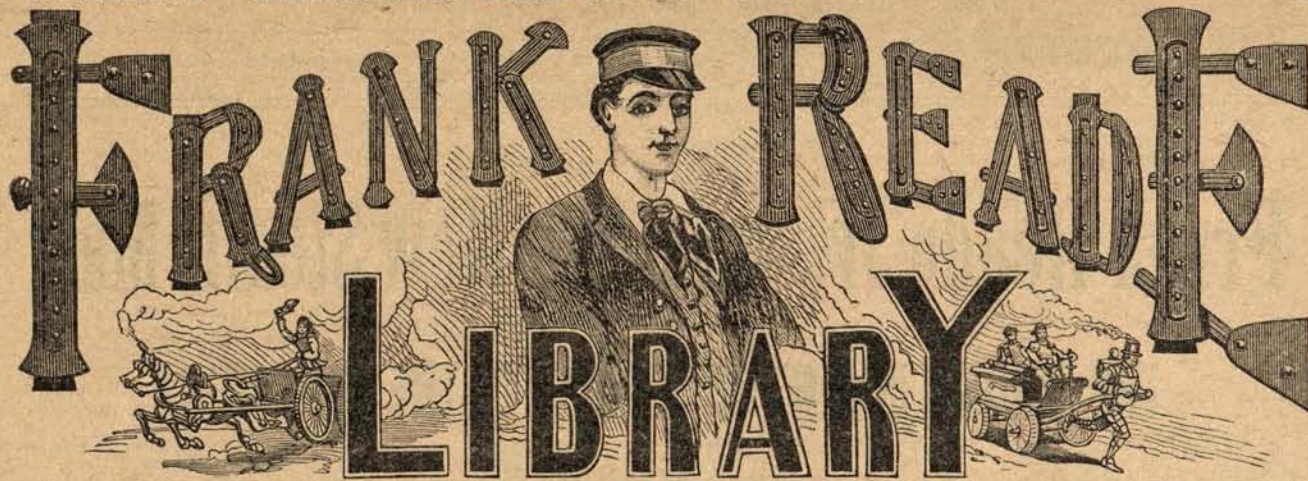


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V. I. I

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FRANK READE, JR.,

AND HIS NEW STEAM MAN; OR, THE YOUNG INVENTOR'S TRIP TO THE FAR WEST.

By "NONAME."



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Frank Reade Jr., and His New Steam Man;

OR,

THE YOUNG INVENTOR'S TRIP TO THE FAR WEST.

By "NONAME,"

Author of "Frank Reade Jr.'s Electric Cyclone; or, Thrilling Adventures in No Man's Land," etc.

CHAPTER I.

A GREAT WRONG.

FRANK READE was noted the world over as a wonderful and distinguished inventor of marvelous machines in the line of steam and electricity. But he had grown old and unable to knock about the world, as he had been wont once to do.

So it happened that his son, Frank Reade, Jr., a handsome and talented young man, succeeded his father as a great inventor, even excelling him in variety and complexity of invention. The son speedily outstripped his sire.

The great machine shops in Readestown were enlarged by young Frank, and new flying machines, electric wonders, and so forth, were brought into being.

But the elder Frank would maintain that, inasmuch as electricity at the time was an undeveloped factor, his invention of the Steam Man was really the most wonderful of all.

"It cannot be improved upon," he declared, positively. "Not if steam is used as a motive power."

Frank, Jr., laughed quietly, and patted his father on the back.

"Dad," he said, with an affectionate, though bantering air, "what would you think if I should produce a most remarkable improvement upon your Steam Man?"

"You can't do it!" declared the senior Reade.

Frank, Jr., said no more, but smiled in a significant manner. One day later, the doors of the secret draughting-room of design were tightly locked and young Frank came forth only to his meals.

For three months this matter of closed doors continued. In the machine shop department, where the parts of machinery were secretly put together, the ring of hammers might have been heard, and a big sign was upon the door:

No admittance!

Thus matters were when one evening Frank left his arduous duties to spend a few hours with his wife and little boy.

But just as he was passing out of the yard, a darky, short in stature and of genial features, rushed excitedly up to him.

"Oh, Marse Frank," cried the sable servitor, "jes' wait one moment!"

"Well, Pomp," said Frank, pleasantly, "what can I do for you?"

The darky, who was a faithful servant of the Reades, and had accompanied both on their tours in foreign lands, ducked his head, with a grin, and replied:

"Yo' fader wants yo', Marse Frank, jes' as quick as eber yo' kin come!"

"My father," exclaimed Frank, quickly. "What is it?"

"I don' know nuffin' 'bout it tall, Marse Frank. He jes' say fo' me to tell yo' he want fo' to see yo'."

"Where is he?"

"In his library, sah."

"All right, Pomp. Tell him I will come at once."

The darky darted away. Frank saw that the doors to the secret rooms were locked. This was a wise precaution for hosts of cranks and demented inventors were always hovering about the place and would quickly have stolen the designs if they could have got at them.

Not ten minutes later Frank entered the library where his father was.

The elder Reade was pacing up and down in great excitement.

"Well, my son, you have come at last!" he cried. "I have much wanted to see you."

"I am at your service, father," replied Frank. "What is it?"

"I want you to tell me what kind of a machine you have been getting up."

"Come now, that's not fair," said Frank Jr. with twinkling eyes.

"Well, if it's any kind of a machine that can travel over the prairies tell me so," cried the elder Reade, excitedly.

Frank, Jr., was at a loss to exactly understand what his father was driving at. However, he replied:

"Well, I may safely say that it is. Now explain yourself."

"I will," replied the senior Reade. "I have a matter of great importance to give you, Frank, my boy. If your invention is as good as my steam man even, and does not improve upon it, it will yet perform the work which I want it to do."

A light broke across Frank, Jr.'s face.

"Ah!" he cried. "I see what you are driving at. You have an undertaking for me and my new machine."

Frank, Sr., looked steadily at Frank, Jr., and replied:

"You have hit the nail upon the head."

"What is it?"

"First, I must tell you a story."

"Well?"

"It would take me some time to go into the details, so I will not attempt to do that but give you a simple statement of facts; in short, the outline of the story."

"All right. Let us have it."

The senior Reade cleared his throat and continued:

"Many years ago when I was traveling in Australia I was set upon by bushmen and would have been killed but for the sudden arrival upon the scene of a countryman of mine, a man of about my own age and as plucky as a lion.

"His name was Jim Travers, and I had known him in New York as the son of a wealthy family. He was of a roving temperament, however, and this is what had brought him to Australia.

"Well, Travers saved my life. He beat off my assailants, and nursing my wounds brought me back to life.

"I have felt ever since that I owed him a debt which could not be fully repaid. At that time I could make no return for the service.

"Jim and I drifted through the gold fields together. Then I lost track of him, and until the other day I have not seen or heard from him.

"But I now find that it is in my power to give him assistance, in fact to partly pay the debt I owe him. This brings us to the matter in hand.

Six months ago it seems that Jim who is now a man of great wealth, still a bachelor and for a few years past living at a fashionable hotel in New York went to his club. When he returned in the evening he found a note worded like this:

Mr. Reade laid a note upon the table, Frank read it:

"DEAR TRAVERS:—I would like to see you to-night upon a very important matter. Will you meet me in twenty minutes at the cafe on your corner. I must see you, so be sure and come.

"A FRIEND."

"Of course Jim wondered at the note, but he did not know of an enemy in the world, so he felt perfectly safe in keeping the appointment. He started for the cafe.

"The night was dark and misty, Jim walked along and had got near the cafe when somebody stepped out of a dark hallway and grasped his arm.

"Come in here," a sharp voice said, we can talk better here than in the cafe."

"Before Jim could make any resistance he was pulled into a dark hallway. Two men had hold of him and something wet was dashed across his face and over his hands, then he felt some liquid poured over his clothes and some object thrust into his pocket."

"Then the door opened again and he was flung out into the street. Jim was unharmed, but amazed at such treatment. He had not been hurt and was at a loss to understand what it all meant.

"The incident had taken but a few moments in its course. At first a thought of foul play had flashed across Jim. Then it occurred to him to look at his hands which were wet with some substance.

"He gave a great cry of horror as he did so. There was blood upon them.

"In fact his hands and face and clothes were almost soaked in red blood. For an instant he was horrified.

"What mystery was this? But he quickly changed his opinion and actually laughed.

"It occurred to him as a practical joke upon the part of his club friends. Satisfied of this he resolved to get even with them.

"He tried to open the door, through which he had been pulled. It was locked and would not yield.

"Then he decided to go back to his room and wash off the blood. But he had not gone ten steps before he was met in the glare of the lamplight by one of the club men.

"Thunder! What's the matter with you, Travers?" asked his friend.

"Oh, nothing, only a little practical joke the boys have been playing on me," replied Jim with a grin. Two or three others came along and Jim explains in like manner. Then he goes to his apartments.

"When he arrives there he is amazed to find the door open and a fearful scene within. The furniture, the light carpet and the walls in places are smeared with blood. Jim now got angry.

"This is carrying a joke a little too far!" he cried, testily. "This spoiling fine furniture is too much."

"But he went to washing the blood from his hands. This was a hard job and took time. Suddenly half a dozen officers came into the room and seized him.

"What do you want?" cried poor Jim in surprise.

"We want you," they replied.

"What for?"

"For murder!"

Instead of being horrified, Jim was mad, madder than a March hare. He just got up and swore at the officers.

"I don't like this sort of thing," he declared. "It's carrying a joke too far."

The officers only laughed and slipped manacles upon his wrists. Then they led him away to prison. Not until brought into court did poor Jim know that he had been made the victim of a hellish scheme.

Murder had really been committed in that house into which he had been dragged, and where he was smeared with blood. A man unknown, was there found literally carved to pieces with a knife.

Blood had been found upon Jim in his room. A trail led from the house to his room. A knife was found in his coat pocket. The evidence was all against him and his trial had just come off and he had just been sentenced to death by hanging with only three months of grace.

Frank Reade, Jr., listened to this thrilling tale with sensations which the pen cannot depict. It was so horrible, so strange, so ghastly that he could hardly believe it true.

He arose and walked once across the floor.

CHAPTER II.

THE NEW STEAM MAN.

THEN the young inventor paused before his father, and in a deeply impressed manner said:

"Then an innocent man stands convicted of murder?"

"Yes."

"In that case it is the duty of every philanthropic man to try and save the innocent."

"It is."

"We must do it."

"I am glad to hear you say that."

"But the question now arises as to how we shall be able to do it. Is there no clew to the real assassins?"

"No definite clew."

"That is very strange. Of course there must have been a motive. That motive would seem to be to get Travers out of the way."

"Yes."

"And he has no enemies?"

"None that he knew of."

"Ah, but what would any one gain by putting him out of the way—"

Frank Reade, Jr., paused. He gazed steadily at his father. Much passed between them in that glance.

"His fortune is a large one," put in the senior Reade, "the right to inherit would furnish the best motive. There is but one heir, and he is a nephew, Artemas Cliff, who is a stockman, somewhere in the Far West. It could not be him."

"Could not?" Frank Reade, Jr., sat down and dropped into a brown study. After a time he aroused.

"I am interested in this case," he declared. "And my Steam Man is at the disposal of justice at any time. But you spoke of the prairies. Is there a clew in the West?"

"The only clew possible to obtain at present," declared Mr. Reade, Sr. "You see detectives tracked two suspicious men to Kansas. There they lost track of them. Everybody believes that they were the assassins."

"Well, I believe it," cried Frank Reade, Jr., with impulse. "I can see but one logical explanation of this matter. Either Artemas Cliff has employed two ruffians to do this awful deed for the sake of Travers' money, or—the case is one not possible to solve with ease."

Frank Reade, Sr., did not display surprise at this statement of his son.

"Now you have the whole thing in a nutshell, my boy," he said. "Of course, you can do as you please, but if you wish to take any kind of a journey with your new invention, here is a chance, and a

noble object in view. That object should be to track down the murderers, and clear Jim Travers. It may be that the nephew, Artemas Cliff, is the really guilty one, but in any case, I believe that it is in the West you will find the solution of the mystery."

"That is my belief," agreed Frank Reade, Jr., "but now that this matter is settled let me show you the plans of my steam man."

Frank Reade, Jr., drew a roll of papers from his pocket and spread them upon the table.

Upon them were the blue print plans and drawings of the mechanism of the Steam Man.

Frank Reade, Senior, examined them carefully and critically. From one piece to another he went and after some time drew a deep breath saying:

"Well, young blood is the best after all. I must say, Frank, that I am beat. There is no doubt but that you have improved upon my Steam Man. I congratulate you."

"Thank you," said Frank Reade, Jr. with gratification.

"But I am anxious to see this marvel at work."

"You shall," replied the young inventor. "To-morrow the Steam Man will go out of the shop upon his trial trip."

A few minutes later Frank Reade, Jr., was on the way to his own house.

He was in a particularly happy frame of mind. He had achieved great results in his new invention, and here, as by design, was a chance afforded him to use the Steam Man to a philanthropic and heroic purpose.

The idea of traveling through the wilds of the West was a thrilling one.

Frank could already picture the effect of the Steam Man upon the wild savages of the plains and the outlaws of Western Kansas and Colorado.

Also the level floor-like prairie of that region would afford excellent traveling for the new invention.

Frank Reade, Jr., was a lover of adventure.

It was an inborn love. The prospect before him fired his very soul. It was just what he desired.

That evening he unfolded all his plans to his wife.

Of course Mrs. Reade was averse to her husband undertaking such a dangerous trip. But after a time she overcame her scruples and reconciled herself to it.

The next morning at an early hour, Frank was at the engine house of the steel works. The wide doors were thrown open and a wonderful sight revealed.

There stood the Steam Man.

Frank Reade, Sr., and a great number of friends were present. Pomp, the negro, was also there, as well as a queer-looking little Irishman with a genuine Hibernian mug and twinkling eyes, which bespoke a nature brimming over with fun. This was Barney O'Shea.

Barney and Pomp had long been faithful servants of the Reades. In all of their travels with their inventions they had accompanied them. Of these two characters we will say no more, but permit the reader to become acquainted with them in the course of the story.

The senior Reade examined the mechanism of the new Steam Man with deepest interest.

"Upon my word, Frank," he cried, "you have beaten me out and out. I can hardly believe my eyes."

Frank Reade, Jr., laughed good humoredly.

Then he went about showing a party of friends the mechanism of the new Steam Man.

The man himself was a structure of iron plates joined in sections with rivets, hinges or bars as the needs required.

In face and form the machine was a good imitation of a man done in steel.

In no wise did he look ponderous or unwieldy, though his stature was fully nine feet.

The man stood erect holding the shafts of a wagon at his hips.

The wagon itself was light but roomy with four wheels and a top covering of fine steel net work. This was impervious to a bullet while anyone inside could see quite well all about them.

There were loop-holes in this netting to put the rifle barrels through in case of a fight.

A part of the wagon was used as a coal bunker. Other small compartments held a limited amount of stores, ammunitions and weapons.

Upon the fender in front was a brake to regulate the wagon on a steep grade, and a slit in the net work here allowed of the passage of the reins, two long lines connecting with the throttle and whistle valves. As to the mechanism of the man.

Here was really the fine work of the invention.

Steam was the motive power.

The hollow legs and arms of the man made the reservoir or boilers. In the broad chest was the furnace. Fully two hundred pounds of coal could here be placed, keeping up a fire sufficient to generate steam for a long time.

The steam chest was upon the man's back, and here were a number of valves. The tall hat worn by the man formed the smoke stack.

The driving rods, in sections, extended down the man's legs, and could be set in motion so skillfully that a tremendous stride was attained, and a speed far beyond belief.

This was the new steam man. The improvements were many and manifest.

All the mechanism was more nicely balanced, the parts more strongly joined, and the steel of finer quality. Greater speed was the certainty.

Fire was burning in the furnace, steam was hissing from the retort, and smoke was pouring from the funnel hat of the man.

Frank Reade, Jr., suddenly sprang in the wagon.

He closed the screen door behind him. Pomp was engaged in some work in the coal bunker.

Frank took up the reins and pulled them. The throttle was opened and also the whistle valve.

Three sharp shrieks the new Steam Man gave and then he was away on the trial trip.

Out of the yard he went and out upon the highway.

Everybody rushed to the gates and a great cheer went up. Down the highway went the Steam Man at a terrific gate.

His strides were long and powerful. So rapidly were they made that a tremendous amount of surface was covered.

It was a good smooth road.

Just ahead was a man riding a horse. Near him was a bicyclist who was noted as a fast rider.

Both had heard that the Steam Man would make his trial run that morning.

Bets had been made by both that they could beat the Man.

Frank guessed the truth at once.

"Ki dar, Marse Frank," cried Pomp, with a chuckle and a shake of his woolly head. "Dem two chaps am got a pile ob gall. Jes' yo' show dem dat dey ain't in it. Won't yo'?"

Pomp had more than one reason for beating the horse and bicycle. He had made a small bet of his own on the result.

It was evident that the parties ahead were ready for the fun.

Frank Reade, Jr., smiled grimly, and opened the throttle a little wider.

The next moment the Steam Man, the bicycle rider and the trotter were all flying neck and neck down the road.

Heavens! what a race that was!

Down the road they flew like a whirlwind. The dust flew up behind them in a cloud.

But the Steam Man just trotted by his competitors with seemingly no exertion at all. Frank turned with a laugh to see how easily they were distanced.

After a good trial, the new Steam Man returned to the foundry yard. As Frank stepped down out of the wagon, his father came up and grasped his hand in an ecstasy of delight.

"Bravo, my son!" he cried. "You have eclipsed my invention. I wish you luck, and I know that you will succeed in clearing Jim Travers."

"I shall take only Barney and Pomp with me," said Frank Reade, Jr. "There will not be room in the wagon for more."

"Well, they will be useful companions," said the Senior Reade. "My son; may God be with you in your enterprise."

Frank Reade, Jr., at once proceeded to make preparations for his western trip.

He visited Travers in prison and talked with him.

"To tell the truth, I am distrustful of my nephew, Artemas Cliff. He is an avaricious villain, and a number of times has tried to swindle me out of money. I know that he has led the life of an outlaw out there on the border."

"But if he aspired to gain your wealth, why did he not attempt your life in some direct manner?" asked Frank.

"I presume he may have feared detection," replied Travers. "If I am hung for the murder of this unknown man, the mystery will be sealed forever. They real murderer will never be known."

"I believe you are right," agreed Frank Reade, Jr. "Well, I will find this Artemas Cliff, and do the best I can towards clearing up the mystery and setting you right."

"Thank you!" said Travers with emotion. "I feel that you will succeed."

CHAPTER III.

ON THE PLAINS.

THE scene of our story now undergoes a great change.

We will transfer the reader from Readestown to the plains of the Far West. Fully five hundred miles from civilization, and right in the heart of the region of the hostile Sioux.

Frank Reade, Jr., had transported the Steam Man as far as possible by rail.

From thence he had journeyed the rest of the ways overland.

Nothing of thrilling sort had as yet marked their journey. But they were upon the verge of the most exciting adventures as the reader will hereafter agree, possible to be experienced by man.

With the broad expanse of rolling plain upon every hand, one morning in June the Steam Man might have been seen making its way along at a moderate gait.

Frank Reade, Jr., with Barney and Pomp were in the wagon.

Frank held the reins and his keen gaze swept the prairie in every direction.

As far as the eye could reach there remained the same broad expanse. There was little to break the monotony.

Barney and Pomp had taken advantage of a lull in their duties to play a social game of poker in the rear of the wagon.

These two unique characters, although the warmest of friends, were nevertheless always engaged in badgering each other or the perpetration of practical jokes.

"Bejabers, I'll go yez ten better on that, yez black ape," cried Barney, throwing down a handful of chips. "I'll take me worrud it's a big bluff yez are playin'. Yez can't fool me."

"Youse will jest find out dis nigger neber plays a bluff game," retorted Pomp with a chuckle. "Jest yo' look out fo' yo'self, I'ish."

"Begorra, I ain't afraid av yez an' I'll go ye the tin," cried Barney. There was a broad grin upon Pomp's face. He quietly picked up ten chips and then put in ten more.

"Hold on, I'ish. I'll go youse ten better."

"Call yez, be hevens!" cried Barney, chucking in ten more.

Then he threw down his hand.

"Can yez bate that?" he cried, triumphantly. "Give us the pot, naygur. Yez are no good."

But Pomp put one black paw over the pile of chips.

"Jes' wait one minnit, I'ish."

"Whurro! Yez can't bate it!" cried Barney, confidently.

He had thrown a good hand containing four kings and two aces.

But Pomp quietly laid down four aces!

The picture was one well worthy of an artist. For a moment the two card players gazed at the six aces in amazement. It was a very curious anomaly that there should be six aces in one pack of cards.

Then Barney sprang up furiously.

"Begorra, it's a big cheat ye are!" he cried, angrily. "Whoever saw the loikes av that? Be me sowl, the hull pile is mine!"

"Don' yo' put yo' hands on dem chips, I'ish!" cried Pomp, angrily.

"P'raps yo' kin tell me wharfore youse got dem two aces, maybe youse can?"

"Bejabers, they war in the pack, but yez kin tell me perhaps where yez got those four aces yez put down there?"

"I tell yo', I'ish, dey was in de pack."

"Be jabers it's the fust pack av cards I ever saw with six aces in it," retorted Barney.

"Now don' yo' gib me any mo' ob yo' sass, I'ish!" blustered Pomp.

"I'll jes' make yo' sorry if yo' does."

"Bejabers yez ain't the size!"

"Look out fo' yo'self, I'ish!"

"Whurro!"

Over went the table leaf, down went the chips in the bottom of the wagon, and the two angry poker players closed in a lively wrestle.

For a moment Barney had the best of it, then Pomp tripped the Celt up and both fell in a heap in the bottom of the wagon.

They chanced to fall against the wire screen door in the rear of the wagon.

It was unlocked and gave way beneath the pressure, and the two practical jokers went through it and out upon the hard floor of the prairie.

They were rolled about in a cloud of dust, and had they not been of something more than ordinary composition they would have suffered from broken bones.

But as it was both picked themselves up unhurt.

