

ROYAL RANGER RALPH;

The Waif of the Western Prairies

BY WELDON J. COBB.

CHAPTER XXIII—Continued.

Darrel seized the bandit's arm and forced him through the doorway. Despard made no resistance at all. Brown snatched his revolver from his belt. Standing in the darkness near the door was a queer-looking vehicle with a rear grating door.

"Get in," ordered the Sheriff, sternly. "What am I arrested for?" demanded Despard.

"Never mind; if you don't want to be lynched, just obey orders."

"This is an old treasure wagon, and stout and secure," said Brown to Darrel.

"There is a driver?"

"Yes."

"And he has orders to proceed to Miners' Gulch?"

"Exactly. Here is the key to the vehicle. Get in with your prisoner, and leave before the miners know of the capture."

"There was an accomplice of this man."

"Where is he?"

"Escaped."

"I'll try and find him. Drive ahead."

Darrel sprang into the vehicle and closed the door. It shut with a snap.

Darrel held his revolver ready for use.

Despard, sullen and silent, sat glaring

furiously at him.

The vehicle left the place and started for the mountain roads. The capture of the bandit had been accomplished most expeditiously. Darrel well knew, however, that he must be very watchful of so wily a foe.

For over an hour not a word was spoken, and the vehicle proceeded on its way. There was a small shelf in the forward part of the wagon. Here a little lamp cast dim rays of light over the interior.

"I think I know you at last," remarked Despard, finally, in a sullen, sneering tone.

"Indeed?"

"Yes. You are the friend of Ranger Ralph."

"And his avenger."

"You expect to prove me to be his assassin?"

"And that of the others—yes."

"To Miners' Gulch."

This seemed to alarm and subdue Despard, for he relapsed into silence.

A casual glance from the rear barred window showed that the vehicle was slowly treading a dangerous road on the very edge of the mountains.

Suddenly he started. He was positive that a figure on horseback had flushed by the vehicle. A minute later there was a shot. It was succeeded by a cry for help and then a fall.

"Whoa!"

The horses came to a halt. The voice was that of Danton. A revolver was thrust through the bars. Its possessor was sheltered by the darkness beyond.

"Move, and you are a dead man," spoke Danton's voice. "Whoever you are, you are in deadly peril. I can see your every movement. Listen to what I say."

These words were directed to Darrel. He clutched his revolver and was silent. "Your driver I have disposed of," said Danton. "You are in my power. Despard, who is this man?"

"The scout's friend."

"Grey?"

"Yes."

"Mr. Grey, you will first hand out the revolver you have in your hand."

Darrel moved as if to obey Danton's request. Instead, he raised it suddenly and fired.

Danton drew back. The horses, alarmed at the shot, started off. With tremendous velocity the vehicle was dragged down a steep grade. Without a driver they dashed madly forward.

One glance showed Darrel their awful peril. They were so near the edge of the precipice that it seemed as if it would go over the edge of the world.

Despard, terrified, sprang excitedly to his feet. A yawning abyss showed as the wagon struck a tree.

The horses broke loose and dashed away. The vehicle tottered, crashed, and fell over the steep mountain road.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A THRILLING ADVENTURE.

It was some minutes before the two men in the locked wagon box could fully realize what had occurred. They knew that the horses had run away, and, the wagon colliding with a tree, had dashed madly onward, deserting the vehicle. The wagon had tottered on the brink of the abyss, and then, turning, fell downward.

Darrel Grey caught one glimpse of the gloomy depths of the valley below, and gave himself up for lost. To his amazement, the wagon whirled downward only a few feet. Then it came to an abrupt halt.

Its sudden stoppage brought him and Despard together with a shock.

Amid the excitement and peril of the occasion, Darrel thought not of treachery on the part of his companion. The latter seemed paralyzed with terror, and his face was white and craven.

"We are doomed!" he muttered, in a frightened tone.

"Not at all," replied Darrel. "We are enemies, Dyke Despard, but for once we had better act in unison."

"Anything to escape a fall into that dark abyss."

Darrel shuddered as he pointed to the yawning depths below.

The lamp in the wagon had been extinguished by the shock of the fall, but the moonlight outside revealed their surroundings plainly. Darrel soon learned their real situation. The wagon lay on its side, about ten feet below the edge of the road.

It had fallen partly on a shelf of rock, partly across a tree, and these supported it temporarily. The end was a frail one, however, and the last holdfast might send them whirling to death a hundred feet below. Darrel groped his way to the door and unlocked it.

"If I allow you to follow me, will you agree to make no resistance?" he asked of Despard.

"I promise," replied the outlaw eagerly.

"Very well; by clinging to the shrubs and rocks we can reach the cliff."

Darrel stepped out the door and clambered over the shelving rock. By careful climbing he reached the cliff in safety. He aided Despard, who had followed him, to reach the same place. Both breathed relievedly at their narrow escape from death.

Darrel was once more on his guard, and the relentless captor, as he clasped his revolver in his hand.

