great desperado, awkwardly. "I'm always glad to assist people in want. You just put that money in a safe place and don't think any more about it. Some day, perhaps, you'll be able to help me and if you are, I shall count upon your doing so."

Puzzled by the suggestion that so insignificant a person as she might be of service to the strong, handsome man before her, the girl was on the point of renewing her attempt to learn his identity when there was a knock on the door.

Exchanging hurried glances, the bandit-chieftain and Jim rose to their feet, crossing the room toward a window, their hands ready to whip out their six-shooters should the summons be from some of their enemies.

Unheeding the significant precaution, Daisy went to the door and opened it.

"Here's a letter from Mr. Hiram Rozier," piped a boy's voice. "He says he hopes Mrs. Shaw's better."

But the girl vouchsafed no reply, simply taking the envelope and shutting the door in the messenger's face.

"What can this be?" she exclaimed, turning the missive over and over in her hands as though trying to learn its contents through the cover.

"Open it and find out," smiled Jesse. "I don't believe it's loaded."

Mechanically Daisy obeyed, drawing forth a carefully folded piece of paper.

"Why, it's the mortgage on Topsey and it says 'satisfied in full of all demands' on it. This is more of your work, sir," she cried, raising her happy face to the great outlaw's.

"So I fancy. I thought the old duffer would listen to reason. And now that everything's all right, we must go."

Finding that her entreaties were of no avail, the girl insisted upon their taking lunch with them and after Jesse had showed her about some medicines he left for the sick woman,

with many expressions of her gratitude for their surprising generosity, Daisy watched them till they were lost in the darkness of the night.

For several rods the two outlaws walked on in silence, then the chief exclaimed:

"I sure am glad we happened to strike that house."

Attributing the statement to his sympathetic nature, Jim praised his bounty.

But when they rejoined Cole and John, he was made aware that it was prompted by other causes as well.

"The old curmudgeon sent back the mortgage, cancelled," announced Jesse excitedly. "I've thrown a jolt into old Hiram that he won't forget till his dying day. *Now for the other Rozier!* Come on. We must be in Ste. Genevieve day after tomorrow."

Realizing that the task would mean hard riding, the bandits lost no time in getting under way, passing through the town that Jesse might point out where the lion he had "bearded in his den" lived, to his fellows.

Twice during the night, the desperadoes were startled by the sound of rapid hoof-beats and reined into the bushes at the side of the road to discover who was riding so late.

The first one proved to be a solitary horseman coming from the direction in which they were going, but the second caused them deep concern.

Five men, with rifles carried across their saddle pommels, ready for instant use, dashed along the highway, bound eastward as were the bandits.

Never uttering a word, the men leaned forward the better to penetrate the darkness ahead.

"Do you suppose they're after us or are they just out on a little game of their own?" whispered Jim as the hoof-beats died away in the distance.

"Goodness only knows," returned the world-famous desperado. "They mean business, whoever they are. Just keep your ears open."

Fearing an ambush, the outlaws rode with the utmost caution, carefully examining any dark places along the highway before they entered.

The possibility that they were officers sent out by Hiram Rozier was discussed but no decision could they come to and it was with feelings of relief that they watched the day dawn.

Pausing in a dense copse for breakfast, they devoured the lunch provided by Daisy and took turns at sleeping till about ten o'clock when they once more took up their course.

Riding in the shelter of the woods, the outlaws covered many miles before sundown when they again rested.

Forced to be content with smoking their pipes and tightening their belts in lieu of supper, they stopped only long enough to feed their mounts, then entered upon the final stage of their cross-state dash.

In contrast to the two previous nights, the moon rose clear, enabling them the better to see the roadway and thus make faster time.

No untoward incidents occurred. Not a traveller did they meet and at six o'clock in the morning they rode into Ste. Genevieve.

Founded by the Catholics in the early part of the eighteenth century, the town had grown in wealth and population steadily. The old French families had imparted a courtliness and refinement that distinguished it from other villages when the horde of home-seekers flocked across the "Big Muddy," lured by dreams of wealth and happiness to be found beyond its shores.

With a thrift inherited from their forebears, the inhabitants saved their money and Jim had not been wrong when he had declared that Rozier's bank usually carried upwards of \$100,000 in its vaults.

The air was redolent with the fragrance of Spring as Jesse, Jim, John and Cole rode through the streets, their minds bent upon a crime against the citizens.

Stopping at the first livery stable to which they came, the outlaws ordered their horses fed and inquired the way to the nearest good restaurant.