The Steam Man had gone on fully one hundred yards before Frank Reade, Jr., perceived that his companions were missing, and at once closed the throttle and brought the Man to a halt.

"Serves the rascals right," muttered Frank, as he saw them pick themselves up from the dust. "They are always skylarking, and no good comes of it."

Frank had stopped the Steam Man. He waited for the two jokers to pick themselves up and return to the wagon.

But at that moment a thrilling thing occurred.

Barney and Pomp had fallen near a clamp of timber.

From this with wild yells a band of mounted Sioux Indians now dashed.

They were a war party—painted and bedecked with feathers, and in the full paraphernalia of war.

The peril which threatened the two jokers was one not to be despised.

It was quite evident that the savages meant to cut off their rejoicing the Steam Man. In that case their fate would be sealed.

But Barney was quick-witted, and saw the situation at a glance.

With a wild howl he broke into a mad run for the Steam Man. It was a question of life or death and he ran as he had never ran before.

Pomp was not so lucky. While Barney was distancing his pursuers, and actually succeeded in reaching the wagon, the ducky suddenly found himself cut off.

Indian ponies were circling about him, the red riders whooping and yelling like veritable demons.

The poor ducky was beside himself with terror and perplexity.

"Golly sakes alibe!" he yelled, with his wool literally standing on end. "Whatebber am dis yer nigger gwine fo' to do? I'se a gone coon fo' suah."

It certainly looked that way. The savages circled nearer and half a dozen of them dismounted and rushed upon Pomp.

Now the ducky was unarmed.

He had not even a pistol or a knife. Of course he was at their mercy.

In less time than it takes to tell it, the savages had closed in about the terrified ducky, and he was quickly thrown upon his back and bound.

Then he was laid across the back of a pony and tied on securely.

Then a lariat was attached to the pony's bridle, and the savages with their prisoner in their midst dashed away.

Barney had reached the Steam Man and climbed into the wagon.

Frank Reade, Jr., had seen the whole affair, and for a moment was too astounded to act.

Then as Barney came tumbling into the wagon, Frank turned the man around and sent him flying toward the savages.

This move was quickly made, and the Steam Man ran forward

rapidly. But quick as it had been, the savages had yet succeeded in making Pomp a prisoner and getting away with him.

"Be jabbers, they've got the naygur bound to a horse," cried Barney, wildly. "Wud yez luk at the loikes, Mither Frank. We must catch the omadhouns and give them a lessin of the right sort."

"I hope we may," replied Frank, with great anxiety, "but I fear the red fiends will get to cover before we can overtake them."

"Whurroo! It's mesilf as will spohil the loike av some av thim," cried Barney, as he picked up his rifle.

The savages were racing like mad across the prairie. They had caught sight of the Steam Man, which was to them some fiend incarnate, some evil spirit which would seek their certain destruction.

Terror of the wildest sort made them whip their ponies to the utmost. It was a mad race. But the Steam Man was gaining.

He took tremendous strides. Frank pulled the whistle valve, and the shrieks sent up on the air were of a terrifying kind.

The savages had all gazed with wonder upon the white man's iron horse that followed its steel track across their prairies.

But this latest appearance, the Steam Man, was too much for their nerves. They could not bear it, and fled.

The Steam Man would certainly have overtaken them. But, not visible until one had turned the timber line and made a rise in the prairie was a distant range of hills.

Toward this the savages were going. If they reached them, they would certainly succeed in eluding their pursuer.

And the chances seemed good. Frank saw, with a peculiar chill, that they were really liable to reach the point aimed at.

He sent the man on at full speed. Barney placed himself at a loophole, and commenced firing as rapidly as he could at the fleeing foe.

The result was that many of them fell, and the others redoubled their exertions to make an escape.

On went the chase toward the distant range of hills. Nearer and nearer drew the ponies to the objective point.

With sinking heart Frank saw that the Indians were likely to reach them before the Steam Man could overtake them.

Of course this would mean safety for the savages, for the Steam Man could not hope to follow the ponies over the rough surfaces there encountered.

"Heavens, we are not going to save Pomp!" cried Frank, with a thrill of despair in his voice. "What shall we do, Barney? Is it not awful?"

Barney was busily engaged in placing fresh cartridges in his Winchester.

"Begorra, it's save the naygur I will if I sacrifice me own loife!" cried the big-hearted Celt. "It's me own fault, for sure, that he iver fell throo the door and got picked up by the red min."

Frank put on all the steam he dared, and the man took tremendous strides forward.

"We will make a mighty effort," he gritted, as he piled on the steam.

"Bejabbers, here goes for wan av the spalpeens!" cried Barney. Then the Irishman's rifle cracked.

One of the savages tumbled from his pony's back. Barney continued to load and fire as fast as he could. But the opportunity was not long granted him.

Suddenly the cavalcade of savages dashed into the mouth of the pass.

They were out of sight in a twinkling. The Steam Man was obliged to come to a halt.

There were huge bowlders and piles of stones to block the passage. Barney and Frank Reade, Jr., exchanged glances of despair.

"That is the end of Pomp," declared the young inventor, with a chill. "I have no doubt that is a part of Black Buffalo's band, and he never spares a life."

CHAPTER IV.

THE COWBOYS.

FRANK had spoken truthfully. The band of savages was really a part of the tribe of which Black Buffalo was the chief.

Throughout all the Kansas border this blood thirsty fiend was known and feared.

He had ravaged more wagon trains, burned more settlements, and committed more massacres than any other Sioux chief in the Far West.

His name was a synonym of terror among the settlers, from Dakota to the boundary line of Texas.

By many he was claimed to be a white man or renegade. Others averred that he was a recreant Pawnee chief.

However this was, certainly no red warrior was better known and feared than Black Buffalo.

And it was into his hands that Pomp had fallen. Small wonder then that Frank Reade, Jr., was much alarmed, and even inclined to believe his faithful servitor's life lost.

The merciless Black Buffalo would not be likely to spare Pomp's life. The savages had captured him alive simply to drag him into the hills and torture him to death.

Barney began to bemoan the situation in violent terms. "Och hone, the poor soul," he cried, "he was a black naygur but

he had a white heart jist that eame. Be jabbers av' we cud only get near enough to the red omadhouns I'd loike to shoot ivery mother's son av thim."

"Well, I don't see why the red fiends haven't the best of us," declared Frank.

"It luks that same, Mither Frank," waited Barney. "I don't see how we can ever get through that pass. The Steam-Man might go there, but the wagon won't."

This was true enough. The Steam Man on the level prairie was invincible, but on rough ground like this wholly useless.

Frank and Barney were beside themselves with solicitude and perplexity.

Frank even thought of going forth on foot to try and overtake the redskins. But of course the folly of such a course was quickly apparent to him.

Barney even attempted to carry out literally this plan. He went so far as to open the door in the wire screen and leap down to the ground.

But Frank cried sternly: "Barney, come back at once. You can gain nothing by such a course."

"Shure, Mr. Frank," cried the Irishman, "if yez will only let me go—"

"Come back," was Frank's terse command, which was reluctantly obeyed by the Celt.

Frank took a careful look at the hills. He chanced to see a smooth pathway up the height, and which seemed to follow the course of the canyon or pass.

Up this the Steam Man cautiously advanced. As they continued to ascend higher a good broad view of the prairie was obtained.

And suddenly reaching an elevation from which a southward view could be obtained, Frank gave a sharp cry, and taking a glass from a locker, sprang to a loop-hole in the netting.

He scanned a number of objects upon the prairie far beyond. At that distance they looked like a herd of buffaloes.

But with the glass Frank saw that they were mounted men and white men at that.

They looked like a roving band of cowboys. In any event they were white men and it was quite enough for the young inventor to know this.

"We can depend upon them to help rescue Pomp!" cried Frank, exuberantly. "Luck is yet with us, Barney."

"Be jabbers I hope so," cried the excited Celt. "If they be white men and have a heart they'll shurely do it."

Frank instantly turned the wagon about and sent the Steam Man rapidly down to the prairie.

He blew shrill blast upon the whistle to attract the attention of the white men.

In this he was successful. As the Steam Man reached the prairie floor, the cavalcade of cowboys came dashing up.

They did not seem surprised at sight of the Steam Man somewhat singularly and drew up fifty yards distant while one of their number rode forward.

He was evidently the leader, and was a tall, dark, evil-looking fellow. Frank Reade, Jr. was not favorably impressed with his appearance.

As the young inventor noted that the whole gang had a forbidding appearance and with a chill Frank realized that he could hardly expect any assistance from such a cut-throat looking band.

The tall, dark leader doffed his sombrero as he rode forward and made a low bow.

"Buenos Senors!" he said with a Spanish accent. "I wish you a fair day. Do you travel far with your Iron Man?"

"I am glad to meet you," replied Frank, eagerly. "We come from the East and we are here upon an important mission."

The stranger smiled and bowed again with a peculiar affectation of politeness.

"I am pleased to hear it. Are you not the gentleman called Frank Reade, Jr.?"

Frank gave a start of surprise. "I am," he replied, quickly, "then you have heard of me."

"I have, Senor Reade," replied the cowboy chief, with exaggerated bow and smile.

"Perhaps you know of my mission here?"

"I do," was the reply.

Frank was more amazed than words can express. What mystery was this?

How had this fellow, who bore the stamp of a Spaniard, learned of his mission to the Far West? The young inventor was staggered for a moment.

"Your mission here," replied the cowboy chief, politely, "is to hunt down two men who you believe are guilty of a murder which they skillfully foisted upon a certain man by the name of Jim Travers."

"You are right!" cried Frank. "But how in the name of wonder did you know that?"

"I prefer not to say. It is enough that I know it."

"It is strange that you should have learned it," said Frank, "but I will ask no more questions just now in the face of a terrible exigency."

"Ah!"

"I want to ask your help."

"My help?"

"Yes."

"Pardon, senior, but I cannot see in what manner I can serve you."

"You must assist me. One of my men—a colored man—has fallen into the hands of the Indians. They have made him prisoner and have just escaped with him into these hills. I ask your assistance in effecting his rescue."

A peculiar smile played about the cowboy's lips.

"Is he not the one you call Pomp?" he asked.

"Yes."

"And that man with you in your cage there is called Barney?"

"Yes."

"Ah, I see—Barney and Pomp. Well, Senior Reade, pray accept my compliments and the wish that you may see civilization again alive, which I do not believe will be the case. Ha—ha—ha! You have blundered into a death-trap!"

Something like a correct comprehension of affairs now began to dawn upon Frank.

"What do you mean?" he gasped in surprise. "Who are you?"

"Well, since you ask me I will tell you," replied the cowboy chief with a laugh. "I am no Spaniard, as you might have thought. I am as good an American as you, and you will have good cause to remember my name in the near future, provided you escape from this trap. I am the man you are so eagerly looking for—I am Artemas Cliff."

"Heavens!" gasped Frank Reade, Jr., "the man I am looking for!"

"The same," replied Cliff, mockingly. "You have undertaken quite a daring deed, my fine inventor, but you will find that you have bitten off a very much larger slice than you can masticate."

"We will see," began Frank.

"You see these men?" continued Cliff. "They are my followers, tried and true. What is it to you whether my uncle, Jim Travis, should hang for murder? You can never prove him innocent—at least, never will, for you will never go from here alive."

"Scoundrel!" cried Frank. "You are the real murderer!"

"Ha, ha, ha! Prove it if you can!" laughed the cowboy chief, derisively.

"I will prove it, if I have to drag the confession from your lips!" cried Frank, resolutely.

"Pshaw! Talk is cheap. Attention, men! Grab the throttle rein of the Steam Man and you can destroy him! Forward! Charge!"

Frank Reade, Jr., heard the command and knew well the danger. He was at a loss to account for Cliff's knowledge of him and his invention.

The young inventor was not aware of the fact that for weeks previous to the starting forth of the Steam Man spies had been busy in Readestown.

But such was the truth.

Artemas Cliff had covered his tracks well. He knew that Frank Reade, the young inventor's father, was a friend of Travers and would see him through, if possible.

Therefore he had provided well for giving Frank Reade, Jr., and the new Steam Man a hot reception on the plains.

With hoarse cries the cowboys descended upon the Steam Man. They urged their horses forward at a full gallop.

Frank Reade, Jr., knew well that it was possible for them to greatly injure his invention, so he made quick action to defeat their plans.

He shouted to Barney:

"Give it to them, Barney. Shoot every man you can."

Then Frank opened the throttle, and let the Steam Man out for all he was worth.

It was an easy matter to outstrip the horses, and the Steam Man kept ahead, while the cowboys came thundering on in the rear.

Then Frank slackened speed so as to keep up a uniform distance between the Man and the horses.

While Barney poured in shot after shot into the midst of the gang of pursuers.

The cowboys began to drop from their saddles one by one. It was a destructive and telling fire.

And they strained every nerve in vain in an effort to reach the Steam Man. Frank kept the Man just far enough ahead to ensure safety and enable Barney to pick off the cowboys with ease.

It took Cliff some time to tumble to this little game.

When he did, and realized that he was simply decimating numbers without gaining ground, he called a halt.

The cowboys were now near the banks of a wide river which was really the Platte, Frank Reade, Jr. saw his advantage and brought the Steam Man to a stop. Then he seized a rifle and joined Barney.

CHAPTER V.

POMP'S RESCUE.

But it was hardly likely that the cowboys would stand their ground long under such a fire.

As fast as they could Frank and Barney worked the repeaters.

The result was that quite a number of the foe lay dead upon the prairie.

But Artemas Cliff knew the fatality of remaining there. Being unable to catch the man, he knew that their only hope now was in retreat.

All of the cowboys fired at the Steam Man. The bullets rattled harmlessly against the steel cage.

Frank at once sprang to the reins and the brake and started the Steam Man in pursuit. It was quite a turning of tables.

The pursuers were now the pursued.

So it continued until suddenly, by the orders of Cliff, the cowboys turned their horses into the river and forded it.

Once on the other side they were soon beyond the reach of the rifle balls. The Steam Man of course could not follow.

The encounter with the cowboys was at an end.

They did not return to the attack, somewhat singularly, but kept on until the rolling plains hid them from view.

Cliff's direful threat against the Steam Man and its inventor, had not been carried out. But Frank did not, by any means, delude himself with the belief that the villain would relinquish the attempt so easily.

"Well, Barney," he cried, cheerily, when satisfied that the scrimmage was over. "We came out of that scrape a little the best of it. It has all turned out as I expected. That Cliff is the real murderer."

"Beggorra, it lukes that way, Mистер Frank," agreed Barney.

"So it does. We must plan to capture the villain, and wring a confession from him."

"Be jabbers that's thrue. If I only had an opportunity I'd pretty quick wring his loon neck for him."

"But that does not settle the question of Pomp's fate," declared Frank. "He must be saved."

"Shure, Mистер Frank."

"But how can we do it?"

This was yet a conundrum.

Frank and the faithful Irishman stood looking at each other. It was a long time before either spoke.

Finally Frank said:

"There's only one way, Barney."

"An' phwat's that?"

"We've got to get into those hills in some way. I don't like to leave the Steam Man, but to save Pomp I'd—"

The young inventor ceased speaking. A strange medley of sounds came from the direction of the pass.

There were wild yells and pistol shots, and then, out upon the prairie, the two astonished travelers saw a motley crew of horses and savages emerge.

The savages were fighting furiously. Frank knew enough of the Indians of that region to know what it all meant.

A band of Sioux and a band of Pawnees, the deadliest of enemies, were engaged in a terrific battle.

Frank took in the scene at a glance.

He at once understood all.

The band which had captured Pomp was undoubtedly the one engaged in this conflict. They had very likely met the Pawnees in the upper part of the pass.

When the Pawnees and Sioux met a fight always followed. Generally the latter came off victorious.

As it seemed now, however, the Pawnees had the best of it.

They were worsting the Sioux in good fashion. Frank and Barney watched the scene a moment until suddenly a sharp cry burst from Barney.

"Beggorra, Mистер Frank, if there ain't the naygur," he cried, wildly.

Barney was right. Frank glanced in the direction indicated and saw a thrilling act.

In the midst of the Sioux was Pomp bound to the back of a mustang.

Suddenly in the midst of the melee the horse was seen to bolt from the rest and dash out upon the prairie.

Of course, Pomp had no control over the beast, having his hands tied behind him.

The mustang took his own course and ran like the wind.

The Sioux did not dare to any of them attempt pursuit. The foe in their front claimed their attention.

"Bejabbers, the horse is runnin' away wid the naygur," cried Barney. "Phwat will we do, Mистер Frank?"

"Catch him if we can," cried Frank, seizing the throttle rein.

He opened the throttle and let the Steam Man go ahead; with long strides the machine began to gain upon the mustang.

Pomp was vainly endeavoring to free his hands.

If he could have done so, and could have got hold of the reins once, he could easily have stopped the horse.

But this he was unable to do.

As a result, the animal carried him along swiftly, and along the base of the hills.

Suddenly the mustang swerved and darted into a narrow pass.

Barney, at the loop-holes of the wagon with rifle in hand, had been sorely tempted to fire at the runaway.

But the fear of hitting Pomp had restrained him.

Now, however, the horse was out of range. But Frank headed the Steam Man for the pass.

Fortunately, it was unobstructed by bowlders, and had a good level floor. The Steam Man was enabled to forge along with safety.

But the mustang and his black rider had gone from sight. However the pursuers kept on.

Suddenly they came out upon a broad plateau with steep descent upon all other sides. This extended among the hills for a distance of several miles.

A great cry of horror now went up from Frank and Barney.

The mustang was seen racing along the edge of a mighty chasm. In a few seconds he would be almost sure to take an impossible leap over a deep gorge.

If he should go to the bottom of that gorge it would be the end of Pomp and the mustang.

This was seen at a glance and with the most intense of horror Barney cried:

"Shall I fire, Mистер Frank? It's the only thing as will save the naygur."

"You will have to do that," replied Frank, sharply. "Look out for your aim, Barney. God help Pomp!"

Barney pulled the trigger.

Crack!

The bullet sped true to its mark. It struck the mustang in the side.

The animal faltered, threw up its head, stumbled, and then pitched forward in a heap.

Pomp lay beneath the horse. It did not require but a few moments for the Steam Man to reach him, however.

In a twinkling Barney sprang out of the wagon and cut Pomp's bonds.

The darky was not in the least injured. He lay with one leg under the mustang, but was easily extricated.

The joy of the darky at his rescue cannot be expressed in words.

He embraced Barney effusively.

"Shure I thought yez kill intoirely, naygur," cried the big-hearted Irishman. "It's moighty glad I am to see yez aloive."

"Yo' kin jest bet dis chile am glad fo' to get out ob dem red debbits' hands," cried Pomp, exuberantly.

And then he dashed aboard the Steam Man and grasped Frank's hand.

"Oh, Marse Frank, I'se dretful glad to see yo'!" cried Pomp, excitedly.

"I am glad to have you back, Pomp," cried Frank. "And to know that you are unharmed in any way. But it was a close shave for you."

"Deed it was dat, Marse Frank. But dis nigger am powerful hard for to kill, an' specs dat's why I lib. But I'se got lots to tell you, Marse Frank."

"You have?" exclaimed Frank.

"Deed I has. P'raps yo' kin find it valuable fo' yo'. I'll jes' tell yo' dat when we went up troo dat pass we jes' cum out pretty quick in a valley. Dat ar' valley was a scrumptious one, an' dar was a trail leadin' down inter it. But afore the Injuns could ride down inter it along cum six white men on hossback an' a right pert young lady on a hoss, too.

"Sakes alibe I nebber seen so pretty a gal in all mah life. Well, dese yer men, dey seemed like dey was 'quainted wid der Injuns. Dey jes' talked as free like wid old Black Buffalo, an' I jes' opened my ears an' listened.

"Dey said dat de gal was a prisoner an' dey was takin' her from a cave in de hills to Ranch V. Dey mentioned de name ob Artemas Cliff. Den dey rode on, sah, an' mah sakes, jus' den up from the valley dere came a hull gang ob Injuns and pitched into us. Ob cose yo' know all de res'."

Frank Reade, Jr., listened with the deepest amazement to this exciting story.

"A young girl!" he gasped. "Of course those men were Cliff's, but where on earth were they going?"

"Dey done said it was to Ranch V. sah."

"Ranch V!" repeated Frank. "That is not very definite. But it must be the headquarters of Cliff and his gang. You didn't hear them say just where that ranch was located, Pomp?"

"No sah, but I jes' took note ob de direckshun dey was goin' an' it was to de souf-west."

"Well," said the young inventor as he turned the Steam Man about, "I cannot imagine who the young girl is or how she fell into the hands of Cliff's gang. But it is certain that she is in their power and we must save her."

"Be jabbers that's roight, Mистер Frank," cried Barney, gallantly, the O'Sheas from Brian Boru down war always known as men av honor an' defenders av female virtue."

The Steam Man started on the return across the plateau.

It was Frank Reade, Jr.'s intention to reach the prairie once more and strike out to the southwest, in the hopes of locating the Ranch V.

The Steam Man ran swiftly to the mouth of the pass which led down to the prairie.

Barney had filled the furnace with fresh coal, and the indicator showed that there was plenty of water in the boiler.

Frank was about to enter the pass when suddenly Pomp sprang up with a wild cry.

The darky sprang to Frank's side and tried to grab the throttle rein. Frank was astounded.

"Hold on there, Pomp. What are you trying to do?" he cried.

"Ki dar, Marse Frank. Stop de Man, or fo' de Lawd we am all done fo', suah as preachin'!"

"What?" gasped Frank.

"If yo' don't believe it, jes look up yonder?"

Pomp pointed one finger upward to the canyon wall above the pass. The sight which rewarded the startled gaze of the young inventor caused him to reverse the throttle and bring the Steam Man to a halt.

Two cowboys were crouching behind an enormous boulder which they had intended to roll down upon the Steam Man.

CHAPTER VI.

THE FIGHT IN THE PASS.

A MORE narrow escape could hardly be imagined.

The precipitation of the huge boulder upon the Steam Man would have destroyed the invention and the lives of those on board.

Just in time Pomp had seen the danger. Another moment and it would have been too late."

"Ki yi, don' yo' see now, Marse Frank?" cried Pomp, wildly.

