

# The Girl Aviators on Golden Wings

Margaret Burnham

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by Margaret Burnham

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THE GIRL AVIATORS ON GOLDEN WINGS

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By Margaret Burnham

## CHAPTER I

### THE GREAT ALKALI

"And so this is the great Nevada desert!"

Peggy Prescott wrinkled her nose rather disdainfully as she gazed from the open window of the car out over the white, glittering expanse--dotted here and there with gloomy-looking clumps of sage brush--through which they had been traveling for some little time past.

"This is it," nodded her brother Roy; "what do you think of it, sis?"

"Um--er, I shall have to wait a while before I answer that," rejoined Peggy judicially.

"Well, here's Jimsy; let's ask him," cried Roy, as a lad of his own age, accompanied by a slender, graceful girl, came down the aisle of the car and approached the section in which the two young Prescotts were sitting.

"Jimsy Bancroft," demanded Roy, "we are now on the great Nevada desert, or on the edge of it. Does it meet with your approval?"

"There's plenty of it anyhow," laughed Jimsy, "and really it's very much like what I expected it would be."

"I feel like a regular cowgirl or--a--er--well, what the newspapers call a typical Westerner already," said Jess Bancroft, Jimsy's sister.

"Only typical Westerners don't protect their delicate complexions from dust with cold cream," laughed Peggy, holding up a finger reprovingly. "As if any beauty magazine won't tell you it's a woman's duty to take the greatest care of her complexion," parried Jess. "Roy and I have been sitting out on the observation platform on the last coach--that is, we sat there till the dust drove us in."

She shook the folds of a long, light pongee automobile coat she wore and a little cloud of dust arose. They all coughed as the pungent stuff circulated.

"Ugh," cried Roy, "it makes your eyes smart."

"That's the alkali in it," quoth Jimsy sagely, "alkali is--"

"Very unpleasant," coughed Peggy.

"But as we are likely to have to endure it for the next few weeks,"

struck in Roy, "we might as well lose no time in getting accustomed to it."

"Well girls and boys," came a deep, pleasant voice behind them, "we shall be in Blue Creek in a short time now, so gather up your belongings. I'll take care of the aeroplane outfits and the other stuff in the baggage car," he went on, "and here comes Miss Prescott now."

The lady referred to was a sweet-faced woman of some fifty years of age, though it was easy to see that the years had dealt kindly with her during her placid life in the village of Sandy Beach, on Long Island, New York, where she had made, her home. Miss Prescott was the aunt of the two Prescott children, and since their father's death some time before had been both mother and father to them--their own mother having passed away when they were but small children.

As readers of the first volume of this series know, Mr. Prescott had been an inventor of some distinction. Dying, he had confided to his son and daughter his plans for a non-capsizable aeroplane of great power. His son had promised to carry on the work, and had devoted his legacy to this purpose.

In that volume, which was called "The Girl Aviators and the Phantom Airship," it will be recalled, it was told how Peggy had been of material aid to her brother in his plans and hopes, and had, in reality, "saved the day" for him when he fell into the hands of some enemies. This occurred on the eve of a great aeroplane contest in which Roy had entered in the hopes of winning the first prize. With the money thus obtained he planned to pay off a mortgage held on Miss Prescott's home by an unscrupulous old banker, whose son was the prime mover in the plots against Roy.

One of the means adopted to force him to sell his secrets was the manipulation of a phantom aeroplane which, for a time, sadly puzzled the lad and his sister. The mystery was solved in a strange way, however, and almost at the same time, the baffling problem of what

had become of Mrs. Bancroft's jewels was also unraveled. All this did not take place without many adventures being encountered by the four chums. Among these was the encounter with the old hermit, Peter Bell, who, through Peggy's agency, was restored to his brother, James Bell, the millionaire western mining man.

James Bell became much interested in the Prescotts and their aeroplanes. Finally he made an advantageous proposal to Roy to travel West and operate for him a line of aeroplanes from some desert mines he had discovered on a trip which almost cost him his life. As autos could not cross the alkali, and transportation of the product by wagons would have been prohibitive in cost, as well as almost impossible to achieve, Mr. Bell had hit on the happy idea of conveying the precious product of his property by aeroplane.

At the same time, it so happened that Mr. Bancroft, the father of Jess and Jimsy, was summoned West by an important railroad deal. This being the case, Jess and Jimsy at once set to work plotting how they could gain their father's consent to their accompanying Peggy and Roy. It was finally gained, although Mrs. Bancroft shook her head over the matter, and, at first, would by no means hear of such

a thing. But Mr. Bancroft urged that it would be a good thing for the children to see the great West, and that as Miss Prescott was to accompany the party, there would be no risk of their running wild.

But while the youngsters had all been so eager for the time to come for starting on their long journey that they could hardly eat, much less sleep, Miss Prescott had viewed with alarm the prospects ahead of her. In her mind the West was a vague jumble of rough cowboys, Indians, highwaymen and desperate characters in general. But there was no help for it. In addition to feeling it was her duty to accompany her young charges, her physician had also recommended her to seek the dry, rarefied air of the great Nevada plateau.

"It will be the very thing for your lungs, my dear madame," he had said; "they are by no means as strong as I could wish."

"Oh, but doctor, the Indians, the--the--" Miss Prescott had begun, when the physician cut her short.

"The only Indians left in the West now are all busy working for Wild West shows," he said, with a laugh; "and as for any other fancied cause of alarm, I dare say you will find the Western men quite as chivalrous and courteous as their Eastern brethren."

And so it happened that the dust-covered train was rolling across the arid solitudes at the edge of the great alkali desert with our party of friends on board. All were looking forward to adventures, but how strange and unexpected some of the happenings that befell them were to be not one of the party even dreamed.

The only member of the adventurous little band not now accounted for is Peter Bell, the former recluse. Peter was forward in the smoking car enjoying his old black pipe, which was his delight and solace and Miss Prescott's particular abomination. Among Peter's other peculiarities, acquired in a long and solitary life, was a habit he had of sometimes making, his remarks in verse. He entered the car just as the conversation we have recorded was in progress.

"Soon, my good friends, o'er the desert, so bold, we all shall be flying with excellent gold."

A general laugh from the young folks greeted him, and Roy struck in with:

"That's if we don't fall to the earth from the sky, and land up in a smash on the white alkali."

The merriment that greeted this was cut short by the raucous voices of the trainmen.

"Blue Creek! Blue Creek!"

Instantly the liveliest bustle prevailed. Belongings of all sorts were hastily bundled together. So intent, in fact, was our party on its preparations for its plunge into the unknown that not one of them noticed two men who stood watching them intently from the opposite end of the car.

"So we've run the old fox into the ground," remarked one of them, a

tall, heavily built fellow with a crop of short, reddish hair that bristled like the remnants of an old tooth brush. He was clean-shaven and had a weak, cruel mouth and a pair of narrow little eyes, through which he could, however, shoot a penetrating glance when anything interested him. Both he and his companion, a sallow, black-haired personage with a drooping pair of moustaches, were just then, seemingly, much engrossed.

"Yes, some place off thar'," rejoined the black-haired man with a wave of his hand toward the west--in which the sun, a ball of red fire, was now dropping, "some whar off thar, across that alkali, Jim Bell has his golden-egged goose."

"Hush, not so loud, Sam; one of those kids is looking at us."

"Pshaw, they hain't got sense to suspect nuthin'," was the scornful reply. "Wonder if Buck Bellew will be hyar ter meet us."

As he spoke the train wheels ceased to revolve and the cars came to a standstill in Blue Creek, a sun-bitten outpost of the "Big Alkali."

## CHAPTER II

### AT THE NATIONAL HOUSE

Blue Creek was experiencing a spasm of excitement unusual to it. As a general thing, the dwellers on the edge of the great alkali wastes--once the bed of a mighty inland sea--were by far too much occupied in keeping reasonably cool, to betray even a passing interest in anything; except the arrival of a train of desolate-looking mules bearing gold from the barren, melancholy hills that rimmed the far-reaching alkali solitudes.

But the dust-whitened train, which twice a day puffed into Blue Creek and twice a day puffed joyfully out again, had, on this particular afternoon, set down a party which had caused unusual speculation among the Blue Creekites.

"Thar's Jim Bell, frum out the desert, an' an old gent who looks like he might be some kin to Jim, and then thar's them likely lookin' lads an' those uncommon purty gals. Never know Jim hed a fam'ly afore. Ef he hez he's kep it mighty quiet all these ya'rs."

These remarks emanated from the throat of Cash Dallam, owner of the National House, Blue Creek's leading, and likewise only, hotel. The National was a board structure, formerly painted--with some originality of taste--a bright orange hue, relieved with red trimmings round doors, windows and eaves. But the sun had blistered and the hot desert winds had cracked and peeled its originally gaudy hues, and it was now a melancholy monotone of dull, pallid yellow. Here and there the paint had vanished altogether, and the bleached boards showed underneath. Like most of the other structures in Blue Creek--which boasted a general store, post office and Chinese laundry and restaurant combined the National House was coated with a

thin layer of gray alkali dust, the gift of the glittering desert beyond its gates.

Cash Dallam's companions on the porch, which faced the railroad station and so was a favorite lounging place for the prominent citizens of Blue Creek and the guests of the hostelry, seemed only languidly interested.

"Thet's a powerful pile of baggage they're toting round," observed "Shavings" Magoon, who owed his nickname to the peculiar color and length of his hair, which looked as if it might have been gathered up bodily from the floor of a carpenter's shop and transferred to the top of his wrinkled countenance, about which it hung like a dubious aureole.

"You say that the tall chap yonder is Jim, Bell?"

The question, asked with some appearance of interest, came from a slender, dark-haired man in a blue shirt and leather "chaps," his face overshadowed by a big sombrero, who up to this time had not spoken. He had been leaning against the front wall of the National, thoughtfully removing some more of its paint by scraping it with the big rowelled Mexican spurs which he affected. These spurs, heavily mounted with Silver, together with a red sash he wore in the Mexican style about his waist, rather marked him out from his fellows on the National's porch.

Cash Dallam looked round as if in astonishment at the voice.

"Why hal-lo, stranger," he said, "whar you bin hidin' all these moons? Yes, that's Jim Bell, sure enough. Wouldn't think he wuz a millionaire ter look at him, would yer?"

The other shook his head.

"Can't most always sometimes tell," he remarked humorously; "that's a right pretty gal yonder, too. Any of you heard what Jim Bell's doing in Blue Creek?" The question came abruptly.

"Don't rightly know," was Cash's reply, "but I heard thet before he went Fast Jim Bell worked his way further inter ther desert than any man has ever bin. What he wuz arter I dunno, but it wouldn't be like Jim Bell ter risk his life fer muthin'."

"Do you reckon it was gold?"

The slender young man's dark eyes kindled in the word he used there was some potent fascination for him.

"Donno 'bout gold," said Cash, thoughtfully; "Thar's silver, yes, and platinum back yonder. So ther Injuns say anyhow. But thar's mighty few white men hes ever got thet fur, an' if they did, they never come back to tell." He gazed out over the crystalline, quivering desert, burning whitely as a spangled Christmas card under the scorching sun. In his day Cash had seen many set out across it who never reappeared.

"Pity thar hain't no way of gitting thar without having ter use stock."

"Ortermobiles?" suggested a withered old man with the desert tan and wrinkles upon him.