It was the belief of the world-famous desperado that men were more daring with their stomachs full than when hunger gnawed at them, and never did he undertake any of his sensational raids without eating first, when possible.

Being directed to a first-class eating place, they laughed and chatted during their breakfast and no one who saw them would have thought they contemplated perpetrating any foul deed.

Purchasing cigars when they had finished their meal, the quartette sauntered out onto the street to find where the Savings Association Bank was located and to look over the building, its approaches and entrances.

In the northern end of the town they discovered it, its name announced by a gold-lettered sign with black background at the top of a one-story building and in smaller letters on the windows.

"What luck," chuckled Jesse as they walked past the bank. "It's right on a corner. You and Jim, John, can wait in this side street. There are nothing but dwelling houses on it, that I can see. By looking through the windows, you can see anybody passing on the main thoroughfare and no inquisitive attention will be attracted to you as there would if you sat your horses in front of the bank.

"When we go back, we'll notice what time it opens. The earlier we turn the trick, the less risk we'll run of being interrupted."

Not just beyond the building did the bandits stop and turn, however. Too thoroughly versed in the art of avoiding attention when they wished to, they walked half a mile beyond the bank, crossed the street and returned on the opposite side.

"Get a look at the cashier's cage," whispered their chief as they drew near.

In the most casual manner, the desperadoes glanced toward the institution, then turned their eyes upon something else.

But in the brief space they had learned what they wished.

White enamelled letters announced that the banking hours were from nine till twelve in the morning and from two till four in the afternoon, and on Saturday evenings from seven till eight.

The desk of the cashier was at the end of the counter next to the side street, evidently so placed that the official might converse with customers without being heard by any others who might be in the bank.

And directly behind the desk the massive steel doors of the vault were visible.

"It's only seven-thirty," declared Jesse, looking at his watch when they had passed the bank. "Let's drop into the hotel and look at yesterday's newspapers. I'd like to see what they have to say about the shindy at the Springs."

No better way of spending the hour and a half they were forced to wait suggesting itself, the quartette entered the village Inn and were soon engrossed in the fantastic report of Jesse's escape from the health resort.

Beyond the usual, exaggerated account of the number of his companions, there was nothing that caused them concern.

But the perusal served as an excellent "kill time" and it was with a start that the great outlaw noticed the hands on the Inn clock pointing to quarter before nine.

"It's time to get the horses," he declared, rising.

Without the quiver of an eyelash to betray their intense excitement, now that the time for action was at hand, the others got up and left the hostelry.

Quickening their pace as they reached the street, they were soon at the livery stable and as the village clock struck the hour of nine, they cantered leisurely past the bank into the side street where Cole and his chief dismounted, leaving their horses in charge of Jim and John.

"Watch out for people who look as though they were going to enter the bank. *And shoot 'em before they do so!*" whispered the world-famous desperado as he gave the reins of his pony to Jim.

No hour of the day could have been more auspicious for the outlaws!

So early was it that few women were upon the street on shopping bent, the merchants were busy reading their morning mail and those of the citizens who worked had gone to their labours hours before.

Passing around onto the main street, for there was only one door to the Savings Association Bank, and that on the front side, Jesse and Cole mounted the two steps and entered the institution.

But as they opened the door they received a shock!

Standing beside the cashier was Forman A. Rozier, Jr.!

In obedience to his father's command, the lad had come to Ste. Genevieve to warn Mr. Harris of his president's fears. With the easy confidence of youth, he had added, on his own responsibility, that he thought his sire was unduly alarmed and that Jesse would have too much to do to get away from the posse at the Springs to think of wreaking his vengeance upon the bank. Yet all the money, save about \$10,000, had been sent to Kansas City as the elder Rozier wished.

No sign did either the bandit-chieftain or his pal make, however, that would disclose their surprise at his presence.

The cashier and the son of the banker were chatting together when Jesse suddenly whipped out his trusty "Colts" and covered them, hissing:

"We've come to help you open the bank! Get a move on and open that vault!"

In blank amazement, the startled cashier whirled about, his mouth opened as though to shout an alarm only to close it as he beheld the ugly muzzles of the four six-shooters pointed at him.

"Don't stand and gawp! Step lively!" admonished the bandit-chieftain.

For an instant, Mr. Harris hesitated, evidently trying to make up his mind whether to save his life or his depositors' money, then whined:

"You have me at your mercy! I'm helpless!"

