

ROYAL RANGER RALPH:

The Waif of the Western Prairies

BY WELDON J. COBB.

CHAPTER XXV.—Continued.
It was fully two hours before the bandits had reached the ravine. The river was now flowing in torrents; the situation was a most gloomy and uncomfortable one. Before them ran the river, broad and deep, and with a swift current.

"Ha! What is this?"

Danton's words announced that he had found a canoe. It was quite large, and evidently belonged to the Indians. Where it lay there were marks on the bank as if a second canoe had recently been there.

"The girl must have escaped by way of the river," remarked Despard.

"Yes, and she had help."

"How do you know that?"

"There are the footprints of two persons here."

"Ha!"

"Both small and apparently those of women."

"Then she had a companion?"

"Undoubt'dly. One of them wore moccasins."

"An Indian?"

"Yes. The Modoc princess."

"Impossible!"

"It must be White Fawn."

Despard turned pale. He dreaded the vengeance of Shadow Snake and his daughter.

"Let us hasten," he said.

"And take the canoe?"

"Yes."

"It will not hold more than half of us."

"Then let the others cross over and get away from the Indians as best they can."

This plan was consummated. A portion of the band were rowed across the river. Despard, Danton and the others then directed the canoe to midstream and allowed it to proceed down the stream.

They passed the cliff and the ravine in safety and soon left it far behind. Apparently they were now far enough away to be safe. The Modocs, in the ravine alone, had not witnessed their departure. Somewhere down the river, in advance of them, they theorized, was the canoe containing the Modoc princess and their escaped captive, Inez Tracey.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE MODOC.
The plots and movements of Dyke Despard, the bandit leader, were fast approaching a climax, as he was soon to learn in a tragic and unexpected manner.

The Indians whom his spy had discovered in the ravine were indeed members of Shadow Snake's tribe, and he had avoided a deadly conflict by his timely escape. The savages had located his recent camp, had trailed him to the ravine, and later explored the cliff, but found no trace of him.

Despard had remained faithfully at his post in the fort.

When the rain and mist obscured the outlaws he did not retreat from the trenchment, but endeavored to watch the cliff as best he could. Thus hidden by the mist the outlaws escaped without his knowledge. He was amazed when at last the mists were dispersed and he saw no trace of his enemies in the vicinity.

Instead, a score of dusky warriors were ascending the winding mountain paths.

What did it mean?

He was perplexed and somewhat alarmed at the discovery. The savages seemed to be following a trail and were coming directly to the summit of the cliff. Sooner or later he must be discovered, and resistance against such super numbers would be folly. Besides, by this time White Fawn and Inez must have effected their escape.

He could not explain the mysterious disappearance of the bandits, but he observed that there was a possibility of leaving the fort and retreating before the Indians reached the summit of the cliff.

Despard began to creep behind the rocks in the direction the Modoc princess and Inez had gone. He saw, some distance away, a place where he might essay a descent to the valley, and hastened to reach it.

Suddenly he started in dismay.

As if by magic, two stalwart savages had darted across his path. Before he could retreat or advance they had seized him securely.

They gave utterance to a triumphant yell, and began to lead him toward the ravine where their chief was. Despard faced his enemies boldly as they gathered around him.

Shadow Snake listened to the rapid words of Despard's captors, in explanation of their researches. Then he turned to the prisoner.

"Ugh!" he ejaculated; "who is the pale-face?"

Shadow Snake did not evidently recognize Despard as the man he had liberated at White Fawn's request at the outlaws' stronghold in Lone Canyon. In his new disguise, the Modoc chief did not suppose his present prisoner and his daughter's friend to be the same person.

"I am the friend of the White Fawn," he said, simply.

The chief started.

"Ugh! The pale-face knows the prints?"

"Yes."

"You have seen her of late?"

"A few hours since."

"Where?"

