

THE GOLDEN CAVES

By CHARLES B. LEWIS, M. QUAD.

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[CONTINUED.]

CHAPTER V.

Let us follow Joe as he leaves the rocky breastworks and creeps forward in the darkness.

The Indian never leaves his dead in the hands of an enemy if it can be avoided. It is not chivalry which induces him to peril his life to remove a dead body, but superstition. As soon as night fell preparations were made to secure the dead scattered on the slope. Half of the bodies had been removed when Joe made his start.

There was but one chance of his working through the lines, and he was taking it. Before he had crept twenty feet he found himself beside the body of a warrior, as he hoped and expected to. He seized it by the arm and began pulling it toward the gully. When half the distance had been accomplished he was joined by a warrior who came up from behind and seized the other arm and said:

"I thought it was my brother, but he must be farther up."

Joe uttered a grunt in reply, and the two dragged the body to the brink of the gully. There other hands received it, and as it was lifted down to be borne away for burial Joe passed along with the three or four warriors in charge. No one seemed to give him particular notice. There were only a few Indians in the gully, the main force having withdrawn temporarily far up to the north.

As Joe followed the body down the gully he saw several Indians coming up to help remove the dead, but he had not gone over two hundred feet when a break in the right bank offered him an opportunity to leave the big ditch. He scrambled out at once and dropped to his hands and knees and crawled away in the darkness.

He had passed the gully, which had been considered the great point of danger, and now to get the lay of the ground about him and seek to discover if there was another circle of Indians.

Forward as silently as a rabbit he ascended a ridge from which he could make observations. "The Indians were carrying off their dead—a portion of them—while the others had built fires behind another ridge and were cooking their meat. They seemed assured that the white men would make no move to assume the offensive, and the repulse had evidently demoralized them for the time being.

The way to the north and the west was unobstructed so far as the scout could determine in the darkness, and after a bit he moved forward, having no other object in view than to cover the twenty miles between him and the forks of the Cheyenne as soon as possible. He was carefully picking his way to the northwest, neglecting no precaution until he should be certain that he was beyond the lines, when he suddenly came upon a dozen or more Indian ponies bunched in a hollow where the dampness had brought forth a growth of sweet grass. Two or three were hobbled, but the rest were free, and after creeping clear around the circle Joe left to find a guard. If one had been left he had temporarily abandoned his post.

The Indian's horse and dog are like the Indian himself. They hate the white man. Although Joe's disguise had carried him through the Indians his scent betrayed him to the horses at once, and as he crept nearer, those which were unfettered moved away. The scout knew the characteristics of the animals, and he lost no time. From a heap of saddles, blankets and lariats he seized a rawhide rope and made a dash for one of the hobbled ponies, making off as fast as his situation would permit. In a couple of minutes he got the rope around the pony's neck and looped it into his mouth and then he had him. It was not more than five minutes work to cast off the hobbles and arrange blanket and saddle, and then he led the animal out of the hollow and over the ridge and away into the darkness until he felt safe in mounting him. The beast fought hard for a few minutes, knowing that it was all wrong, but the strong arms and the hard heels of the scout finally humbled him, and he went off through the darkness at a gait which would have distanced pursuit had it been attempted.

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And an Indian has the instincts of a fish or wild animal. The panther or wolf may be driven from his lair and pursued for miles, but he can return to it by the shortest route. Lead an Indian blindfolded a hundred miles from any familiar point and turn him loose and his eyes will instinctively turn in the direction of home.

As Joe rode forward through the gloom of night he had no fear that he would come out above or below the forks. His only anxiety was that he might fail in finding the party. Suppose it had pushed ahead faster than he had figured! Suppose it was still two or three days away! Suppose the order to set out had been countermanded!

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of the country began to change. Instinct told the scout that he was approaching the forks. If the party were there there would be a score of signs to show it before coming within rifle range. At the distance of a mile away Joe pulled his horse down to a walk and thus went forward, listening with bated breath for some sound to locate the camp.

The soft footsteps of his horse alone broke the mighty silence. Not so much as the chirp of a cricket came to him from out the darkness.

When yet half a mile from the forks Joe's heart sank within him. If there was a camp near at hand his horse should make some sign. The Indian's dog and pony are his sentinels as he sleeps.

There was a grove of cottonwoods at the forks, and around and about was grass in plenty. It was the spot for a camp, but there was no camp. The scout advanced at a steady walk until he reached the edge of the grove unchallenged. The scout settled it. The party had not arrived. He almost cried out in his disappointment, and for the next few minutes he knew not what to do.

