

walls offer any better encouragement. Keith lifted himself to the grated window, getting a glimpse of the world without, but finding the iron immovable, the screws solidly imbedded in the outside wood. He dropped to the floor, feeling baffled and discouraged.

"It will have to be the plank back of the bench, Neb," he announced briefly, wiping the perspiration from his face. "Get down there, and work it as loose as you can without making any noise, while I keep my ear to the door and listen for any interruption."

They took turns at this labor, discovering a loose nail which gave an opening purchase at the crack, thus enabling the insertion of a small wooden block, and insuring space for a good finger grip when the right time came. A sleepy Mexican brought in their dinner, and set it down on the bench without a word, but on his return with supper, the marshal accompanied him, and remained while they ate, talking to Keith, and staring at the room. Fortunately, the single window was to the west, the last rays of the sun struck the opposite wall, leaving the space behind the bench in deep shadow. Whatever might be the plans of "Black Bart" and his cronies, Keith was soon convinced they were unknown to Hicks, who had evidently been deceived into thinking that this last arrest had created no excitement.

"That's why we picked yer up so early," he explained, genially. "Bart said if we got to yer afore the boys woke up they'd never hear nuthin' 'bout it, an' so thar wouldn't be no row. He didn't even think thar'd be any need of keepin' a special guard fer night, but I reckon I won't take no such chance as that, an' I'll have a couple o' deputies prowlin' 'round ter back. When Carson does wake up, she's hull."

He left them tobacco and pipes, and went away evidently convinced that he had performed his full duty. The two prisoners, puffing smoke rings into the air, heard the heavy clang of the iron bar falling into place across the door, and sat looking into one another's faces through the deepening twilight. In the mind of both black and white reposed the same thought. The negro was first to break the silence.

"Tears ter me, Massa Jack, like dis yere Bart pusson an mighty anxious ter hab no suspicions raised."

"Anybody but Hicks would see that," acknowledged the other, the rings of smoke circling his head. "But he hasn't any brains. It was pure nerve that got him the job. Well, this is one time that Bart pusson is going to find an empty coop. We'll get out, Neb, just as soon as it gets dark enough. Hicks isn't likely to put on his extra guard for an hour yet, and the 'Red Light' bunch won't be fit for business much before midnight. By that time we'll be in the sand hills, heading south, able to give them a run for their money—we'll have horses, too, if we can find them."

The negro's eyes shone white. "Fo' de Lawd's sake, Massa," he protested, "dat'd sho' be a hangin' job if ebber day cotched us."

Keith laughed, knocking out the ashes from his pipe. "With an hour's start that will be the least of my troubles," he said, quietly.

CHAPTER VI.

The Escape.

It was dark enough for their purpose in half an hour, the only gleam of remaining color being the red glow of the negro's pipe, even the opening in



"Land's Sake, You Doan Mean to Steal Dem Horses?"

the iron grating being blotted from sight. Keith, staring in that direction, failed to perceive any distant glimmer of star, and decided the night must be cloudy, and that time for action had come. Guided by Neb's pipe bowl, he touched the boy on the shoulder.

"Knock out your ashes, and shuffle about lively with your feet, while I pry up the board."

In spite of his slenderness, Keith possessed unusual strength, yet no exertion on his part served to start the loosened plank sufficiently for their purpose. Ripping a strip from the bench he managed to pry the hole somewhat larger, arranging the board itself so as to afford the necessary leverage, but even then his entire weight failed, to either start the spikes, or crack the plank. Some alteration began in the other room, the sound of angry voices and shuffling feet being plainly audible. It was clear to Keith that they must take the chance of a noise, and no better time than this could be chosen.

"Here, Neb, take hold with me, and

bear down—put your whole weight on it, boy."

The two flung themselves upon the end of the bench, leaping up and down so as to add weight to power. Something had to give, either the stout wood of their improvised lever or else the holding of the plank. For an instant it seemed likely to be the former; then, with a shrill screech, the long spikes yielded and the board suddenly gave. With shoulders inserted beneath, the two men heaved it still higher, ramming the bench below so as to leave the opening clear. This was now sufficiently ample for the passage of a man's body, and Keith, lowering himself, discovered the earth to be fully four feet below. The negro instantly joined him, and they began creeping about in the darkness, seeking some way out. A rudely laid foundation of limestone along obstructed their path to the open air.