Briefly Despard related how he had met the White Fawn. He told the Snake he had once saved his daughter's life. In return he had rescued Inez from Despard, and despatched the pursuit and the attack on the mountain hut. The old chief's eyes blazed fiercely as Despard spoke Despard's name.

"Ugh!" he uttered savagely. "The Black Crow shall be trampled. Whither has he gone?"

"I do not know."

"And the Fawn?"

"Escaped by the ravine to the river." Shadow Snake held a brief conference with his braves.

"The Eagle shall be the friend of the Snake," said the Modoc chief to Despard. "Together we will find and punish the Crow."

Despard showed the rattlesnake chain White Fawn had given him, and this cemented the confidence and friendship of the Modoc braves. Shadow Snake at once went ashore the cliff, and reached the ravine on the other side.

"The canoes are gone!" he uttered angrily, as they came to the spot where Despard had reached the river.

Indian sagacity soon formed a theory as to their theft, which proved to be the correct one. The canoes they learned had evidently been taken at intervals.

"The Fawn went first with the pale-face maiden," explained Shadow Snake. "Why do you think so?" Despard ventured to inquire.

"Because the boat was pushed into the water as an Indian would do it, and the

paddles were used at the side to aid its progress. The Crow has gone in pursuit. Some of his men were taken across the river."

"Why?"

"Because there was not room enough for them in the canoe."

Shadow Snake gave rapid orders as he arrived at these conclusions. He divided his band, and sent half of them in pursuit of the outlaws who had crossed the river. With the others and Despard Grey he started down the banks of the stream.

Meanwhile the objects of Despard's solicitude, White Fawn and Inez, had met with some exciting adventures. The Indian maiden and her charge had managed to reach the ravine in safety after leaving Despard Grey. They had selected one of them. She knew that the river led to some settlements, and for the present her only thought was to place Inez in a position of safety.

The rain made their situation extremely uncomfortable, but White Fawn resolutely plied the paddles, and they made swift progress. It was not until after noon that any incident occurred that in any way tended to alarm them. At a point where the river divided, as she looked back, the Fawn saw a canoe coming down the stream about a mile distant. This caused her to hasten the progress of their own boat. An hour later, in the distance, she heard the sound of shooting and alarms. Confronting him with drawn revolvers were two men.

The Modoc princess was about to descend the stairs. She must not discover him yet. Despard silently retreated and cautiously re-entered the room where Danton was. He started as he did so. Danton stood by a table pale and alarmed. Confronting him with drawn revolvers were two men.

Then followed a weary tramp through the forests. At last, towards nightfall, they reached what looked like a mining settlement. Then a small village came into view, and on its outskirts they came across a rather pretentious inn, designated by a large sign-board as the Fair Play Tavern.

"We have reached a place of safety," said the Modoc princess, as she designated the tavern. "You are wearied and pale. See, yonder is a white squaw. Speak to her."

A woman, apparently the landlord's wife, was visible at the rear door of the inn. Inez approached and addressed her.

She told her briefly that she and her companion had lost the way, met with bandits, and wished to remain at the inn all night. The sight of money influenced the woman to agree to give them shelter.

A sigh of relief escaped the lips of Inez as she found herself with White Fawn in a comfortable room of the tavern. She, however, expressed a deep anxiety for her lover's safety. White Fawn stated that with the morning she would return to the scene of their recent adventures.

A meal was served in their room, and Inez sat at the window gazing out at the front of the tavern.

She started and uttered a cry of dread as the lights from the bar-room showed two new arrivals. At a glance she recognized them as Danton and Dyke Despard.

CHAPTER XXVII.
AT THE TAVERN.

The two men who had just entered the Fair Play tavern were indeed Dyke Despard and his evil accomplice, Danton. At the sight of them new terror and apprehension seized the timid Inez, and even White Fawn looked anxious and concerned.

But they, however, knew the true condition of affairs with the outlaws they would have been less fearful of their power to injure them. For retaliation, swift and terrible, seemed to have followed the bandits, and the arrival of their leaders at the tavern was the natural result of a flight from their enemies.