"Tired 'em," struck in another of the same type. "No go. Sunk to ther hubs in mud holes an' then if it wusn't thet ther wuz ther sand to shove through and they hed ter give it up. No, ther vehicle or ther critter hain't invented that's goin' ter get away off thar back of beyond whar the gold lies--or whar they say it does," he added rather doubtfully. "When I was a kid back East my poor mother used ter tell me that gold lay at ther end of ther rainbow. I began huntin' it then and I've kep' it up ever since, an' will to ther end, I reckon."

"You say the vehicle isn't invented that will cross that stretch of alkali?" asked the tall young man, with a jingle of the metal ornaments hanging from the chased shank of his spurs.

"Thet's what. No rig, er devil wagon, er critters neither."

The reply was given with the emphasis of conviction.

"How about airships?"

The remark was dropped carelessly almost, by the spur-wearer.

"Airships! By ginger, thet's so!"

The pessimist spoke in a rather crestfallen tone.

"Seems ter me I read in an Eastern paper a while back suthin' about Jim Bell's bin at a place near New York and engaging a young chap ter build him some aeroplanes. Thar was a good bit of mystery about it. Say, boys, I wonder ef that's what Jim Bell's in Blue Creek fur?"

"Thar's one thing sartin," spoke up "Shavings" Magoon, "ef Jim Bell's got ther means ter git an aerial gold line he'll be safe enough frum them ornery road agents like ther fellers thet stuck up ther Laredo stage only last week an' got away with the specie box from Red River Falls. I reckon thar ain't no stage robbers with acroplanes yet a while."

"Queer thing about that Laredo robbery," put in Cash thoughtfully, "thar was several inter it, an' it seems thet they've all got clar away."

"Good thing for them, eh?" said the stranger, jingling his spur ornaments harder than ever.

Cash sniffed.

"Good thing. Wall, stranger, I'd hate ter tell you what 'ud be the least of what 'ud happened to them, it would freeze your blood."

"Not an unpleasant thing to have happen to day," said the stranger, carelessly, and carefully flicking some gray dust from his "chaps" with his rawhide quirt, "so you think that Jim Bell means to start some sort of an air line from whatever he has discovered in the

interior into this place?"

"Don't know nothing about it," snapped Cash, rather impatiently; "you're a heap interested in Jim Bell, stranger."

"Naturally. He's quite a famous man in his way. I suppose he is one of the greatest mining authorities in the West."

But at this point Cash perceived that Mr. Bell's party had finished seeing to the disposal of their piles of baggage and were headed for the hotel. The operation had been a long one, as they bestowed particular attention upon sundry wooden boxes of oblong shape which might have held almost anything. Whatever their contents might be they were evidently held in some esteem by the Bell party.

A few seconds after Cash had broken off the conversation so abruptly, he was greeting the new arrivals. The other porch loungers stood sheepishly at some distance, some of them uneasily twisting their fingers. The presence of the young girls in the party filled them with a bashful terror such as they had never experienced in the numerous adventures and perils through which most of them had passed.

"The young ladies are Miss Prescott and Miss Bancroft," Mr. Bell said, introducing his companions, after the fashion of the Western country, to the hotel proprietor; "this is Roy Prescott and his chum, Jimsy Bancroft, and this," indicating the man whose resemblance to himself had already been remarked upon, "this is my brother, Mr. Peter Bell."

"Glad ter meet yer, miss; glad ter meet yer all, I'm sure," sputtered out Cash with one of his finest bows, and Cash was reckoned to be "a right elegant chap" in that primitive society.

### CHAPTER III

#### VOICES IN THE NIGHT

After supper--a queer meal to their Eastern tastes--the young folks were glad enough to retire to their rooms.

"Oh, what a funny place!" cried Jess, as she and Peggy, carrying a glass lamp which reeked of kerosene, entered their chamber. The walls were of rough boards with no attempt at ornamentation, a gorgeous checked crazy-quilt covered the bed--for though the days are hot on the desert, the nights are quite sharp. The floor, like the walls, was bare, and when the girls peered at themselves in the tiny mirror they gave little squeals of amused disgust. The heat of the sun, too, had drawn out the resinous qualities of the raw wood, and the room was impregnated with an aroma not unlike that of a pine forest under a hot sun.

"I expect we'll see some much funnier places before we get back East," said Peggy decidedly, and beginning to unpack her

silver-fitted dressing-bag, which was the one luxury she had allowed herself.

"I expect so, too; and I think it's jolly to rough it," chimed in her chum; "but it's hard to get used to it all at once. Stepping right off a Pullman into this is rather a sharp contrast, you must admit."

"It is," agreed Peggy, heartily. She stepped to the window and gazed out on an uncovered porch outside. It was, in fact, the roof of the one below. On it flourished quite a little grove of scraggly plants of various kinds, which were carefully tended by Cash's wife. They were, perhaps, the only green things in Blue Creek.

But Peggy had little eye for all this. Her lips parted in a quick gasp of admiration as she gazed upon the night spell of the desert. The dark sky was sprinkled with countless stars, large and luminous and beaming with a softer, stronger light than in the North. A brooding silence hung over the town--the silence of the desert. The hush was broken only by the droning notes of a song, accompanied on a guitar, which came from off in the distance on the outskirts of the little settlement. The music emphasized rather than broke the silence.

Jess came to Peggy's side, and upon her, too, descended the feeling of awe that the "Great Alkali" casts over all who encounter it for the first time.

"Peggy," she said at length, "I'm--I'm the least bit frightened."

Her chum felt a slight shiver run through the girl as she pressed against her.

"Frightened, girlie? Frightened of what?"

"I don't just know. That's what makes it feel so bad. I guess it's the silence, the sense of all that loneliness out beyond there that upsets me. It feels almost as if there were some living presence off over the alkali that meant us harm."

"I think I know what the matter is," said Peggy gently, "you're tired and overwrought. Come, let us get to bed, for Mr. Bell has ordered in early start in the morning."

Just how long afterward it was the awakened Peggy had no means of telling, but as she lay sleepless she felt a longing to look out over the light-shrouded desert once more. Arising she tiptoed to the window, and drawing the shade without making more than the merest rustle of noise she looked out. As she did so Peggy almost uttered a startled exclamation, which, however, she instantly checked.

Three men had just emerged upon the balcony from an adjoining window. They brought chairs with them and sat there smoking. Peggy could catch the rank, strong odor of the tobacco.

"It's better out here and we can talk more quietly," said one of them, as they sat down. "You say that Bell and his outfit start to-morrow?"

"That's what I overheard him say when I was listening to 'em talking arter supper," struck in another voice, "so I guess it's the early trail for us, too."

"Reckon so," came in a third speaker; "Jim Bell is going to travel fast. He's got the best horses and mules in this part of the country, and he won't spare 'em."

"You mean the alkali won't, I guess," put in the first speaker with an unpleasant laugh; "but he won't go far with ther stock. At the last waterhole he'll leave 'em and go on by aeroplane."

"You're crazy!"

"Never more sensible in my life. I--"

"Hush! Don't make such a racket. Fer all we know some of them may be awake and hear us. Now the old Steer Wells trail--"

But here the speaker sank his voice so low that it was impossible to hear his further words. But Peggy, as she crept back to bed with her heart throbbing a little bit fast, felt vaguely that the conversation boded some ill to the mining man and his party of gold seekers.

"I'm sure I recognized one of those voices," she said to herself; "it was that of the tall, dark young man with the immense spurs and that picturesque red sash, who was eyeing us so at supper. Jess and I thought he looked like a romantic brigand. What if he should turn out in real earnest to be a desperate character?"

Determining to speak to Jim Bell in the morning about the conversation she had overheard, Peggy dropped off into a deep slumber at last, but her dreams were disturbing ones. Now she was traversing the Big Alkali, with its pungent dust in her nostrils and her feet crunching its crusty surface. She was lost, and would have cried out had she been able to open her lips. Then she was dying of thirst. Her lips were parched and cracked and the sun beat pitilessly down. So the hours passed till the stars began to pale and a new day was at hand. Before sunrise the party had been called, and, filled with excitement, made the wooden walls of the National Rouse resound with the hum of preparation.

Now, though Peggy at midnight had fully determined to tell Mr. Bell all she had overheard, Peggy, in the bright, crisp early dawn, felt that to do so would be absurd. After all, the men might merely have been chatting about the party, whose expedition was surely an adventurous and interesting one. It might make Mr. Bell think her a victim of girlish fancies if she went to him with the story, so Peggy decided to remain silent. Afterward she was sorry for this.

As arrangements had been made with the ubiquitous Cash for burros and ponies before the party left for the West, there was little or no delay in getting started. The girls uttered delighted exclamations as their little animals were led up to the hotel steps by a long-legged Mexican who was to accompany the party to Steer Wells, where the ponies were to be abandoned and a permanent camp formed. From that point the dash into the alkali would be made by

aeroplane.

For Peggy there was a lively little "calico" animal which both girls pronounced "a darling." But Jess was no less pleased with her little animal, a bright bay with a white star on its forehead. For the boys similar animals had been provided, while Miss Prescott's mount was a rather raw-boned gray of sedate appearance. In her youth Miss Prescott had done a good deal of horseback riding, and the manner in which she sat her mount showed that she had not forgotten her horsemanship. Mr. Bell and his brother bestrode rather heavier animals than the rest of the party, while Juan, the guide, contented himself with a remarkably small burro. When in the saddle his lanky legs stuck out on either side of his long-eared steed and appeared to be sort of auxiliary propellers for the creature.

Six pack burros had been obtained, and on two of these the camp equipment and utensils were carried. The remainder of the little animals carried the wooden cases in which the three monoplanes were packed, and the boxes containing mining instruments and tools. One of these was painted red, and in it was carried a supply of "giant" powder--a kind of dynamite used in mining operations.

"I shall keep my eye on that particular burro," remarked Jimsy, "and if he ever runs away I shall gallop off in the opposite direction."

But Mr. Bell explained that the explosive stuff was packed in such a manner that even the most violent shock would not set it off.

"Still, we won't experiment," declared Roy.

Ten minutes after the cavalcade had drawn up in front of the hotel, attracting the attention of the entire population of Blue Creek, the party was ready to set out on the first stage of their adventurous, journey. The girls looked very natty in corduroy skirts, neat riding boots, with plain linen waists and jaunty sombreros. The boys, like Mr. Bell and his brother, were in khaki, and each carried a fine rifle, the gift of Mr. Bell. Miss Prescott had at first wished to resuscitate her old riding habit, but instead, before she left the East, the girls had persuaded her to have an up-to-date one made of cool, greenish khaki.

"You look like a modern Diana," said Mr. Bell, with a gallant bow, which brought the color Miss Prescott's blooming cheeks.

"Really, Mr. Bell, that is too bad of you, when you know I am trying to grow old gracefully," retorted Miss Prescott.

"And now," said Mr. Bell, running a watchful eye over the entire outfit, "we are all ready to start."

A cheer, which the girls took up, came ringing from the boys' throats.

"Hooray!" they shouted.

"Good luck!" cried Cash Dallam from his porch, and several in the crowd caught up the cry..

Juan uttered a series of extraordinary whoops, and working his legs like the long limbs of a seventeen-year locust, he dashed to the head of the procession. The next minute they were off, the pack burros trotting behind in a sedate line.