This had been laid in mortar, but of inferior quality, so that little difficulty was experienced in detaching sufficient to obtain hand hold. Working silently, not knowing what watchers might be already stationed without, they succeeded in loosening enough of the rock to allow them to crawl through, lying breathless in the open. Accustomed as they were to the darkness, they could yet see little. They were upon the opposite side from the town, with no gleam of lights visible, prairie and sky blending together into spectral dimness, with no sound audible but the continued quarrel in the front room of the jail. Keith crept along to the end of the building from where he could perceive the lights of the town twinkling dimly through the intense blackness. Evidently the regular evening saturnalia had not yet begun, although there was already semblance of life about the numerous saloons, and an occasional shout punctured the stillness. A dog howled in the distance, and the pounding of swift hoofs along the trail told of fresh arrivals. An hour later and the single street of Carson City would be alive with humanity, eager for any excitement, ready for any wild orgy, if only once turned loose. That it would be turned loose, and also directed, the man lying on his face in the grass felt fully assured. He smiled grimly, wishing he might behold "Black Bart's" face when he should discover the flight of his intended victims. But there was no time to lose; every moment gained, added to their chance of safety.

"Are those horses tied there by the blacksmith's shop?" he asked, pointing.

The negro stared in the direction indicated, confused by the shadows thrown by the dim lights. "I reckon dey am, Massa Jack; I done make out fo'."

"Then two of them must belong to me, come on, boy."

He ran forward, crouching behind every chance cover, and keeping well back behind the line of shadows. A slight depression in the prairie helped conceal their movements, and neither spoke until they were crouching together beside the wall of the shop. Then Neb, teeth chattering, managed to blurt out:

"Fo' de Lawd's sake, yer don't actually mean ter steal dem hosses?"

Keith glanced about at the other's dim black shadow.

"Sure not; just burrow 'em."

"But dat's a hangin' job in dis yere country, Massa Jack."

"Sure it is if they catch us. But we'd be strung up anyway, and we can't be hung twice. Besides there is a chance for us with the ponies, and none at all without. An hour's start in the saddle, Neb, and this bunch back here will never even find our trail; I pledge you that. Come, boy, stay close with me."

It was the quiet, confident voice of assured command, of one satisfied with his plans, and the obedient negro, breathing hard, never dreamed of opposition; all instinct of slavery held him to the dominion of this white master. Keith leaned forward, staring at the string of deserted ponies tied to the rail. Success depended on his choice, and he could judge very little in that darkness. Men were straggling in along the street to their right, on foot and horseback, and the saloon on the corner was being well patronized. A glow of light streamed forth from its windows, and there was the sound of many voices. But this narrow alley was deserted, and black. The fugitive stepped boldly forward, afraid that otherwise he might startle the ponies and thus create an alarm. Guided by a horseman's instinct he swiftly ran his hands over the animals and made quick selection.

"Here, Neb, take this fellow; lead him quietly down the bank," and he thrust the loosened rein into the black's hand.

An instant later he had chosen his own mount, and was silently moving in the same direction, although the night there was so black that the obedient negro had already entirely vanished. The slope of the land not only helped cover their movements, but also rendered it easy for them to find one another. Fully a hundred yards westward they met where a gully led directly down toward the river. There was no longer need for remaining on foot, as they were a sufficient distance away from the little town to feel no fear of being discovered, unless by some drunken stranger. At Keith's command the negro climbed into his saddle. Both ponies were reggie, but not vicious, and after a plunge or two to test their new masters, came easily under control. Keith led the way, moving straight down the gully, which gradually deepened, burying them in its black heart, until it finally debouched onto the river sands. The riotous noises of the drunken town died slowly away behind, the night silent and dark. The two riders could

scarcely distinguish one another as they drew rein at the edge of the water. To the southward there glimmered a cluster of lights, marking the position of the camp of regulars. Keith drove his horse deeper into the stream and headed northward, the negro following like a shadow.