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Nothing occurred to create an alarm or disturb the scout's slumbers, and with the first signs of dawn he was on his feet. A quarter of an hour later he was beating back and forth for signs of the white party. Ten minutes' search satisfied him. It had passed. No one, white or red, had passed the forks within three days. Joe had no food, and as his horse had been left behind the prospect of procuring fresh meat was anything but encouraging. Anxiety offsets hunger, however.

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And every man left behind was depending on the energy of the scout, whose nerve had carried him out of the fort to save the party from the horrible fate which seemed in store for them. Joe realized this, and taking a deep draft of the cold waters of the Cheyenne he caught up his horse and mounted and held for the west, keeping this right hand bank of the river and pushing the gait as fast as he dared. He had begun to believe that no party had left Fort Sully, but he was riding furiously forward in that desperation which makes men cling to straws in midocean.

CHAPTER VI.

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Nothing occurred to create an alarm or disturb the scout's slumbers, and with the first signs of dawn he was on his feet. A quarter of an hour later he was beating back and forth for signs of the white party. Ten minutes' search satisfied him. It had passed. No one, white or red, had passed the forks within three days. Joe had no food, and as his horse had been left behind the prospect of procuring fresh meat was anything but encouraging. Anxiety offsets hunger, however.

At the east end of the grove was a tall cottonwood standing alone. Joe mounted to its very top to make an observation. The country to the northeast was rolling, with timber along the course of the river, but after scanning the country as closely as possible the scout descended with the conviction that no considerable body of men was within twenty miles of him. Had the party from Fort Sully been within fifteen miles of him he could have detected the smoke of their morning campfires.

Should he wait? Not his impatience was too great. He had left the beleaguered wagon train feeling that the fate of every man depended upon finding the soldiers at the forks. It had been a long, long night to the men crouched down behind the breastworks and expecting an attack at any moment. Had an attack been made? Had they been strong enough to repel it? If not, the morning sun was looking upon their disfigured corpses. If so, the horrors of thirst were creeping in upon the defenders to madden and disorganize them. Every mouthful of meat and bread would but add to their torments. Every hour would render the heroes more desperate.

And every man left behind was depending on the energy of the scout, whose nerve had carried him out of the fort to save the party from the horrible fate which seemed in store for them. Joe realized this, and taking a deep draft of the cold waters of the Cheyenne he caught up his horse and mounted and held for the west, keeping this right hand bank of the river and pushing the gait as fast as he dared. He had begun to believe that no party had left Fort Sully, but he was riding furiously forward in that desperation which makes men cling to straws in midocean.

Up one ridge—down the other side—up and down—never a change in the lay of the ground for miles and miles, but holding as straight for the forks as the needle of the compass could point.

Hunters in the woods have their signs and need no compass. The hunters and scouts on the plains seem to divine by intuition. To the average eye the great plains are a trackless waste. To the scout they are an open book. Blindfold him and lead him in circles for an hour, and when the hoodwink is removed he will give the compass points without hesitation.

And an Indian has the instincts of a fish or wild animal. The panther or wolf may be driven from his lair and pursued for miles, but he can return to it by the shortest route. Lead an Indian blindfolded a hundred miles from any familiar point and turn him loose and his eyes will instinctively turn in the direction of home.

As Joe rode forward through the gloom of night he had no fear that he would come out above or below the forks. His only anxiety was that he might fail in finding the party. Suppose it had pushed ahead faster than he had figured! Suppose it was still two or three days away! Suppose the order to set out had been countermanded!

The pony went forward through the darkness at a steady gait, seeming never to tire, and after midnight the character

of the country began to change. Instinct told the scout that he was approaching the forks. If the party were there there would be a score of signs to show it before coming within rifle range. At the distance of a mile away Joe pulled his horse down to a walk and thus went forward, listening with bated breath for some sound to locate the camp.

The soft footsteps of his horse alone broke the mighty silence. Not so much as the chirp of a cricket came to him from out the darkness.

When yet half a mile from the forks Joe's heart sank within him. If there was a camp near at hand his horse should make some sign. The Indian's dog and pony are his sentinels as he sleeps.

There was a grove of cottonwoods at the forks, and around and about was grass in plenty. It was the spot for a camp, but there was no camp. The scout advanced at a steady walk until he reached the edge of the grove unchallenged. The scout settled it. The party had not arrived. He almost cried out in his disappointment, and for the next few minutes he knew not what to do.

"They may have passed here no longer ago than noon," he finally argued with himself