"That's the way to talk," grinned the great outlaw. "But 'actions speak louder than words.' Open that vault or you'll be running errands for the Devil before you're two minutes older!"

His hands trembling so that he could with difficulty work the combination, the cashier strove to obey.

Intent upon watching him, Cole and Jesse had left young Rozier unguarded.

Biding his time, the youth waited till the robbers' eyes were riveted on the steel vault, then made a dash for the door.

But the sound of his steps recalled the bandits to his existence.

Whirling, the great outlaw swung at him with his pistol barrel, just grazing the top of his head.

"No you don't, you little cuss!" he snapped. "Come here to me or I'll make a new heir to the Rozier wealth!"

Fearing to disobey, young Forman walked slowly toward his captor.

"Get up there behind the counter," commanded the bandit-chieftain. "That's the way. Now hold this bag!" And he produced the ever-present gunny-sack from the blouse of his shirt.

The massive doors of the safe had answered to the manipulation of the tumblers in the combination and Cole was inside as the boy reluctantly took hold of the bag.

"Where's the rest of the money?" demanded the eldest of the Younger brothers, emerging with only two sacks of gold in his hands and a couple of packages of bank notes under his arms.

"It's—it's in Kansas City!" whimpered the cashier.

"A—ha! I see! This is your doings, you little pig-faced mut!" roared Jesse, grabbing young Rozier by the coat collar and shaking him while he poured a torrent of blasphemous abuse on his luckless head. "How much *was* there in the vault last night, old baldy?" he snarled at Mr. Harris.

"\$8,500."

"How much did you send to Kansas City?"

"Not quite \$100,000."

At the thought of the vast amount of which he had been deprived by the journey of the bank president's son to Ste. Genevieve, the wrath of the world-famous desperado broke out anew.

"Why didn't you stay in the Springs?" he thundered. "I was a fool not to have shot you when you pointed out my tent to Dillaby."

Gazing at the bandit in terror, the youth blinked at him a moment, then cried:

"You're 'Howard' the false miner! Father was right! Help! He—"

But the cry was stifled in his throat by the powerful fingers of the terrible outlaw.

"You lie, you little vermin! I'm not 'Howard'—I'm Jesse James! A—ah! It makes you blanch when you think that you and your money-loving father insulted *me* and set detectives on my track, eh?

"You've cheated me out of \$100,000 by coming here! And by the blood of my mother! I'll take it out of your hide. I'll teach the Rozier tribe better than to try to drug Jesse James with doped wine!"

And before either Cole and the cashier recovered from their surprise at the fury of the great bandit's denunciation, Jesse lifted the banker's son from the floor, hurled him into the vault and slammed the massive doors shut.

"It'll cost old Rozier a few dollars before he gets you out of here," chuckled the world-famous desperado.

And to the horror of Mr. Harris, he aimed his revolver at the lock and pulled the trigger, shattering the combination with the bullet.

"He'll die! He'll smother!" wailed the cashier.

"Let him! If you dare to raise an alarm for five minutes, I'll come back and blow the top of your bald pate off.

"Come, Cole! We'll go back to the Springs and get old Rozier. And just remember this, you Harris. If Rozier doesn't resign as president of this bank, I'll raid it every year.

"Tell *that* to your directors!"

Chapter XVI.

THE BUTCHERY AT CHALK LEVEL.

Terror-stricken at the casting into the vault of his master's son and the destruction of the lock, Mr. Harris stared in bewilderment at the prison-vault, aware that the boy might suffocate before workmen could open the doors.

Even the dire threat of repeating the robbery failed to arouse him and no heed did he pay as Jesse picked up the bag of plunder and walked calmly from the building, with his pal at his side.

But the pistol shot had been heard!

In his yard across the street, a man had been setting out flowers.

As the report rang out from the bank, he glanced toward it and beheld the desperadoes, their pistols pointed at the cashier.

Dropping his gardening implements, the man rushed into the house to get his shotgun, bravely intending to go to the assistance of Mr. Harris.

"What is it, Henry?" asked his wife as she noticed the scared expression on her husband's face as he ran for his weapon.

"Robbers—in the—bank!" he gasped, taking the gun from its rack by the kitchen door.

"Gracious me! What are *you* going to do?"

"Go to the help of Mr. Harris, of course."