"March on," he said, gently, "we have lost time."

He glanced up and down the deserted mountain road. There was no trace of either Danton or the horses that had broken loose from the wagon.

"Hold on," said Despard.

"Well, what is it?"

"You intend to take me to Miners' Gulch?"

"Yes."

"What?"

"Can you ask? Your many crimes?"

"I will be poor satisfaction to you."

"Why?"

"You are losing time."

"In what way?" asked Darrel.

"In seeking revenge on me, you are leaving your friends in danger."

"What friends?"

"Ranger Ralph and the girl, Inez Tracey."

"Ranger Ralph is dead."

"No; he escaped at the old hermit's cave. I saw him."

"Allowing that, he can take care of himself."

"But the girl. She is a prisoner with the Indians. Instead, he stood silently regarding the two persons he had happened to find so strangely.

He was, too, somewhat puzzled at the actions of White Fawn's companion. The whole dress and manner of the latter were strangely peculiar and grotesque. He possessed a patrachal appearance and wore a white beard commanding nearly to his waist. He wore dark spectacles and a strange cone-like hat on his head. His dress was a mixture of civilized and savage, and was ornamented with shells and war-paint.

Not a word was spoken as the journey was resumed. Darrel resolved to convey his prisoner to the next mining settlement, and there make known his crimes, and return to search for the driver of the wagon, who had been shot by Danton.

Later, he learned that the driver had escaped with a slight wound.

For over an hour the lonely tramp continued. Several times, as they came to where the road was more tortuous, Darrel paused.

He imagined he could hear horses' hoofs in the distance, but finally attributed the sound to some ravine water or cataract. He was not aware that a wily foe was upon his trail, that Darrel's accomplice, Danton, had followed him, intent on rescuing the former.

As they rounded a point of rocks, Grey started quickly. Too late to avoid a catastrophe, Darrel eaved to fire at an advancing for suddenly revealed behind them. It was Danton, and he was on horseback.

With a deft movement a lasso shot out from the saddle bow. The rope encircled his form, pinioning his arms tightly.

The revolver fell to the ground. With a cry of fierce delight Despard seized it. Danton gave a sharp, lightning jerk, sending the other end round his waist, and faced his captive with malignant joy depicted on his evil face.

"The tables are turned, my friend," he jeered.

Darrel was silent with discomfiture and chagrin.

Despard proceeded to see that the lasso was firmly tied around the prisoner.

"We won't delay here," remarked Danton. "Some of this man's friends may be on our trail. Come along, Captain."

Danton urged forward his horse. Despard walked by his side conversing with him. Danton was compelled to keep pace with them, secured to the other end of the rope. He could hear enough of the conversation of his captors to know that they were discussing his fate.

He made every effort possible to release his hands, and had almost succeeded in getting one arm loose, when Danton suddenly halted.

"What is it?" asked Despard.

"Look ahead."

"A fire!"

"Yes."

"Perhaps a camp-fire of the Indians."

"That you must learn. Reconnoiter and see who it is."

They had left them and went in the direction of a glint of light in a dark a distant a shore. Danton sat still, regarding Darrel, until Despard returned. The leader reappeared finally.

"We're in luck, Danton!" he cried.

"What do you mean?"

"It's a camp yonder in the thicket."

"Redskins?"

"No."

"Vigilantes?"

"No."

"What then?"

"A dozen of one of our old bands."

Danton uttered a satisfied ejaculation.

He started the horse forward so suddenly that Darrel was thrown from his sides.

The latter was at that moment near the edge of the cliff and fell into a deep chasm.

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According to the rule above cited, Mr. Jay Gould cannot be regarded a gentleman, and that title can only rest upon his grandson, should a goodly proportion of the Gould wealth be preserved for him, and this long after his death.

He is the son of one of the most powerful families of England, a generation or two hence may be the Astors, Vanderbilts and the Goulds.

England may manage American

breweries, while the "irony of fate" is likely to "even up" this invasion of our malt interests by furnishing the sea-girt isle with her "first families."

He then discerned a means of escape. If he could reach the cliff and raise himself, he could reach a place of safety.

He seized the lasso and shot up several feet. Then seizing some twigs growing out of the cliff, he endeavored to ascend still higher.

In a flash Darrel comprehended his peril.

He discerned that when Danton reached the tree across which they were swaying, he would cut the rope and send him to his death below. With a free hand he seized the foot of Danton.

"Let go!" yelled the bandit.

"I will not. You will let me ascend first or I will hold on to you all night."

"Shoot him!" shouted Danton to Despard, wild with rage.

The outlaw leader leaped over the edge of the cliff and leveled a revolver at Danton. There was a fla and a report. Danton withdrew his hand from the lasso as a sharp, searing sensation coursed his body.

Darrel began to pull at the rope.

Darrel shot downward and Danton followed him.

Glancing over his shoulder, Darrel saw that the horses had dashed away.

He reached the cliff in safety.

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