But just as they started an odd thing happened. Peggy experienced that peculiar feeling which sensitive persons feel when they are being watched. Glancing quickly round she encountered the penetrating glance of the tall, dark young man who had formed one of the group on the porch the previous evening. He turned his eyes away instantly as he perceived that his interested gaze had been intercepted. As he did so, Peggy, despite the heat, felt a little shiver run through her.

But the emotion passed in a moment under the excitement of the dash forward. Before long, the rough habitations of Blue Creek lay far behind them, and in front there lay, glittering under the blinding sun, the far-reaching expanse of the desert. Off to the southwest hovered what seemed to be a blue cloud on the horizon. But they knew that in that direction lay the Black Rock hills, a desolate chain of low, barren mountains.

As if by instinct they all drew rein as the solitudes closed in about them. Rising in his stirrups Mr. Bell pointed into the distance. "Yonder lies the end of the rainbow!" he exclaimed with a touch of rude poetry.

"And back there are the wings to fetch forth the pot of gold," laughed Jess, indicating the packing cases on the burros' backs.

"Yes, the golden wings," struck in Peggy, but there was a wistful note underlying her light tone. The spell of the desert, the unreclaimed and desolate, was upon her.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE DESERT HAWKS

While our little party had been making its way so arduously across the almost impenetrable waste of sand and alkali, another party equipped with tough, desert-bred horses and a knowledge, so intimate as to be uncanny, of the secret ways and trails of the sun-bitten land, had made preparations for departure.

It had been no fancy on Peggy's part when she imagined that she heard the partial details of a plot against Mr. Bell on the night during which she had lain awake in the rough hotel of Blue Creek. Had the party possessed the power of seeing through partitions of solid timber, they would have been able to behold within that room a scene transpiring which must, inevitably, have filled them with uneasiness and even alarm.

Red Bill Summers, one of the best known of the desert hawks, as the nefarious rascals who ply their highwayman's trade on the desert are

sometimes called, had been one of the passengers on the train whose keenly observing eyes had surveyed the little party as they disembarked. His companion, the man with the drooping moustache was likewise invested with a somewhat sinister reputation. But probably the worst of the trio who foregathered that night at the National House was the romantic looking young man with the red sash and the silver spurs whom the others called Buck Bellew.

Mr. Bell and his expedition into the desert formed the topic of their conversation. It was evident, as they talked, that their main desire was to trap or decoy him on his way, but as they discussed plans this intention gradually changed.

"He's got kids with him, and young gals, too," said the dark-mustached man, who seemed to be a little less ruffianly than his companions, "we don't want to do them no harm."

"Not if we can help it," rejoined Red Bill Summers, wrinkling his low forehead, "but I ain't goin' ter let them stand in our way."

"Of course not," chimed in Buck Bellew, playing with the tassels on his red sash, and jingling his silver-mounted spurs in a somewhat dandified fashion, "pretty girls, too," he added.

"Ther point's just this," struck in Red Bill, apparently paying no attention to the other's conversation, "Jim Bell's got a desert mine some place out thar yonder. This young chap he had with him, what's his name--"

"Prescott," suggested Buck Bellew.

"Ay, Prescott, that's it. Wal, this yer Prescott has invented some sort of an air ship, I read that in the papers. It's pretty clear to my mind that this air ship is going to be used in getting the gold out of the desert. That's plain enough, eh?"

"Yes, if your first idee is right. If he's got a paying mine in reality," agreed Bellew.

"Oh, I'm satisfied on that point. Jim Bell's too old a fox to go inter the desert onless he had stithin' worth going arter."

"Well, what are we going to do about it?" asked the third man with a grin, "build an aeroplane, too. For myself I'm free to confess I ain't no sky pilot and don't never expect to be one."

"This ain't a minstrel show," scowled Red Bill.

"Couldn't help laffin' though," said the black-mustached one, "talkin' uv aviators reminded me of that story of the feller who went ter see I lier doctor and git some medicine. Ther doc he says, 'I want you to take three drops in water very day.' Ther young chap fainted. When he recovered they asked him what the matter was. He says, 'I'm an aviator. Three drops in water would finish me in a week.'"

"That'll do from you," grunted Red Bill, without the trace of a smile at this little anecdote, "let's git down to bizness. Those folks leave here to-morrow. They'll go early in the morning. "We

can't follow them too close without excitin' suspicion. The problem is to keep track of them without they're knowing it."

"Don't they take any servants or help?" asked Bellew after a pause.

"Yes, they do."

"You're certain?"

"I made it my business to find out. They are going to take a guide. Have him engaged, in fact."

"Who is he?"

"Oh, a no good Mexican, a chap named Juan Baptista."

"Juan Baptista!" exclaimed Bellew slapping his leg, "that's fine. Couldn't be better."

"You know him?"

"So well that he'll have to do anything I say."

"You can make him obey you then?"

"I know of a horse stealing case in which he was mixed up. If he won't do what we tell him to I'll threaten him with exposure."

"Good. He is sleeping in the corral with their ponies. Let's go down there now and rouse him out. Then we'll have part of the business settled."

"I'm agreeable. Come on."

As noiselessly as possible the three plotters crept from the room and tip-toed down the corridors. Following a long passage they presently emerged into a star-lit stable-yard. In that part of the west doors are not locked at night, so they could go out without bothering about a key.

"Where's the corral?" whispered Buck as they came out of the hotel.

"Right over there. See that haystack. The greaser's asleep this side of it. Right under where that saddle is hanging on the fence."

"All right. Come on."

Led by Buck Bellew, whose spurs gave out an occasional jingle, they crept across the yard. Presently they came upon a dark bundle lying huddled at the foot of the corral palings.

Bellew stirred the inanimate bundle with his foot. The spurs gave out a tinkling, musical jingle. The thing moved, stirred and finally galvanized into life. It was finally revealed as the figure of a rather ill-favored Mexican, unusually tall for one of his race who are, as a rule, squat and small.

"Buenas tardes, Juan!" greeted Buck Bellew.

"Buenas tardes, senors," was the response. "But what for do you disturb me in thees way. Know that to-morrow with the rising of the sun I have to awake and saddle the beasts, and fare forth into the alkali with party of gringos."

"That's all right. That's what we came to talk to you about, Juan," said Bellew. He bent low and pushed his face almost into the Mexican's brown and sleepy countenance.

"Do you know me!" he grated out.

"Todos Santos! Caramba! It is the Senor Bellew!"

"Not so loud Juan. There may be somebody around who would recognize that name. It is enough that you know me."

"What do you wish with me, senor?"

The Mexican's voice shook. Evidently he feared this tall, good-looking, though dissolute, young Gringo.

"You are to escort a party of gringos headed by a Senor Bell as far as Steer Wells, are you not?"

"Si senor. As I said to-morrow before the rising of the sun must I be awake. I must saddle and pack, and--"

"All right. Never mind that. I have a little bit of work for you to perform, too. If you do it well you will be rewarded. If not--"

"If not senor--?"

"If not--well don't let us dwell on unpleasant subjects. I want you to ride with these gringos. Listen to all that they say. Talk to them and learn from them all that you can."

"Of what?"

"Of their destination--of where they are going--what they are going to do when they get there, and so on. You understand?"

"Perfectly senor. But they have paid me well and promised more. Senor Bell is a good man. He is--"

"Will you do what I tell you?"

The voice was sharp and imperious.

"Senor, I would do much for you. But this--"

The Mexican spread his hands helplessly.

"I cannot. It would be too bad a thing to do."

"Very well. I'll call Cash Dallam. Tell him who you are and how it was you who was concerned in the theft of those horses from Diablo River. You know what would happen to you then. You know--"

But the Mexican was down on his knees. His hands were raised in

mute appeal. His teeth' chattered like the busy heels of a clog dancer.

"No, no, senior. Santa Maria, no, no!" he begged.

"It's entirely up to you," was the cold response. "Now will you do as I say?"

"Yes, yes. A thousand times yes, senior. Anything you say-- anything."

"I thought so," rejoined Bellew grimly. He turned with a look of triumph to the two silent spectators of the scene, who nodded smilingly. The Mexican's pitiful agitation seemed only to amuse those callous hearts.

"You will travel, as I said, with these gringos," pursued Bellew, "and glean all the information you can. Then, when you have found out all about where they mean to go, and how long they mean to stay and so on, you will find an opportunity to drop out of their company."

"Si senior," quavered the man, "and then--"

"And then you will be met by us. We shall take care of you."

"But Senior Bell and the senioritas?"

"We will take care of them, too," was the grim response.

It was not till the next day, at noon, that the three desert hawks left the hotel, long after the departure of the Bell party. They rode slowly in the opposite direction to that in which the other party had gone, till they had gotten out of sight of the little town. Then, taking advantage of every dip and rise in the surface of the plain, they retraced their steps and soon were riding on the track of the Bell outfit.

"Whar wa'ar you all ther forenoon?" asked the black-mustached man of Red Bill as they rode along.

"I was doing a bit of profitable business," was the rejoinder.

"Selling something?"

"No finding something out. Boys, Jim Bell's in our power."

"In our power," laughed the other, a laugh in which Bellew chimed in. "I reckon you don't know him yet."

"Don't eh?" snarled Red Bill, stung into acrimonious retort. "I reckon your brain works just a bit too quick, Buck."

"Waal, ef you know so much, let's hear it?"

The red-sashed, silver-spurred Buck Bellew reined in closer to his companions, rowelling his little active "paint" horse as he did so, till it jumped and curvetted.

"It's just this," said Red Bill Summers, unconsciously lowering his tone although there was no one about to hear but his companions, a few, blasted-looking yuccas and, far overhead, a wheeling buzzard.

"Jim Bell ain't never filed no location of ther mine with ther gov'ment."

If he had expected to produce a sensation, he must have felt justified by the results of this announcement. Buck Bellew whistled. The black-mustached man gave a low, long-drawn-out exclamation of:

"Wo-o-o-w!"

"Thought you'd sit up and take notice," grinned their leader. "Sounds foolish-like, but it's true. I searched ther records, but it ain't on 'em."

"Maybe he's filed a claim some place else," suggested the black-mustached man.

"There you go, throwing cold water as usual," snorted Buck Bellew.

"Taint cold water. It's common, ornery hoss sense. That's what it is. Do you s'pose that any man 'ud be foolish enough to locate a rich mine an' then not file a claim to it?"

"Heard of sich things been done," commented Red Bill. "Maybe he ain't over and above anxious fer anyone ter go in alongside of him afore he's had a chanct ter take up some more land. Maybe--"

"Waal, no use guessing at sich things," rejoined Buck; "fer my part I guess Red is right. Jim Bell ain't had the hoss sense te file a claim. And if he ain't--"

"That makes it all the easier fer us. Wonder ef thet feller Juan is learning much?"

Bill Summers was the speaker.

"He's sharp as a steel trap," volunteered Bellew, "when he wants to be."

"I guess arter that dressing down you giv' him las' night he'll want to be, all right," opined the black-mustached man.

"Guess so," grinned Buck; "if he ain't, it'll be the worse fer him."

As he spoke they topped a little rise. Over in front of them, and on all sides--the desert, vast, illimitable, untrod of man, lay, a desolate expanse of nothingness.

Far, far off could be seen a tiny blue cloud, resting on the horizon--the desert range.

"Thar's whar Jim Bell's mine is, I'll bet a hoss and saddle," said Bellew reining in his horse and pointing to the distant azure mass.