There was a ford directly opposite the cantonment, and another, more dangerous, and known to only a few, three miles farther up stream. Keeping well within the water's edge, so as to thus completely obscure their trail, yet not daring to venture deep for fear of striking quicksand, the plainsman set his pony straggling forward, until the dim outline of the bank at his right rendered him confident that they had attained the proper point for crossing. He had been that way only once before, and realized the danger of attempting passage in such darkness, but urgent need drove him forward.

"Follow me just as close as you can, boy," he said sternly, "and keep both your feet out of the stirrups. If your horse goes down hang to his tail, and let him swim out."

There was little enough to guide by, merely a single faint star peering out from a rift of the clouds, but Keith's remembrance was that the ford led straight out to the center of the stream, and then veered slightly toward the right. He knew the sand ridge was only used by horsemen, not being wide enough for the safe passage



"Do You See That Straight Ahead of You?"

age of wagons, but the depth of the water on either side was entirely problematical. He was taking a big chance, yet dare not wait for daylight. Summoning all his nerve and alertness, he urged his horse slowly forward, the intelligent animal seeming to comprehend the situation, and feeling carefully for footing. The actions of the animal gave the rider greater confidence, and he loosened his grip on the rein, leaving the pony's instinct to control. The latter fairly crept forward, testing the sand before resting any weight upon the hoof, the negro's mount following closely. The water was unusually high, and as they advanced it bore down against them in considerable volume; then, as they veered to the right, they were compelled to push directly against its weight in struggling toward shore. The men could see nothing but the solid sheet of water rushing down toward them from out the black void, and then vanishing below. Once Keith's horse half fell, plunging nose under, yet gaining foothold again before the rider had deserted his saddle. A dim darkness ahead already revealed the nearness of the southern bank, when Neb's pony went down suddenly, swept fairly off its legs by some force eddy in the stream. Keith heard the negro's guttural cry, and caught a glimpse of him as the two were sent whirling down. The coiled rope of the lariat, grasped in his right hand, was hurled forth like a shot, but came back empty. Not another sound reached him; his own horse went steadily on, feeling his way, until he was nose against the bank, with water merely rippling about his ankles. Keith driving feet again into the stirrups headed his horse down stream, wading close in toward the shore, leaning forward over the pommel striving to see through the gloom.

He had no doubt about Neb's pony making land, unless struck by some driftwood, or borne to the center of the stream by the shifting force of the current. But if Neb had failed to retain his grip he might have been sucked under by the surge of waters. A hundred yards below he found them, dripping and weak from the struggle, yet otherwise unharmed. There were no words spoken, but the black and white hands clasped silently, and then Neb crept back into the saddle, shivering in his wet clothes as the cool night wind swept against him. Keeping close in toward shore, yet far enough out so that the water would hide their trail, the fugitives toiled steadily up stream, guided only by the black outline of the low bank upon their left.

CHAPTER VII.

In the Sand Desert.

Suddenly Keith halted, bringing his pony's head sharply about, so that the two faced one another. The wind was rising, hurrying clouds of sand into their eyes, and the plainsman held one hand before his face. "There's no need of keeping up a water trail any longer," he said quietly. "By all the signs we're in for a sand storm by daylight, and that will cover our tracks so the devil himself couldn't follow them. Got a water bag on your saddle."

"I reckon I do an one, sah."

Keith felt of the object Neb held forth

"Yes, and a big one, too; fill it and strap it on tight; we've got a long, dry ride ahead."

"Whar yo' propose goin', Massa Jack?"

"To the 'Bar X' on the Canadian. I've worked with that outfit. They'll give us whatever we need, and ask no questions; I don't know of anything in between. It's going to be a hard ride, boy, and mighty little to eat except what I saved from supper."

"How far am it to dis yere 'Bar X'?"

"A hundred and fifty miles as the crow flies, and sand all the way, except for the valley of Salt Fork. Come on now, and keep close, for it's easy to get lost in these sand hills."

