

ROYAL RANGER RALPH;

The Waif of the Western Prairies

BY WELDON J. COBB.

CHAPTER XVI.

IN THE CAVE.

Ranger Ralph, the old scout, was not idle while all the events described since his mishap at the river were transpiring.

When the horses ran away and dashed the wagon over the cliff head, Lone Canyon Tavern, the ranger at first gave himself up for lost.

The descent was a terrible one, and it turned and fell, and finally struck the water with a crash.

Then, dazed and bruised, he was half conscious that the horses had become separated from the vehicle, and that the latter, badly shattered, was floating down the stream.

It had now become so dark, especially in the shelter of the cliffs that lined the river perpendicularly, that he could not estimate his situation except that he was being borne rapidly away from the scene of the accident by the stream's swift current.

"I'm rid of the outlaws, any way," he muttered grimly, "and probably safe." I wonder if young Grey has managed to find the girl, or if she is still a captive and on her way to this desolate place?"

His predicament was not a pleasant one, for the wagon box was immersed in water and he was wet through from the dip in the stream.

Finally it began to sink so low that he was compelled to climb out on the top of the wagon, and thence later to the top of the wagon cover itself.

From here he regarded the fast-flying landscape sil ently and clung to his frail raft as it was driven hither and thither by the rock-choked current.

There was a final crash, and Ranger Ralph was flung head foremost into the river.

The wagon was splintered to pieces as it came in contact with a huge rock in midstream, and floated away leaving the scout floundering in the water.

He struggled to reach the shore, and stood with dripping garments ruefully surveying his situation.

Darkness and solitude surrounded him, and there seemed no means of leaving leaving the narrow, confined canyon except by the waterway up and down stream.

Suddenly a light appeared in the distance, and the scout stood peering at it for some time, vainly endeavoring to make out its location and cause.

"It must be a lantern or camp-fire of the outlaws," he deeded, and he determined to endeavor to make his way toward it.

In the darkness and amidst unfamiliar scenes this was no easy task, and his progress was slow and laborious.

Clinging to trailing vines and shrubs, scaling rocks, fording and swimming, he managed finally to gain a pile of rocks directly beyond which was the light he had seen.

It proved to be as he had surmised, a camp-fire, built somewhat back in a cave-like aperture of the rocks.

It was accessible by a narrow, dangerous path from the cliff above, and was evidently one of the entrances to the mountain fastness of the bandits.

A dozen rough forms were visible in the glow of the firelight, and among them Ranger Ralph readily recognized several whom he had known to be members of Despard's outlaw band.

From his place of espionage the old scout could watch his enemies and determine at leisure the best course to pursue.

There was no fear of interruption, for while he might gain the entrance to the cave it was not likely that they would come his way. He was so near to the entrance of the cave that he would almost hear the laughter and conversation.

There was only this ledge of rock between him and the open space in front of the cave.

He had crouched low as two men came toward where he was. At first he determined to retreat, as he feared they were coming over the ledge; but as they paused at the edge of the stream near by he discerned that one of them bore a bucket in his hand, and that they had come to obtain some water for the camp.

"What's the programme, anyway?" he heard one of the men ask; and the other replied:

"A general breaking up of the band, I hear the boys say."

"And a division of the profits?"

"Yes. It's whispered about that Despard is tired of the life, and that it has become too dangerous to suit him. He's afraid of trouble with Shadow Snake, and he's got some scheme for a fortune at the girl's hand who has brought her."

"What trouble could he have with Shadow Snake?"

"He's afraid the old Modoc chieftain will learn about his treachery in regard to the princess."

"White Fawn?"

"Yes; and Danton and he have played the Indians false."

"About what?"

"The emigrant train. They stole most of the plunder, and the Snake will represent this and our desertion. I wouldn't wonder if the Modoc chief sent a messenger to demand restitution. Anyway, he's made enemies of the savages by his actions."

The men returned to the cave just then, but their conversation formed a theme of thought in the scout's mind for some time after their departure.

"The girl is here," muttered the ranger, "and Despard has some plan for letting the emigrant. I must learn what his schemes are, and at once. But how?"

Ranger Ralph reflected deeply for over an hour. Then, as a bold idea flashed upon his mind, he determined on its immediate execution.

He theorized readily that Despard meditated leaving the country, and that he would probably take Inez Tracey with him. The girl was now doubtless a prisoner in the outlaw's stronghold.

The fortune her father had left her was the object of Despard's plot.

To rescue the girl and foil the renegade in securing that fortune, the scout felt that he must act quickly.

Ranger Ralph was noted along the frontier for his shrewdness, not only as a scout but as a detective.

It was in the latter capacity that he had now decided to act, and although his design was a bold one, he believed that he could be able to successfully carry it into execution.

Rapidly he formulated his plan. It consisted, first, in the assumption of a perfect disguise, and the hardy old ranger, fully prepared for just such contingencies as the present one, was soon at work on a thorough transformation of his personal appearance.

With a keen-edged razor he shaved off his luxuriant beard. Then he proceeded to paint his face and arrange his attire in accordance with his designs.

When he had completed his toilet it is doubtful if his nearest friend would have recognized him.

He resembled a half-breed, and his stained skin, one eye shaded by a bandage, limping gait and general uncivil-

ized appearance gave him just the look he desired, to enable him to penetrate to the enemy's camp with his identity unsuspected.

When he had fully completed his mental plan of the action, the scout cautiously clambered over the ledge of rocks and made his way toward the camp fire.

Several forms sprang to their feet and impeded his further progress as he reached the entrance to the cave. A man whom he recognized as Van e raised a gun menacingly.