"Guess you'd win," nodded Red Bill Summers, "and," he added, his

keen eyes narrowing to slits he gazed straight ahead, "and thar, I reckon, is Jim Bell himself and his party."

They followed the direction of his gaze. Far off across the glittering ocean of sand and alkali a yellowish cloud--almost vaporish, arose. It seemed to be a sort of water spout on land. It drifted lazily upward. The experienced desert hawks knew it for what it was. The dust cloud raised by a company of travelers.

As their glances rested on it intently, not one of the three figures toping the crest of the little rise, spoke.

Their tired horses, too, stood absolutely still. Men and animals might have been petrified figures, carved out of the desolation about them. There was a something impressive about them as they stood there in the midst of the desert glare. Silent, hawk-like, and intent. Their very poses seemed to convey a sense of menace--of danger.

Suddenly they wheeled and turned, and their mounts, as the spurs struck their damp sides, broke into a lope. As they galloped, Red Bill burst into a song. A lugubrious, melancholy thing, like most of the songs of the plainsmen.

"Bury me out on lone prair-ee  
Out where the snakes and the coyotes be;  
Drop not a tear on my sage brush grave  
Out on the lone prair-e-e-e-e-e!"

Then the others struck in, their ponies' hoofs making an accompaniment to the gruesome words:

"The sands will shift in the desert wind;  
My bones will rot in the alkali kind;  
I'll be happier there than ever I be  
In my grave, on the lone prair-e-e-e-e-e!"

It began to sound like a dirge, but still the leader of the hawks of the desert kept it up. He bellowed it out now in a harsh, shrill voice. It rasped uncomfortably, like rusty iron grating on rusty iron.

"Maybe upon the judgment day;  
When all sinners their debt must pay;  
They'll find me and bind me and judge poor me;  
All in my grave, on the lone prair-e-e-e-e-e!"

As the last words of this dismal chant rang out, an echo seemed to be flung back at the singer from behind a neighboring ridge, upon which the lone yuccas stood upright, like, so many figures of formed bits of humanity.

"Ye-e-e-e-e-e!"

It came in a long drawn out wail that fairly seemed to make the desert ring with its gruesome echoes. All at once it was taken up from another point. Then another echoed it back. It seemed to be proceeding from a dozen quarters of the compass at once.

Strong nerved as all three of the riders were, it appeared to make a strange impression on them.

"What in the name of Kit Carson wuz that?" demanded Red Bill drawing rein.

"Dunno. It sounded like someone havin' fun with that ther cheerful little song of yourn," said the black-mustached man.

"That's what it did. I'd like to find the varmint. I'd make some fun fer him."

The man scowled savagely. His nerves had been unpleasantly shaken by the wild, unearthly cries.

"It didn't sound human," he said at length; "tell you what, let's jes' look aroun' and see if we kin find any trace of who done it."

Buck Bellew said nothing but he grinned to himself. Plainly something amused him hugely.

"All right," he said, "we'll look."

They rode about among the desert dips and gullies for some time, but they could discover no trace of any agency that could have produced the weird cries. Both Red Bill and the black-mustached man were plainly nonplussed.

"This beats all," opined Summers. "I don't even see a track any place."

"Nor don't I," rejoined his companion seriously. Both were superstitious men, a failing apparently not shared by Bellew, who stood regarding them, seated easily sideways in his saddle, with an amused look.

"Hey Bellew, why don't you come an' look. You alters wuz a good tracker?" demanded Red Bill looking up suddenly.

"Not fer me, thanks," was the easy response, "ef you want to hunt spooks--"

"Who said it wuz a spook or any such pack uv nonsense?" glared back Summers.

"I didn't," declared the black-mustached man with great positiveness.

"No more did I," angrily sputtered Red Bill "thar ain't no such things nohow."

"I dunno," said the black-mustached man seriously. "I do recollect hearing my old grandmother, back East, tell about a ghost what she seen once. Want ter hear about it?"

No one replied, and taking silence for consent, he went on.

"Grandmother was married to a decent old chap that was a teamster. He used to haul farm stuff to the city in the day and it was often

pretty late afore he got out again. Well, on his way he had to pass a cemetery, a buryin' ground you know, and I tell you he didn't like it. It sort of got on his nerves to think that some night one of them dead folks lying there all so quiet might arise from ther graves.

"It seems as how it allers haunted him ter think that some night as he wuz drivin' by that ther buryin' ground--"

"Yer said that once before," snapped Summers looking nervously about him, "get on with your story."

"Well I am, ain't I?"

"Not fast enough."

"Waal this is a ghost story and ghosts don't move fast."

"Ho! ho!" laughed Bellew hollowly.

"As I was sayin', grandpop didn't like the idee of some night seeing a tall form, all in white, come gliding down among them tombstones, and raising its hand cry to him in a solemn voice--"

"Wow."

The shout came from Summers. He had suddenly felt something light on his shoulder. Thence it had crawled to neck and laid clammy feet upon him. It was an immense dragon fly, but he had evidently mistaken it for something else, to judge by the start and exclamation he had given.

"Ain't gittin' on yer nerves, be I?" asked the black-mustached man innocently.

"No, no. Get on with your fool story for goodness sake."

"You wuz a sayin' thet your fool grandpop wuz supposin' that ef something said to him as he wuz-oh, go on and tell it yourself!"

"All right. Well then grandpop was jes' a thinkin' how awful it 'ud be ef anything like that ever did happen. He'd come home and talk to grandma'am at nights about it. I tell you his nerves was powerful upsot. Suthin' like yours."

"Like mine, you long-legged lizard!"

"I mean like yours might hev bin ef you'd bin in my grandpop's place, Red."

"Oh, all right. Perceed. What nex'?"

"Waal, one night jes what he'd bin a dreadin' did come ter pass. He was goin' by ther graveyard when he hearn the awfulest screech you ever hearn--"

"Yow-e-ow-ee-ow-ow!"

Red Bill Summers started and turned pale. It was a repetition of

the cry that had interrupted his song. Without wasting time on ceremonies, he dug his spurs into his horse and dashed off. The narrator of the ghost story, as badly scared as his companion, followed him at post haste. Ther Bellew laughing heartily, turned and followed them. But at a more leisurely speed. From time to time, as he pursued the flying forms, his big frame shook with mirth. Somebody once said that a man who gives a hearty laugh was not all bad. If this is true, there must have been considerable good in Buck Bellew.

After about a mile of riding he overtook the other two.

"What's the hurry?" he inquired easily.

"Nuthin', nuthin'," said Summers, still a bit shaky, "my pony scairt at suthin, I reckon, and jes' naturally dashed off. I had a hard job te pull the cayuse in."

"Same hyar, same hyar," said the black-mustached man.

"Rot!" laughed Bellew. "In my opinion, you're both a pair of cowards. Don't pull your gun on me, Summers. You wouldn't fire at me, and you know it."

Summers sullenly put up his gun.

"Say, what's ther matter with you, Buck?" he asked grumpily.

"What's the matter with you two, you mean? Why, you dashed off like a girl in a red sweater with a bull on her heels."

"I tole you ther ponies ran away," said Summers, shifting his little eyes. Somehow he couldn't look Bellew in the face.

"Yes, and I guess what made 'em run was suthin' like this--"

A quizzical look stole over Bellew's lean, handsome features. All at once the air became filled with the same mysterious sounds that had so alarmed Summers and the other man.

"Ye-e-e-e-e-e-ow-w-w-w-w-e-e-eeee!"

"Buck! You consarned old ventriloconquest!" shouted Summers, vastly relieved as Bellew burst into a roar of hearty laughter.

"Forgot I used to be ventriloquist with a medicine show, eh?" chuckled Bellew, rolling about in his saddle. "Come in handy sometimes, don't it?"

"Waal, next time yer goin' ter practice, jes' let us know in advance."

Summers' face held rather a sheepish grin as he spoke. The black-mustached man looked even more foolish.

"Make a good signal, wouldn't it?" asked Bellew presently.

"Yes. By the way, reckon you could imitate a coyote, Buck?"

"Easy. Listen!"

A perfect imitation of a coyote's yapping, hyena-like cry rang out.

"Great. Maybe we can use that sometime."

How soon that cry was to be used, and to what disastrous effect on our little party of adventurers, we shall see as our story progresses. But the next time Buck Bellew gave that thrilling, spine-tightening cry, was to be under far different circumstances, and with far different results--results fraught with great importance to our young adventurers.

## CHAPTER V

### THE DIVINING RODS

"What wonderful clouds. They remind one of the fantastic palaces of the Arabian Nights!" exclaimed Miss Prescott.

It was at the close of the noonday halt that she spoke, reclining with the rest of the party under a canvas shelter, beneath which lunch had been eaten.

Off to the southwest the clouds she referred to had been, in fact, gathering for some time. Domed, terraced and pinnaced, they rose in gloomy grandeur on the far horizon. But Miss Prescott had not been the first to notice them. For some reason Mr. Bell, after gazing at the vaporous masses for a few minutes, looked rather troubled. He summoned Juan, who was feeding his beloved burro, and waved his hand toward the clouds, the same time speaking rapidly in Spanish.

"What is it? Is there a storm coming?" asked Jess, noting Mr. Bell's somewhat troubled look.

"I do not know, and Juan says he is not certain yet either," was the response. "Let us hope not, however."

"I don't see why it should trouble us," said Peggy. "We have good tents and shelter, and as far as a good wetting is concerned I should think it would do this dried up place a lot of good."

"That is not what was worrying me," confessed Mr. Bell with a smile; "if it was to be an ordinary Eastern storm I should not mind any more than you. But the desert has many moods--as many as--you will pardon me--a young lady. Even the storms of the Big Alkali are not like others. They are dry storms."

"This would be no place for an umbrella dealer then," remarked Jimsy airily.

"No, I am speaking seriously," went on Mr. Bell; "frequently such storms do great damage through lightning, although, during their progress, not a drop of rain falls. The electrical display,

however, is sometimes terrific. That is what I mean when I say 'a dry storm.'"

"I can't bear lightning," cried Jess; "I always go in the cellar at home when it comes."

"Never mind, Jess, Roy and I will dig you one if the storm hits us," put in her brother gallantly.

"And one for me, too, please!" cried Miss Prescott; "I'm dreadfully afraid of lightning."

"Well, let us hope that we shall none of us have any cause for alarm," put in Peter Bell, the former hermit. "When I lived my solitary life I often used to wander out in the height of a storm. It was beautiful to watch the lightning ripping and tearing across the sky. The lightning and the thunder did not scare me a bit. But--."

"You'd soon have changed your mind if by lightning you'd been hit," struck in Jimsy before the old man could complete his verse. A good natured laugh, in which Peter Bell joined as heartily as the others, followed this bit of improvisation.

"Well, let us be pressing on," said Mr. Bell presently; "we are not carrying any too heavy a water supply, and I am anxious to replenish it by nightfall. By the way, that means a new experience for you youngsters. You will get your first taste of alkali water."

"But how are you going to get water in this desert?" exclaimed Roy wonderingly.

"You will see before many hours," was the reply with which they had to be content.

All that afternoon they pressed on without anything of interest occurring. The distant clouds grew more imposing and blacker in hue, but they seemed to draw no closer. The heat, however, was oppressive, and the glare of the desert hurt Peggy's eyes.