Keith had ridden that hundred and fifty miles of sandy desolation before, but had never been called upon to make such a journey as this proved to be. He knew there was little to fear from human enemies, for they were riding far enough east of the Santa Fe trail to be out of the path of raiding parties, while this desert country was shunned by Indian hunters. It consisted of sand hills after sand hill, a drear waterless waste, where nothing grew, and mid the dread sameness of which a traveler could only find passage by the guidance of stars at night or the blazing sun by day. To the eye mile after mile appeared exactly alike, with nothing whatever to distinguish either distance or direction—the same drifting ridges of sand stretching forth in every direction, no summit higher than another, no semblance of green shrubbery, or silver sheen of running water anywhere to break the dull monotony—a vast sandy plain, devoid of life, extending to the horizon, overhung by a barren sky.

They had covered ten miles of it by daybreak, their ponies traveling heavily, fetlock deep, but could advance no further. With the first tint of rose in the east the brooding storm burst upon them in wild desert fury, the force wind buffeting them back, lashing their faces with sharp grit until they were unable to bear the pain. The flying sand smote them in clouds, driven with the speed of bullets. In vain they lay flat, urging their ponies forward; the beasts, maddened and blinded by the merciless lashing of the sand, refused to face the storm. Keith, all sense of direction long since lost, rolled wearily from the saddle, burrowed under the partial shelter of a sand dune, and called upon Neb to follow him. With their hands and feet they made a slight wind-break, dragging the struggling ponies into its protection, and burrowed themselves there, the clouds of sand skurrying over them so thick as to obscure the sky, and rapidly burying them altogether as though in a grave. Within an hour they were compelled to dig themselves out, yet it proved partial escape from the pitiless lashing. The wind howled like unloosed demons, and the air grew cold, adding to the sting of the grit, when some sudden eddy hurled it into their hiding place. To endeavor further travel would mean certain death, for no one could have guided a course for a hundred feet through the tempest, which seemed to suck the very breath away. To the fugitives came this comfort—if they could not advance, then no one else could follow, and the storm was completely blotting out their trail.

It was three o'clock before it died sufficiently down for them to venture out. Even then the air remained full of sand, while constantly shifting ridges made travel difficult. Only grim necessity—the suffering of the ponies for water, and their own need for soon reaching the habitation of man and acquiring food—drove them to the early venture. They must attain the valley of the Salt Fork that night, or else perish in the desert—there remained no other choice. Tying neckerchiefs over their horses' eyes, and lying flat themselves, they succeeded in pressing slowly forward, winding in and out among the shifting dunes, with only the wind to guide them. It was an awful trail, the hoofs sinking deep in drifting sand, the struggling ponies becoming so exhausted that their riders finally dismounted, and staggered forward on foot, leading them stumbling blindly after. Once the negro's horse dropped, and had to be lashed to its feet again; once Keith's pony stumbled and fell on the sand, and he would have died there, lacking sufficient strength to lift the dead weight, but for Neb's assistance. As it was he went staggering blindly forward, bruised, and faint from hunger and fatigue. Neither man spoke; they had no breath or energy left to waste; every ounce of strength needed to be conserved for the battle against nature. They were fighting for life, fighting grimly, almost hopelessly, and alone.

About them night finally closed in, black and starless, yet fortunately with a gradual dying away of the storm. For an hour just they had been struggling on, doubting their direction, wondering daily if they were not lost and merely drifting about in a circle. They had debated this sorely once, the ponies standing dejectedly, tails to the storm, Neb arguing that the wind still blew from the south, and Keith contending it had shifted into the westward. The white man won his way, and they staggered on uncertain, the negro grasping the first pony's tail to keep from being separated from his companion. Some instinct of the plains must have guided them, for at last they dragged themselves out from the desert, the crunching sand under foot changing into rock, and then to short brittle grass, at which the ponies nibbled eagerly. The slope led gradually downward, the animals seeking water, and

in their saddles, the riders let them go, and they never stopped until belly deep in the stream, their noses buried. The men slithered in their saddles, until, at last satisfied, the ponies consented to be forced back up the bank, where they nibbled at the short tufts of herbage, but in a manner expressive of weariness. Keith flung himself on the ground, every muscle of his body aching, his exposed flesh still smarting from the hail of sand through which they had passed.

