

ROYAL RANGER RALPH:

—on—
The Waif of the Western Prairies

BY WELDON J. COBB.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE MODOCES.

Walford, the old hermit, started slightly as Inez stepped before him. He peered anxiously, curiously into her face, and then seized her hand, his impressive face aglow with sudden emotion.

"Yes," he murmured, "it is indeed the daughter of my old friend—I could not mistake that face."

Inez stood with downcast eyes and paled countenance and did not reply to his words. Despard hissed but one menacing sentence into her shrinking ear.

"Remember your promise!" he breathed heavily. "Your lover dies if you fail me now."

Then aloud he said to Walford: "You are satisfied that this is Inez Tracey?"

The hermit bowed assentingly.

"She has a letter from her father written just previous to his death. If you wish to see it she will show it to you."

"I would like to see it."

Inez produced a missive she had received some weeks before.

The hermit perused it, returned it to her and asked, "This gentleman is your intended husband?"

For a moment Inez faltered. She seemed about to deny the query when she met the fierce, threatening glance of her captor.

"Yes," she gasped, almost inaudibly. "And wish me to deliver to him the trust left me to execute by your dying father?"

"If you will."

Walford drew a time-worn paper from his breast.

"In this document," he said, "your father left his fortune to you in my charge. The fortune consists of lands in California near the sea coast, which are already deeded to you, and a description of which is contained in this paper."

He handed Despard the document as he spoke.

"These lands," he continued, "are comparatively worthless; but, besides them, Mr. Tracey left a fortune in tangible shape. It comprises a casket containing diamonds, into which he converted his wealth in Peru; diamonds which, while they only fill a small metal box, represent a value exceeding one hundred thousand dollars."

"And you have these diamonds?" asked Despard eagerly.

"Yes. My friend Tracey told me to deliver them to his daughter. I now do so."

The hermit retired to a darkened portion of the apartment, and was gone for some moments. When he returned he bore a small black box in his hand.

The avaricious eyes of Despard gleamed with secret exultation. The coveted fortune of the Traceys was within his grasp at last, and he could scarcely contain himself for joy.

The old scout, a silent and interested spectator of all that had transpired within the past few moments, was terribly excited.

He saw the apparent accomplishment of all Dyke Despard's evil plans. He saw the Tracey fortune wrested from its rightful owners, to enrich a desperate villain. He saw Inez the wife of the renegade.

He resolved to act boldly. Drawing his revolver he sprang past the bandits.

"Hold!"

His voice was clear and commanding. The startled Despard recoiled.

Ranger Ralph had wrested the casket from his grasp just as the old hermit had handed it to him.

"Walford, do you not know me? It is I—Ranger Ralph!"

The suppressed exclamation broke from the old hermit's lips.

"You!" he cried.

"Yes, yes. Yonder man is Dyke Despard, the outlaw, and the girl is acting under his threats."

"Down him!"

The enraged Despard shouted the order to his men hoarsely. He himself sprang upon the scout as he spoke.

The box fell with a clang sound from the hand of Ranger Ralph to the hard stone floor of the cavern.

The other outlaws were about to press forward to aid their companion and leader, when a sudden episode diverted them from their purpose."

A lithe form, that of a woman, darted suddenly into view. Springing from a dark corner of the cave, she revealed the face and figure of White Fawn the Indian princess.

She glided to where Despard and the scouts were struggling in deadly combat. With one blow she drew a knife into the back of the outlaw leader.

Then, stooping, she seized the box of jewels and disappeared like a dash from one of the dark corridors of the place.

With a cry of pain and rage Dyke Despard staggered back.

"Shoot them down!" he cried hoarsely to his men as he retreated to their ranks.

The old hermit seized the scout as the latter was about to spring forward to rescue Inez. At the same moment the outlaw fired at them.

"This way," spoke the hermit quickly. He drew Ranger Ralph out of range of the bullets of their foes.

"Follow me," he ordered.

"But the girl!"

"You cannot rescue her now."

Walford had darted down a dark corridor. Suddenly he paused. A series of savage yells emanated from the apartment they had just left. They were mingled with the alarmed cries of the bandits.

Loud reports of continuous firing shook all the silent echoes of the place. "What does that mean?" demanded the astounded scout.

"Modocs."

"Yes. They have penetrated the cave. See! They are coming this way. Haste, old friend and partner, I have a safe retreat if we can only reach it in time."

The truth flashed across Ranger Ralph's mind as he obeyed his companion and stumbled down a dark corridor.

White Fawn, he reasoned, had reached the tribe, and they had returned with her to wreak vengeance on the renegades.

In this theory, however, the old scout was only in a measure correct. What had really happened was this:

White Fawn had rode toward the place where she supposed the Modocs were encamped. She had seen her father and had told him all the cruel story of her wrongs.