"What do you want? Who are you? How came you here?" he demanded quickly.

In accordance with his assumed character, the scout folded his arms over his breast and adopted a sullen, defiant expression of face.

"The Black Crow," he muttered. "I must see him."

"Who are you?"

"Ta-tula, the half-breed."

"How did you come here?"

"The Modoc knows the hiding-place

of the white men and the paths

that lead to it," was the scout's steady reply, admirably couched in the Indian vernacular.

Vance stared.

"Ha!" he ejaculated, "you come from the Modocs?"

"I come from the emigrant train. I bear a message. Where is the Crow?"

"Why do you wish to see him?"

"He will know when he comes to Shadow Snake."

It was evident from Vance's manner that he recognized the fact of Despard's double-dealing with the Modoc chieftain.

"Inez!" he cried, and sprang toward her with outstretched arms.

"Ha!" he ejaculated, "you come from the Modocs?"

"I come from the emigrant train. I bear a message. Where is the Crow?"

"Why do you wish to see him?"

"He will know when he comes to Shadow Snake."

It was evident from Vance's manner that he recognized the fact of Despard's double-dealing with the Modoc chieftain.

"Inez!" he cried, and sprang toward her with outstretched arms.

"Ha!" he ejaculated, "you come from the Modocs?"

"Did Ta-tula come alone?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Sit down by the camp-fire there; I will speak with the Crow."

"Ugh!"

The scout was led into the cave through several long passages, and finally into an apartment that was apparently a portion of a wooden hut that was built over the river and into the cliff.

Despard and Danton sat at a table's drinking, and the former glanced at the other figure of Vance's companion.

"Here is the half-breed," said the Modoc.

"From Shadow Snake?" asked Despard.

"Ugh!" replied the scout in a disguised tone of voice.

"What does he want?"

"His share of the plunder taken from the emigrant train. The Crow has played him false, and he seeks restitution or revenge."

Despard evinced a cool unconcern of the scout's somber threats. He listened calmly while the disguised ranger in guttural tones told of the dissatisfaction and anger of the Modoc chieftain. Then he said:

"Shadow Snake demands gold?"

"Ugh!"

"And if it is not sent to him?"

"War," was the laconic reply.

"When must he have his answer?"

"In two suns."

"Good. Before another day is past, Ta-tula will know my decision. You can stay here until then."

Ranger Ralph retired with calm dignity, and congratulated himself upon the fact that he had not been recognized by the outlaw.

"Watch that half-breed closely," said Despard to Vance; and the latter followed the scout from the room.

"We have no time to lose," said Danton, when they were alone.

"That is true."

"The Modocs will march against us unless we return a share of the booty."

"Then we will act at once. I have located the haunt of the old hermit."

"Wal-ford?"

"Yes; and in the morning I shall go there. Once I secure the secret of Inez Tracey's fortune, I shall leave a small amount of plunder for them to divide, and you and Vance, the girl, and myself will leave this part of the country forever."

Meanwhile Ranger Ralph had been led toward the river end of the cave by Vance.

He paused ere they reached the campfire.

"Ta-tula is weary," he said.

"All right; you can sleep anywhere here."

The pretended half-bred flung himself upon a broad rock. Vance contented himself with proceeding to the spot where his companions were, and after telling them to see that Ta-tula was pained no further attention to the scout.

"Wal-ford!" ordered the scout to Despard and Vance.

"The outlaws will be aroused——"

"I will hold these two at bay, and cover your escape."

erching movement, began to step gradually toward the apartment.

Ranger Ralph's attention was divided between him and Inez. He saw that the outlaw was too thoroughly engrossed in watching the inmates of the apartment to pay any attention to him. Cautionily, therefore, the scout began to steal after him.

A few steps enabled him to gain a complete view of the interior of the cave. He came to a dead stop with sheer surprise as he saw the cause of the girl's emotion.

"Darrel Grey!" he muttered under his breath.

It was indeed the young scout.

As the reader will remember, after he left the Fawn, he had penetrated to the cave of the outlaws from the closed valley into which he had been driven.

When Despard had removed Inez to the cave, Darrel had reached a spot where a huge rock blocked up the entrance to the apartment. For over an hour he sought to push this barrier away and at last he had succeeded.

It was his entrance that had so far released the captive maiden.

"Inez!" he cried, and sprang toward her with outstretched arms.

"Ta-tula, the half-breed."

"How did you come here?"

"The Modoc knows the hiding-place

of the white men and the paths

that lead to it," was the scout's steady reply.

It was evident from Vance's manner that he recognized the fact of Despard's double-dealing with the Modoc chieftain.

"Inez!" he cried, and sprang toward her with outstretched arms.

"Ta-tula, the half-breed."

"How did you come here?"

"The Modoc knows the hiding-place

of the white men and the paths

that lead to it," was the scout's steady reply.

It was evident from Vance's manner that he recognized the fact of Despard's double-dealing with the Modoc chieftain.

"Inez!" he cried, and sprang toward her with outstretched arms.

"Ta-tula, the half-breed."

"How did you come here?"

"The Modoc knows the hiding-place

of the white men and the paths

that lead to it," was the scout's steady reply.

It was evident from Vance's manner that he recognized the fact of Despard's double-dealing with the Modoc chieftain.

"Inez!" he cried, and sprang toward her with outstretched arms.

"Ta-tula, the half-breed."

"How did you come here?"

"The Modoc knows the hiding-place

of the white men and the paths

that lead to it," was the scout's steady reply.

It was evident from Vance's manner that he recognized the fact of Despard's double-dealing with the Modoc chieftain.

"Inez!" he