"Henry Farnam, are you a fool? Will you never learn to mind your own business? Go to Harris' rescue, will you? Well, I guess not. If you stay here, the robbers'll probably not hurt him. I know him too well to think he'd refuse to do what they said. But if they see you rushing at them with a gun, they'll like as not kill him and put a bullet into you for your pains. And your insurance premium hasn't been paid for this year! No, sir. You just put that gun back in its rack and stay in the house!"

Accustomed to the domination of his energetic spouse, Farnam meekly returned the weapon to its place by the kitchen door and followed his wife into the front room to watch proceedings from a safe position behind the closed blinds.

"There they go! Mercy, how fierce they look! Henry, Henry, I've saved your life!" babbled the woman, as the outlaws strode away from the bank, throwing her arms around her husband's neck.

But Farnam was more interested in the robbers and wriggling from the hysterical embrace, saw them mount their horses and dash madly up the street.

Sure that they were gone, he rushed from his house and gave the alarm.

From all sides men ran in response to his frenzied shouts and the excitement was increased by the appearance of the cashier in the door of the looted bank, crying for dynamite, gunpowder and sledge hammers.

When they learned, however, of the entombment of young Rozier they dashed in all directions to get implements to cut their way into the vault. But though the massive doors had failed to protect the funds, they resisted all attempts to demolish them and, in despair, the leaders of the rescue work decided to blow them off with nitro-glycerine, deeming it preferable for the banker's son to run his chances of being hit by flying fragments than to die of strangulation.

All of the people who had been attracted by the wild shouts could not get into the bank, however, and some of those compelled to stand on the outside talked of pursuing the thieves.

Quickly a dozen men volunteered their services.

"Go and get horses and guns!" yelled a voice. "You can't catch 'em on foot."

Oblivious of the sarcasm, the men rushed to secure them.

Had any of them been possessed of intrepid courage, they might have recovered the plunder!

As the outlaws raced northward up the main street, Jesse handed the bag of spoils to John, that he might have both hands free to use his shooting-irons should they be followed.

Frightened, as the sack was swung toward it, the animal which John rode, bucked furiously, unseating him.

As the bandit struck the street, the gunny-sack burst, spilling the gold and greenbacks.

Cursing wildly, the world-famous desperado yanked his pony to its haunches.

"Pick it up!" he roared.

But as his companions dismounted, the bandit-chieftain discovered that John's horse was tearing madly up the street.

At the very moment when success was hovering over them the series of accidents had occurred!

Undaunted, however, the great outlaw determined to keep his ill-gotten gains. No pursuers were in sight and if the runaway pony could be caught, they might still make

good their escape. Yet he was loath to leave his pals to go in chase lest a posse appear while he was away.

As he was hesitating what to do, the rumble of wheels in a side street caught his ear and turning toward it, he beheld a man whose cast of countenance proclaimed him a German, driving a lively pair of bays attached to an express wagon.

To see was to act, and riding toward him, Jesse shouted:

"Hey, Dutchy! Chase that horse lively and bring him back!"

"Mein gracious! I can't," protested the farmer.

"You'll either do it or die! Which do you prefer?" And the terrible outlaw whipped out his "Colts."

"Ach, Himmel! I kotch him! I kotch him!" returned the terrified German.

Heading his bays after the runaway, the farmer set them at a gallop.

Satisfied that the pony would soon be restored to them, the bandit-chieftain ordered his men to draw their guns and form a circle around the recovered money, that their evident purpose of guarding their treasure might warn off any would-be rescuers.

But as the quartette looked down the thoroughfare toward the bank they were alarmed to see a body of horsemen gather in front of the institution.

The distance between them was just about a mile, too short for safety.

"If that Dutchman doesn't come back with John's horse, he'll have to double up with Jim when the posse gets half-way to us. I'll tie the money-sack to my saddle pommel. If they press us too hard, we'll give 'em a battle!"

Instantly the desperadoes prepared to mount.

"Hoopla! Here come's Dutchy with my horse!" cried John, looking up the street.

"And here come a dozen man-hunters!" retorted Jesse, as the troop left the bank.

Anxiously the desperadoes watched the race.

"Better mount," snapped the world-famous outlaw as the posse neared the half-way mark he had chosen as the limit of safety.

"Hey, you beer guzzler! Hurry up with that mare or I'll plug you full of lead!" bellowed John, pointing his rifle at the German.

"Ach, Himmel! Don't shoot!" implored the latter. "I coom in chust a second."

Inspired by the desire to save his skin, the farmer lashed his bays furiously, dragging the captured runaway by a halter he had tied around her neck.