"I see," replied Frank, in thrilled tones. "My God! that is a narrow shave. We would have been crushed to atoms in another moment as I live."

"Whurroo! Give the spalpeens a good bit av cold lead!" shouted Barney, rushing to one of the loopholes with his rifle.

"That's right!" cried Frank, doing the same.

"Golly, yo' kin bet we will do dat!" chimed in Pomp.

The two cowboys, seeing that their game was exposed, sprang up with wild shouts of dismay.

As they did so they were exposed to shots from below. The three rifles spoke sharply in chorus.

The two would-be destroyers tumbled in a heap. Their fall was followed by a wild chorus of yells from the thickets and boulder piles above.

A volley of bullets came from there and rattled harmlessly against the steel netting, showing that the cowboys were there located in great force.

How they had chanced to be there at that critical moment our adventurers could only guess.

But Frank mentally concluded that at best they were but a division of Cliff's gang, and they had happened upon the spot by chance.

Seeing the Steam Man they had seized what seemed to them a fine opportunity to destroy it.

How far short they came of it we have already seen.

A red-hot contest now began between the cowboys and those in the steel wagon.

Of course our three friends had a vast advantage inasmuch as they were protected from the shots of their foes.

Of course the outlaws far outnumbered them, but it was not at all a difficult matter to pick them off occasionally with a rifle bullet.

Volley after volley the cowboys fired at the Steam Man.

When at length it became patent to them that their shots were futile, they made the air ring with yells of baffled rage.

Then they ceased firing and silence ensued. Every cowboy had disappeared seemingly from the canyon wall.

But this did not deceive Frank Reade, Jr.

He knew that this was only a game of the foe and that it would yet be unsafe to try the pass.

"Bejabbers, ain't there some other way av gettin' out av this place?" cried Barney, giving the plateau a sweeping glance.

But the chain of hills surrounding it did not lend color to such a possibility.

"It don't look like it," said Frank, dubiously.

"I jes' fink dat am de only way out ob dis place," said Pomp.

"We are in a kind of trap," declared Frank Reade, Jr. "We were not sharp or we would have avoided this scrape."

As it was, however, the best they could do was to watch for an opportunity to run the gauntlet through the Pass.

But they had not long to wait for new and thrilling developments. Suddenly Pomp gave a startled cry.

"For massy sakes, Marse Frank, jes' yo' look out yonder. What-ebber am dey up to now?"

Over the edge of the plateau there was visible a line of men advancing rapidly toward the Steam Man.

They were deploying right and left as if to surround him. This was certainly their purpose.

"They're thryin' to surround us!" cried Barney.

Frank watched the maneuver with deep interest.

He smiled grimly.

This was certainly the purpose of the foe. But the young inventor saw in the move a betterment of his own chances.

"They will not gain what they hope to," he said, resolutely.

Then he saw that a line of armed men had deployed across the mouth of the Pass to prevent the Steam Man from escaping in that direction.

In Frank's judgment there were fully two hundred cowboys in the party. This was tremendous odds, but the young inventor did not fear the results.

With a wild cheer the cowboys began to close their line in about the Steam Man.

Frank Reade, Jr., opened the whistle valve and let out several defiant shrieks.

Then he started the Steam Man in a straight line for the pass.

Pomp and Barney with their repeaters began to fire upon the line of men there.

The repeaters did deadly work.

It was a constant fusillade, and the cowboys dropped like sheep. The error of their plan could now be seen.

In dividing their forces to make the surrounding line, they had weakened themselves. Frank had seen this.

If they had been merely content with holding the pass, it would have been extremely doubtful if the Steam Man could so easily have escaped.

Just as fast as they could work the sixteen-shot Winchesters, Barney and Pomp mowed down the opposing line of cowboys.

The line was thin, and it would have required a very solid corps to have withstood that scathing fire.

Down went the Steam Man toward the Pass with fearful speed.

Heaps of the dead and wounded cowboys lay upon the ground. As

the Steam Man reached the Pass, a number of the cowboys tried to grasp the throttle reins and stop the machine.

But the ponderous body of the Man knocked them aside like flies and the wheels of the heavy wagon crushed them into death or insensibility.

The Steam Man literally forged his way through the Pass like a rocket.

Barney and Pomp cheered wildly and fired parting shots at the discomfited foe.

In a few moments the Steam Man ran out upon the prairie. Frank did not waste time but set his course at once to the Southwest.

He was anxious to locate Ranch V. This he believed was his first and most important duty.

He was satisfied that nothing was to be gained by remaining in the hills.

He was confident that Cliff had gone to the Ranch V wherever it was. More than all else, he was powerfully interested in the mysterious young lady as described by Pomp.

He was determined to know who she was, and what Cliff held her in captivity for.

The day was rapidly drawing to a close.

After a short while the hills faded out of sight, and the rolling prairie was visible upon every hand.

Then, as the Steam Man took his long strides across the even plain, Frank suddenly caught sight of a beaten path or trail.

It was plainly a trail much used and bore a trifle east of south. Frank brought the Man to a stop.

"I would like to know where that trail goes to?" he declared. "I am not sure but it is the route to Ranch V."

"Golly, Mars Frank!" cried Pomp, craning his neck and looking to the southward a little ways. "What am dat jus' ober dat roll in de prairie? Am not dat some berry suspicious object?"

Frank gazed in the direction indicated and saw a tall, black-looking timber seeming to rise out of the roll in the prairie. But he knew that it was beyond.

Frank let the Steam Man go along for a quarter of a mile, and topping the rise a startling sight was revealed.

There, scattered over several acres of land were the blackened ruins and charred timbers of some buildings.

It was easy to see what these buildings had constituted.

A large ranch with stockade, extensive cattle pens and yards, had once stood upon this spot. Frank allowed the Steam Man to pass through the ruins.

Thrilling sights were accorded our adventurers.

There were heaps of ashes, the bones of animals, and several charred skeletons of human beings.

There was every evidence that a fight had occurred at the place, and that the ranch had been burned by either Indians or rival cowboys. As chance had it the sign which, painted in broad letters, had once hung over the yard gate, had not been destroyed, and lay upon the ground near.

Our explorers were enabled to read it plainly.

"Rodman Ranch."

Barney and Pomp descended from the wagon, and spent some time in exploring the ruins.

"I jes' tink de Injines burned up dis yer place," averred Pomp.

"Begorra, it's the devil's own job they med av it," declared Barney. But Frank said, with conviction:

"Just as likely it was the work of Cliff and his gang. They are outlaws at best, and if Rodman Ranch was a respectable place, they would be sure to wish it destroyed."

Barney and Pomp re-entered the wagon now, and once more the quest for Ranch V was begun.

But night came on, and they had obtained no clue.

A good place was found to camp, and it was decided to wait until morning before pursuing the journey further.

Accordingly everything was made comfortable with this end in view.

No camp fire was made, for this was not deemed necessary.

At night they always slept in the wagon, and Barney and Pomp served turns in watching.

The fires in the furnace were banked, and the Steam Man was given a rest just the same as the others.

One place was always as good as another in camping out thus, save that it was necessary to be near a body of water, so that the boilers could be filled with ease the next morning.

The Steam Man was thus cared for, the fires banked, and everything made shipshape when, after Barney had been on watch not more than two hours, the first of a series of thrilling incidents occurred.

The night was as dark as Erebus, not a star twinkled in the ether, for heavy black clouds overhung all.

Spddenly Barney saw a light glimmering far out on the prairie.

It increased to quite a respectable size and continued to blaze for a long time.

The Celt watched it for a long while. Then his curiosity got the better of him.

"Bejabbers, that's quare," he muttered. "I'll make sure there's something wrong about that now."

Barney, acting upon impulse, leaned over and grasped Frank's shoulder. The young inventor awoke with a start.

CHAPTER VII.

THE VIGILANTS.

"W-WHAT'S the matter?" gasped Frank, sleepily arousing himself. "Whist now, Misther Frank! There's a quare loight out yonder on the prairie, an' I thought I'd jist call yure attention to the same, sor."

"A loight?" muttered Frank, now fully awake. He got upon his feet, and rubbing his eyes, stared at the distant blaze.

"That is odd," he muttered. "It will do to investigate that."

"Sure, it may be a camp fire," ventured Barney.

"If so, then we must find out who the campers are," declared Frank.

It was but an instant's work to arouse Pomp.

Then the fires in the furnace were started, a line of hose was run to a creek near, and the boiler was filled.

In an incredible short space of time steam was got up, and the Steam Man moved ahead.

Frank held the throttle reins and directed the Steam Man's course toward the distant camp-fire.

For such it was, as became evident as they drew near.

At first no movement was made by the camping party, and Frank fancied that they had nobody on guard.

But as the Steam Man with clanking tread came within one hundred yards of the camp, a wild shout went up and a gun was discharged at the Steam Man.

Frank was now able to see the circle of the camp as revealed by the firelight.

Men had been rolled in blankets upon the ground to the number of a score.

But these were now upon their feet. Just beyond it could be seen that mustangs were corralled.

Frank Reade, Jr., had no way of knowing whether the campers were friends or foes.

He had fancied them a part of Cliff's cowboys. Still there was a possibility they were not.

At any rate he could not treat them as foes until he learned positively that they were such.

So he brought the Steam Man to a stop just fifty yards from the camp.

The scene in the camp now was a ludicrous one.

The men were filled with mingled fear, amazement and stupefaction at the sight of the Steam Man.

The fiery eyes and nostrils and mammoth proportions of the man in the darkness made him look like a monster from the infernal regions.

The startled cries of the campers came to the amused hearing of those in the wagon.

"Great Jericho! What d'yer call that thing?"

"It's the devil hisself!"

"He's arter us!"

"That last drink at ther cross trails was too much for us boys. We've got 'em bad."

"I reckon we'd better fix up a prayer. Ther old gentleman has cum to git us."

Barney and Pomp exploded with laughter. It was very funny.

But as soon as the pandemonium had for a moment subsided, Frank Reade, Jr. hastened to shout:

"We're human beings the same as you. Have no fear. Who are you?"

The words had an astounding effect upon the campers. After a moment of stupefied silence the answer came back.

"Who the dickens are you?"

"I am Frank Reade, Jr., and this is my new invention, the Steam Man," replied Frank. "You have nothing to fear."

The campers now saw the three men in the wagon as Barney turned on the light of the calcium and illuminated the vicinity.

At once their fear fled and a comprehension of all dawned upon them. "A steam Man, by thunder, and built all of iron!"

"Wall, that beats all!"

"What'll come next?"

"That beats the iron hoss all holler!"

The campers now came thronging about the wagon. As the number was limited, Frank did not feel particularly uneasy, though he held the throttle ready and Barney and Pomp had their repeaters at hand.

But the fears of our three adventurers were quickly allayed.

One of the men, a tall, powerful framed man, came forward, and said:

"Wall, cap'en, we're glad to meet you an' yer Steam Man. My name is Sim Harmon, an' I'm captain of this band, who are all Vigilants from Poker Gulch. We're out on the trail of a gang of ruffians."

"Vigilants!" cried Frank Reade, Jr., with joy. "Then you are not members of the Artemas Cliff gang?"

"Artemas Cliff!" cried Harmon. "He is the chap we want. If we can lay hands on him we'll stretch his neck, you bet. D'yer know whar we kin find him?"

"I am on his trail myself."

"The deuce ye are?"

"It's the truth."

"What for?"

Frank opened the door of the wagon, and descending shook hands with the Vigilant captain.

He told him explicitly of the mysterious murder of which Jim Trav

ers had been adjudged guilty, but which it was believed was the work of Cliff.

Harmon listened with interest.

"So that's another game of the cuss!" he cried. "Wall, that's a bad one, but I reckon we've a wuss count agin him, stranger."

"Indeed!" exclaimed Frank.

"Did ye cum across ther ruins of a ranch out hyar on ther peairy some miles?"

"I did."

"Wall, that was onct Rodman Ranch, an' Ralph Rodman was one of the best men in this part of ther West. But that ornery cuss Cliff fell in love with pretty Bessie Rodman, his darter, an' when Ralph denied him the right to come a-courtin' her, ther scoundrel jest brought down a gang of hoodlums an' burned down the ranch, toled off ther gal, an' killed all ther rest about ther place."

"Horrible!" exclaimed Frank. "But you have not told me of Rodman. What became of him?"

"Wall, that illustrates ther villainy of ther cuss. Just previous to burnin' ther ranch, two men, Sid Bowen an' Jem Ducey, hired by Cliff, enticed Ralph to New York by bringin' him a bogus message from a brother, who was represented as bein' in great distress. That's the last seen of Rodman. What they did with him we don't know. But I've heard that Bowen an' Ducey have returned, an' Rodman didn't cum with 'em. It's my belief he's been done away with, an' it's all a game of Cliff's to get the gal Bessie into his possession."

A great cry broke from the lips of Frank Reade, Jr.

This story of Harmon's he had listened to eagerly, and, as it was unfolded, bit by bit, a clear, concise comprehension of all now came to him.

He saw the hideous details, the cold, scheming construction of a deep and awful plot, involving murder and abduction and terrible wrong.

"Great heavens!" he gasped, wiping cold perspiration from his brow. "Your story throws a great light upon the matter which I have in hand, Mr. Harmon."

"The deuce you say!" gasped the captain of the Vigilantes.

"It is the truth," cried Frank. "I think I can tell you the true fate of Ralph Rodman, and you will agree that Cliff is the projector of one of the most awful double plots of crime that human being could be capable of."

The Vigilantes all gathered around the young inventor, agog with interest.

"Ye don't mean it?" gasped Harmon, with amazement. "Ye're huntin' Cliff then ther same as we are?"

"Yes."

"What fer?"

"To force a confession or explanation from him of a mysterious murder of which his own uncle, James Travers, of New York, has been adjudged guilty and who is now in prison awaiting his sentence of hanging about a year from now."

"Oh, this villain is a deep one. But I have told you of that mysterious murder and, as Heaven is my judge, I believe the victim of that murder which was purposely thrown upon Travers was Rodman. You see Cliff's object in throwing the murder upon Travers was to see him hang and thus inherit his vast wealth."

For a moment after this statement silence reigned.

Appalled with the magnitude of the villain's plot all remained silent. But the mystery was cleared up at last.

All understood now exactly the deep game of Artemas Cliff.

But one sentiment reigned supreme in the breasts of all. Artemas Cliff should be brought to justice.

It was easy enough to see how the wretch in planning to win Bessie Rodman had enticed Rodman to the East and there murdered him. Then to kill two birds with one stone he had caused the awful crime by clever circumstantial evidence to be thrown upon his wealthy uncle, James Travers.

Of course, with Travers' death, he would inherit the millions left by him.

Ralph Rodman was dead. The ranch was a heap of ashes.

For these crimes Artemas Cliff was responsible. But Bessie Rodman was yet in his power. Travers was near the gallows.

These two people must be saved.

Frank Reade, Jr., saw the mission, as did Harmon.

Instinctively they clasped hands.

"I reckon we both know what to do," declared the Vigilant captain tersely. "Pr'aps we kin work together. I'll help you all I kin."

"And I will help you," replied Frank. "We will bring Cliff to justice if the Steam Man can help us to do it."

"He will hang if I kin get my hands onto him."

"But we must make no mistake. He is strongly backed up. You have only twenty-five men with you."

"But they air all men," replied Harmon, pluckily.

"I will not question that," replied Frank, "but the weight of numbers would defeat you. Cliff has several hundred men in his command."

"We're not afraid of 'em. Yet ye're right enuff. It's well fer us to go easy."

"It is well to be careful," said Frank. "I think that you had better keep along with us for a time."

"All right!"

"I think there is no doubt but that the young girl whom Pomp saw in the hills was Bessie Rodman."

"In course it was her."

"They were taking her to Ranch V. Do you know where it is?"

"Yes," replied Harmon, quickly, "that's on Stone River, an' it's a pesky big place too. Thar's a big stockade around it an' armed men are allus a-watchin' for fear an outsider will git in. So that's ther place, eh? Wall, it will be hard to git Bessie out of Ranch V."

"She shall be got out or I will give my life in the attempt!" cried a tall, handsome young plainsman with flashing eyes.

He looked much in earnest. Frank gazed at him critically. A little later he was introduced to him as Walter Barrows, a rising young stockman, and the lover of pretty Bessie Rodman.

CHAPTER VIII.

ON TO RANCH V.

PLANS were quickly made.

It was decided to work upon strategical grounds, as their force was so much lighter than Cliff's.

"You see, if we can strike Ranch V. at a time when Cliff and the majority of his men are in the hills we can capture the place," declared Frank, shrewdly.

"That's bizness," agreed Harmon, "but ye're the boss. I kin see that ye've got a better head piece nor I have, Mister Reade."

"We will not admit that," said Frank, modestly, "but rather let us work together, Mr. Harmon."

"All right, cap'en. I'm with ye."

Further plans were elaborated, then as only a few hours yet intervened until dawn, it was decided to snatch a few brief hours of sleep.

With the early dawn all were astir. The Vigilants saddled their mustangs and all was soon ready for the start.

The Steam Man was an object of great wonder to the plainsmen.

"By Jinks!" exclaimed one of them, "the sight of that queer-lookin' critter oughter scare the life out of any number of Injuns."

"I think the Steam Man will aid us much in accomplishing our ends," said Frank, modestly.

The start was made just after daybreak. The Vigilants rode alongside the Steam Man on their mustangs.

Of course Frank was compelled to go more slowly on this account.

But the Vigilantes knew the way to Ranch V, and this was, after all, the most important thing of all.

Frank considered it a great piece of luck in having fallen in with the Vigilantes.

He now understood exactly how matters stood all around.

It was near noon when a halt was called in a small basin near a lake of water.

Here camp was briefly made, and also at the same time an important discovery came to hand.

A broad trail made by a cavalcade of men and horses was discovered.

It pointed to the north.

Harmon examined it carefully and finally, with great exuberance, cried:

"It's good luck, friends. That thar trail I believe was made by ther cowboys an' it leads to ther hills. It's over three days old, an' they haven't come back this way. I should think that the most of ther men must be up there, in which case Ranch V. will be almost deserted. Cum on, boys, let's capture ther hull place."

With a cheer the Vigilants sprang to saddle.

Soon they were once more galloping over the prairie.

Not two hours later, or in the middle of the afternoon, Harmon drew his horse alongside the Steam Man and pointing to the south cried:

"Look yonder, Mr. Reade. Do ye see them lines of high ground? Wall, jest this side ar ther Ranch V."

A cheer went up from all.

"Begorra, it's Ranch Ours it'll be, if iver we get there," declared Barney.

"Golly, won't dis be a big 'sprise party fo' dat vilyun Cliff," cried Pomp.

Frank Reade, Jr., held the Steam Man at a steady stride, and very soon the ranch came in sight.

It was truly a most extensive establishment.

The stockade and buildings covered acres of ground. A great herd of cattle were feeding on the open plains.

The main ranch itself was surrounded by a high stockade, which would resist most any ordinary attack with small arms.

As the Vigilants and the Steam Man came swiftly rushing down upon the place, a great commotion was seen to take place.

Men rushed out into the yards, horsemen went scurrying about, and down came the stockade gate.

But Harmon and his men rode boldly down to the gate, and began to assail it with axes.

While Frank Reade, Jr., kept the Steam Man on an elevation near, from which he with Barney and Pomp, covered the work of invasion by a hot fire with their Winchesters.

The cowboys could not get upon the stockade to fire at the assailants for this reason.

Harmon's men therefore worked with perfect immunity.

No more favorable time for an attack could have been chosen.

There were but few of the cowboys in the ranch, and these were picked off by the fire from the Steam Man as fast as they appeared on the stockade.

With lusty cries the vigilants chopped through the timbers of the gate.

In a remarkably brief time a hole was cut through and the gate raised.

The Steam Man rushed into the yard, and in less than ten mfu-

utes every cowboy in the place was a prisoner, and Ranch V. was captured.

Walter Barrows, the brave young stockman, was the first to enter the main ranch.

The instinct of a lover took him to the chamber in which Bessie Rodman was kept a prisoner.

He burst in the door and clasped the young girl in his arms.

That was a joyous meeting.

When they appeared in the yard the vigilants cheered wildly. It was a brilliant victory.

Ranch V. was captured.

The stronghold of the outlaw Cliff, the den of villainy and vice, was captured. It did not require much time for them to reach a decision as to what to do.

"Every building must be laid low!" cried Harmon. "Put the torch to every accursed timber.

The cry was taken up and spread from lip to lip.

In haste torches were procured. Harmon himself lit the first, and was about to apply it to a building.

But he did not do so.

A thrilling incident stopped him. A loud cry went up.

"The cowboys! they are coming! To arms everybody! There comes Cliff at their head!"

Every eye was turned to the plain beyond the stockade.

There was no disputing the truth. Cliff and his gang returning from the hills had come just in time.

It would be folly now to burn the ranch.

Harmon seeing the desperate exigency dropped the torch, and cried:

"To the stockade! It's for life or death, boys. Fight to the last!"

But the command was not necessary. Already the brave Vigilants were at their posts.

Cliff with his small army of followers came on at a swinging gallop.

He could see that the ranch was in the possession of a foe.

This inflamed his wrath, and, with loud curses and yells, he rode down in the van of his followers.

Frank Reade, Jr., had taken in the situation at a glance.

He knew that it would be flatly impossible for the score of vigilants to hold those three hundred desperadoes long at bay.

It would mean the eventual massacre of every vigilant. This Frank wished to avoid.

The young inventor had induced Bessie Rodman to seek refuge in the wagon. Otherwise, she would certainly fall into the hands of the foe again.

Frank started the Steam Man ahead, and went down to the stockade. He made the vigilantes a hasty address.

"Nothing will be gained by holding this place," he declared, with force. "You cannot do it. The odds are too great."

"But we cannot surrender," cried Harmon, "and how can we retreat?"

"Easily enough," replied Frank, "there is a rear gate. Open it and cut out upon the prairie."

"But they may overtake us?"

"It is your only hope. You'll have to work lively, for they are trying to surround the stockade. I'll cover your retreat easy enough."

Harmon saw that Frank was right.

He did not pause to argue the point further. With quick commands he caused his men to fall back.