"If they didn't look so hideous, I wish I'd brought along those old smoked glasses I wore on the beach at Atlantic City," she thought more than once.

Sundown found the party skirting along the foot of rough, broken hills clothed with a scanty vegetation. Juan nodded approvingly and at once suggested making the camp there.

"We'll see if there is any water first," said Mr. Bell.

"It looks as if you need not take the trouble," declared Roy, "it's as dry as a week-old crust."

"Not quite so fast, young man," laughed Mr. Bell, "appearances are often deceitful, especially on the desert."

He dismounted, and reaching into one of the packs drew forth a slender forked stick. Then, while they all gazed in a puzzled silence at his actions, he passed it hither and thither over the dry

floor of the desert.

"Oh, I know what it is now!" cried Peggy suddenly. "It's a divining rod!"

"A divining rod?" echoed Roy. "What's that?"

"Oh, look!" cried Jess, before Peggy could answer; "it's moving!"

The slender switch held by Mr. Bell was certainly behaving in a very odd manner. It could be seen to bend and sway and hop and skip about as if it had been suddenly endued with life. Mr. Bell, who was by now at some distance from the party, looked up with a satisfied expression.

"Get a shovel and dig here!" he ordered Juan. But the Mexican had fallen into a deep slumber from which it took not a little effort to awaken him. When he was finally roused and made to understand what was required of him, he set to work with a will, however, and made the dirt fly.

The boys pitched in, too, and before long quite a deep hole had been excavated. The girls, peeping cautiously over its edge, gave a delighted cry. Actual water was beginning to drain into it from the side. True, it was not of the color or temperature they had been used to associating with the fluid, but still the sight of it was welcome enough to the travel-stained wayfarers.

"You can come out now, boys, and leave the hole to fill up, which it will soon do," declared Mr. Bell.

The interval of waiting for the water to flow in a goodly quantity was spent in adjusting the girls' tent, and in setting the camp to rights generally. A sort of blue-colored bunch grass grew in considerable quantities about the water hole, and this the burros seemed to find quite palatable. The ponies and horses, however, would not touch it, and had to be regaled on the pressed hay and grain which were carried for the purpose.

In the midst of all this there came a sudden sharp cry from the water hole, followed by a loud splash.

"It's old Mr. Bell! He's fallen into the water hole!" shrilled Peggy.

"Head over heels, too. Hurry and we'll get him out," cried the boys.

Roy seized up a lariat, and followed by the others started for the hole. It was as they had guessed. Venturing too close to the brink of the excavation, old Mr. Bell had slipped, and the former hermit was floundering about like a grampus in the water when his rescuers appeared. Luckily, it was not deep, and they soon had him out of it and on his feet. The old man, with great good nature, declared that he had rather enjoyed his involuntary bath than otherwise. He was so mud-stained and drenched, however, that it was necessary for him to make an immediate change of clothes. When he emerged from his tent with dry apparel, the aged recluse felt moved to compose a verse, which he did as follows:

"Within the mud hole's watery depths,  
A grave I almost met,  
But luckily I was pulled out Alive, but very wet."

"Well, Peter," laughed his brother, "you certainly are a poetic philosopher. But now, if you are quite finished with the water hole, we will draw some for our own use, and then Juan can let the stock have a drink."

As the first bucket for camp use was drawn, Peggy hastened up with a cup and extended it.

"Oh, do let me have a drink," she exclaimed; "I'm dying with thirst and can't wait for tea."

"Same here," cried Jess, eagerly.

Mr. Bell smiled and eyed them quizzically.

"I wouldn't advise you young ladies to try it till it has been boiled," he said, "but of course if you insist--"

"We do," cried both girls.

"Fill the cups, Juan," ordered Mr. Bell.

The guide did so, and Peggy and Jess eagerly raised the receptacles. But hardly had they taken a swallow before they hurriedly ceased drinking.

"Oh, what awful stuff!" sputtered Peggy, while Jess simply gasped.

"Bah! It tastes like aged eggs added Roy, who had also taken a swallow. "Is it poisonous?"

"Not a bit of it," laughed Mr. Bell; "it is simply alkali water, and when you have drunk as much of it as I have you'll be used to it and not mind it. But I must admit that on first introduction it is rather trying. It is better when it is boiled, though. It seems to lose that acrid flavor."

And so it proved; and Miss Prescott declared that she had never enjoyed a cup of tea so much as the one she drank that evening at supper on the desert. As dusk fell, Juan produced a battered guitar from a case which was strapped to the back of his saddle, and seating himself cross-legged in the midst of a semi-circle of enthusiastic listeners he banged out a lot of Spanish airs.

Then Jimsy danced a jig with incomparable agility and Roy did some tricks with cards and handkerchiefs that were declared superior to anything heretofore seen. But the little entertainment was to come to an abrupt conclusion. So engrossed had they been in its progress that they had not noticed that the sky had clouded over, and that it had suddenly grown insufferably oppressive.

All at once a red glare enveloped the camp. It lasted only for the fraction of a second, but in its brief existence it displayed some very white and alarmed faces.

The electric storm that Mr. Bell had dreaded was upon them.

## CHAPTER VI

### A DRY STORM

In describing what immediately followed, Peggy has always declared that her sole impression was of continuous "flash and crash."

The first red glare, as a jagged streak of lightning tore across the sky, was followed by an earsplitting thunder roll. Almost instantly the entire heavens became alive with wriggling serpents of light. The criss-cross work of the bolts ranged in hue from a vivid eye-burning blue to an angry red. And all the time the thunder roared and crashed in one unceasing pandemonium. A smell of brimstone and sulphur filled the air. The tethered stock whinnied and plunged about in mad terror.

"Juan, look to the stock!" shouted Mr. Bell above the turmoil. But Juan, at the first crash, had flung himself face downward on the sand and lay there trembling and praying.

As there seemed no possibility of getting him up, the boys and Mr. Bell set to work on the by no means easy task of securing the terrified animals more carefully.

In the meantime, the girls, in Miss Prescott's tent, were having a hard time to convince that lady that the end of the universe was not at hand.

"Oh, dear, why did we ever come out here!" cried the terrified woman; and then the next minute:

"Just hark at that! We shall all be killed! I know it! Oh, this is terrible!"

"It will soon be over, aunt, dear," exclaimed Peggy bravely, though her own head ached and her eyes burned cruelly from the glare and uproar.

"Yes, dear Miss Prescott," chimed in Jess; "it can't last; it--"

There was a sudden blinding glare, followed by a crash that seemed as if the skies must have been rent open. With it mingled a loud scream from Miss Prescott and cries and shouts from outside the tent.

"Something in the camp has been struck!" exclaimed Peggy rushing to the tent door.

"It's Juan's burro!" cried Jess, who had followed her; "look at the poor thing, off over there."

In the radiance of the electric display they could see quite plainly the still form of the little animal lying outstretched on the ground. Juan heard the girl's cry, and for the first time since the storm had begun he moved. Directly he perceived the motionless form of his mount he appeared to lose all his terror of the storm, and sprinted off toward it on his long legs. As he ran he called aloud on all the saints to look down upon his miserable fate.

But as he reached the side of his long-eared companion, the creature, which had only been stunned by the bolt, suddenly sprang to its feet and, no doubt crazed by fear, began striking out with its hind hoofs. As ill luck would have it, poor Juan came within direct range of the first kick, and was sent flying backward by its force.

Behind him lay the water hole, and before he could stop the cowardly guide found himself over the brink and struggling in the muddy water. His cries for help were piercing, but as Mr. Bell and the boys were busy, and as they knew that the Mexican was in no actual peril, they left him there for a time.

In the meantime, the first terrific violence of the storm had subsided, and before long it passed. As it growled and muttered off in the distance, lighting up the desert with an occasional livid glare, Juan came scrambling out of the mud-hole. He did not say a word, but went straight up to his burro. He saddled it in silence, strapped his old guitar on its back and, swinging himself into the saddle, dashed off across the alkali, his long legs working like pendulums on either side of the little creature. It actually seemed as if he were propelling instead of riding it.

The boys wanted to know if they should set off in pursuit of their errant guide, but Mr. Bell said that it would be the best thing to let him go if he wished.

"He was more of a hindrance than a help," he declared, "and he and his burro between them ate far more than their share of food."

"But won't the poor man become lost or starve?" asked Miss Prescott, who, now that her alarm had passed with the storm, had joined the group.

"Not much danger of that," laughed Mr. Bell, "a fellow of Juan's type can subsist on next to nothing if he has to, and his burro is as tough as he is, I suspect."

"At any rate, he must have thought so when he got that kick," laughed Peggy.

"It reminded me of a verse I once heard," put in the former hermit.

And then, without waiting for anyone to ask him to repeat the lines in question, he struck up:

"As a rule, never fool  
With a buzz saw or a mule."

"I expect that's excellent advice," laughed the old man's brother, "but now, ladies and gentlemen, as the excitement of the night seems

to be over, I think we had better retire. Remember, an early start to-morrow, and if all goes well we ought to be at Steer Wells by nightfall."

"If we steer well," muttered Jimsy, not daring to perpetrate the pun in a louder tone of voice.

Fifteen minutes later, silence entrenched the camp, which seemed like a tiny island of humanity in the vast silence stretched round about. As they slumbered, the girls, with their silver-mounted revolvers--gifts from Mr. Bell--under their pillows, the clouds of the dry storm rolled away altogether, and the effulgent moon of the Nevada solitudes arose.

Her rays silvered the desolate range of barren hills and threw into sharp relief the black shadows which marked the deep gulches, cutting the otherwise smoothly rounded surfaces of the strange formation.

Suddenly, from one of the gulches, the figure of a man on horseback emerged and stood, motionless as a statue, bathed in moonlight on an elevation directly overlooking the camp. For perhaps five minutes the horseman remained thus, silent as his surroundings. But suddenly a shrill whinny rang out from one of the horses belonging to our party, who had seen the strange animal.

Instantly the figure turned and wheeled, and when Mr. Bell, ever on the alert, emerged from his tent to ascertain what the noise might portend, nothing was to be seen.

"That's odd," muttered the mining man, "horses don't usually whinny in the night except to others of their kind who may suddenly appear. I wonder--but, pshaw!" he broke off; "the thing's impossible. Even if our mission were known nobody would dare to molest us.

"But just the same," he continued, as, after a careful scrutiny, he returned to the tent he shared with his brother, "but just the same I'd like to know just why that animal whinnied."

Whoever the watcher of the camp had been, he did not reappear that night, but while old Mr. Bell prepared breakfast, and the girls were what the boys called "fixing up," the mining man summoned the boys to him and observed that he wished them to take a little stroll to see if better grass for the stock could not be found in the hills. This was so obviously an excuse to get them off for a quiet talk that the lads exchanged glances of inquiry. They said nothing, however, but followed Mr. Bell as he struck off toward the barren range.

As soon as they were out of earshot of the camp the mining man informed them of his suspicions and of what he had heard the night before.

"On thinking it over I am more than ever convinced that somebody must have been hovering about the camp last night," he declared, "but it is no use alarming the others unnecessarily, and, after all, I may be mistaken. In any event, from now on, we will post ourselves on sentry duty at night so as not to be taken by surprise in the event of any malefactors attacking us."

"Then you really think, sir, that somebody may have wind of the object of our journey and molest us?" inquired Roy soberly.