Darting forward to meet him as he drew near, John yelled:

"Fling me the rope!"

Glad to be free of his blood-thirsty employers, the fellow hurled the halter-end at the bandit as he clattered past in his wagon, never looking around to see whether it was caught or not.

But a shout of joy from behind told him that it had been. Yet scarcely had it died away when a howl of fury from in front warned him that the posse did not approve his actions and, in fear of being made to pay a penalty for lending aid to the robbers, he yanked his bays into a side street, taking the corner on two wheels.

Tarrying not to battle with their pursuers, the desperadoes continued their course northward.

Their ponies, however, were tired from the hard riding of the past few days and those of the posse rapidly overhauled them.

"I guess it's fight after all," snarled Jesse. "Be ready to halt and fire when I give the word."

But the next moment he was roused to fresh fury by the command bellowed at him:

"Surrender! We've got you at our mercy!"

Reining in his mount, the great outlaw sneered:

"Turn 'round and go home before you're hurt. Come a rod nearer and we'll shoot! Take aim, boys!"

Throwing their Winchesters to their shoulders, Cole, John and Jim waited.

This determination to resist any attempt to capture them abashed the posse and they halted to hold a conference.

"Once more, we call upon you to surrender," yelled the spokesman at its conclusion.

Realizing that men who temporized when they outnumbered them three to one would make no desperate attempt to kill them, Jesse exclaimed to his men:

"Give them a volley just over their heads."

Instantly the rifles cracked.

"Charge!" thundered the great bandit.

Ducking as the bullets whistled above them, the pursuers paused only till they beheld the yelling robbers dashing toward them, then turned and fled incontinently.

"That'll do, boys!" laughed Jesse. "There's no use playing with fire. While they're recovering their nerve, we'll have the opportunity to get into the woods."

And once more whirling their ponies, the outlaws rode from Ste. Genevieve.

Without let or hindrance, they reached a dense copse where they divided the booty and discussed plans for hiding till the first heat of the chase should die out.

Jesse and Cole were for crossing the Mississippi and bearing to the south, seeking cover in the mountains of Kentucky or Tennessee.

John and Jim, however, argued that there would be less danger in recrossing the state and going back to where they started from.

Finally it was agreed that they should separate, the bandit-chieftain and his chum going where they thought best and the others announcing their determination to return to the home of their uncle at Chalk Level, all to meet at the rendezvous at Sni Mills in five weeks.

But as they shook hands at parting, little did they think that one of them would not be alive to keep the appointment!

John's decision was his death-knell!

When Captain Lull arrived at Monegaw Springs, from Chicago, to take charge of the demoralized forces of the Pinkertons after their abortive attempt to trap Jesse at Brett's camp, he spent only time enough at the health resort to learn the details and transferred his base of operations to Osceola.

Realizing that his actions would be hampered should it be known that he was a detective, Lull took the name of Allen and gave it out that he was acting as a buyer for a cattleman who was then in St. Louis.

This city was selected because the man-hunter had a clever friend, named Wright, whom he wished to have assist him in running the bandits to cover.

The way thus paved for Wright's coming and their subsequent trips through the surrounding country, Lull, or Allen, sent a code despatch summoning the amateur sleuth.

"Find everyone of their friends or relatives in the vicinity of the Springs," declared the latter when he had been apprised of the situation. Yet before they could put the plan into operation, the news of the raid on the bank and the sensational imprisonment of young Rozier was flashed throughout the world.

"That won't make any difference to us. In fact it increases the chances of our success," asserted Wright when he read the report. "If Jesse was shrewd enough to know that he could commit a robbery at the other side of the state when everybody thought he was in hiding about the Springs, he'll resort to the same tactics and come back here in the belief that the search will be the hottest around Ste. Genevieve."

Convinced by the argument, Lull acquiesced in the proposition to remain. And though their scheme did not catch the man they wanted, it did catch one of the outlaws.

Having pursued their inquiries as far as they could, the man-hunters found themselves balked by the suspicion of the natives for strangers. And to remove the barrier, they finally pressed an inhabitant of Osceola, Edward Daniels by name, into service as a guide.

A friend of both the Jameses and Youngers in their youth, Daniels suggested that a visit to the house of the latter's uncle, Theodorick Snuffer, at Chalk Level, might not be without result.

Accordingly they decided to visit the place a week after the looting of the bank, that the outlaws might have ample time to return across the state.

With an early start, the three supposed cattle buyers arrived at Snuffers' just at noon.