The stockade gate in the rear was opened just in time, and the vigilants rushed out upon the prairie.

They set out at a mad gallop for the distant hills.

The cowboys with mad cries followed. But they met with quite a serious obstacle in their pursuit.

The Steam Man kept exasperatingly between them and the vigilants.

From the rear loopholes of the wagon Barney and Pomp kept up a steady fire with the Winchesters.

Nearly every shot emptied a saddle, and despite their superior numbers, the cowboys soon found it better and safer to keep well out of range.

The pursuit lasted for ten miles. Then the horses of both parties became fagged and they were compelled to halt.

But Harmon's men, by dint of careful work, got their horses into the fastnesses of the hills. Here they felt more secure.

The Steam Man had well covered the retreat of the vigilants. But darkness was now coming on and a serious question presented itself to Frank Reade, Jr.

To remain where they were for the night would be to incur the risk of a midnight attack from the cowboys.

This might result seriously.

At least Frank was disposed to evade it.

He consulted with Harmon, and the result was an arrangement which it was believed would be better for all.

In the fastnesses of the hills Harmon felt sanguine of holding his own against the cowboys.

Therefore it was decided that the Steam Man should leave the vicinity and go far enough away over the prairie to make sure of safety for the night.

Accordingly Frank left the vicinity and sent the Man striding over the plain in the dusk of evening.

There was no visible indication that the cowboys intended to pursue.

They had apparently gone into camp not five miles distant.

Frank kept on with the Steam Man until twenty miles had been covered.

Then he came to a halt.

It seemed as if they must feel safe here. Accordingly, arrangements were made for passing the night.

A comfortable seat was arranged for Bessie Rodman and, much exhausted by the fatigue of her experiences, she quickly fell asleep.

But tears had wet her cheeks and trembled on her eyelashes. Frank had told her of her father's death.

"Oh, I fear it is more than I can bear," she declared, in agony of spirit. "My dear, dear father. Oh, if I were a man, how I would avenge him!"

"There are plenty to do that," replied Frank, cheeringly. "The villain shall surely pay for his evil deeds."

"I hope it may come to pass," she said, sincerely.

Then she dropped off to sleep. But even as she slept, deadly peril hung over her young and beautiful head.

CHAPTER IX.

POMP'S MISTAKE.

FRANK READE, JR., felt comparatively safe as he rolled himself up in a blanket and went to sleep. He did not believe that the villain, Cliff, would be able to molest them that night.

It was Barney's first watch.

The Hibernian, until midnight, kept a good lookout in the cage. Then he called Pomp to succeed him.

The darkey kept a good lookout until the early morning hours.

The darkness was most intense.

At about this time Pomp experienced a deadly faintness at the pit of the stomach and a great longing for water.

His thirst became most consuming, and it seemed as if he must, at any cost, gratify it.

But he found, upon looking in the tank, that it was empty.

There was not a gill of cold water in the wagon. Pomp grew sober with this dampening reflection.

"I jes' fink if I had a bit of watah I would be a' right," he muttered; "but how ebber am dis niggah gwine fo' to get it, dat's what I'd like to know."

Pomp went to the steel screen and tried to penetrate the darkness. He knew that not ten yards distant were the waters of a small creek. He could hear them rippling now.

It was directly at variance with his orders to open the cage door. Yet it seemed to Pomp as if he must do so.

The risk did not seem great.

There seemed little likelihood of the proximity of a foe.

Pomp felt certain that he could reach the creek, get his drink, and get back safely to the wagon.

He was sorely tempted. The desire was most powerful.

"Golly!" he muttered, with a wry face. "What am I gwine fo' to do? I don' believe dar's any danger ob going out dar, but if Marse Frank knew it he'd fix me putty quick. Sakes alibe! but what am a chile gwine fo' to do? I am mos' dyin' fo' a drink ob watah."

Pomp thought of awakening Barney and enlisting his aid.

But he reflected that the Celt would be certain to disagree with his scheme.

There was no other way but to assume the responsibility himself. Pomp drew a deep breath.

Then he fell to listening.

All was silent as the grave.

"Sho!" he muttered. "Dar ain't no danger at all. I'll jest hab dat watah as suah as I'm born."

He quickly slid back the bolt in the door and opened it.

Then he stepped out of the wagon. In another moment he glided down to the water's edge.

Pomp flung himself flat and began to drink of the creek water.

But he had not taken one drink when he became aware of an appalling sensation. He turned his head and glanced back at the Steam Man.

The lantern hanging in the cage showed the open door and all as plain as day. But, great heavens! What did he see?

Dark forms were swarming about the machine. One was already in the wagon.

Pomp saw this much, and then his attention was claimed by another matter. He suddenly felt a heavy body descend upon him and talon fingers clutched his throat.

In that flash of time Pomp had turned partly over.

He was just in time to see the flash of a knife blade. He made a convulsive upward blow, and grasped the wrist of his unknown assailant.

By the merest chance the death blow had been averted.

But it was a close call.

Then with a herculean effort Pomp rolled over the edge of the bank, and the next moment, with a powerful swing, he had brought himself and assailant into the water of the creek.

The sudden bath caused Pomp's adversary to relax his grip.

The darkey had no further motive for continuing the struggle, and striking out swam for the opposite bank.

He clambered out of the water, and crawled into a thicket.

There he lay shivering, and witnessed a thrilling scene upon the other bank of the creek.

The occupants of the wagon had all been aroused, and were every one prisoners, in the power of Cliff and his cowboys.

The outlaw had managed to cover the twenty miles, skillfully following the trail by means of a dark lantern.

He had been hovering with his minions about the Steam Man, just as Pomp committed the indiscretion of leaving the door open.

Of course it was an easy matter for the cowboys to board the wagon and make prisoners of all on board.

The glee of Cliff was beyond expression.

He danced and clapped his hands with fiendish joy. He pinched Bessie's arms until she screamed with agony, and with brutal laughter roared:

"Oh, I'll make ye all dance. Ye thought ye'd git away from me, did ye, gal? I'll show ye that ye can't get away from Artemus Cliff. Ha, ha, ha! What a good joke."

He laughed uproariously.

"All mine," he continued. "And this Steam Man, this wonderful invention, is just what I want. I can travel around in great style. Oh, Mr. Frank Reade, Jr., I'll dance on your grave yet."

"Monster!" cried Frank, writhing in his bonds. "You'll never succeed. A righteous God will never permit it."

The villain gave his men carte blanche to make camp and indulge in a carousal.

They did so until daybreak, and then Cliff stated that it was his purpose to go back to Ranch V.

It did not take him long to understand the mechanism of the Steam Man.

He quickly found out how to use the throttle reins. He was aided by the fact that he had once been a locomotive engineer.

With the early morning light the start for Ranch V. was made.

And Pomp, wet and shivering and horrified, crouched in the thicket upon the bank of the creek, saw the Steam Man and his friends, all in the power of the foe, take departure.

When they had gone Pomp came out of his hiding-place.

"Golly!" he muttered, with distended eyeballs, "I jes' fink dis nigger hab done de berry awfulest ting eber known. Dar am only one way fo' Pomp to save his honor, an' dat am to fix some way to rescue Marse Frank an' all ob de odders, an' I'll do it if I can."

Pomp was very much in earnest.

He was a brave and generous fellow, and willing at any time to sacrifice his life for his master.

In some manner he must certainly vindicate himself. He crossed the creek again and stood upon the spot where the Steam Man had been.

Of course the machine was out of sight by this time, but nevertheless, Pomp took the trail and proceeded to follow it.

For some hours he trudged on over the prairie. All the while the darky was revolving in his mind some plan for the relief of his friends.

He was bound to admit that it was a puzzle. Yet he did not lose hope.

The hills were every moment becoming plainer. Already Pomp had covered five of the twenty miles.

The darky was a good walker, and no distance was too great for his trained muscles.

The sun was beginning to run high in the heavens, and a brisk breeze blew across the prairie.

Pomp kept on steadily.

The trail kept on toward the hills, and the sagacious darky reflected that Cliff was likely going to join the main body of his men.

"I jes' fink I can see what dat rascal am up to," muttered Pomp. "He am jus' too sharp to let de game slip him once he gits his clutches onto it. He am jus' goin' fo' to take de Steam Man to his Ranch V., and dar's whar dis darky must go an' try fo' to work some leetle plan fo' to rescue Frank Reade, Jr., an' de odders. Dat am a fac'."

With this logical conclusion Pomp trudged on.

He was now on the last five miles of his journey to the hills. The sun was long past the noon hour when Pomp, by dint of rapid walking, had made the hills.

There was no sign visible of the Steam Man or of the cowboys.

But Pomp saw that the trail continued around the base of the hills.

This puzzled the darkey a moment.

He paused and scratched his head in deep thought.

"Dat am a drefful queer thing," he muttered. "Dat ain't de way to go to Ranch V. if I see right in mah conjeckshun."

Then he paused, and a light of comprehension broke across his face.

A distant sound had come to his hearing. It was the faint rattle of fire-arms far up in the hills.

"Golly!" he ejaculated. "I see de trick ob dat berry sharp fox, Artemus Cliff. He am gwine fo' to gib de Vigilants a good lickin' afore he goes to Ranch V. Dat am jus' my bes' way for to jine Marse Harmon an' his men, an' help dem trash the cowboys."

Pomp's mind was made up.

He would join the vigilants and do his best to give the cowboys a good drubbing. He at once struck into the hills.

But alas for Pomp!

Luck seemed against the darky for the time being. He had not more than fairly entered a narrow pass when an appalling incident occurred.

The air was suddenly broken by wild yells, and in an instant he was surrounded by half a hundred painted savages, who burst from niches and crevices in the rocks about.

They pounced upon him, and before Pomp had even time to think of resistance he was a prisoner.

The savages swarmed about him like bees. Words cannot express Pomp's dismay at this turn.

His eyes bulged, and his knees shook as with the ague.

"Fo' de good Lor' dis am drefful!" he groaned. "I see done fo' dis time, an' dar am nobody to rescue Marse Frank!"

It was truly a dubious outlook. The savages were of Black Buffalo's gang of Sioux, and they seemed much elated at getting the prisoner once more into their clutches.

They chattered and gesticulated like a flock of magpies, and some of them approached Pomp with their tomahawks as though they would fain make an end of him then and there.

But the others held them back and an excited wrangle followed.

All this while Pomp was writhing in his bonds. In vain he tried to break them.

For some while the savages wrangled. Then a compromise was made and Pomp was picked up bodily, and carried through the pass and into a small glade among some trees.

Here he was tied to a tree and a great heap of fagots were piled at his feet.

With a chill of horror, the darky saw that the savages meant to take his life in a horrible manner.

He was to suffer death in the flames. Pomp felt sick and faint. But even in that moment he thought not of himself, brave fellow, but of Frank Reade, Jr., and the others.

"Golly sakes, whoebber am gwine fo' to save Marse Frank, now?" he groaned.

CHAPTER X.

IN THE ENEMY'S POWER.

ARTEMUS CLIFF shouted in evil glee and triumph as he manipulated the Steam Man and let him out for a swift run across the prairie.

He amused himself by racing with his followers who were on horse-back.

"By jingo!" he roared, "this is more fun than I ever had before. Why this beats the steam-cars all to smash. And it's all mine. Why I can travel like a prince now. Ha-ha-ha! I'm the luckiest man on earth."

He turned and fixed a glowering gaze upon Bessie Rodman.

"And ye're mine too," he cried, "the lily of the prairie. The happy life companion of Artemus Cliff. When I get my hands onto Uncle Jim Travers' millions, we'll travel the world over, my daisy."

Bessie did not appear to heed his words, though her face increased a trifle in its pallor.

"Monster!" cried Frank Reade, Jr., with intensity. "You will never succeed. Heaven will not permit it."

"Heaven don't have much to do with me," cried the villain, with a lurid oath. "The devil has been a good friend of mine, and I ain't afraid of his place either."

"Begorra, they wudn't have ye even there," cried Barney. "Ye are too wicked for avin that place."

"Oh, ho, Irish, you've got your tongue, eh?" cried Cliff, with a vicious laugh. "So ye think I'm too bad, eh?"

"Be me sowl, thar cudn't be a place too bad for ye!"

"I'll have a nice little hades fixed fer yer right on this earth an' I'll give ye a fair taste of it in advance, too," said the villain, vengefully.

"Arrah, ye can't scare me at all, at all," he retorted. "Yer threats are jist the same as a puppy dog's bark."

"You'll find that I'm the kind of a dog that bites," averred the villain.

"It's not me that cares fer yer bites."

"We'll see about that. Don't blow your horn too soon."

"Begorra, that's good advice fer yerself, ye blatherskite? Av I on'y had me two hands to use now I'd baste the rascality out av ye or I'd make a good job fer ther undhertaker."

"Talk is cheap," sneered the villain. "Ye'd better save yer wind."

"It's yerself as nades it most," said Barney, bound to have the last word.

Cliff evidently found Barney's tongue equal to his own, for he abandoned the conversation in a sullen fashion.

Bessie Rodman made no attempt at speech.

She sat silently in one corner of the wagon.

Frank Reade, Jr., also remained silent.

The twenty miles were quickly covered by the Steam Man. It was yet far from the noon hour when they arrived at the camp of the previous night.

The cowboys in full force were there, and as Cliff appeared with the Steam Man, they made the welkin ring with yells of delight and satisfaction.

All crowded around to examine the steam wonder and inspect its mechanism.

The prisoners looked out upon a sea of faces. They were not kindly regarded by the cowboys.

"Take 'em out and shoot 'em, Cliff!" cried a voice in the crowd.

"Give 'em twenty paces and a grave seven feet deep."

But Cliff refused to do this.

"Leave it to me!" he cried. "I've got a better plan."

"What is it?" was the cry.

"I want ye all to be ready in half an hour to go into the hills an' corner Harmon an' his gang. There must not one of the vigilants go out of here alive."

"Hurray!" yelled the cowboys.

"We can give them the worst thrashin' they ever had."

"In course we can."

"In regard to these prisoners, the gal is going to be my wife. The others I'm going to have some fun with down to the ranch. We'll have a rabbit chase with 'em, or something of the kind."

"Good!" yelled the mob, carried away with the plan. Thus the fate of the prisoners was decided by their captors. But the question of attack upon the vigilants was now the one in order. Preparations were at once made for cornering Harmon and his heroic little band.

Several parties of cowboys were dispatched to head off any possible attempt at escape from the hills.

Harmon's men were certainly hemmed in on all sides, and it was a most dubious outlook for them.

The exultation of the cowboys was beyond expression.

"We've got 'em dead sure!" cried Cliff, triumphantly. "Not a one on 'em can possibly escape."

The cowboys now began to close the line in about their prey.

A pass was found through which the Steam Man was taken, and to a point within easy range of the position held by the Vigilants.

Harmon had chosen an elevated position on a kind of small table-land or plateau.

Here behind boulders he had concentrated his forces. The position was not a bad one to defend.

To charge upon it the cowboys would have to ascend a height of fifty feet or more in the face of a strong fire.

But this sacrifice of men Cliff did not intend to make, at least not at once.

There were other points of vantage about, which the cowboys quickly took possession of.

From these a desultory fire was kept up with the Vigilants with some loss upon both sides.

But Harmon's men could not very well withstand any loss whatever. This the cowboys could stand better.

The Steam Man, however, could advance to very close proximity with the Vigilants, and those on board were safe from any shots of retaliation.

This made it bad for Harmon for he had no way of checking this most destructive fire.

It was a most galling thing for Frank Reade, Jr., to remain idle and see his invention used in such a manner.

He groaned aloud with horror and dismay. Barney did the same.

"Oh, if I could only free myself," declared the young inventor.

"Begorra, I wish I cud do that same," muttered Barney.

Cliff and the three cowboys with him in the cage were doing their best to shoot every Vigilant who exposed himself.

They were thus so deeply engrossed that they paid no special heed to the prisoners for the time.

Barney, quick-witted Irishman, noted this fact.

At a favorable moment he leaned over and whispered to Frank:

"Bejabbers, Mister Frank, I think I know av a way to turn the tables on them blasted omadhounns."

"The deuce!" gasped Frank. "What is it, Barney?"

"Whisht now an' work quiet, me gossoon!" whispered Barney.

Cliff and the three cowboys with him in the cage were doing their best to shoot every Vigilant who exposed himself. They were thus so deeply engrossed that they paid no special heed to the prisoners for the time.

Frank experienced a thrill.

"Can you do it, Barney?"

"Av course I kin."

"But if they see us—"

"They'll never do that. Be aisy now, me gossoon, an' roight on the shelf there there's a knife an' yez kin cut my bonds at the same toime. Thin we kin take care av ther four av thim. I'll take two meself."

"And I'm good for the other two or I'll die!" muttered Frank.

"All right, Barney, do your best."

"I will that."

But at this moment Bessie Rodman leaned forward, and in a soft whisper said:

"Wait! There is a quicker way."

Frank and Barney were astonished.

"What?" exclaimed the young inventor.

By way of reply Bessie drew both hands from behind her.

They were free. There were livid lines upon the fair wrists, where the cruel thongs had cut in.

But the shapely hands were so small that Bessie had been enabled to slip them through the bonds and free them.

Up to this moment neither Frank nor Barney had looked upon the young girl as more than the ordinary weak woman.

That is to say, they had not given her credit for the amount of nerve she possessed.

But they were given ample evidence of it now.

Quick as a flash, and with commendable resolution, she reached over and seized the knife upon the shelf.

It was but a moment's work for her to cut Frank's bonds. As they snapped, the young inventor took the knife and quickly cut Barney's.

Their captors were at the loop-holes firing, and had not seen this move.

Nothing could have worked better.

Frank picked up a club, and Barney an iron bar. Nobody can handle a weapon of the sort better than an Irishman.

"Whurroo! bad cess to yez fer a pack av omadhounns," cried Barney, dealing one of the cowboys a crashing blow on the head.

Before one could think, the iron bar came down upon the head of another. Both sank senseless to the floor of the wagon.

Frank Reade, Jr., had knocked Cliff senseless. Only one of the foe was left, and he was quickly knocked out.

In a twinkling, as it were, the tables were turned.

Barney and Frank Reade, Jr., were now masters of the Steam Man once more. The irrepressible Irishman pulled the whistle valve and sent up a shriek of defiance and triumph.

Then Frank Reade, Jr., swung open the wagon door.

"Throw them out!" he cried; "all but Cliff."

Barney obeyed the command. The three cowboys were quickly dumped out upon the ground.

But Cliff was allowed to remain. The villain lay insensible in the bottom of the wagon.

Frank was about to bind him, when an imminent peril claiming his immediate attention prevented him.

The cowboys were aware of the turning of the tables in the wagon.

With mad yells they were rushing forward in a body to surround the Steam Man. Unless immediate action was made they would succeed.

Frank knew well the danger of this move.

It would be an easy matter for the cowboys to ruin the invention by a single blow. There was but one way, and that was to beat a retreat.

Barney seized his repeater and began firing into the crowd of cowboys. Frank opened the throttle and sent the Steam Man up the incline toward the stronghold of the vigilants.

Of course the latter had seen and understood all.

They embraced the opportunity to pour a flank fire into the ranks of the cowboys. It was a moment of thrilling sort, but the Steam Man seemed to have the best of it when a thrilling incident happened.

CHAPTER XI.

WITH THE VIGILANTS.

In another moment the Steam Man would have been in the ranks of the vigilants.

It would have been a great point scored, for Cliff would then be a prisoner and the way to save Jim Travers from the gallows would have been paved.

But it was not to be.

The villain had come to in the meanwhile, but cunning rascal that he was, had laid inanimate in the bottom of the wagon.

He had seen all that was going on, and when he saw that the Steam Man was certain to escape he knew that only desperate action upon his part would save him now.

Accordingly while Frank and Barney were occupied at their posts, he made a sudden lightning leap for the door in the cage.

Unfortunately Barney had not fastened it.

A little scream of warning came from Bessie, but it was too late.

The villain flung open the door and sprung out.

He tumbled heels over head down the decline.

This was partly done on purpose to avoid any bullets sent after him. But none struck him, and he was the next moment in the ranks of his men.

Frank turned just in time to see the daring escape.

The young inventor's disappointment was so great that he came near leaving the wagon to pursue the villain.

"Begorra, av ther devil ain't got clane away entoirely!" cried Barney in dismay.

"I'm sorry," returned Frank. "But take the precaution now, Barney, to bolt that door."

Barney complied with alacrity.

Then he was obliged to return to his post, for the enemy were thick in the rear.

But the next moment the Steam Man topped the rise.

A volley from the Vigilants drove the cowboys back for the time.

Then Frank Reade, Jr., brought the machine to a halt upon the plateau.

The Vigilants were wild with delight, and crowded about the Steam Man. Frank Reade, Jr., opened the door and descended among them.

In an instant Harmon was by his side and had gripped his hand.

"God bless ye, Mr. Reade!" cried the whole-souled plainsman.

"It's like takin' the paw of one brought back from the dead. Dog-dast it, but I'd given ye up entirely when I see that your Steam Man was in the hands of that coyote. It's all like a kind of miracle."

"I think we may congratulate ourselves," said Frank, "but do you know that we are in a tight box?"

"Nobody knows it better," declared Harmon.

"I doubt if we pull out of it."

"What kin we do?"

"Is there no avenue open for retreat?" asked Frank.

"Not a one."

"Then we can only stay here and fight to the last. Of course I might be able to elude them with the Steam Man, but I'd never try that while any of your band are left."

"Praps it would be ther best way," said Harmon, generously. "At least you could save the gal. It don't matter so much about us. We're only rough men, and not a one of us afear'd to die."

"You are heroes!" cried Frank, with fervor, "and if I should desert you, I would forswear my honor as a man. No, the Steam Man will stay here and fight for you until the last, depend on it."

"In course we need your help," replied Harmon. "Mebbe we'll whip ther skunks yet."

"We'll try it."

"Begorra, that we will," cried Barney. "Whurroo! av' I only had a good whack at that baste av' a Cliff now I'd spohil his beauty foriver."

Walter Barrows and Bessie had been holding a joyful conference. But now the order went up:

"Every man to his post. The enemy are coming." There were no delinquents. Not one in that heroic little band hung back.