Within an hour the warriors were aware of Despard's treachery, and were on the war-path, wild with emotions of revenge and rage.

One hour after Despard had left the outlaw stronghold with Inez Tracey, the savages arrived there. The bandits left behind, immediate victims to the vengeance of the Modocs, but White Fawn managed to induce her father to spare Darrel Grey.

Provided with a horse, he was led out

out of sight of the tribe by the chief and told to hasten to some of the settlements, as the savages were bboldly and intoxicated, and he could not restrain them.

The Fawn then led them after Despard.

She was the first to enter the cave of the old hermit, and as has been seen she secured the diamond casket and fled.

She was lurking in one of the numerous corridors of the cave when the Modocs penetrated to the p'sace.

A scene of the wildest confusion ensued. The savages attacked the renegades mercilessly.

The unarmed Inez was borne away captive by two of the Indians.

Despard had disappeared mysteriously at the very commencement of the attack. The wily outlaw leader favored his perf', and, wounded as he was, managed to escape.

Shadow Snake ordered a thorough search for the Crow, and by accident the savages went down the corridor where the hermit and Ranger Ralph had gone.

Walford g ganced back as he heard the savages.

"They are following us," he said to his companion.

"Is there a way out of the place?"

"There is a place of safe refuge for us, yes," replied the hermit. "As to these savages, we will stop their pursuit."

"How?"

"That you shall see."

The hermit had halted at a place where the corridor widened. Watching his grim features silently, the scout drew a keg from a recess in the rock.

Walford p'aced it across the corridor. A minute later a flaring, spluttering fuse, emitting brilliant sparks, told the scout that the old hermit intended in a summary manner to close the pursuit of their savagous foes.

CHAPTER XX.

THE HOUSE IN THE AIR.

"Powder!" ejaculated Ranger Ralph, as the hermit hurried him from the spot.

"Exactly. The Indians would have overtaken us, and we had to cut off our retreat."

"Have we done it?"

"Wait and see."

The corridor they were pursuing came to an end at last. It terminated at a shelf of rocks overlooking a little ravine that was a branch of the main canyon.

So precipitous was the descent, and so frail the area of the rock they had reached, that the scout looked dismayed.

"I see no way of escape," he remarked.

"Wait."

Both stood silent for some moments. Suddenly there was a deafening explosion.

"The powder?"

"You believe it will block up our retreat?"

"I am sure of it."

"And now how are we going to leave here?"

"Look out and see."

Ranger Ralph advanced to the edge of the rock. He uttered a cry of interest and delight, as his eyes met a curious spectacle.

From the rock a dead tree ran like a bridge across to a high perpendicular column of rock. Twenty feet beyond this was another rock.

Between the two, he'd firmly in place, was a rude, dilapidated hut formed of logs.

"That is my retreat," said Walford.

"And a safe and strange place it is," retorted the hermit. "But how did that house ever come there?"

"It was built by me ten years ago, when the two rocks were one."

"Understand."

"Gradually they crumbled away."

"And left the house between them?"

"Exactly."

"Is it safe?"

"For the present, yes. Some day it will go crashing down. Cross over on the tree."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Ranger Ralph did as directed.

"If any of them attempt to cross, fire at them," said Walford.

"I am going to destroy the means of access to your place of refuge."

"Not at all. There is an outlet by the other rock."

The scout remained on guard behind the rock. The old hermit crept cautiously toward the spot where the dead tree rested on the first cliff of stone.

Ranger Ralph could observe all the movements of the savages without being seen. He saw one of them finally make a movement as if to cross the impromptu bridge. The scout drew a bead on him and fired.

The astonished Modoc fell back with a cry of pain. His companions, too, retreated further into the cave. They were completely mystified at the strange attack.

Their bewilderment increased when they saw the tree go hurtling down the ravine.

The hermit had pushed one end clear of the rock, and it fell, depriving the savages of any opportunity of crossing to the rock. A minute later he rejoined the scout.

"There is no danger to be apprehended from our enemies that way?"

"None."

"There may fire at us."

"The rock intervenes, and they cannot reach us. No, they will soon retire from the cave as they came."

"And then?"

"An attack from below, I presume."

"That won't amount to much."

"I don't know," remarked Walford concernedly. "Now they have discovered us, they will execute all their cunning to dislodge and destroy us."

For over an hour, however, there was no especial commotion visible in the valley below. The Modocs had moved their camp farther down the valley.

Quite a party of them had sought shelter behind some rocks directly under the cabin. From their frequently pointing to the cabin the hermit and the scout realized that they were forming some plan of assault.

Ranger Ralph looked anxiously at the stock of powder he had.

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AN 8-year-old son of Dr. Gregg, of Pendleton, was crushed beneath a load of wood and cannot recover.

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