John and Jim were eating dinner when the strangers stopped in front of the gate and their suspicions were instantly aroused.

In response to a hail, the old miser went to the door.

"How do we get to the Widow Sims?" asked Lull.

"Turn to your left, about two rods from where you are, and follow the path, through my field. It's about a mile and you can't miss it, for there ain't no other shanty 'round."

Thanking Mr. Snuffer for the directions, the detectives rode on.

But as they went, the two bandits watched them from the window.

"That was only a bluff, asking about Widow Sims," declared Jim as the man-hunters passed the path about which they had been told. "I'll bet they're detectives. Let's go and look 'em over."

The proposition met with the instant approval of his brother and taking an extra brace of pistols, they saddled their ponies and rode after the man-hunters.

Rounding a bend in the road, the Youngers suddenly came face to face with the man-hunters as the latter were retracing their course.

"Ed Daniels!" exclaimed Jim in amazement at the sight of his old friend.

"It's John and Jim Younger," whispered the traitor to Lull and then whirled his horse and dashed into the underbrush.

Their astonishment at such action on the part of their old associate was instantly explained.

"Throw up your hands!" commanded Lull, covering the outlaws with his revolvers.

But the desperadoes' answer was borne by leaden slugs!

Drawing their six-shooters with wonderful quickness, they fired at the detectives.

John's bullet struck Lull in the breast and he toppled from his saddle.

Yet as he fell, he fired his revolver and John pitched to the ground, his jugular vein severed by the shot.

Beside himself with grief, as he saw the blood spurting from his brother's neck, Jim emptied his revolver at the fast disappearing form of Wright, without stopping him,

however.

Tears pouring from his eyes, he turned toward John's dead body, when he heard a gun bark and felt a burning sensation in the fleshy part of his right hip.

"Ed Daniels, I'll have your heart's blood!" he shrieked, as he leaped his horse into the underbrush in the direction from which the sound had come.

Not expecting such a move, the traitor was caught facing the infuriated desperado and before he could pull the trigger of his pistol a bullet crashed through his forehead.

Satisfied with the killing of the man who was responsible for his brother's death, Jim returned to the lifeless body, picked it up tenderly and, with the blood drenching his clothes, rode with it in his arms into his uncle's door-yard.

Tarrying only long enough to carry the corpse inside the house and to give instructions to the miser to have it properly buried, on pain of death, Jim tossed him a bill to defray the expenses, took John's money from his clothes, kissed his lifeless lips, rushed to his horse, vaulted into the saddle and dashed from the yard, scattering the neighbours, who had been attracted by the firing, right and left as he quickly vanished from sight in the woods.

Chapter XVII.

CONCLUSION.

Working with the realization of the necessity of haste, the mechanics who had been summoned to liberate young Rozier from his steel tomb in the bank at Ste. Genevieve drilled two holes in the doors and filled them with nitro-glycerine, using soap to keep the liquid from running out.

When the fuse was ready, the people were ordered from the building.

There was a moment of breathless suspense, then an explosion of the detonating cap was heard, followed by a deafening roar as the terrible agent of destruction went off.

The sides of the bank were blown into the street and pieces of the massive doors of the vault were hurled in all directions.

Rushing into the ruins, the searchers were able to get into the safe and found the banker's son unconscious on the floor, where the force of the explosion had thrown him.

His youth stood him in good stead and before night he was up and about, little the worse for his soul-trying ordeal.

When the robbery, the threat to repeat it every year, and the attempt to send to awful death his son and heir were telegraphed to Banker Rozier, at Monegaw Springs, he promptly wired back his resignation and with all possible haste took his family to Europe.

And with his departure from the country, Jesse's desperate game to take vengeance for the insult to him was ended.

Lying hidden by day and proceeding cautiously at night, the great outlaw and Cole found a snug retreat in the "Blue Grass" State where they remained for a couple of weeks.

Saddened by the report of John's death, they decided to return to Missouri, where they paid a hurried visit to Mrs. Samuels.

Finding that, for once, the man-hunters had not troubled her and that Susie was still in Deepwater, Jesse told her about the Shaws and at her suggestion took them to the home of Dr. Samuels' niece at Fayetteville, in Johnson county, where Mrs. Shaw regained her health and Daisy forgot her desertion by her husband in her new life.

And, happy in the happiness of his friends and family, the world-famous desperado stole away to the Ozark mountains to see his sweetheart.

[The End.]

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