It was true that the foe were coming again to the attack. With Cliff leading them they were charging furiously up the hill. But the Vigilants stood firm and gave them a raking volley.

For a moment they wavered. Then once more they came on. Cliff's voice could be heard as he rallied them.

"Curse ye, go on up thar and kill the hull crew of 'em!" he yelled. "Don't let one of them escape alive! Kill 'em, every one, and don't give any quarter!"

"We'll see about that," muttered Frank Reade, Jr. "It may not be so easy to do all that, Mr. Cliff."

Frank and Barney, from their position aboard the Steam Man, could pour a terrible fire into the ranks of the foe.

It was a terrible battle! The cowboys were mowed down like grain before the sickle; yet they did not waver, but came on faster.

Every moment they drew nearer the top of the rise. If they surrounded it the sequel would be brief.

Overpowering muscles would quickly tell the story, and the little band of vigilants would be wiped out of existence.

It was, without doubt, Cliff's purpose to give no quarter. A wholesale massacre would be the result.

The Vigilants were now fighting for their lives. As well die facing the foe as with back turned. Every man was resolute in this.

But the tremendous body of men swept over the rise and gained the plateau. In a twinkling the Vigilants were surrounded, and it seemed as if no power would intervene to save them from sure and total extinction.

Frank Reade, Jr., took in the situation at a glance, and cried despairingly:

"Barney, we are lost! Our end has come, and we are as good as dead men already!"

Poor Pomp saw no way out of the awful situation in which he was placed.

Death in its most awful form was upon him. A worse fate could not be imagined.

The savages piled the brushwood about him, and danced with demoniac yells about the pile.

If Pomp could have turned pale, he would have been whiter than chalk at that moment.

But for all this, the darky's fears were even now more for his friends than for himself.

"Golly Massy!" he chattered, shivering like one with the ague. "Whatebber will be de end ob all dis. Yere Ise gwine fo' to be burned to death, and Marse Frank in de clutches ob dat rascal Cliff, an' nobody to rescue him. Oh, good Lor' it am drefful."

It was indeed a dreadful thing.

But Pomp was certainly powerless. Higher the brushwood was heaped, and then one of the savages advanced with a torch.

In a moment he had applied it to the pile.

The dry wood burned like tinder. In an instant great flames sprang up.

But they were at the edge of the pile. However, Pomp felt their heat and they would soon reach him.

The poor darky was nearly insane with a frenzy of desperation.

The savages now began a fiendish dance about the pile. They leaped and ran, and swung their tomahawks and made hideous faces at their victim.

But fate had not ordained that this was to be Pomp's end. Even while death seemed certain, rescue was close at hand.

Suddenly there smote upon the air the ring of horses' hoofs, and a quick sharp order, followed by the crash of carbines.

Indians fell in heaps before that volley. A panic resulted and the next moment through the smoke Pomp saw the gleam of uniforms, and knew that a body of United States cavalry had happened upon the spot just in the nick of time.

The darky was beside himself with the realization.

He tried to break his bonds, and cried:

"Sabe me, sogers—sabe Pomp! He am gwine fo' suah to burn to death ob yo' don' sabe him!"

But the call was not necessary.

Through the smoke sprang two dismounted soldiers. In a twinkling the burning brush was kicked aside, and Pomp's bonds were cut.

Then the darky was face to face with a tall, handsome young officer.

The Indians had been dispersed and the fight was over.

"I am Col. Clark, of the United States Seventh Cavalry," said the young officer. "Who are you?"

"I am Pomp!" was the darky's prompt reply.

The officer smiled.

"Well, who do you belong to?"

"I belongs to Marse Frank Reade, Jr.," replied Pomp, with emphasis. "Ise a free nigger, but I goes wherebber Marse Frank goes jest de same."

"Oh, I see," replied the officer; "well, where is your master just now?"

"Golly, for goodness!" cried Pomp, excitedly. "He am in a heap ob trouble, an' yo' kin help him out of it."

With this Pomp told Clark all about the Steam Man and their mission in the West.

The young colonel listened with deep interest, and then when apprised of the fact that the Steam Man and its passengers were in the hands of Cliff, he cried, excitedly:

"By Jupiter! that man Cliff is just the chap I am after. Word was brought to the fort some time ago of a den of thieves up here with a rendezvous called Ranch V. Do you know of it?"

"Golly sakes, Marse colonel," cried Pomp, excitedly, "yo' kin jest bet I does! Jes' yo' find de cowboys and rescue Marse Frank and he done show yo' where de Ranch V. are."

"It shall be done if we are able," said Colonel Clark.

He turned to his men who were scattered about the vicinity, having been engaged in driving the savages out of the valley.

But the bugle quickly recalled them.

A spare horse was brought forward for Pomp and then the cavalrymen in solid body rode out of the valley.

As they struck the prairie below, the distant sounds of firing came to their ears.

It was the din of the conflict between the Vigilants and the cowboys. Aided by the sounds Colonel Clark was able to gallop straight to the scene.

Through a pass in the hills they reached the plateau. They burst upon the cowboys in the rear just at the critical moment when it seemed as if Harmoc's heroic little band was doomed.

It required but a glance for Clark to take in the situation.

Whirling his sabre aloft he spurred his horse forward with the thrilling command:

"Forward! Charge!"

CHAPTER XII.

THE FORTUNES OF WAR.

Just at that moment when utter destruction threatened the brave little band of vigilants the U.S. soldiers came upon the scene.

Nothing could have been more opportune.

It was the saving of the day. The emotions of all at sight of the glittering uniforms may be imagined.

A great shout of triumph went up. A yell of dismay came from the cowboys.

Then followed the rattling of steel and the flash of sabre blades. Before that charge what force could stand?

Backward the followers of Artemus Cliff were forced.

In vain the villain tried to rally them. They would not respond.

The odds were too great and they broke and fled in wild confusion.

The next moment Pomp dashed up the incline and dropped from his horse almost at Frank Reade, Jr.'s feet.

"Bress de Lor', Marse Frank," he cried ecstatically. "Yo' am alibe an' well, an' dis nigger hab brought yo' a rescue aftah all. P'raps yo' forgib me fo' leabn' de Steam Man when I hadn't ought?"

"You are forgiven, Pomp!" cried Frank, lightly. "I might have done the same thing myself. I am glad no harm came to you. I had given you up."

"Deed no, Marse Frank!" cried the delighted darky. "I is too bad fo' to die. Hi dar, I'ish, I is glad to see you!"

"Well, if it ain't the naygur!" cried Barney, with a wild rush at Pomp. "Whurroo, its glad I am to see yez onct more alive an' well! Bejabbers that's so!"

The two friends embraced warmly. Then Colonel Clark rode up and saluted all.

"It seems that you've been having a bit of a squall here," he declared, "but at any rate you've vanquished the enemy."

"With your timely assistance," replied Frank. "But I believe we are not strangers, colonel."

"Frank Reade, Jr., the inventor!" cried Clark, springing from the saddle and seizing Frank's hand. "Well, now, I'm glad to see you. But come to think of it, your colored man mentioned the name of Frank Reade, but I never dreamed that it was you."

"It is nobody else," replied Frank with a laugh. "And I well remember you."

"And I do you," replied Clark. "I was once one of an army commission to visit you and make you an offer for one of your inventions on a gun."

"You are right."

"You would not sell it."

"No," replied Frank. "I do not care to sell any of my inventions. They are for my own use. I will always, however, put them at the disposal of the weak and oppressed."

"Truly a noble sentiment," agreed the colonel, "but I am anxious to capture this man Cliff. Hello! what have you there? A giant in iron? One of your new inventions is it? Well, that beats all."

With this Clark proceeded to make an inspection of the Steam Man. A great crowd of the newcomers were doing the same.

It was an object of great wonderment. Frank showed its working to the entertainment of all.

But Cliff's men had not been so easily beaten as the savages.

They had dispersed into the passes and were somewhat scattered, but here they made a stand and resisted stubbornly.

It was necessary to dislodge them as quickly as possible.

At any moment they might avail themselves of the fortunes of war and turn victory into defeat.

So Clark quickly called his men together.

Only a brief rest was all that he would accord them.

"The bugle sounded 'boots and saddles,' and every man was quickly mounted.

A plan was quickly outlined between Frank Reade, Jr., and Col. Clark.

This was that the cavalry should pursue and thoroughly rout the cowboys, even going down to Ranch V to effect its destruction.

The vigilants were to return home, and the cavalry would see to the punishment of Artemas Cliff.

But the Steam Man was to remain at a point below until the return of the cavalry.

If possible Cliff was to be captured alive and a confession wrung from his lips.

This plan had been agreed upon.

The vigilants were not wholly satisfied, yet did not demur.

Clark and his command dashed away into the hills.

The vigilants and the Steam Man started for the open prairie.

This division of forces very soon proved to be an unwise and unfortunate thing.

The fortunes of war are proverbial for changes.

Strongly entrenched in the hills, Cliff's gang gave the soldiers a disastrous battle.

In vain the plucky young colonel tried to dislodge them.

They fought like tigers, and having the advantage of location, actually decimated the cavalry one half in number.

Until nightfall, Col. Clark kept persistently waging the battle.

Then he began to think of retreat.

But, to his horror, he found that this was by no means as easy a matter as he had fancied.

The foe had actually closed in upon him, and nearly every avenue of retreat was closed.

He was literally surrounded by the foe.

"My soul!" he muttered, in deep surprise; "this is not very good generalship on my part."

What was to be done?"

It was plainly impossible to dislodge the foe.

The little band of cavalymen were now hardly adequate to cope with the foe in their front.

It really seemed as if Cliff had received reinforcements. The number of his band had in some mysterious manner been increased.

Darkness was coming on rapidly.

Something must be done, and at once. Col. Clark racked his brain for an expedient.

Certainly they must extricate themselves from this position, and without delay. Men were falling every moment about them, and the enemy's line, like a cordon of death, was every moment drawing tighter about them.

Cold sweat broke out upon the intrepid colonel's brow.

"My God!" he muttered. "What is to be done?"

It was a terrible question. They were literally in a trap of death. Cliff was aware of this, and his men made the air hideous with their yells. Closer they crowded the line.

In this extremity Clark regretted having separated himself from the Vigilants and the Steam Man.

But this error had been made, and it was too late to correct it.

But the brave colonel was not long without an expedient.

He called out one of his pluckiest privates, and said:

"Jason, do you want to undertake a ticklish job?"

"I'm ready, sir," replied the private, with a salute.

"You know we are in a tight box?"

"Yes, sir."

"We must have reinforcements or the enemy will surely get the best of us."

"It looks that way, sir."

"Now, I want you to try to get through the enemy's line. Look for the Vigilants and the Steam Man and tell them to come to our aid. Then ride to the fort as fast as you can for a fresh squad. Tell the officer in charge to send two hundred mounted men."

"Very well, sir."

"Do you think you can do this?"

"I will do it or I will not come back."

Clark knew that Jason meant just what he said.

A few moments later the courier for relief slipped carefully into the shadows and was gone.

A prayer trembled on Clark's lips.

"I don't care for myself," he muttered, "but I cannot bear to see my brave boys slaughtered like sheep."

Darkness now thickly settled down. Of course no fighting could be done until the break of day.

But the cavalymen were not in a position to guarantee them much rest.

Few of them dared to sleep, and then it was upon their arms.

As the night hours dragged by, Clark paced the ground upon the outskirts of the camp and listened for some sign of the return of Jason.

He knew that it was not possible for the faithful courier to return from the fort under two days.

But if the cavalry division was reinforced by the Vigilants and the Steam Man they might be able to keep the foe at bay until the fresh squad should arrive.

Thus the plucky young colonel clung to hope.

Time passed. It seemed an age to Clark before a silent shadowy form slipped out of the gloom and into the camp.

As it drew nearer he recognized the courier Jason.

"Well, my man!" he said, sharply. "You are back."

Jason saluted quickly.

"Where are the reinforcements?"

"I did not find them."

"But—did I not tell you to find them?" began the colonel, angrily

"Easy, colonel," said Jason, respectfully. "I think I have done a better thing, sir."

"What do you mean?"

"It's a good way to the fort. You might be cut to pieces before I could return. I have found an avenue by which I think we can escape."

Clark's manner changed instantly.

"You don't mean it?" he exclaimed, excitedly. "What is it?"

Jason drew nearer and lowered his voice in a mysterious manner.

"Just over that pile of bowlders," he whispered, "I found a narrow passage through the mountain side. It is almost a cavern, for the top is so closely overhung with bushes. It's a close squeeze for the horses, but I think we can all get through and out upon the prairie before daybreak."

Col. Clark was intensely excited.

"Good for you, Jason!" he cried, in a joyful manner. "Arouse the camp, but do it quietly. Put every man in his saddle within ten minutes. You have solved our salvation, and you shall be promoted."

Jason hurried away to do the bidding of the colonel.

In a brief space of time the camp was aroused.

The weary soldiers, worn out with fighting, were only too glad to learn of the possibility of an escape.

At once preparations were made to steal a march upon the enemy.

The passage described by Jason was found. It was necessary to first pry aside a huge bowlder before passage could be made.

Into the passage the little band went, and one by one filed out into the valley beyond.

So skillfully was the move executed that the foe never dreamed of it. Daybreak came, and Cliff was furious to find that his intended victims had given him the slip during the night.

The cavalymen had reached the prairie in safety, and galloped away from the hills.

Clark knew that his only and best move now was to return to the fort for reinforcements.

He could not hope to do anything with the foe with such a mere handful of men.

Accordingly, just as the sun appeared above the horizon, the little cavalcade, with its shattered ranks, galloped away across the plain.

No effort was made to search for the Vigilants.

Clark knew that even with their aid it would not be feasible to give battle to the cowboys.

Clearly it was necessary to have two hundred more men. The colonel set his lips vengefully.

"I will teach that desperado a lesson," he muttered. "He shall be swept out of existence together with his rascally crew, and before another week."

On over the prairie they galloped toward the fort.

And as they rode, thrilling adventures were the lot of Frank Reade, Jr., and his friends on board the Steam Man.

Let us, therefore, for a time, deviate here and follow their fortunes.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE ABDUCTION.

CHIEF HARMON of the Vigilants was not wholly content to abandon the trail of the cowboys, just here.

He indulged in quite an argument with Frank Reade, Jr.

His remarks were not without logic.

"Why, only look at the sense of the thing," he declared. "It is by no means possible that the soldiers are going to have an easy time with Cliff and his men. They may turn the tables on them yet. I tell you it was a premature thing for that colonel to do, to set us adrift so quickly."

"Yet he ought to know his own strength," said Frank.

"I don't believe he does."

"I cannot but feel that he is doing the right thing."

"I don't feel that way."

"Well, in case of defeat the stigma will not fall upon you."

"Ah, but that is not the idea. We must not let Cliff defeat them. If he does, he will defeat us."

"What do you propose?"

"I am not going back home yet. We will make a camp down here on Willow Creek. When we learn for a fact that Cliff has been done up, then we will go home. Until then we are on duty."

Frank saw that Harmon was right. He extended his hand and said:

"I agree with you."

"I knew ye would," replied the Vigilant leader. "We can do this upon our own responsibility. You are to wait for Clark at a point below here, I believe?"

"Yes."

"Very good. That point is on Willow Creek. We will accompany you there."

It was nightfall before Willow Creek was reached.

In a convenient spot camp was made. The darkness became most intense in the vicinity.

Camp-fires were made and guards posted.

The fires in the furnace of the Steam Man were banked, and the occupants descended and mixed with the Vigilants.

The men gathered around the fires, and told stories and cracked jokes.

Walter Barrows, the young Vigilant who was so deeply in love with Bessie Rodman, had waited upon her at the wagon stop, and together they took a lover-like walk down the bank of the creek.

Nobody saw them go, and it is doubtful if any one would have sought to restrain them.

But they were committing unwittingly an act of great risk and folly. For unknown to any in the camp a coterie of dusky savages lurked in the tall prairie grass about.

Barney and Pomp were entertaining the camp with some of their munchausen stories.

The plainsmen roared with laughter until their sides ached.

Both were comical mokes and were continually playing roasts upon each other. Barney had just worked a gag upon Pomp when suddenly the distant crack of a pistol was heard.

Instantly every man in the camp was upon his feet.

The most intense of excitement reigned. All was confusion.

Then one of the guards came rushing in.

"There's a hull lot of Apaches down yonder," he cried, "ther grass is full of 'em and I reckon they've surrounded the camp."

"Steady all!" thundered Harmon, the Vigilant leader. "Who fired that pistol shot?"

"I don't know," replied the guard.

"Is anybody outside the line?"

"Yes."

"Who?"

"Walter Barrows and the young lady passed me not an hour ago. They went on down the creek."

"My soul!" gasped Harmon, with white face, "that was Barrows pistol without doubt. He an' the gal have certainly fallen into the grip of ther Injuns. We must make lively work to save 'em."

Frank Reade, Jr., had listened to this report with a sensation of horror.

Barney and Pomp had at once desisted in their fun-making, and Barney proceeded to open the Steam Man's furnace.

The crack of rifles now sounded all around the camp.

The savages, without doubt, were drawing their line closer, and meant if possible to exterminate the little band of Vigilants.

But a line of defense was then thrown out, and the skulking savages were held at bay.

But a desultory and very unsatisfactory species of warfare was kept up in the darkness.

It was impossible to tell how to move or where.

The enemy fired from all directions and practically at random.

Many of the Vigilants were wounded, and Captain Harmon was angry.

"Confound an Injun!" he muttered, in disgust. "They have sich a sneakin' way of fighting. They allus attack one after dark, an' hain't got the pluck to come out in the open an' fight."

Everybody was bound to acknowledge the logic of this.

But the savages kept up the same mode of attack until Frank Reade, Jr., made a diversion.

Barney had succeeded in getting up steam once more in the Steam Man, and now Frank Reade, Jr., approached Harmon.

"Give me five men," he declared, "and I will whip the foe for you."

"Five men!" gasped Harmon. "Why, they're ten to one out there."

"I don't care if they are."

"But—"

"Will you give me the men?"

"Oh, yes, but—"

"There's no time for questions, Captain Harmon. Leave it all to me."

"All right, Mr. Reade."

By Harmon's orders five of the Vigilants joined Frank Reade.

He led them aboard the steam wagon. Then he closed the door and seized the reins which connected with the throttle.

The Steam Man gave a shriek loud enough to perorate the ear drums of any one in the vicinity.

Then it dashed out upon the prairie.

The effect may be imagined.

The monster with fiery eyes and all flame and smoke, with clanking thunderous tread plunging into the midst of the foe, was an apparition well to be feared.

Right into the midst of the savages the Steam Man ran.

While the armed men in the screened wagon poured destructive volleys into the midst of the red foe.

Pen cannot adequately describe the situation.

For a moment the Apaches held their ground. Then, with wild, baffled yells they fled before the conqueror.

In less than twenty minutes the vicinity had been practically cleared of savages.

They retreated to a point below where their ponies were corralled.

Mounting, they dashed away to the westward. The Steam Man pursued until finding a creek, they escaped for good.

Then the Steam Man returned to camp.

But although the foe had been repulsed, matters were still bad enough.

Walter Barrows and Bessie Rodman were missing.

That they were captives was a forlorn hope. That they had been murdered was a dreadful fear.

Delay was almost fatal in this case. Without loss of time a good trailer was put upon the trail of the lovers.

Daylight was breaking in the east, and this enabled him to easily follow the trail.

Along the banks of the creek it ran for nearly a fifth of a mile.

Then the trailer paused.

Here without doubt was the spot where Barrows had been attacked by the Apaches.

There were footprints and marks of a struggle. A rifle, with broken stock, was picked up.

"It is Barrows' gun," said one of the Vigilants.

Blood was found upon the ground, but no trace of the bodies.

"They have been taken away as captives," declared Harmon, positively. "There is no doubt of that."

"Or thrown into the creek," suggested one of the Vigilants.

Investigation for a moment gave the pursuers a thrill of horror.

There were footprints down to the water's edge, and the marks of some heavy body dragged thither.

In the shallow water, protected by reeds, was a body.

For a moment all expected to recognize Barrows. But all drew a breath of relief.

It was not him.

The body was that of one of the Apaches. Doubtless it was one shot by Barrows, and his body had been thrown into this place to escape the notice of the white pursuers.

"That's an Injun trick," declared Harmon, positively. "I'm mighty well satisfied that the captives are alive."

"I hope you are right," said one man.

"Ditto!" said another.

"Then let us take the trail," cried Frank Reade, Jr. "If possible, we must rescue them."

The question was settled at once. All sprung to saddle, and the trail, which was quite plain, was followed.

Across the prairies went the Steam Man, with the Vigilants behind. Of course their horses could not compete with the Man on a level stretch, but Frank did not try to run away from them.

The Indians bore away to a southwesterly course, and soon a range of hills became visible above the horizon.

Harmon made them out as the Black Bear range.

"If they get into those hills with the captives," he declared, "we'll have mighty hard work diggin' 'em out."

"Why?" asked one of his men.

"Bekase, there's more holes and out of the way dens there than you could shake a stick at."

Barney and Pomp crouched down in the wagon, and kept their rifles in readiness for business.

Frank Reade, Jr., watched the plain ahead with eager eye, but though the trail was plain there was yet no signs of overtaking the red foe.

As they drew nearer the hills it became almost a certainty that the savages had sought refuge there.

A long stretch of plain intervened to the hills.

This was easily to be inspected with a glass, and Frank did so. There was no sign whatever of the Indians.

All hope was thus given up of overtaking the redskins before reaching the hills.

It seemed a certainty that they had reached their caves, and the only alternative left was to scour them thoroughly.

But when quite near an entrance between high hills, suddenly the pursuers topped a rise in the prairie and were rewarded with a startling sight.

Just below, in a depression, was the band of savages, seemingly engaged in making camp.

A small creek ran through this depression.

As is well known, Indians always encamp upon the banks of a stream. Yet it was a surprise to the pursuers that they should venture to camp in this open spot.

At sight of their foes the astonished redskins were thrown into a tumult.

Instantly a mad retreat was begun for the mountains.

A wild cheer pealed from the lips of the vigilants.

Harmon settled himself in his saddle and shouted:

"Forward, all! Charge!"