"I don't know; but it is always best to be on the safe side," was the rejoinder; "the towns on the edge of the desert are full of bad characters and it is possible that in some way the reason of our expedition has leaked out."

By this time they had walked as far as the mouth of one of the bare canyons that split the range of low, barren hills. Roy, whose eyes had been thoughtfully fixed on the ground, suddenly gave a sharp exclamation.

"Look here, Mr. Bell," he exclaimed, pointing downward, "what do you make of that?"

He indicated the imprints of a horse's hoofs on the dry ground.

"You have sharp eyes, my boy," was the reply; "those hoof-prints are not more than a few hot old, and certainly clinch my idea that someone on horseback was in the vicinity of the camp last night."

Jimsey looked rather grave at this. Roy, too, had a troubled note in his voice as he inquired:

"What do you make of it all, Mr. Bell?"

"Too early to say yet, my boy," said the mining man, who had been studying the hoof-prints, "but I can tell you this, that only one man was here last night."

"We have nothing to fear from one man," exclaimed Jimsey.

"I know that," was Mr. Bell's response, "but this lone visitor of last night may have been only the scout or forerunner of the others, whoever they may be."

"That's so," agreed Roy, "at any rate he must have had some strong object in spying on us."

Nobody would come out into this desolate place without an aim of some sort."

"No question but that you are right there," agreed Mr. Bell, whose face was grave, "I have half a mind to turn back and not bring the ladies further into what may prove to be a serious situation."

"So far as Peggy is concerned you'd have a hard time trying to get her to turn back now," declared Roy; "her mind is bent upon helping to get the air line from the mine into working order, and I guess Jess feels the same way about it."

"It would be a sad blow to them to have to go back now," agreed Jimsey; "suppose, Mr. Bell, we wait and make our suspicions more of a certainty before we decide upon anything."

"Perhaps that would be the best course," agreed the lad's elder, "but I must confess I feel sorely troubled. It is agreed, is it

not, that not a word of our suspicions are to be breathed to the ladies?"

"Oh, of course," agreed Roy; "after all," he added cheerfully, "the man who left those tracks may have been a prospector or a desert traveler of some kind, and have had no sinister motives."

"I am inclined to think that, too," said Mr. Bell, after a pause; "after all, nobody could have any object in attacking us at such a time."

## CHAPTER VII

### PROFESSOR "WANDERING WILLIAM"

The ponies, and the larger steeds ridden by the elders of the party, were pushed forward at a rapid gait all the morning. As had been explained by Mr. Bell, it was necessary for them to reach Steer Wells by sundown, as they could not hope to encounter any more water holes till they gained that point.

In the meantime, water was carried by means of an ingenious arrangement of Mr. Bell's. This was nothing more or less than two large bags of water-proof fabric, which could be filled and then flung on the pack burros' backs. In this way enough was carried for each of the animals to have a scanty supply, although there was none too much left over. That day's luncheon halt was made near a stony, arid canyon in the barren hills, along whose bases they were still traveling.

While the others set about getting a meal, Peggy and Jess linked arms and wandered off a short distance from the camp, bent on exploring. All at once Peggy gave a sudden, sharp little cry.

"Oh, Jess, look! What a funny little creature!"

"Ugh, what a horrid looking thing! What can it be?" exclaimed Jimsy's sister.

"It's--it's like a large spider!" cried Peggy suddenly, "and what horrid hairy legs it has, and--oh, Jess--it's going to attack us!"

"I do believe it is o-o-o-h!"

The cry was a long drawn out one of shrill alarm as the "large spider," as Peggy had termed it, tucked its legs under its fat, hairy body and made a deliberate spring at the two girls. Only their agility in leaping backward saved them from being landed upon by it. But far from being dismayed apparently, the creature was merely enraged by this failure. It was gathering itself for another spring when:

Crack!

There was a puff of smoke and a vicious report from Peggy's little revolver, and the next instant the thing that had so alarmed the two

young girls lay still. At the same moment the rest of the party, frightened by the sound of the sudden shot, came running up.

"A tarantula!" cried Mr. Bell, "and one of the biggest I have ever seen. It is fortunate for you, young ladies, that he did not bite you or there might have been a different tale to tell. Which of you shot it?"

"Oh, Peggy of course," cheerfully admitted Jess; "I can't pull the trigger yet without shutting my eyes."

"Hurrah for Peggy Prescott, America's premier girl rifle and revolver shot!" shouted Jimsy in blatant imitation of a show man.

"What a pair of fangs!" cried Roy, who had picked up the dead tarantula and was examining it carefully.

The girls could not repress a shudder as they looked at the dead giant spider, lying with its great legs outstretched, on Roy's hand.

"The Mexicans have a superstition that even if one does not die from the effects of their bites that the tarantula can inoculate a person with dancing poison," said Mr. Bell.

"Dancing poison?" they all cried in an astonished chorus.

"Yes," explained the mining man, "that is to say, that its poison will cause a sort of St. Vitus's dance."

"Good gracious! How unpleasant!" cried Jess. "I'm awfully fond of dancing, but I wouldn't care to come by my fun that way."

"Better than being bitten by the kissing bug anyhow," teased Roy mischievously.

The episode of the tarantula furnished plenty of conversation through the luncheon hour, and caused Miss Prescott many shudders. The poor lady was beginning to think that more dangers lurked in the desert than on any of her most dreaded street crossings in New York.

But little time was spent over the midday meal, and then the final "leg" of their dash across the alkali to Steer Wells began. The sun was low, bathing the desert in a crimson glow, when Mr. Bell, who was riding in advance, gave a sudden shout and pointed ahead to a patch of forlorn looking trees in the distance.

"Steer Wells," he announced.

The boys gave a cheer and plunged forward, with Peggy and Jess close behind. But the others advanced more sedately.

But as they drew closer to the clump of trees standing so oddly isolated amid the waste of alkali, they noted with surprise that they were not to be the only persons to share the hospitality of the oasis. From amid the foliage a column of blue smoke was rising, betokening the presence of other wayfarers. Instantly speculation became rife among the young folks. Who could be the sharers of their excursion into the untraveled wastes? They were soon to discover.

A strange figure stepped from the trees as the ponies, in a cloud of dust, dashed up. It was that of a tall, angular man with a pair of iron-rimmed spectacles perched on a protuberant nose. He was clean shaven, except for a goatee, and his wrinkled skin was the color of old leather. Long locks of gray hair hung lankly almost to his narrow, sloping shoulders. Above these straggly wisps was perched jauntily a big sombrero of regulation plainsman type. But the strangest feature of this strange personage lay in the remainder of his attire, which consisted of a long black frock coat hanging baggily to his knees and a pair of trousers of the largest and most aggressive check pattern imaginable. His feet were encased in patent leather boots, over which were gaiters of a brilliant yellow.

Under the trees could now be seen a small wagon painted a bright red, which bore upon its sides the inscription:

"Professor Wandering William, Indian Herb Remedies. They make the desert of life to bloom like the Rose Gardens of Mount Hybla. 50 cents per bottle or half a dozen for \$2.50."

The professor's angular mule team were browsing on the scanty grass that grew within the circle of trees, while above a fire of chips and twigs there hung an iron pot, which evidently contained the professor's supper. As for the professor himself, he clearly stood revealed in the person of the strange character who now, taking off his sombrero, waved it three times around his head in solemn rhythm, and then, raising a high pitched voice, shouted:

"Welcome! Thrice welcome to this fertile spot amid the stony desert. Like the Great Indian Herb Remedy, it blooms like the Rose Gardens of Hybla. Ahem!"

The conclusion of this speech was a dry cough, after which the professor solemnly readjusted his hat, and coming forward, said in quite ordinary tones:

"Howdy-do."

By this time the remainder of the party had galloped up, and arrived just as the young folks, hardly knowing what to say, had responded "howdy-do" likewise.

"I hardly expected to find anyone else here," said Mr. Bell, and then by way of introduction, he rattled off their names, the professor bowing low as each was presented.

"And now," said he, "allow me to present myself, Professor Wandering William, proprietor and originator of the Great Indian Herb Medicine, good alike for man or beast, child or adult. Insist on the original and only. Allow me," and the speaker suddenly whisked round with unexpected agility and darting toward his wagon opened the back of the vehicle and presently reappeared with several small bottles. He handed one to each of the new arrivals.

"Samples!" he explained, "and free as the birds of the air. If you like the samples, make a purchase. Money back if not exactly as represented."

With as grave faces as they could assume, they all thanked this queer character, and then Mr. Bell asked.

"May I inquire what you are doing in the desert, Professor. I should think you would find this part of the country a most unprofitable field."

"My dear sir," rejoined the professor, "twice a year I make a pilgrimage into the desert to gather the ingredients of The Remedy. You behold me now almost at the conclusion of my labors. In a few days I shall return to the haunts of civilization and gladden the hearts of mankind by disbursing The Remedy on my terms as quoted on the wagon yonder."

The professor lent a hand in unsaddling and unpacking the stock of the adventurers, and proved to be of great assistance in several ways. Evidently he was an experienced plainsman and he suggested many ways in which their equipment might be lightened and adjusted. His odd manner of talking only possessed him at intervals, and at other times he seemed to converse like any rational being.

This put a queer idea into Peggy's head.

"I wonder if he's acting a part?" she thought to herself. But the next minute the professor's exaggerated gestures and tones convinced her to the contrary. Although his manner was as outlandish as his choice of clothes, still there was a certain something about it which negated the idea of its being assumed, unless the professor was a most consummate actor. He informed the party that he had set out to cut across the desert from California and had had several narrow escapes from death by reason of lack of water.

He appeared much interested when Mr. Bell informed him that the party had started out from Blue Creek, adding--as he deemed wisest--that they were a party of tenderfeet anxious to explore the desert at first hand.

"So you were in Blue Creek recently, eh?" he said, with an entire lack of his exaggerated manner, but in crisp tones that fairly snapped; "didn't hear anything there of Red Bill Summers, did you?"

With a half smile Mr. Bell replied that they had not had the pleasure of the gentleman's acquaintance.

"Don't know about the pleasure part of it," shot out the professor, "he's the most desperate crook this side of Pikes Peak. I'd give a good deal for a look at him myself. I--I have a professional interest in him," he added, with a queer smile which set his eyes to snapping and crackling.

"A medical interest, I suppose?" inquired Mr. Bell, "you think he'd make an interesting study?"

"Most interesting," was the reply in quiet, thoughtful tones.

But the next instant the professor was back at his old pompous, high-flown verbal gymnastics, and after supper he entertained them till bedtime with tales of his experiences, to which both boys and

girls listened with wide-eyed astonishment.

"The oddest character I have ever encountered," declared Mr. Bell, as the professor, after bowing low to the ladies and apostrophizing the male portion of his audience, retired to his red wagon, within which he slept.

They all agreed to this, but Peggy said rather timidly:

"Somehow I don't think he's quite as odd as we think him."

"What do you mean, my dear?" asked Mr. Bell.

"Why, when he spoke about that Red Billy whatever his name was, did you see how different he looked? Younger somehow, and--and oh, quite different. I don't know just how, but he wasn't the same at all."

"Oh, Peggy's trying to work up a romantic mystery about the professor," teased Jess; "maybe he's a wandering British lord in disguise or the interesting but wayward son of a millionaire with a hobby for socialism."