He had not the slightest conception as to where they were, except he knew this must be the Salt Fork. Utterly confused by the maze of shifting dunes, through whose intricacies they had somehow found passage, the blackness of the night yielded no clue as to their point of emergence. The volume of water in the stream alone suggested that in their wanderings they must have drifted to the eastward, and come out much lower down than had been originally intended. If so, then they might be almost directly south of Carson City, and in a section with which he was totally unacquainted. One thing was, however, certain—they would be compelled to wait for daylight to ascertain the truth, and decide upon their future movements. There was another barren, sandy stretch of desolation lying between this isolated valley and that of the Canadian, and their horses would never stand to be pushed forward without both rest and food. As to themselves—they had eaten their last crumb long since, but this was not the first time both had known starvation.

Keith arose reluctantly, and removed the saddles from the animals, hobbling them so they could graze at will. Neb was propped up beneath an out-cropping of the bank, which partly protected him from the wind, a mere hulk of a shadow. Keith could not tell whether he slept or not, but made no effort to disturb him. A moment he stared vacantly about into the black silence, and then lay down, pillow his head upon a saddle. He found it impossible to sleep, the chill of the wind causing him to turn and twist, in vain search after comfort, while unappetized hunger gnawed incessantly. His eyes ranged about over the dull gloom of the skies until they fell again to the earth level, and then he suddenly sat up, half believing himself in a dream—down the stream, how far away he could not judge, there gleamed a steady, yellowish light. It was no flicker of a camp fire, yet remained stationary. Surely no star could be so low and large; nor did he recall any with that peculiarity of color. If such a miracle was possible in the heart of that sandy desert he would have sworn it was a lamp shining through a window. But he had never heard of any settler on the Salt Fork, and almost laughed at the thought, believing for the instant his brain played him some elfish trick. Yet that light was no illusion; he rubbed his eyes, only to see it more clearly, convinced now of its reality. He strode hastily across, and shook Neb into semi-consciousness, dragging him bodily up the bank and pointing down the stream.

"Do you see that?" he inquired anxiously. "There, straight ahead of you?"

The negro stared, shaking with cold, and scarcely able to stand alone.

"Maybe it am de moon, Massa Jack," he muttered, thickly, "or a goblin's lantern. Lawd, I don't jest like de looks ob dat ting."

"Well, I do," and Keith laughed unseeingly at the negro's fears. "All I wanted to know was if you saw what I saw. That's a lamp shining through a window, Neb. What in heaven's name it can be doing here I am unable to guess, but I'm going to find out. It means shelter and food, boy, even if we have to fight for it. Come on, the horses are safe, and we'll discover what is behind that light yonder."

CHAPTER VIII.

The Wilderness Cabin.

The light was considerably farther away than they had at first supposed, and as they advanced steadily toward it, the nature of the ground rapidly changed, becoming irregular, and littered with low growing shrubs. In the darkness they stumbled over outcroppings of rock, and after a fall or two, were compelled to move forward with extreme caution. But the mysterious yellow glow continually beckoned, and with new hope animating the hearts of both men, they staggered on, nerving themselves to the effort, and following closely along the bank of the stream.

At last they arrived where they could perceive dimly something of the nature of this unexpected desert oasis. The light shone forth, piercing the night, through the uncurtained window of a log cabin, which would otherwise have been completely concealed from view by a group of low growing cottonwoods. This was all the black, enshrouding night revealed, and even this was merely made apparent by the yellow illumination of the window. The cabin stood upon an island, a strip of sand, partially covered by water, separating it from the north shore on which they stood. There was no sign of life about the hut, other than the burning lamp, but that alone was sufficient evidence of occupancy. In spite of hunger, and urgent need, Keith hesitated, uncertain as to what they might be called upon to face. Who could be lying in this out-of-the-way spot, in the heart of this inhospitable desert? It would be no cattle out-post surely, for there was no surrounding grazing land, while surely no professional hunter would choose such a barren spot for headquarters. Either a hermit, anxious to escape all intercourse with humanity, or some outlaw

select so isolated a place in which to live. To them it would be ideal. Away from all trails, where not even widely roving cattlemen would penetrate, in midst of a desert avoided by Indians because of lack of game—a man might hide here year after year without danger of discovery. Yet such a one would not be likely to welcome their coming, and they were without arms. But Keith was not a man to hesitate long because of possible danger, and he stepped down into the shallow water.