With a yell the Vigilants put spurs to their horses and made for the Indian encampment.

Frank Reade, Jr., started the Steam Man on a circuit to head off the savages.

But as he did so Pomp clutched his arm.

"Hi dar, Marse Frank!" cried the ducky. "Does yo' see dat little party ober dar making fo' de hills?"

Frank did see them.

"Yes," he replied.

"Well, dat am Missy Bessie an' her lover jes' as suah as yo' am bo'n, Marse Frank, an' dar am half a dozen Injuns jes' holding onto de bridles ob der hosses. I makes it out, sah, dat dey fink dey kin reach de hills afo' de Steam Man, sah."

"By Jupiter, you're right, Pomp!" cried Frank, with inspiration. "But we'll try and spoil that little game."

"Dat's right, Marse Frank!" cried the darkey. "I jes' fink de Man kin obertake dem hosses suah enuff."

Frank seized the reins and pulled open the throttle.

As the Steam Man went forward with his mighty stride Frank opened the whistle valve and let out a mighty shriek of such loudness that the echoes were repeated a hundred fold in the recesses of the hills.

CHAPTER XIV.

IN HOT PURSUIT.

THE party of savages with the two captives in their midst, evi-

dently intended to reach the hills, if possible, before being overtaken by the Steam Man.

At first Frank had fancied it easy to cut them off. But there were several depressions in the prairie which the Man had to circuit, and the distance was greater than Frank had really dreamed of.

Like a runaway locomotive the Steam Man raced over the plain. The vigilants were having a running fight with the savages.

But Frank Reade, Jr., was doomed to disappointment. He failed to cut off the band of abductors, and they vanished from sight in a deep pass.

It was too rocky a trail for the Steam Man to follow. Thus far the villains had the best of it.

"Golly sakes, Marse Frank!" cried Pomp, "dey done git away wif dem prisoners fo' suah."

"It looks like it," agreed Frank, in a baffled tone, "but there ought to be some way to cut them off."

"Begorra, there's only won way," declared Barney.

"What is that?"

"Let the naygur shay with the man, an' you an' I will go afther the divils a-foot," said the Celt.

For a moment Frank entertained no hopes of the success of such a plan.

Then he glanced back to the prairie where the vigilants and the Indians were having their battle.

It was nip and tuck between them, but Frank saw that the vigilants were fast getting the best of it.

Not more than half a dozen of the savages had the captives in charge. To be sure, the odds were three to one, yet Frank believed that with the plucky Barney's help, they could defeat them.

To think with Frank Reade, Jr., was to act.

He did not waste time, but seizing a rifle, cried:

"Your idea is a good one, Barney. We will act upon it. Pomp, keep a sharp eye out for danger untill we return."

"A'right Marse Frank," replied the faithful darcy.

Barney, delighted that Frank had seen fit to adopt his plan, was quickly ready and they left the wagon.

The Indians, to be sure, had the start of them, but the pass was rocky and it was hardly likely that they would succeed in getting a great lead.

Swiftly the two rescuers pressed forward.

They climbed over piles of bowlders, crept through narrow defiles, and climbed high steeps.

It seemed that progress must be slow for the ponies of the Indians, and they should be overtaken before long.

Suddenly Barney paused with a sharp cry.

He seized Frank by the arm and pulled him back into the cover of an angle in the mountain wall.

He was none too soon.

The crack of rifles smote upon the air and the shower of bullets came down into the pass.

"Bejabbers, I saw the spalpeens just in the nick av time!" declared Barney, peering around the edge of the cliff wall. "Av I hadn't we'd have been dead gossoons as sure as me name is Barney."

"You're right there!" cried Frank, slipping extra cartridges into his rifle; "that was a close call."

"Indade it was."

"I had no idea we were so near the rascals."

"Bejabbers, I didn't meself till I see the top-knot av wan of thim over that ridge yender."

"They are ready for us, then."

"Bejabbers, and we're ready too. If I iver get a bead on any wan av them there'll be a job for the coroner, bad cess to thim."

"Where are they? I can't see their position very well."

"Aisy, Mистер Frank," said Barney, "they're hiding up yonder jist ferninst that big scrub av an oak on the edge of the cliff."

Frank looked in that direction. Suddenly Barney gave a sharp cry.

"Whurro!" he yelled.

Quick as a flash his rifle went to his shoulder.

Crack!

A yell of agony rang through the gorge. Then down over the cliff tumbled an Indian almost at the Celt's feet.

The bullet had pierced his skull and his final account was settled.

"Good shot, Barney!" cried Frank, "that only leaves five for us to tackle."

Then quick as a flash the young inventor threw his rifle to his shoulder.

Crack!

Another yell, a death cry went up on the air of the defile.

"Bejabbers, that's only four av the divils left," chuckled Barney. It's only two to wan, Mистер Frank."

"You're right, Barney!" cried Frank, with enthusiasm, "but the odds are yet too great."

The outlook now was certainly encouraging for the rescue of the prisoners.

But the two rescuers knew better than to essay an open attack.

The Indian method of warfare was in this case far the best. They remained strictly under cover.

All was quiet on the bluff above.

But it was not by any means likely that the foe were inactive.

The great danger now was that they would continue to slip away deeper into the hills and reach some inaccessible hiding place.

Our rescuers waited as long as seemed consistent with safety.

Then Frank said:

"I think we'd better make a break, Barney."

"All roight, sorr," replied the Celt. "Do yez think it safe?"

"We must use caution. It may be possible that they are trying to draw us from our hiding place."

"So I thought, sorr."

"Again, they may be far into the hills by this time. We will gain nothing by staying here."

"All roight, sorr."

Barney began to scan the side of the cliff. A path was not visible anywhere. Yet the Celt did not believe it impossible to climb to the top.

If this could be done they might then succeed in getting upon level ground with the foe and escape the risk of their bullets.

Frank divined Barney's purpose and said:

"I think we can climb it, Barney."

Bejabbers we'll thry."

Barney had just got his hands and feet into niches in the cliff when a startling sound came up the pass.

"Hark!"

"What is it?"

The tramp of ponies' feet could be heard and the distant baffled yells of savages were wafted up on the breeze.

"The Indians are coming up the pass," cried Frank, with dismay.

"Barney, there's not an instant to lose."

"Begorra, yez are roight," cried the Celt, beginning to make his way up the cliff.

It was a smart climb up the steep wall, but it was safely made at length.

They were now on level ground with the four captors. But a careful reconnoitering of the vicinity showed that they had left.

In the lull in the conflict they had slipped away into the hills.

But Barney took the trail and they went forward again in pursuit.

The sounds of the foe coming up the pass in their rear, however, every moment became plainer.

But fortunately, just at a point where the trail diverged deeper into the hills, the foe must have turned in another direction for very soon the sounds died out.

"We have nothing to fear from them," cried Frank, with a breath of relief. "They have gone in another direction."

Very soon the hills began to merge into a deep valley. Through this there ran a swift stream.

As Frank and Barney entered the valley Barney shouted:

"Be me sowl, there be the spalpeens now."

"Where?" asked Frank.

"Jist down there ferninst that grove of trees, Mистер Frank."

"Sure enough."

"The four savages and their captors were plainly seen on the banks of the creek."

They were just in the act of embarking in a canoe.

Frank saw that he must act quick if he would prevent this.

So he said, sharply:

"Go to the right, Barney, I will go to the left, and we must head them off."

"All roight, sorr."

Away went Barney on the mad run. The savages had already got the canoe into the water.

They saw him coming and a yell was the signal. The captives were hustled into the light craft and it was pushed out from the shore.

Down into the current it went. There was no time to lose.

Frank Reade, Jr., came to a stop and raised his rifle. It was a desperate chance but he took it.

A quick aim, a bead skillfully drawn on one of the paddlers and—

Crack!

A wild Indian yell went up and the prow of the canoe swung around.

Over into the water went the doomed savage. The shot had been a good one.

But the canoe was at the moment at the head of some swift rapids. The next moment it was racing down them, and turning a bend in the stream vanished from view.

Frank had not time to draw another bead before it was out of sight, and when it reached the lower level and came into view again it was out of range.

Barney came along now and shouted:

"Be jabbers, yez did well, Mистер Frank. That was a beautiful shot. There's only three av ther red divils left."

This was true, but the three savages seemed likely to elude their pursuers after all.

The canoe was racing down the stream, and fast nearing a defile in the hills.

If it should enter this, there was little doubt but that the fugitives would make their escape.

Frank and Barney saw this in the same moment.

"Begorra, Mистер Frank, we must cut the divils off!" cried the Celt.

"Forward, then!" cried Frank. "Is there not a short cut?"

Both looked for this. In the same instant they espied it.

The creek took a long turn, and by cutting directly across a meadow the two pursuers saw that they would be likely to cut off the savages.

Accordingly they started forward on the run.

The Indian captors saw their move at once, and an angry yell went up from them.

One of them rose in the canoe and took quick aim and fired. The bullet whistled close to Barney's ear. The Celt stopped and cocked his rifle.

"Be jabbers, I'll spoil that fellow!" he cried. Have at yez, ye blatherskite!"

Barney's rifle spoke. But the motion of the canoe very likely destroyed the aim, for the bullet did not take effect.

At this point the canoe took a swift course, and in the twinkling of an eye seemed to have overcome the skilled hand at the paddles.

In a flash it went over and the entire party were dumped into the waters of the creek.

A great cry went up from Frank Reade, Jr.

"My God! they will be drowned!"

Forward the brave young inventor rushed. He thought of poor Barrows with his hands tied.

Thrown into the waters of the creek, it did not seem as if any power on earth could save him.

But two of the savages had seized the prisoners. The canoe had overturned in close proximity to the shore.

The third savage gave assistance, and as the water did not chance to be deep, all got ashore.

"Now we have them!" cried Frank, confidently.

But his statement was premature. Even as it seemed that the rescue was certain, an incident occurred to prevent.

From behind a small hillock appeared Red Bear's gang of Apaches, full half a hundred strong.

CHAPTER XV.

THE VIGILANTES TO THE RESCUE.

The appearance of the savages was most inopportune. Mounted on their fleet ponies, with wild yells they swept down upon the party.

The three Indian captors yelled with delight. Frank and Barney of course came to a halt. Of course it was folly to tempt fate.

To attempt to stand against that gang was folly.

"By Jupiter!" gasped the young inventor. "It's all up with us, Barney! We are badly beaten!"

"Tare an' 'ounds!" grumbled the angry Celt. "That beats all me wolf's relations! Phwativer shall we do now, Misther Frank?"

"Beat a retreat," declared the young inventor. "Come on, Barney!"

"It's meself as hates to retreat," said Barney, stubbornly. "Oh, if we only had the Steam Man an' the naygur here now we'd moighty soon turn the thing about."

The two rescuers now turned about and hastily beat a retreat across the valley.

But they had not gone far when the Indians began to ford the creek for the purpose of giving pursuit.

Barney saw the move and called Frank's attention to it.

"Be me sowl, Misther Frank!" cried the Irishman, excitedly, "we've got to make quick toime, or they'll have our scalps."

"You are right, Barney."

But at that moment Frank Reade, Jr., lifted his gaze, and a mighty cry escaped his lips.

Directly in front of them, a body of armed men swept into the valley.

They were the Vigilants, and at their head rode Harmon. At sight of Frank and Barney they urged their horses on faster with a loud cheer.

This was answered by the two fugitives, with a will.

The savages, seeing the Vigilants, now changed their tactics. They turned their horses about and rode swiftly on the back trail.

Frank could hardly wait for Harmon and his men to come up. Enthusiastic greetings were exchanged, and also experiences.

The Vigilants had driven the Apaches before them into the hills.

But upon entering the fastnesses, with which they were not familiar, the Indians had given them the slip.

In the search, they had come upon the scene at an opportune moment.

There seemed no better thing to do than to give pursuit to the savages at once.

Accordingly a couple of spare horses were provided for Frank and Barney, and they rode forward on the charge.

The delay had been brief, but it had enabled the savages to cross the creek and start for the defile beyond.

Down thundered the vigilants in hot pursuit.

The creek was quickly forded and the pursuers seemed to be gaining at every bound.

But of a sudden the savages executed a peculiar and inexplicable maneuver.

Suddenly and without warning they split in two sections, one going to the right and the other to the left.

In one division was the girl captive, Bessie Rodman, and in the other Walter Barrows.

The party who had the girl in charge started for the defile.

The other made directly across the valley. In a flash of time the purpose of the savages was made apparent.

The vigilants could not go both ways with splitting up.

As they were much less in number than the Apaches the result of this would be to greatly weaken them, if not actually place them at the mercy of the red foe.

On the other hand it was a problem as to which direction to pursue or which party to follow.

Harmon drew a slight rein upon his horse and wavered a moment.

The vigilants naturally were inclined to go to the rescue of their comrade, but Frank Reade, Jr., comprehending the folly of this, cried:

"The girl first. We can rescue the man later."

"Yes!" cried Harmon, in a voice of thunder; "that is our duty! The girl first, boys; then we will try and save Barrows."

The vigilants cheered, and away thundered the troop toward the defile.

A few moments later they reached it and entered it.

High walls of black, forbidding rock arose on either side to a mighty height. The bed of the defile was rough and strewn with bowlders.

It was harder for the horses of the vigilants to pick their way through here than the fleet-footed ponies of the savages.

Accordingly the Indians gained quite a lead. But after a quarter of a mile of the defile had been traversed the vigilants were brought to a halt in an unceremonious manner.

The defile seemed suddenly to take an upward trend here, and high piles of bowlders made a barrier of some height.

Suddenly from behind this barrier there came the flash of rifle muzzles, and a volley of bullets came rattling down through the defile.

Two of the vigilants were wounded, and Harmon instantly called a halt.

Cover was quickly sought behind rocks and corners near. It was evident that the Indians had here made a stand. The Vigilant leader was puzzled.

But suddenly Frank Reade, Jr., gave a sharp cry:

"Listen!"

His acute ear had caught the sound of horses' hoofs coming up the defile in their rear.

"By thunder!" ejaculated Harmon, with sudden terrible comprehension, "we are trapped!"

The men gazed blankly at each other.

Nothing was more apparent. The Apaches under the shrewd Red Bear had certainly very cleverly outgeneraled them.

Led into the defile by one division of the Apaches, the other had proceeded to block up the outlet, and thus literally the Vigilants were in a trap.

There was not the advantage in facing a foe in this manner that there was in having him wholly in the front.

To be attacked both front and rear would demoralize even the largest and bravest of armies. Harmon was completely taken aback.

"Wall, I swan!" he exclaimed, with earnestness, "I never believed an Injun could beat me in any such way as that. But we are in for it, boys, and no mistake. We've got to fight hard."

The savages in front were keeping up a raking fire.

Those in the rear had now drawn near enough to also open fire. The fun had begun.

But the brave band of white men had no thought of fear or of retreat.

They at once, by Harmon's direction, sought safe places of cover and proceeded to return the fire.

Every time an Indian's top-knot showed above the fringe of rocks, it was made a target of.

Thus, the battle was kept up for over an hour.

Then an idea occurred to the inventive mind of Frank Reade, Jr.

He had carefully examined the face of the pass. In doing so he had discovered what looked like a feasible foot path over the cliff!

At once he called Harmon aside and explained a plan to him.

"I think we can defeat the savages easily in this manner," he declared. "Give me five men and I will guarantee a surprise for them."

"Mr. Reade, take what force you need," declared the vigilant leader. "I have full confidence in your ability to do as you say. May you succeed."

Frank at once selected five men from the troop.

Then with Barney he led the way cautiously up the path.

Fortunately, it was overhung with foliage to a large extent, so that they were hidden from the view of those in their rear.

In a few moments a position near the brow of the cliff had been reached. Then Frank's surmise was verified.

The little party could look down upon the heads of the savages. It was an easy matter to pour a volley amongst them with most demoralizing effect.

Frank sent one of the men back down the cliff, to give Harmon the cue when to make a charge.

Then at a favorable moment Frank gave the order to fire.

Six repeating rifles were turned upon the savages, and as fast as they could be worked, they were engaged in firing a volley down upon the heads of the exposed savages.

The effect was startling.

The savage is never the one to stand in open field and fight. At once a panic seized them.

It was the moment for the charge, and Harmon's men rushed forward.

Up over the rocks they went. In a twinkling the savages were driven from their entrenchments and utterly routed, and completely dispersed.

Frank Reade, Jr., and Barney saw their opportunity, and rushed upon two of the savages who had Bessie Rodman in charge.

In a moment the girl captive was free once more and among friends. The two guarus fled for their lives.

All this had happened in a twinkling of an eye, comparatively speaking. But the light was not over.

The force in the rear were coming to the attack.

But Harmon's men were now in a position to command the defile. A quick, sharp conflict ensued, and the Apaches were driven back with great slaughter.

The vigilants had thus far the best of it.

The enemy had been routed, and Bessie Rodman rescued.

Only one other thing now remained to be accomplished, and this was the rescue of Walter Barrows.

But even as the question was being discussed a loud cry arose, and the next moment a flatless, blood-stained young man came dashing down over the cliff and fell half fainting in the midst of the vigilants.

It was Barrows.

In the midst of the fight the plucky young plainsman had succeeded in breaking his bonds, and after a desperate fight with two of his captors, had made his escape.

Everybody extended congratulations to the young couple, and then plans for the future were discussed.

It was not certain that the savages would not return to the attack. But a report was brought in by a number of scouts sent out that the Apaches had withdrawn from the field entirely.

It was therefore decided to go back to Willow Creek.

It was not known whether Col. Clark had been victorious with the cowboys or not.

Until this question was settled Harmon had no idea of returning home.

"Until Cliff and his gang have been wiped out of existence," he declared, "I shall not give up their chase."

Frank and Barney were anxious to return at once to the Steam Man and Pomp.

They were, by no means, assured that the darky was safe or that he might not have got into trouble.

Accordingly the start was at once made for the prairie.

Down one of the defiles the vigilants rode. Coming out into the little valley they crossed this and entered the pass.

But they had not proceeded a hundred yards into the pass when one of the advance scouts came rushing back and gave a thrilling report.

"Their cowboys are coming up their pass!" he cried. "That's a host of 'em, and Art Cliff is at the head of 'em."

"The cowboys!" gasped Harmon.

The greatest excitement ensued.

"My soul!" exclaimed Frank Reade, Jr., in dismay. "Clark has been defeated!"

"Bad luck to the omadhouns!"

"But what of Pomp?" exclaimed Frank with alarm. "Barney, we ought at once to ascertain where he is."

"To be shure, Misther Frank," agreed the Celt, "but how in the name av all the saints are yez goin' to do it? Be jabbers, these cowboys have got us cornered."

In a very few moments a large sized battle was in progress in the pass.

CHAPTER XVI.

POMP MAKES ACTION.

Now let us return to Pomp and the Steam Man, whom in the detail of the thrilling adventures just chronicled we have neglected.

The darkey entertained nothing like fear at being left alone on board the Steam Man.

Indeed, he rather enjoyed the responsibility thus put upon him.

He could occasionally hear rifle shots from the hills, which assured him that Frank and Barney were making it hot for the savages.

"Golly!" he muttered. "I jes' reckon dem Injuns git de worstest ob dat fight. Ki dar, if dey amn't comin' dis yer way. I spec's I better move."

This was true.

The Indians had been driven before the vigilants, and starting for the hills were coming straight toward the Steam Man.

It was evident that they meant to enter the hills at this point.

Pomp knew that it would be folly to remain where he was with the Steam Man.

The savages might ruin the machine as he could not hope alone to hold them at bay.

So he opened the throttle and started away with the Man.

He kept on until satisfied that he had reached a safe point.

Meanwhile the Indians reached the pass and entered it.

The vigilants, however, did not seem in a hurry to pursue. They remained on the battle ground for some while looking after their dead and wounded.

When they did start for the pass Pomp had returned and was there stationed.

As they came up the darkey put his head out of the screen door and shouted:

"Good fo' yo', Marse Harmon. Jes yo' gib dem Injuns a good hekin' fo' luck. I reckon yo' kin do it."

"I reckon we can, Pomp," replied Harmon. "At least we'll try it."

"If yo' sees Marse Frank, jes tole him fo' me, dat his carriage am waitin' fo' him. Will yo'?"

Harmon replied that he would and rode away laughing immoderately.

The vigilants all vanished up the pass. It seemed ages after they had gone, when Pomp received another great surprise.

Suddenly, hearing the clatter of hoofs he turned his head, and scrutinized the prairie.

A thrilling sight met his gaze.

There, coming over a swell in the plain was a body of horsemen.

It required but a glance for the darky to recognize them.

They were the cowboys with Artemus Cliff at their head. They were riding directly down upon the Steam Man.

They were just coming from the scene of their victory over Clark. Pomp's eyes stuck out like agates and he sprang to his feet.

"Glory fo' goodness!" he gasped. "Dat am Cliff and his debbils. I jes' reckon I get out dere way."

In an instant he opened the throttle and let the Steam Man race out upon the prairie.

The cowboys gave a wild yell, and attempted pursuit.

But they could not keep anywhere near the Man, and finally abandoned it. With baffled yells they returned and disappeared in the pass.

"Golly, dat am a berry bad ting for Marse Frank an' de cders," muttered Pomp. "Dey will neber be anticipating de comin' ob dem rapsallions, an' dat will make tings berry bad, indeed."

The darky at once began to wax anxious as to the fate of his friends.

He began to feel as if it was very much his duty to enter the hills and render what assistance he could.

But what was to be done with the Steam Man?

Pomp reflected that he might take it with him if he could only find some way of doing so.

To attempt to traverse the rocky Pass was out of the question.

The darky was in a quandary.

Soon he heard the sounds of firing. The battle was on, and at no great distance, either.

Pomp could hardly contain himself. He walked up and down in the cage like a prisoner in his cell.

"Ob co'se, I has Marse Frank's ordahs to stay yere," he muttered, "but it am evident dat Marse Frank needs all de help dat he can get. What ebber I kin do, I jes' don' know what."

The darky sat down and began sober reflection.

He was a shrewd fellow, and as a result he was not long in formulating a plan.

He sprang up finally.

"By golly, I'll jes' do dat ting!" he cried, finally. "It am de bes' ting I kin do."