The others burst into laughter at Jess's raillery, but Miss Prescott gently said:

"There is a great deal in womanly intuition, my dear, and for my part I had the same feeling as you. I mean that that man was not just what he appeared to be, namely, a chattering, ignorant quack."

"Well, as we may have him for a neighbor for some days we shall have a chance to watch him closely," said Mr. Bell.

But in this the leader of the party of adventurers turned out to be wrong, for when they awoke the next morning the grove did not contain the professor or his red wagon. Only the ashes of his fire were there to tell of his sojourn. But on one of the trees they found pinned a note.

"Sorry to leave so abruptly, but circumstances compelled. Perhaps we shall meet again. Who knows!"

And that, for many days, was to be the last they saw of the professor. When they re-encountered him--but of the surprising circumstances under which this was to take place we shall learn later.

## CHAPTER VIII

### A DESERT FIGHT

There was too much before them for the party to spend much time in speculation concerning the professor's sudden disappearance. Immediately after breakfast Mr. Bell called the boys aside and said:

"How long will it take to get an aeroplane ready?"

The question came briskly, as did all Mr. Bell's speeches.

"I think I can promise to have a machine ready for flight by noon," was Roy's rejoinder after a brief interval of thought.

"Good! In that case we will waste no time in getting to work. I am anxious to reach the mine and stake it out properly for claim filing purposes. The less delay the better."

It was news to both boys that the definite legal claim to his discovery had not yet been made by Mr. Bell.

"Well, at any rate you are not likely to be bothered by claim jumpers away off here," commented Roy.

"No, I hardly think so," was the response, "but in these matters one cannot be too careful. Since the news spread that I have struck it rich there are men capable of enduring any hardship if there exists a possibility of wresting it from me."

"I should have thought that in order to be on the safe side you would have filed your claim before you came East," put in Peggy, who had joined the little group of consultants.

"I would have done so were it not for the fact that to have filed my claim and given the location would have set on my track the entire, restless gold-seeking horde that hangs about desert towns," said Mr. Bell, with some warmth. "It is an outrageous thing, but nevertheless a fact, that the moment one files a claim it becomes public property. In my opinion the government should protect the locator of a gold find."

"But would that be quite fair to the others," said Peggy softly. "Shouldn't everybody have an opportunity to develop natural resources?"

Mr. Bell gazed at her admiringly.

"You are right, my dear, and I'm a selfish old bear," he said, "but just the same, not all gold-seekers make desirable neighbors. Many desperate men are among them."

Peggy's mind wandered back to that midnight conversation she had overheard on the porch of the National House. But the same dread of ridicule that she had experienced then still held her, and she refrained from mentioning it.

By noon, with such good will did they work, that not only was one of the monoplanes erected and ready for flight, but a second was partially assembled, and only required the finishing touches to be in readiness for its aerial dash. While the boys, with the girls eagerly helping them, worked on the flying machine, Mr. Bell carefully studied a map he had made of the mine's location, and tested his compass. This done he--as sailors say--"laid out a course" for himself. From the springs the mine lay about due southeast and some hundred and twenty miles away.

In case of accidents the mining man traced carefully a second map, which was to be left behind in the camp so as to be constantly available in case anything happened to the first one, it had been decided that Jimsy, who by this time had become quite a skillful aviator, was to accompany Mr. Bell in the preliminary flight.

Roy and Mr. Peter Bell were to be left in charge of the camp, and in the event of the first aeroplane not returning that night the second, one was to be dispatched in search of it.

As an old plainsman, Mr. Bell had not laid his plans without taking into consideration the possibility of accident to the aeroplane, and none realized better than he did what serious consequences such an accident might have.

In the chassis of the machine with the travelers were placed a stock of canned goods, a pick and shovel and several hundred feet of fine but tough rope. A supply of water in stone jars and an extra stock of gasoline were also taken along. At the conclusion of the noon meal the motor was started and found to be working perfectly. Nothing then remained to be done but to bid hasty "au revours" and wing off across the barren wastes.

"If all goes well we may be back to-night," said Mr. Bell as he slipped into the seat set tandem-wise behind Jimsy.

"And if not?" inquired Roy.

"In that case," and Mr. Bell's voice held a grave note, "in that case you will take the other monoplane and start out to look for us."

The roar of the motor as Jimsy started it drowned further words. Blue smoke and livid flames burst from the exhausts. The structure of the flying machine shook and quivered under the force of the explosions. The next instant the first aeroplane to invade the Big Alkali scudded off across the level floor of the desert, and after some five hundred feet of land travel soared upward. In fifteen minutes it was a fast diminishing speck against the burnished blue of the Nevada sky.

There was some feeling of loneliness in the hearts of those left behind as they turned back toward the camp under the straggly willows. But this was speedily dissipated by that sovereign tonic for such feelings-namely, work. Much was to be done on the remaining monoplane, and with the exception of brief intervals of "fooling" the young people spent the rest of the day on finishing its equipment. Sunset found the machine ready for flight and the girl aviators and Roy very ready indeed for the supper to which Peter Bell presently summoned them by loud and insistent beating on a tin pan.

You may be sure that as the sun dipped lower, the sky toward the southwest had been frequently swept by expectant eyes, but supper was served and eaten, and the purple shadows of night began softly to drape the glaring desert and still there came no sign of the homing aeroplane.

"Reckon they don't want to risk a night flight and so have decided

to camp at the mine," suggested old Peter Bell in response to Miss Prescott's rather querulous wondering as to the reason of the non-return.

"That must be it," agreed Roy easily, demolishing the last of a can of chicken.

Truth to tell, inwardly he had not expected the travelers back that night, and perhaps there lingered, too, in his mind, a faint desire to test out the other aeroplane in a task of rescue, in the event of the one Jimsy was driving breaking down.

But when morning came without a sign of the missing monoplane speculation crystallized into a real and keen anxiety. It was determined to delay no longer but set out at once in search of it. To this end the recently equipped airship was stocked with food and water, and shortly before noon Roy finished the final tuning up of the engine. The others watched him anxiously as he worked. It seemed clear enough that some real accident must have occurred to the other machine.

"James would never keep us in suspense like this," said Mr. Bell, "if he could reach us and relieve our anxiety."

Roy was just about to clamber into the chassis when Peggy and Jess, who had been missing for several minutes, emerged from their tent. Each girl wore an aviation hood and stout leather gauntlets. Plainly they were dressed for aerial flight. Roy gazed at them quizzically.

"I hate to disappoint you girls," he said, "but I've got to play a lone hand in this thing."

"No such thing," said Peggy in her briskest tones; "what if anything happened to you? Who would run the machine if we weren't along?"

"That's quite true, Roy," struck in Jess, "and besides if--if anything has gone wrong with Jimsy who has a better right to be near him than I?"

Roy looked perplexed.

"What am I to do, Aunt Sally?" he appealed, turning to Miss Prescott.

To Peggy's astonishment, as much as anyone else's, Miss Prescott did not veto their going.

"I think it would be great folly for you to go on an expedition of this kind alone," she said, addressing Roy. "As Peggy says, if anything went wrong what could you do alone?"

"Oh, aunt, you're a dear!" cried Peggy, giving the kindly old lady a bear hug.

"But I make one condition," continued Miss Prescott, "and that is, that whatever you find, you do not delay, but report back here as soon as possible. I could not bear much more anxiety."

This was readily promised, and ten minutes later the three young aviators were in the chassis of the big monoplane. After a moment's fiddling with levers and adjustments Roy started the motor. Heavily laden as it was the staunch aeroplane shot upward steadily after a short run. As it grew rapidly smaller, and finally became a mere black shoe button in the distance, Miss Prescott turned to old Peter Bell with a sigh.

"Heaven grant they all come back safe and sound," she exclaimed.

"Amen to that, ma'am," was the response, and then unconsciously lapsing into his rhythmical way of expressing himself, the old man added: "Though flying through the air so high they'll come back safely by and by."

And then, while old Peter shuffled off to water the stock, Miss Prescott fell to continuing her fancy work which the good lady had brought with her from the Fast. An odd picture she made, sitting there in that dreary grove in the desert, with her New England suggestion of primness and house-wifely qualities showing in striking contrast to the strange setting of the rest of the picture.

## CHAPTER IX

### AGAINST HEAVY ODDS

"Any sign of them yet, Roy?"

Peggy leaned forward and gently touched her brother's arm.

"I can't see a solitary speck that even remotely resembles them," he said. "It looks bad," he added with considerable anxiety in his tones.

Peggy took a peep at the plan which was spread out before Roy on a little shelf designed to hold aerial charts. Then she glanced at the compass and the distance indicator.

"We must be close to the place now," she said; "it's somewhere off there, isn't it?"

"There" was a range of low hills cut and slashed by steep-walled gullies and canyons. In some of these canyons there appeared to be traces of vegetation, giving rise to the suspicion that water might be obtained there by digging.

Roy nodded.

"That's the place, and there's that high cone shaped hill that the plan indicates as the location of the mine."

"But there's not a trace of them-oh, Jimsy!"

Jess's tones were vibrant with cruel anxiety. Her face was pale and

troubled. As for Peggy, her heart began to beat uncomfortably fast. But she wisely gave no outer sign.

"Don't worry, girlie," she said in as cheerful and brisk a tone as she could call up on the spur of the moment, "it will be all right. I'm sure of it."

Circling high above the range of barren hills they took a thorough survey of them. There was no sign of the missing aeroplane or her occupants, but all at once beneath them they saw something that caused them all to utter an astonished shout.

In one of the shallower gullies there was suddenly revealed the forms of an immense pack of animals of a gray color and not unlike dogs.

"Wolves!" cried Peggy.

"No, they are coyotes," declared Roy; "I recollect now hearing Mr. Bell say that these hills were frequented by them."

While they still hovered above the strange sight, a sudden swing brought another angle of the gully into view, and there, hidden hitherto by a huge rock, was the missing aeroplane.

But of its occupants there was not a trace.

"We must descend at once," decided Roy.

"But, Roy, the coyotes!"

It was Jess who spoke. The sight of the immense pack of the brutes thoroughly unnerved her. As they swung lower, too, they could hear the yappings and howlings of the savage band.

"I don't think they will bother us," said Roy. "I've heard Mr. Bell say that they are cowardly creatures."

"If they do we'll have to fly up again," said Peggy; "but we simply must examine that aeroplane for some clue of the others' whereabouts. Besides we have our revolvers."

"And can use them, too," said Roy with decision. "Now look out and hold tight, for I'm going to make a quick drop."

The gully seemed to rush upward at the aeroplane as it swooped down, coming to rest finally, almost alongside its companion machine. Luckily, the big rock before mentioned concealed the new arrivals from the view of the pack gathered further up the gully.

No time was lost in alighting and examining the machine, but beyond the fact that none of the food or water had been disturbed there was no clue there. Another puzzling fact was that the rifles Mr. Bell and Jimsy had brought with them still lay in the chassis. This seemed to dispose of the theory that they had been attacked. But what could have become of them? Was it possible that the coyotes--? Roy gave an involuntary shiver as a thought he did not dare allow himself to retain flashed across his mind. And yet it was odd the presence of that numerous pack all steadily centered about one spot.

"I'm going to try firing a shot into the air," said Roy suddenly; "if they are in the vicinity they will hear it and answer if they can."

"Oh, yes, do that, Roy," begged Jess. "Oh, I'm almost crazy with worry! What can have happened?"