"Come on, Neb," he commanded, "and we'll find out who lives here."

The window faced the west, and he came up the low bank to where the door fronted the north in intense darkness. Under the shadow of the cottonwoods he could see nothing, groping his way, with hands extended. His foot struck a flat stone, and he plunged forward, striking the unlighted door so heavily as to swing it open, and fell partially forward into the room. As he struggled to his knees, Neb's black face peering past him into the lighted interior, he seemed to perceive in one swift, comprehensive glance, every revealed detail. A lamp burned on a rudely constructed set of drawers near the window, and a wood fire blazed redly in a stone fireplace opposite, the yellow and red lights blending in a peculiar glow of color. Under this radiance were revealed the rough log walls plastered with yellow clay, and hung about with the skins of wild animals, a roughly made table, bare except for a book lying upon it, and a few ordinary appearing boxes, evidently utilized as seats, together with a barrel cut so as to make a comfortable chair. In the back wall was a door, partially open, apparently leading into a second room. That was all, except the woman.

Keith must have perceived all these in that first hurried glance, for they were ever after closely associated together in his mind, yet at the moment he possessed no clear thought of anything except her. She stood directly behind the table, where she must have sprung hastily at the first sound of their approach, clutching at the rude mantle above the fireplace, and staring toward him, her face white, her breath coming in sobs. At first he thought the vision a dream, a delirium born from his long struggle; he could not conceive the possibility of such a presence in this lonely place, and staggering to his feet, gazed wildly, dumbly at the slender, gray clad figure, the almost girlish face under the shadowing dark hair, expecting the marvellous vision to vanish. Surely this could not be real! A woman, and such a woman as this here, and alone, of all places! He staggered from weakness, almost terror, and grasped the table to hold himself erect. The rising wind came swirling in through the open door, causing the fire to send forth spirals of smoke, and he turned, dragging the dazed negro within, and snapping the latch behind him. When he glanced around again he fully believed the vision confronting him would have vanished. But no! there she yet remained, those wide-open, frightened brown eyes, with long lashes half hiding their depths, looking directly into his own; only now she had slightly changed her posture, leaning toward him across the table. Like a flash he comprehended that this was reality—flesh and blood—and, with the swift instinct of a gentleman, his numbed, nervous fingers jerked off his hat, and he bowed bareheaded before her.

"Pardon me," he said, finding his voice with difficulty. "I fell over the step, but—but I didn't expect to find a woman here."

He heard her quick breathing, marked a slight change in the expression of the dark eyes, and caught the glitter of the firelight on a revolver in her lowered hand.

"What did you expect to find?"

"I hardly knew," he explained lamely; "we stumbled on this hut by accident. I didn't know there was a cabin in all this valley."

"Then you are not here for any purpose to meet with any one?"

"No; we were lost, and had gone into camp up above, when we discovered your light."

"Where do you come from?"

Keith hesitated just an instant, yet falsehood was never easy for him, and he saw no occasion for any deceit now.

"Carson City."

"What brought you here?"

"We started for the 'Bar X' ranch down below, on the Canadian; got caught in a sand-storm, and then just drifted. I do not know within twenty miles of where we are."

She drew a deep breath of uncalculated relief.

"Are you alone?"

"The negro and I—yes; and you haven't the slightest reason to be afraid of us—we're square." yess

She looked at him searchingly, hunting something in Keith's clean-cut features, seemed to bring reassurance, evidence in the man.

"I am not afraid," she answers, turning toward him around the short table. "Only it is so lonely here, and you startled me, hurting in without warning. But you look all-right, and I am going to believe your story. What is your name?"

"Keith—Jack Keith."

"A cowman?"

"A little of everything, I reckon," a touch of returning bitterness in the tone. "A plainsman, who has punched cattle, but my last job was government scout."

"You look as though you might be more than that," she said slowly.

(To be continued next week.)