He opened the throttle and started the Steam Man along the base of the hills. With keen eye he studied the possibility of entering them.

By the pass it was impossible. But he imagined that it would not be difficult to find another means.

Nor was he disappointed.

At a certain point the hillside was shorn of trees and bowlders. It made a smooth surface even over the brow of the height.

As the Steam Man was provided with power to climb any height of this sort, Pomp at once set his course up the height.

Up went the Steam Man with prodigious strides.

Nearer the top he drew. Pomp had no means of knowing whether it would be possible to go further or not.

But his best hopes were realized upon reaching the summit.

Down a gentle incline the Steam Man went, and through a scattered grove of trees, and came out into a valley deep in the hills.

The sound of firing was now quite plain.

Indeed, as Pomp guided the Man down into the valley, he saw the powder smoke of the conflict in the pass, just a short way up the valley.

"By golly!" muttered the darky, joyfully, "I reckon dat I get dar jes' in de bes' time. Won't Marse Frank be glad fo' to see me!"

But at that moment a startling thing occurred.

The Man was traveling slowly, when just as the bottom of the incline was reached, two powerful savages sprang out of the grass and seized the throttle rein.

Pomp was so taken by surprise that for a moment he could not act.

The pulling of the rein closed the throttle, and the Man came to a halt.

Pomp could not use the rein to open it again, and had there been more of the red foe, the Steam Man would have been at their mercy.

But there were only two of them, and while one held the rein the other essayed to hack his way into the wagon with his tomahawk.

Pomp acted with the rapidity of thought.

"G'way from dar yo' red imp!" he yelled, picking up a revolver.

"If yo' don't I'll jes' bore a hole in yo'."

But the red man did not desist, and Pomp, springing to a loop-hole fired at him.

The bullet went true to its aim, and the Indian fell dead.

The other savage seeing the fate of his companion let out a baffled yell, and relaxing his grip on the valve rein fled precipitately.

Pomp did not take the pains to fire at him, but coolly picked up the valve rein, opened the throttle and the Steam Man went on.

Straight for the scene of the conflict at the mouth of the Pass Pomp went.

When he came upon the scene he found a thrilling and sanguine conflict in progress.

At sight of the Steam Man a cheer went up from the Vigilants.

In a moment Frank and Barney were aboard and shaking hands with Pomp.

The situation was quickly explained.

"I thought mos' likely yo' would want de Steam Man, Marse Frank," said the faithful darky. "So I jes' fetched him ober to yo'."

"You have done well, Pomp," said Frank, joyfully. "Of course,

this insures our safety. With the Steam Man we would easily escape the cowboys. But it will never do to leave these brave Vigilants to their mercy."

"Ob co'se not, Marse Frank," cried Pomp, seizing his rifle. "Jes' yo' let dis chile draw a bead on dem rapsCALLIONS. I'll show dem dat Pomp kin use a rifle."

The Steam Man was placed in the van of the line of battle. Protected as they were by the impervious screen, those on board could fire with advantage at the cowboys.

The battle was a hot one, but every moment the cowboys slowly gained ground.

What was worse, the ammunition of the Vigilants seemed to be giving out.

With plenty of ammunition, it was possible that the Vigilants could have held them at bay for a long while.

But, of course, when the ammunition should give out, the battle would be ended.

White-faced, but determined, the brave plainmen stood their ground.

Not a man of them thought of retreat. All were prepared to give up their lives like heroes.

There seemed no way of getting out of their present desperate situation.

To retreat was about equal to an impossibility, for it would be out upon the open plain where they would be shot down like sheep.

The situation was an awful one.

"Durn it, I don't keer for myself," said bluff Harmon the vigilant leader, "but some of the boys have families dependent on 'em. Ah, that dog of a Cliff has sins to answer fer."

"You are right," agreed Frank Reade, Jr. "But there must be some way of getting out of this scrape."

"How?"

"Ah, that is a sticker. There is no hope of reinforcements near?"

"None whatever."

"The Steam Man could be sent for them in quick time, if such a thing were possible."

"But it is not. The nearest place is Ranch V, and that is Cliff's own den. We know that."

"Certainly."

"The fort is too far off. There is just one forlorn hope."

"Ah!"

"The cavalry?"

"But they may have been all wiped out."

"Very true. Well, we must die then like men. But, Mr. Reade, there is no reason why you should not take the girl in your Steam Man and make your escape."

Frank placed a hand upon the vigilant captain's shoulder.

"Yes!" he said, briefly. "I could do that."

"Then do it. We will hold the foe at bay until—"

"Stop!"

Harmon looked his surprise.

"You do not know me," said Frank Reade, Jr., determinedly, "do you think I would desert you in this hour of need?"

"But—"

"Never! If you die so do we. Until the last the Steam Man will stand his ground."

With tears of emotion in his eyes Harmon gripped Frank's hand.

"God bless you!" was all he could say.

At this moment one of the vigilants came up excitedly.

"We are just firing the last cartridges," he declared. "What shall we do? Is it a retreat, Harmon?"

"Retreat!" cried the vigilant leader, clubbing his rifle. "Never! Come on one and all. The crisis has come. Now let us show them how brave men can die."

The cowboys with their wild cheers were forcing the crippled vigilants back.

But even in the moment of their victory a strange sound came from the rear and a mighty cry went up from the throats of the vigilants.

"Hurrah! We are saved! Rescue has come at last."

CHAPTER XVII.

ONCE MORE IN THE ENEMY'S POWER.

It had been Col. Clark's firm intention to return to the fort for reinforcements.

It was a long ways, but he did not reckon this. He thought only of securing a sufficient body of men to cope successfully with the cowboys.

So on they rode the little remnant of the squad for the far distant fort.

But after a night had been spent in camp, just as the bugle called "boots and saddles," one of the guard sighted a body of horsemen just coming over a swell in the prairie.

The alarm was given and Clark rode out to investigate.

One glance was enough and a cry of joy escaped his lips.

"Hurrah!" he cried. "We are in luck. It is Romaine's company of one hundred men. Forward all!"

With cheers the little band rode out to meet the reinforcements.

The command had been sent out under Captain Romaine to search for Clark and his men.

The two officers shook hands and explanations were made.

"You have come just in the nick of time, Romaine," declared Clark. "We can now return and whip the cowboys."

"We are with you, colonel!" declared the captain with a salute.

"The boys are itching for some hot work."

"Well, I will promise it to them," laughed Clark, as he took command.

At once the cavalry set out at full gallop for the hills.

It seemed like a strange fate that guided them almost to the very scene of the conflict.

The firing was heard long before the pass was reached, and Clark hurried his men forward.

He at once threw them into the pass in the rear of Cliff's gang.

It was an opportune moment, too.

Just as the last cartridge of the vigilants was used the cavalry struck the rear of the cowboy gang.

Instantly a panic seized Cliff's men. They made a brief stand, and then were driven up a side defile into the hills.

Here they made a stubborn stand.

The cavalry literally cleared the pass, and riding through came into the midst of the vigilants.

The scene which followed baffles description.

In a moment Clark and big Harmon were shaking hands with the deepest emotion.

"Ye came jest in the nick of time, Clark," declared the vigilant chief. "In ten minutes more we might have all been dead men."

"Then we are in luck," cried the colonel, "for which I am very glad. Ah, Mr. Reade, I am glad to see you."

"The same," replied Frank, as he gripped hands with the colonel.

Then Clark rode away up the defile to see what was going on there.

He found the fiercest kind of a battle in progress. The cowboys had intrenched themselves once more and were making a bold stand.

The cavalry outnumbered them, but they were in a very advantageous position.

The best efforts of Clark's men would not suffice to dislodge them. For a long while the sanguine battle went on.

In vain Clark tried to eject them from their position. His bravest efforts met with failure.

The intrepid colonel knew that if he could get the foe into the open he could hope to whip them.

But as it was it looked certainly as if his plucky little band would be badly decimated in the accomplishment of the desired end.

In this quandary Frank Reade, Jr., appeared upon the spot.

The young inventor had borrowed a horse of one of the vigilants and rode up to see how the fight was going on.

"Well, colonel," he said, greeting Clark, "how are you making out?"

"Not as well as I could desire," replied the colonel in a dejected manner.

"What is the matter?"

"Why, I can't drive the rascals."

"Why not?"

"They have a position up there in the hills which is unassailable."

"I disagree with you," said Frank, quietly. "I am not a military engineer, but I am a land surveyor and I tell you their position on that hill is not of the best."

Clark was staggered.

"Why, it is the best position about here," he declared.

"No," said Frank, gravely. "Yonder is a much better position."

He pointed to a hill to the right, and which the one upon which the cowboys were seemed to overlook.

"What—try to command the foe from that hill?" cried Clark, scornfully. "We would only expose ourselves, and they would sweep us from it like chaff before the wind."

"No, they wouldn't."

"Now, Mr. Reade, what is the use for you to talk that way? The hill upon which they are is higher than this one."

"It may be higher in the number of feet," replied Frank, "but not in advantage of position."

"How do you make that out?"

"It is easy enough to see. The top of this hill is smooth, is it not?"

"Yes."

"The top of theirs is craggy and they cannot climb up to it. Their position is far from the top. A position on the top of yonder hill will easily look down into their camp."

Clark was surprised, but he saw the logic of Frank's remark.

"By Jove!" he cried. "Perhaps you are right."

"I think you will find that I am."

"But I would have taken my oath that they had the highest position around here."

"Well, that would seem to be really so, for the hill itself is higher. Yet it is but an optical delusion."

Clark extended his hand to Frank.

"Mr. Reade," he cried warmly. "You are right. I acknowledge my mistake. Perhaps your opportune suggestion may enable us to whip the foe."

"If it is of any value, I am highly pleased!" said Frank, modestly.

"I feel that it is, and I shall at once proceed to take the hill."

Clark at once proceeded to do this. By his command his men moved up the back side of the hill.

This protected them from the bullets of the cowboys.

Arrived at the top of the smooth hill, it was found that Frank Reade, Jr., was right.

They were enabled to look right down upon the cowboys in their position.

"Hurrah!" cried Clark, jubilantly, "that means victory."

A volley was given the astonished cowboys. They returned with ill effect.

The tables were exactly turned upon them, and they were not slow to see the point.

A red-hot fire was kept up for some little time, but the cowboys no longer held the advantage.

Indeed it began to look muchly as if they were to be driven from their position.

Suddenly all firing ceased.

The cowboy gang were not in sight, nor did they fire another shot.

Clark feared a stratagem or some fatal decoy, and dared not at once order a charge.

But finally he became convinced that the cowboys had evacuated their position and had made a retreat.

Flushed with victory Clark ordered his men to charge.

Up the slope they went with fixed bayonets. But when they cleared the top of the intrenchments, hastily thrown up by the cowboys, it was found that they had gone.

They had departed quite unceremoniously and completely. Not an article of any kind was left behind. Indeed it also became a mystery as to the course taken by them. Not a sign of a trail could be found.

It baffled the cavalrymen. "By Jupiter!" exclaimed Clark, in disgust, "how are you going to fight such a shadowy foe. If they would only come out like men and fight it out it would be all right. But they don't dare do it."

"You would whip them," said Frank Reade, Jr., with a laugh. "That is why they are playing hide and seek."

"I suppose so, but it makes it pretty hard for me. I suppose the best course now is to send out scouts and scour the hills."

"Exactly."

"All right. I will do it."

"I hope you will succeed."

"Thank you. I will do it or die."

"That is a good resolution."

"Well, I mean it, every word of it."

With this Clark ordered his men to horse, and the quest at once began.

Frank did not believe that he could be of further service just now, so he decided to return to the Steam Man.

Mounting his horse he rode down through the defile. In a few moments he reached the spot where the remnant of the brave Vigilant band were.

There was the Steam Man intact, but Frank saw at a glance that something was wrong about the camp.

Everybody appeared to be deeply excited. Young Barrows was seen wringing his hands and rushing about madly.

Frank sent his horse forward rapidly.

Barney saw him coming and ran out to meet him.

"Och hone, Mither Frank!" he cried.

"Well!" exclaimed Frank, reining up his horse, "what is the matter?"

"Sure, somethin' terrible has happened since ye went away."

"Well, what is it?"

"Shure, sor, the young lady, Bessie, has gone, sor, an' divil a wan av us kin find her anywhere."

"Bessie Rodman gone?" gasped Frank. "Can that be possible?"

"Shure, sor, it is, an' faix they all do believe that the divil av cowboys, be the orders av Artemus Cliff, have got her agin."

"Great heavens!" cried Frank, with horror, "how on earth could they have done that! Is there not enough of you here to prevent?"

"Shure, sor, that is thrue enough," cried Barney. "But it's the gerrul's fault hersilf, av ivery wan believes."

"Her fault!" cried Frank, in surprise. "How could that be?"

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE LOVERS' QUEST.

"I'll tell ye how it was, Mister Reade," cried bluff Harmon, the vigilant, as he came up. "Ye see the gal took big chances. Thar's a spring in that bit av bushes there an' she went over to git a drink of water. Nobody has seen her since."

"Have you made a good search?" asked Frank, sharply.

"An all-fired good one."

"But how do you know that Cliff's gang have got her?"

"Because we know that it could not be Injuns, for the ground was marked with prints of the cowboys' shoes."

Frank received this information with sinking heart.

He knew that it must be too true that Bessie Rodman had again fallen into the hands of Cliff.

It was a dismaying reflection.

To effect her rescue would prove no easy task.

Just how to go to work to do it was a problem to Frank.

But he was not long in deciding upon a plan of action.

Meanwhile young Barrows, desperate over the thought that his girl love was once more in Cliff's power, had made a daring move.

Alone he rode away into the hills.

He was determined to rescue Bessie or sacrifice his life in the attempt.

Barrows was a youth of rare pluck and great determination.

In this quest he was aided by his blind love for Bessie Rodman.

For her he would gladly give up his life.

Striking into the hills he sought to follow the trail of the abductors.

But it was soon lost in the flinty ground, and his best efforts to recover it were in vain.

However, he kept on with feverish resolution. It was now a blind quest, but this did not deter him in the least.

Soon Barrows had penetrated deep into the hills.

He heard the distant sounds of firing and knew that the soldiers and Cliff's men were yet having it out.

"God give me strength to rescue Bessie Rodman!" he prayed, as he rode on.

It had occurred to Barrows that the young girl might have been taken to Ranch V by her captors.

He had half made up his mind to proceed thither when a thrilling thing occurred.

Suddenly the sharp crack of a rifle smote upon the air.

Barrows reeled in the saddle and his horse gave a plunge.

A line of red blood trickled down over his face. The bullet had grazed his cheek bone.

It was a narrow escape.

The fraction of an inch in another direction, and the bullet might have penetrated his brain.

Young Barrows had faced danger and death times enough to know quite well what to do.

He instantly dropped from his horse and spoke a word of command to the animal.

The faithful and well-trained steed wheeled and galloped away into the cover of timber near.

Barrows himself sank down behind a pile of rocks.

All this was done in the twinkling of an eye.

The trained westerner whose life is in danger knows well the value of quick action.

It was this which saved the life of Barrows, for half a dozen bullets came whistling down the mountain side the next moment.

He had run unconsciously upon his foes. He experienced a thrill as it occurred to him that this was most likely the party who had Bessie Rodman in their charge.

"Heaven help me now!" he muttered, fervently. "I must save her or die!"

From his position he could safely scrutinize the mountain side.

He saw that far up on its side there was a rude cabin made of bark and logs.

From this the storm of bullets had come.

Nothing could be seen of those within the cabin.

But Barrows believed that not only was the foe within, but also Bessie Rodman.

He was somewhat at a loss now to know just what move to make.

To advance openly to the attack would have been an act of folly.

He would certainly have met his death in a summary fashion.

So while pondering on the subject he continued to watch the cabin windows.

He held his rifle in readiness for instant use.

Suddenly a face appeared for an instant at one of the windows.

It was quickly withdrawn, and Barrows had not time to fire. He recognized it, however, as the face of one of the outlaws.

The young plainsman's nerves were steel, and he watched his chance again with nervous anxiety.

Suddenly the opportunity came. Once more the face appeared.

Barrows raised his rifle quick as thought.

Crack!

A wild cry went up, the sound of a falling body was heard, and then the tramping of feet and bitter curses.

Barrows knew that his shot had taken effect.

Then he changed his position. But not a sound or a sign of life came from the mysterious cabin.

"If they are in the cabin they are keeping mighty dark," he muttered. "They surely must be there, for I have not seen them come out as yet."

A great length of time had elapsed.

Certainly an hour and a half of waiting had passed, and Barrows felt that he must do something and at once.

"I shall die of worriment if I stay here," he muttered. "Perhaps—"

He paused. A thrilling thought had struck him.

It was more than likely that he had been waiting all this while for nothing.

It would have been not by any means a difficult matter for the foe to have slipped out by a rear exit, and by this time be far from the spot.

But how was he to determine this fact.

It could only be done by approaching the hut boldly and searching it.

To do this was to incur the risk of a bullet from the outlaws.

This might be only a clever trick of theirs to draw him from his cover.

All these thoughts passed kaleidoscope like through Barrows' brain.

He was satisfied that the foe could be but a half dozen in number.

If he could have kept up a desultory battle with them in his present position he believed that he could have picked off a number of them, and thus reducing their numbers eventually bring the fight to a focus with a fair chance of winning.

But the outlook now was by no means so prepossessing.

It was more than likely that he would have great difficulty in cutting off the abductors before they should join the main body of the cowboys.

In this case it would be more difficult to rescue Bessie Rodman.

Barrows now realized his folly in starting out single handed to pursue the abductors.

If he had now several of his companions with him the hut could have been surrounded and there would have been little trouble in making the rescue.

But time was speeding and something had got to be done at once.

Barrows proceeded to act.

He began to cautiously climb up the mountain side keeping in the cover of rocks and trees.

He was very careful not to expose himself to a shot and in this way had soon reached a point from which he believed he could see the rear end of the cabin.

There it stood lonely and silent.

Was it really deserted or were the foe yet within its walls?"

To all appearances it was deserted.

Barrows hesitated a moment and then took the desperate chance.

He emerged boldly from the woods and approached the cabin.

On he went until within ten yards of the door. Yet there was no sign of life.

The next moment he reached the door.

It yielded to his touch and he entered. The place was deserted.

There were evidences that the foe had been there.

Also Barrows made a thrilling discovery. In the soft dirt of the floor he discovered the footprints of Bessie Rodman.

At least it was safe to presume that they were hers, for there was no likelihood that the region for many miles held another of her gentle sex.

Feverishly Barrows examined the trail and followed it out through a rear door of the cabin.

It led into a narrow gulch and up the mountain.

It was quickly lost in the gravelly soil, but Barrows kept on up the mountain.

He now censured himself for not having acted with greater dispatch.

He believed that had he changed his position earlier he would

have become aware sooner of the change of base of the abductors.

This was undoubtedly true, but on the other hand there had been the great risk of exposure to a bullet.

On the whole the lover felt that he had reason to be grateful for his success in so promptly striking the trail of the foe.

He kept on up the mountain with increasing hopes.

If he could once more overtake the abductors under more favorable circumstances he believed that he could effect the rescue of Bessie Rodman.

He still kept on up the mountain.

Then he suddenly halted at a point from which he had a good view of the country about.

He looked down upon a level plain below some distance which was fringed with trees.

In the verge of this timber line Barrows saw a number of moving figures.

He was satisfied that they were the party of abductors and he even fancied he could see the form of Bessie Rodman.

With deadly resolution Barrows started in pursuit.

Down the mountain he went and soon reached the level of the plain.

The party was now out of sight but Barrows believed that he could overtake them.

So he set out at a rapid pace along the verge of the timber. Exciting experiences were in store for him.

CHAPTER XIX.

FRANK'S NARROW ESCAPE.

FRANK READE, JR., had decided to go at once in quest of the abductors of Bessie Rodman.

He called Pomp and Barney aboard the Steam Man, and the start was made.

Of course they were not aware that Barrows had started out upon the same mission.

It was decided to proceed up the Death Gulch, for Frank fancied that the abductors had likely struck out over the mountain range.

The gulch could be traversed by the Steam Man easily, and Frank deemed it safer to travel that way.

Up the gulch the Steam Man went.

For some distance all went well, and no incident worthy of note occurred.

But finally a branch of the canyon was reached, and here a halt was called.

This extended to the southward.

Frank knew that the outlaws could not have crossed this without a wide detour.

The ground was high above the walls of the canyon, and the young inventor decided upon a different move.

The Steam Man proceeded up this canyon for some ways.

Then Frank called a halt.

"We will stop here," he said.

"Shure, Misther Frank," cried Barney, "phwat iver do yez want to do that fer? It's a clear course ahead."

"I am well aware of that, Barney," replied Frank, "but I am not sure that we are following the right course."

"Indade, sor."

"I mean to climb to the top of the canyon wall here and take a look off at the country."

"Shure enough, sor!"

"Golly, Marse Frank, amn't youse gwine to let dis chile go wif yo'?"

"Begorra, not a bit av it!" cried Barney. "Shure, yez may stay wif the Steam Man, naygur."

"Yo' g'long, I'ish! I reckon Marse Frank take me dis time."

Frank smiled and said:

"Yes, it is no more than fair, Pomp, for you to go this time. You will remain with the Man, Barney."

Barney did not demur, for he knew that it would be of no use.

But he had been with Frank on excursions many times, and perhaps felt that it was no more than fair that Pomp should have this chance.

No time was lost.

Armed with rifles and revolvers, the two explorers left the Steam Man.

A good path up the canyon wall was selected, and after an arduous climb they finally reached the summit.

From here a mighty view of the country about was obtained.

As far as the eye could reach to the eastward was the level expanse of plain.

In the other direction mountain peaks rose above them to a great altitude.

Frank had a powerful glass, and with this proceeded to scrutinize the country below.

But he could see nothing of the cowboys, nor was he able to tell in what direction Clark's men had gone.

He desisted at once what he believed to be smoke ascending from behind distant trees, and fancied that this might be from the guns of the military and the cowboys.

But of this he was not sufficiently positive to venture to go thither.

"Well, Pomp!" he said dubiously, as he closed the glass, "I don't see that we can locate the abductors of Bessie Rodman from here. I declare I am befogged."