The sharp bark of Roy's pistol cut short her half hysterical outbreak. Following the report they listened intently and then:

"Hark!" exclaimed Peggy, her eyes round and her pulses beating wildly. "Wasn't that a shout? Listen, there it is again!"

"I heard it that time, too," exclaimed Roy.

"And !!" cried Jess.

"It came from down the canyon where those coyotes are," went on Peggy.

"That's right, sis, and it complicates our search," said Roy, "but we've got to go on now. You girls wait here for me while I investigate, and--and you'd better take those rifles out of the other aeroplane."

"Oh, Roy, you're not going alone?" Peggy appealed.

"I'm not going to let you girls take a chance till I see what's ahead, that's one sure thing," was the rejoinder.

Before another word could be said the boy, revolver in hand, vanished round the big rock. Hardly had he done so, when there was borne to the girls' ears the most appalling confusion of sounds they had ever heard. The bedlam was, punctuated by several sharp shots, and Roy appeared running from round the rock. His hat was off, and as he approached he shouted:

"Get back to the aeroplanes! The pack's after us!"

At the same instant there appeared the leaders of the onrush. Great, half-famished looking brutes, whose red mouths gaped open ferociously and whose eyes burned wickedly.

But Roy had hardly had time to shout his warning before an accident, entirely unexpected, occurred. His foot caught on a stone and he came down with a crash. The next moment the pack would have been upon him, but Peggy jerked the rifle she had selected to her shoulder and fired into the midst of the savage horde. With a howl of anguish one of the creatures leaped high in a death agony and came toppling down among his mates, a limp, inanimate mass. This checked the surging onrush for an instant, and in that instant Roy was on his feet and sprinting briskly toward the girls.

Straight for the aeroplanes they headed. Reaching them they entrenched themselves in what they could not but feel was an immensely insecure position.

"Thank you, sis," was all that Roy, with a bit of a choke in his

voice, was able to gasp out before the leaders of the pack were on them.

More by instinct than with any definite idea, the young people began desperately pumping lead into the seething confusion of gray backs and red gaping mouths.

All at once poor Jess, half beside herself with terror, gave a throaty little gasp.

"I think I'm going to faint," she exclaimed feebly.

Peggy gave her a sharp glance.

"You'll do no such thing, Jess Bancroft," she said sharply, although the pity in her eyes belied the harshness of the words, "if you do I'll--I'll never speak to you again!"

The words had their calculated effect, and Jess made a brave rally. At almost the same instant a shot from Roy's rifle brought down the largest of the creatures of the desert, a big hungry looking brute with tawny, scraggy hair and bristling hackles. As he rolled over with a howl of anguish and rage a sudden wavering passed through the pack. It was like a wind-shadow sweeping over a field of summer wheat.

"Hooray, we've got them beaten!" shouted Roy, enthusiastically.

The lad was right. Their leader fallen, the remainder of the pack had seemingly no liking for keeping up the attack. Still snarling they began to retreat slowly--a backward movement, which presently changed into a mad, helter skelter rush. Panic seized on them, and down the dry arroyo they fled, a dense cloud of yellow, pungent dust rising behind them. In a few seconds all that remained to tell of the battle in the gulch were the still bodies of the brutes that had fallen before the boy and girl aviators' rifles.

They were contemplating the scene when, from further up the gully, there came a sound that set all their pulses beating.

It was the shout of a human voice.

"Thank heaven you were not too late!"

While they were still standing stock still in startled immobility at the recognition of Mr. Bell's voice, there came another hail.

"Hello, Jess! Hello, Peggy and Roy!"

Emerging from the cloud of dust which was still thick, there staggered toward them two uncanny looking figures in which they had at first some difficulty in recognizing Mr. Bell and Jimsy Bancroft. But when they did what a shout went up!

It echoed about the dead hills and rang hollowly in the silent gully. An instant later the reunited adventurers were busily engaged in exchanging greetings of which my readers can guess the tenor. Then came explanations.

"On arriving in the arroyo," said Mr. Bell, "Jimsy and I decided to set out at once to examine the mine site, and lay it off for purposes of proper location with the United States government. I must tell you that the mine--or rather the site of it--is located in that cavern yonder further up the arroyo."

"Why it was round the entrance to that that the coyotes were gathered when we first dropped!" cried Peggy.

"Exactly. And very much to our discomfort, too, I can tell you," rejoined Mr. Bell dryly.

"They had you besieged!" exclaimed Roy.

"That's just it, my boy. They must have been famished, or they never would have gathered up the courage to do it, for, as a rule, one man can put a whole pack of the brutes to flight. I suppose, however, they realized that they had us cornered, for, with a sort of deadly deliberation, they seated themselves round the mouth of the cavern, seemingly awaiting the proper time for us to be starved out or driven forth by thirst. Luckily, however, we had canteens with us and a scanty supply of food, otherwise it might have been the last of us."

Jess shuddered and drew very close to Jimsy.

"And you had no weapons," volunteered Roy.

"Ah, I see you encountered our guns in the chassis of the aeroplane. No, foolishly, I'll admit, we omitted to arm ourselves for such a short excursion. Of course we never dreamed of any danger of that sort in this lonely place, and least of all from the source from which it came. But I can, tell you, it was an ugly feeling when, on preparing to emerge with some specimens of the ore-bearing rocks, we found ourselves facing a grim semi-circle, banked dozens deep, of those famished coyotes. They greeted our appearance with a howl, and when we tried to scare them off they just settled down on their haunches to wait."

"Their silence was worse than their yapping and barking, I think," struck in Jimsy.

"It certainly was," agreed Mr. Bell; "both of us tried to keep up good hearts, but when the night passed and morning still found the brutes there, things began to look bad. Of course we knew that you would set out to look for us when we did not return, but we did not know if you would reach here in time."

"But you did," cried Jimsy, regarding the dead bodies of coyotes the vanquished pack had left behind.

"And excellent work your rifles did, too," declared Mr. Bell warmly.

"Our rifles and--the Girl Aviators," said Roy, and proceeded to tell the interested listeners from the cavern some incidents which caused them to open their eyes and regard our girls with unconcealed admiration.

## CHAPTER X

### RESCUED BY AEROPLANE

"What's that down there?"

Roy pointed downward from the aeroplane to a small black object crawling painfully over the glistening white billows of alkali far below them.

The lad, his sister and Jess were on their way back from the arroyo in which the battle with the coyotes had occurred. Mr. Bell and Jimsy had been left behind, for the former was anxious to "prospect" his mine as thoroughly as possible in order to ascertain if it gave indications of living up to its first rich promise. A brief inspection of the cave had thoroughly disgusted Peggy and Jess.

"Is this a rich gold mine!" Jess had cried, indignantly regarding the dull walls on which the torches had glowed unflatteringly; "it looks more like the interior of the cellar at home."

"All is not gold that glitters," Mr. Bell had responded with a smile. At the same moment he had flaked off a chunk of dark colored metal with his knife.

"There, Miss Jess," he exclaimed, handing it to the girl, "that is almost pure gold, and I am in hopes that there is lots more where that came from."

And they had been kind enough not to laugh too immoderately at Jess's discomfiture.

A short time later, having located a water hole and partaken of a good lunch, Roy and his companions had re-embarked and started back to camp with the joyful tidings that the missing adventurers had been found. They had been under way but a short time when Roy's attention had been attracted by the moving dot which had caused him to utter the exclamation recorded at the beginning of this chapter.

Against the flat, baking, quivering expanse of alkali the crawling splotch of black showed up as plainly as a blot of ink on a sheet of clean white blotting paper. Peering over the edge of the chassis they all scrutinized it closely.

"It's--it's a man!" cried Jess at length.

"So it is!" declared Peggy, "and on foot. What can he be doing out in this desert country without a horse?"

"He's in trouble anyhow," declared Roy, excitedly. "See, he's staggering along so painfully that it looks as if he couldn't go a step further. I'm going to drop and find out what the trouble is."

As he spoke the boy threw in the descending clutch, and the big monoplane began to drop as swiftly as a buzzard that has espied some

prey far beneath him.

As they rushed downward the whirr of their descent seemed to arouse the being so painfully crawling over the hot waste beneath them. He looked up, and then, extending his hands upward in a gesture of bewilderment, he staggered forward and the next instant stretched his length on the alkali, falling face downward.

"Oh, he is dead!" shrilled Jess, clasping her hands.

"I don't think so," was Roy's grave reply, "but we must get to him as quickly as we can."

There was no need to tell Peggy to get the water canteen ready. Her busy little fingers were fumbling with it. As they touched the ground she leaped nimbly from the chassis and sped over the burning desert floor to the side of the recumbent wayfarer. A second later Roy and Jess joined her. Very tenderly they turned the insensible man upon his back and dashed the water upon his face.

He was a short, rather stockily built man of middle age, and obviously, from his mahogany colored skin and lank black hair, a Mexican. He was dressed in a tattered shirt with a serape thrown about the neck to keep off the blazing rays of the sun. His feet were encased in a kind of moccasins over which spurs were strapped. Evidently, then, he had been mounted at some time--presumably recently, but where was his horse? How did he come to be wandering under the maddening heat of the sun over the vast alkali waste. But these were questions the answers to which had to be deferred for the present, for it began to appear doubtful if they had arrived in time to fan the wanderer's vital spark back into flame.

But at length their ministrations met with their reward. The man's eyelids flickered and a deep sigh escaped his lips. Before long they could press the water canteen to his mouth. He seized it with avidity and would have drained it.

"Only a little," cried Peggy; "I read once how a man, dying of thirst, was killed outright when he was given too much water to drink."

So Roy wrenched the canteen from the prostrated man's feeble grasp before he had drained more than a mouthful or two. But even that had revived him, and he was able to sit up and gaze about bewilderedly. All at once his eyes rested on Peggy, and he seemed to regard her as the means of his salvation from a terrible death on the alkali. Kneeling down he cried out in a pitifully cracked voice:

"You missie angel from heaven. Me Alverado your servant always. No go away ever!"

"By ginger, Peggy, you've made a conquest!" cried Roy, half hysterically.

Now that the strain of the struggle between life and death was over Peggy flushed and looked embarrassed. She was not used to the exaggerated character of the Mexican. But if she feared another outburst it did not come. Far too much exhausted to say more,

Alverado--as he called himself--sank back once more on the alkali.

"Quick! Carry him to the aeroplane and get him into camp," cried Roy, raising the half-conscious Mexican's head. "You girls take his feet and we'll put him in the bottom of the chassis on those cushions."

Consequently, when the aeroplane once more took the air it was to fly lower than usual under its additional burden, but in the hearts of all three of its American occupants there rang the joy of having saved a human life from the unsparing alkali.

"Aunt Sally! Aunt Sally! Everything's all right and we've got a patient for you," was Peggy's rather uncomplimentary greeting as the aeroplane alighted and came spinning across the dusty expanse toward the willow clump.

Miss Prescott threw up her hands and old Mr. Peter Bell hastened from amidst his beloved horses.

"Everything's all right but you've got a patient!" cried the New England lady, who looked very prim and unwesternlike in a gingham gown and sun bonnet to match.

"No time for explanations now," cried Roy. "Come on, Mr. Bell, and help us get our sick man out and then we'll tell you all about how we found Jimsy and Mr. Bell at the mine."

With Mr. Bell's assistance it did not take long to transfer Alverado

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