The canoe containing the outlaws had nearly overtaken the fugitives. The Modocs had pursued the bandits. Despard and his men had been attacked by the Indians at a bend in the river.

Shadow Snake was their leader and Despard Grey was among them. Before the started outlaws could prepare for a defense, a deadly hail of leaden bullets was poured into their midst.

Instantly the river became the scene of the greatest confusion and excitement. The canoe, penetrated by the bullets, sank in midstream, and those not killed or wounded tried to swim to the opposite shore.

Of their number only two escaped—Despard and Danton—and they were both slightly wounded. Of the others not one escaped the dread vengeance of the Modocs.

The bandit leaders gained the shore, even precipitately, as had been seen, reached the Fair Play Tavern shortly after the arrival of the fugitives.

They entered the house, seeking to evade notice, and passed into the anteroom behind the bar. The landlord, who was the banker, merchant and magistrate of the place, followed them with a short range of recognition on his face.

"Well, gentlemen—" he began.

"What?" you don't know us?" said Danton.

"Despard!" he finally ejaculated, after staring at them for some moments.

"Exactly, and in trouble. See here, Marvin, we're in a bad box, and we've got to leave the country."

"How is that?"

"Close the door and we'll tell you." Then he closed and locked the trap-door as the landlord entered the room.

The latter seemed somewhat excited. "I guess you were right about being pursued," he said.

"Why so?" asked Despard.

"The two men came into the bar-room few minutes since who acted very suspiciously."

They had emptied their revolvers at short range. Neither had been seriously injured. Just as Despard reached the spot, the outlaw had darted up a steep incline.

"We shall meet again!" he cried. "You have triumphed this time—help!"

The word surged in his throat. As he reached the summit of the eminence, a deafening detonation rang forth.

Pierced by a hundred bullets, Dyke Despard fell dead.

He had run directly into an ambush of the very Indians who had accompanied Despard to the vicinity of Fair Play. A moment later Shadow Snake appeared.

"Our vengeance was complete—his foe was dead, and the outlaw band of Despard had ensued."

He had left a lantern with them, and the two girls stood silent and alone, watching its flickering rays and anxious awaiting the woman's return.

"There's a trap in the floor leading to the cellar, and thence to the stables. How are the fugitives going to know it?"

"Because we have many enemies on our trail, and will probably be closely pursued. Bring us something to eat and drink, will you? We are nearly famished."

Despard was some time operating the bolt, which apparently had not been used for years. He finally slid it back and forth, and opened it cautiously, as Danton had suggested, to a hall that ran from the upper to the rear portion of the house.

Despard seemed determined to understand his surroundings, and to be prepared for an escape under all contingencies. He stepped into the hall, which was in complete darkness, and closed the door after him. He saw that to attempt to leave by the rear of the

house would be folly if the place was surrounded. He cautiously ascended the stair a few steps.

"If it comes to the worst we can retreat," he muttered. "Ha! What was that?"

Distinctly from the hall above he caught the sound of voices. He thrilled wildly as he recognized them, for they were those of Inez and White Fawn.

"Return to the room," the latter was saying.

"But every moment we delay is fatal, with that man in the house."

"The Black Crow can not know that we are here," responded the Indian maiden.

"I will soon learn of it. Let us fly. And be pursued and overtaken by him. No, we are safer here. Return to the room, and I will find out our true peril."

"Then see the ladyland," urged Inez.

"If she will provide us with horses we will leave at once."

"Be it so. I will return soon."

The eyes of the outlaw chief gleamed triumphantly. The fugitives he had abandoned as effectually escaped were under the same roof. He must devise a plan to secure Inez and the diamonds at once.

The Modoc princess was about to descend the stairs. She must not discover him yet. Despard silently retreated and cautiously re-entered the room where Danton was.

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