"Golly, Marse Frank," cried Pomp, with dilated eyeballs, "what eber yo' tink we bettah do now?"

"I declare I don't know."

"Ise done reckon dat de cowboys hab gone back to dat ranch ob dere's wid dat lily gal."

Frank gave a start.

It had not before occurred to him that the abductors might have taken their captive to Ranch V.

Indeed, so strongly did he become impressed with the possibility that he was half inclined to start at once for the ranch.

But sober second thought impelled him first to think of searching the hills.

If she could not be found in them then it would be time enough to think of paying Ranch V a visit.

An incident happened at the moment also that for a time prevented any move of the sort.

Pomp had begun to scale a small peak near.

"P'raps I kin get a bettah look from up yere, Marse Frank!" cried the darky. "Jes' de same, I tries it fo' yo'."

"All right, Pomp," replied Frank. "Tell me if you see anything of importance and I will come up."

"A right, sah."

Pomp went up the peak.

He reached the top and began to look over the country, when suddenly he beheld a thrilling scene below.

Frank had gone to the edge of the canyon to look over and see what the Steam Man was about.

As he leaned over the edge of the deep gorge he did not see a giant form suddenly glide from a crevice in the cliff behind him.

It was, in reality, an enormous black bear.

The brute had caught sight of Frank, and being in an ugly mood, started for him.

The bear advanced so quickly and noiselessly that Frank was all unaware of his presence until the brute was upon him.

Then a terrific blow from the bear's paw sent him reeling over the edge of the cliff.

Over the edge went the young inventor, and a yell of horror and pain went up from Pomp's lips.

"Golly sakes, Marse Frank, hab yo' fallen down to yo' death?" cried the affrighted darky, as he came tumbling down the peak like a madman.

Frank had certainly gone over the edge.

The bear stood upon the verge of the precipice growling savagely. Pomp was in a frenzy of fear and horror. He could not see what was to prevent his beloved master from going down to his death.

He would have rushed to the spot where Frank had stood but the bear was there.

At this moment the stillness of the gorge was broken by the shrill whistle of the Steam Man.

This was enough for Pomp.

In a moment he raised his rifle and fired at the bear.

Ordinarily, he would have been compelled to fire many times, but as chance had it, this single shot proved fatal.

It struck the bear full in the eye and went crashing through his brain.

The big brute went over the edge of the precipice and crashing down into the gorge.

Pomp heard plainly the crash of the bear's body as it struck the bottom of the pass.

Then he rushed to the edge and looked over.

He saw the bottom of the gorge plainly enough. There lay the inanimate form of the bear.

The Steam Man stood not twenty yards distant from this spot, and Pomp saw Barney far below, yelling and waving his hands.

The darky answered, and then caught sight of something which thrilled him.

Clinging to a jutting bit of rock in the canyon wall he saw Frank Reade, Jr., hanging between heaven and earth.

The astonished darky fell upon his stomach and leaned far over the edge of the gorge.

"Golly, Marse Frank!" he cried, excitedly, "I done fought yo' was a-goner fo' suah. Hab yo' got a strong hold dar?"

"Pomp!" cried Frank, in sharp tones, "I am nearly exhausted. I fear I shall lose my hold here soon."

"Fo' Hebben's sake," cried the affrighted darky, "don' yo' say dat, Marse Frank. If yo' fell down to de cornah ob dat gorge yo' would be killed fo' suah. Yo' jes' wait an' dis chile will help yo'."

"You'll have to hurry, Pomp!" cried Frank, in an exhausted manner.

"Yo' kin jest bet I will."

"Whurroo, there naygur!" cried Barney from below. "Wud yez be after letting down a rope to Misther Frank. Quick, now, or yez won't have the time."

Pomp acted quickly.

The darky carried constantly a lariat at his waste.

This he lowered over the edge and down to the point where Frank was hanging suspended between earth and sky.

Pomp had acted with great dispatch, but even as the rope went over the edge, a warning cry went up from Barney below.

"My God! I am falling!" cried Frank, with horror.

His hands were slipping over the edge of the jutting bit of rock to which he clung.

The next moment they released their grip entirely and down he went.

But, as good fortune had it, just below him was a stump growing out of the cliff.

Against this he fell and his clothing caught upon a jagged root.

It held him firmly, and there he hung safe and secure.

A cry of joy went up from Pomp and Barney.

"Jes' yo' hang right on, Marse Frank!" cried the darky, earnestly. "Don' yo' gib way at all, an' dis chile he done pull you up a right."

"All right, Pomp," cried Frank, regaining his coolness so habitual to him. "I think I am safe here."

"Praise de Lor' fo' dat!" cried the elated darky. "Jes' hol' right on."

Down went the lariat.

In a moment more it settled over Frank's shoulders.

As Pomp drew on it, Frank made it secure under his arms.

Then the darky began to draw up on the rope. It required some exertion of strength, but in a few moments Frank cleared the edge.

But at this moment a loud shout came up from the gorge below.

It was Barney's voice raised in a note of alarm.

"My soul!" cried Frank, excitedly. "What can have happened?"

Both rushed to the edge of the canyon and looked over.

CHAPTER XX.

THE FLOOD—CORNERING THE FOE.

It was a thrilling sight which met their gaze. They saw Barney leaping up and down and gesticulating wildly. "What is the matter?" cried Frank. But before the words had fairly left his lips he saw what was the trouble. Along the bottom of the gorge a thin stream of water was flowing. Every moment it was increasing. "Bejabers, Mистер Frank, is there much more wather comin'?" cried Barney. "Shure if so, I'm thinkin' we'd better be after gettin' out of here." "Right?" cried the young inventor, excitedly, "but where can it come from?" He ran to an eminence near and from which a good view of the upper canyon could be had. And there Frank beheld a thrilling sight. At the upper end of the canyon was a large lake made by an accumulation of logs and debris across the source of the canyon. Here half a score of men with axes and iron bars were engaged in breaking the dam so as to let the whole lake down into the gorge. It would mean a flood of awful sort if they succeeded. It would surely sweep the canyon clear, and the position of Barney was a most perilous one. Frank saw this with horror. He knew at once that the workmen were of the cowboy gang. Already the dam could be seen to be giving way. In a very few moments the flood must come. No time must be lost. Into the canyon the water would plunge and engulf everything in their path. Frank waited no longer. He sprang to the edge of the canyon and shouted to Barney: "Go, for your life, Barney. Run for the plain. We will take care of ourselves." "All right, sar!" Barney sprang into the cage and away went the Steam Man with a shriek down the canyon. The next moment a terrible roar came from the headwaters of the gorge, and then Frank and Pomp saw the mighty flood coming. Like a race horse it surged down through the canyon. It was now a mad race between the Steam Man and the flood. It was a long way to the plain below, and Frank groaned with horror as he realized the uncertainty of the Steam Man's reaching it. There were places where the Steam Man must go slowly, and this would mean overtaking by the flood. But Barney, with his shrewd Irish wit, had realized this. He knew that it would be impossible for him to reach the plain before the flood. So he decided upon a wise move. He reached the junction of this canyon with the other. There was not a moment to spare. Looking back, he could see the water coming in mountainous billows. The Steam Man had to be checked a trifle in order to turn into the other canyon. But Barney made the turn all safely, and the Steam Man shot up the canyon far enough to avoid the back current of the flood. "Bejabers, I'm in luck this toime!" cried the Celt, jubilantly, as he opened the whistle valve. The note of safety was heard by Frank and Pomp with a sensation of great relief and joy. They understood at once the move made by Barney. "That was a capital thought of Barney's," cried Frank. "It is lucky that he did not keep on the plains. He would have been overtaken." "I jes' reckon dat am a fac'!" cried Pomp. "Well, I fink we'd bettah get back to de Steam Man as quick as eber we can." "You are right, Pomp," declared Frank. "Our position here will be hardly a safe one now." "Youse right, sah." The flood in the canyon was now rapidly subsiding. The great lake had quickly emptied itself into the canyon. In a short while the bed of the canyon was once more dry. Barney then ran the Steam Man back into the main canyon, and Frank and Pomp hailed him. "You did well, Barney!" cried the young inventor, joyfully. "You made the best possible move." "Begorra, I knew well enough that I had to git out of the way of the wathers, sor," replied Barney. "But shure, are yez comin' down soon?" "We are comin' right down," replied Frank. Down the canyon wall they scrambled and safely reached the gorge. Then they greeted Barney with joy and clambered aboard. "Shure, phwativer will yez do now, Mистер Frank?" cried Barney, eagerly. "I shall follow the canyon up and try to dislodge the outlaws," replied Frank. "Very good, sir!" cried Barney, with readiness. "We'll go ahead thinf'!" "Yes." Barney took the reins and the Steam Man went on up the gorge. In a short while they had reached the dam which had held back the lake. Here a course was found directly out upon a vast plain. Frank was about to direct the man's course thither when an incident occurred to for a moment delay them. A loud and harsh voice came from the cliff above. "Hello, down there!" The speaker could not be seen. The Steam Man came to a halt. "Well!" cried Frank.

"Ye're Frank Reade, Jr., eh?" "That is my name." "Wall, I'm Artemas Cliff. I give ye fair warnin' to surrender. Ye're in a death trap." "Thank you for informing us," retorted Frank, "but I don't believe I'll surrender yet." "Ye won't then?" "No." "Then take the consequences." "I can do that." A savage curse came down upon the air. Then the crack of rifles was heard and bullets pattered against the steel netting. Of course no harm was done, and Frank only smiled grimly. He sent the Steam Man up the gorge, and in a few moments came out upon the plain, which was deep among the hills and hemmed in with a line of timber. The cowboys continued to pour volley after volley into the Steam Man. Frank waited until he had reached a favorable position. Then he stopped the Steam Man, and picking up his rifle, said: "Come, boys! let's give them as good as they send." Of course Pomp and Barney were ready and eager. A destructive fire was sent into the covert of the cowboys. In a few moments it grew so hot that they could not remain there, and had to get out. With baffled yells they retreated deeper into the hills. "Whurroo!" yelled Barney jubilantly. "Shure it's aisy enough to whip such omadhouns as they be!" "Golly! don' yo' be too suah, I'ish," remonstrated Pomp. "What do yez know about it, naygur?" "Suah, I know jes' as much as yo' does, I'ish." "G'long! Yez are a big stuff." "I amn't so big a wan as yo' am." "Say that agin, an' I'll break the face av yez." "Huh! Yo' can't do it." The two rogues would have had a friendly set-to then and there, but Frank interposed. "None of that," he cried, sternly; "there is serious work before us." This was a quietus upon the two rascals, and they ceased their skylarking. The cowboys had been driven back, but now a thrilling sound came from the distant hills. It was the heavy volleying of many rifles. There could be but one explanation. Evidently the cavalry had come into conflict with the cowboys. A good sized battle was in progress. An impulse seized Frank. He realized that he ought to join that conflict. There was no doubt but that the Steam Man could do much to aid the cavalry. So he started the Man across the plain, looking for an opening into the hills in the direction of the firing. This it, however, seemed not easy to find. But as the Man was skirting the line of timber, a thrilling scene was suddenly brought to view. In a small clearing in the verge of the timber two men were striving to down one. It was a terrific and deadly struggle which was in progress. The single fighter was holding his own well. Near by, with arms tied behind her, was a young girl. It was Bessie Rodman. "My God!" cried Frank. "Quick, for your life, boys! We must put an end to that struggle. Don't you see it is young Barrows, and he is fighting to rescue the girl." "Golly, dat am a fac'!" cried Pomp, excitedly. "Jes gib me a chance at dem rapsallions." Up to the spot the Steam Man swiftly ran. A cry of wildest joy and hope welled up from Bessie Rodman's lips. Young Barrows also saw that rescue was at hand and made extra exertions to overcome his foes. The cowboys, however, seeing that succor had come tried to break away. As Barrows was too exhausted to restrain them they succeeded and dashed away at full speed. Reaching their ponies they mounted and were out of sight in a twinkling. The next moment Barrows had clasped Bessie in his arms, first cutting her bonds. "Thank Heaven!" he cried. "We are united once more, and this time let us hope never to part." Those aboard the Steam Man pretended to be busy during the affecting meeting. But soon the lovers came to the cage and a general welcome followed. An explanation of all followed, and then plans for the future were quickly decided upon.

CHAPTER XXI.

WHICH IS THE END.

THE sound of firing now came from the hills quite plainly. It was evident that Clark's men were having a hard battle. Barrows detailed his experiences as we have recorded in a previous chapter. Then it was decided at once if possible to join the cavalry. "If I can place Miss Rodman in your charge, Mr. Reade," said young Barrows, gallantly, "I will gladly join the soldiers and aid in the repulse of the foe." "You may do that," replied Frank, readily. "In fact, I think it safer for the lady to remain in the wagon hereafter." "You are very kind." "It is nothing." Accordingly Bessie was given a seat in the wagon. Then Barrows mounted one of the ponies left by the cowboys. "I will see you later," he said lifting his hat to Bessie.

Then he rode away to join the cavalry in their battle. The Steam Man, of course, could not hope to follow so quickly. The fleet pony could go through narrow paths, and of course Barrows reached the scene of action long before the others. But Frank Reade sent the Steam Man along at a good pace. After some search a pass was found, and the Man made its way carefully through, and suddenly came out upon the field of action. The cowboys were strongly entrenched in the hills, and seemed disposed to make a final stand.

Col. Clark's men were making desperate attempts to drive them from their position.

As the Steam Man came dashing up to the spot a great cheer went up from the soldiers.

Frank answered it by pulling the whistle valve of the Man and sending up a sharp note.

The Man could not hope to reach the position of the outlaws, for the ground was too uneven.

But a position was taken up from where the battle could be easily watched.

Then Col. Clark came up to the wagon. Warm greetings followed, and Frank said:

"Is there anything I could do to help you, colonel?"

"I think not," replied the gallant officer. "I believe we shall drive them out very soon now."

"I hope so."

"If I am not mistaken the day of Cliff and his gang are numbered."

"That is joyful news."

"Yes."

"I hope you will succeed."

"Thank you."

The colonel rode away and the voyagers watched the contest with interest.

One watching the beautiful face of Bessie Rodman could have seen that she was inwardly praying for her lover's safety.

But fortune was with the troops, though they had experienced a hard battle.

The position of the outlaws was a very strong one and almost unassailable.

High walls of rock were there for them to use as a breastwork. It was not easy to dislodge them except at great loss of life.

But Clark was not a man to be defeated.

He urged his men on and slowly but surely drove the foe before him. Frank Reade, Jr., now with Barney and Pomp and Bessie Rodman on board, took the Steam Man out on to the prairie.

For over an hour a kind of desultory conflict was kept up in the hills.

Then Col. Clark suddenly came dashing up to the wagon.

"We have got them dislodged," he cried. "And I think they have struck out for Ranch V. Now if you will show us the way, Mr. Reade, we will try and exterminate this poisonous gang."

"With pleasure!" cried Frank.

He started the Steam Man at once for Ranch V.

Across the prairie the machine ran rapidly, and the cavalry galloped in the rear.

It was in the latter part of the day that all came out upon a rise overlooking the stockade of Ranch V.

But the cowboys had got there in advance and had made ready for an attack.

Col. Clark was a man of immediate resources.

Without hesitation or a moment's delay he threw his men forward on the charge. At almost the first attack the gate was carried and the soldiers entered the yard.

But step by step Artemus Cliff contested the way.

His men by divisions surrendered half a dozen or more at a time. Being thus made prisoners, they were sent to the rear. In this manner the numbers of the cowboy gang were decimated.

Suddenly a thrilling cry went up.

"Fire! Fire!"

The stockade and ranch proper had been fired, and great columns of flame now arose.

The scene was fast becoming a thrilling one. Darkness was coming on, and the rattle of firearms the dark shadows of night partially dispelled by the flames, gave a weird aspect to everything.

Slow but sure was the conquest of Cliff and his gang.

Now he was driven to his last resort, the corner of the stockade nearest the river. Scarce a score of his followers now remained.

It was utterly no use for him to resist longer. The villain saw it but yet kept on fighting doggedly.

"Surrender, or die!" cried the lieutenant who led the squad. "It is your only chance."

The remaining cowboys threw up their hands. But Cliff pitched forward in a heap upon the ground, struck by a pistol ball.

There he was found later under a heap of dead men. He was removed to the camp near and his wounds examined.

Ranch V was a thing of the past.

Not a stick was left standing, and of the cowboy gang fully a hundred had rendered up their final account.

Possibly twenty of the cavalymen had been killed.

It had been quite a severe battle, but Frank Reade, Jr., and his companions could not help but feel overjoyed at the result.

Barney and Pomp had an old time set to over the victory, this time Pomp coming off victorious.

The night was passed quietly. Early the next morning a surgeon came to the Steam Man and called for Frank.

He announced that Cliff was dying, and wanted to make a confession but would make it to nobody else.

Frank hurried to the dying couch of the villain. Cliff's filmy gaze was fixed upon him eagerly, and he said, huskily:

"Reade, I'm done for. I made a good fight but I've lost. The game's up. I might as well make a clean breast of it. Uncle Jim is innocent of Rodman's death. Sid Bowen and Jim Ducey, my trusted pals, killed Rodman and worked the whole game. That's all. I reckon I can die better now."

"You have done a good deed, Artemus Cliff," said Frank, kindly. "And may God forgive you your sins."

But the villain did not answer. Already his eyes were set. The Master had called him. He had cheated the gallows after all.

A grave was dug on the prairie and Frank saw that he was properly buried.

The confession was put in writing and duly witnessed. The mission of the new Steam Man to the far west was ended.

The spirits of all were bright and cheerful, now that the end had come.

The extermination of the Cliff gang was certainly a blessing to that part of the State, and no one regretted the villain's demise.

Preparations were now made for the return home.

Of course, Col. Clark and his command would return to the fort, but Frank now thought of Bessie Rodman.

"By Jupiter!" he muttered, "something must be done for her. Poor girl! she is without a friend in the world now."

Barney and Pomp winked at each other, and Barney cried:

"Bejabbers, Misther Frank, have yez lost yer powers av penetration?"

"I reckon yo' am way off, Marse Frank," rejoined Pomp.

"What are you fellows driving at?" asked Frank, in surprise.

"Why, dat ar' gal, she am got one ob de bes' friends in de worl'. Jes' yo' cast'yo' eye ober dar an' see dat spruce young feller who am walkin' wid her."

Frank did "cast his eye" in the direction indicated, and saw Bessie and young Walter Barrows approaching.

There was a particularly happy light upon the faces of both.

"Pshaw!" muttered Frank. "That young fellow can't marry her yet. She's got to have a home in the meanwhile. Miss Rodman, one moment, please."

The lovers paused, and Frank said brusquely:

"I can understand your position, Bessie, very well, and I know that you need a home. I can only offer to take you to Readestown with me, and my wife will do all in her power—"

"One moment, sir," said Barrows, with burning face. "You are very kind, but let me first explain. I am this lady's natural protector for life."

"What?" gasped Frank.

"Yes, she is my wife."

Pomp and Barney collapsed at the expression upon Frank's face.

"Your wife?" gasped the young inventor. "When were you married?"

"Just now, and the ceremony was performed by the chaplain of the regiment."

Frank thrust forth his right hand, and gave Barrows a grip which made him wince.

"You must pardon my conduct," he cried, "but it was such a surprise. I wish you both worlds of happiness."

Some hours later the new Steam Man was on its way homeward. A week later it was in Omaha, Nebraska, and not long thereafter was at home in Readestown.

The young inventor was received at home with an ovation, and his father, the distinguished Reade Senior, was overjoyed to learn that the evidence had been procured to clear Travers.

As for the latter he came from prison like one coming into a new life and from that time on regarded Frank Reade, Jr. as his greatest earthly benefactor.

The new Steam Man and his wonderful western trip was the talk of the country.

People came from near and far to see the invention and it was not long before the young inventor suddenly found himself involved in another daring project.

The new Steam Man was destined to make another trip, and become involved in adventures even more thrilling than these just recorded, and a full and detailed account of the second trip may be found in

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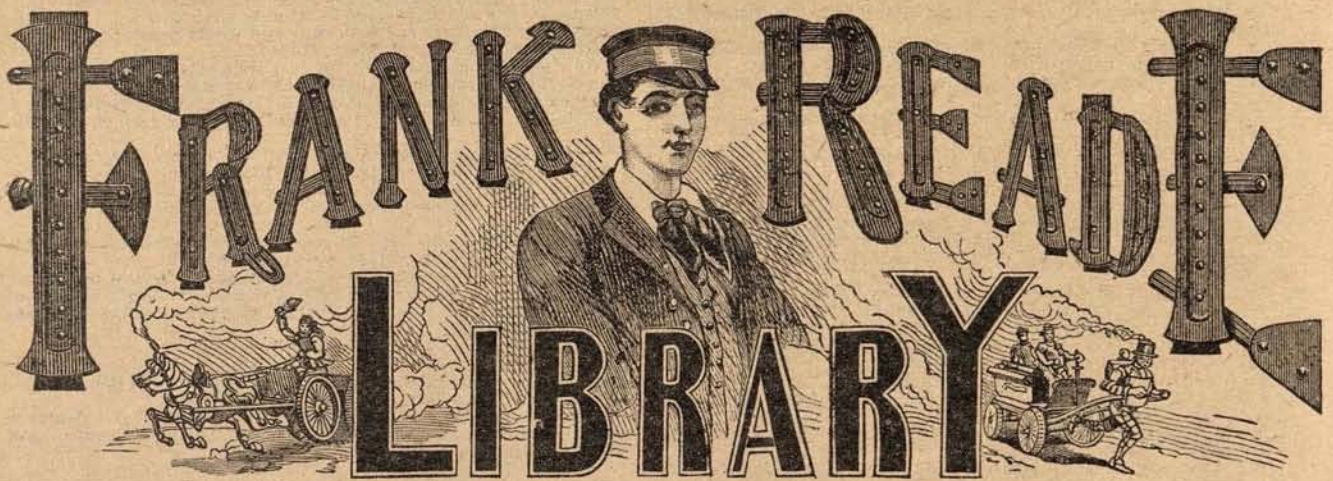
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