

BY EXPRESS.

Early morning in the Sierra. A faint glimmering of dawn in the east, tinging the lower edges of dark storm clouds rifted by the icy winds; faint peaks dimly visible through the twilight, looming ghostly in their snowy shrouds against the paling gray of the murky horizon. Tall pines shadowing in graceful grandeur the moist and slippery sides of the dark ravines, through which gurgle the vagrant waters of a storm that has raged through the night. Absolute solitude—even the wind has ceased its monotonous requiem, exhausted by its mad efforts in the hours of darkness. The air grows colder. A snowflake flutters down through the uncertain half-light, hesitates an instant, as if struggling against a manifest destiny, and then falls helplessly, hopelessly, into the yellow, watery mud of the torn and gullied mountain road, to be absorbed with impunity and lost forever. Under the silent boughs of a great pine, watching the gathering light in the east—a man—the only living creature visible in this sad, gloomy picture. A man veils his features, and in his hands, cocked and ready for instant use, he holds a double barreled shotgun.

"I wonder where I will be this time tomorrow?" Most men sibilize when alone, and this man simply obeyed a natural impulse in uttering his thoughts aloud. The sound of his voice seemed to relieve the monotony. "I won't be here, that's certain," he continued. "I know where I think I'll be, but it's a mighty long distance, and the trail's through the woods. I've got three chances at the outcome—safety; bolts, bars, and strong walls; or—"

The musical jingling of spurs and the irregular slap dash of a horse's hoofs trotting through the mud interrupted the vague speculations of the man and caused him to draw closer into the shadow. The horseman passed. As the jingling of spurs and splutter of hoofs died away over the hill the man emerged from the shadow and looked down the road. He listened; his form, slightly bent, was outlined against the dawn-light, a sinister silhouette, only half human, if the imagination were to seek a resemblance between the motionless form in this attitude and a bird of prey. Suddenly the listener started back once more. The movement was agile and cat-like; firm, determined, desperate. A singular melody of sound floated through the still air—the creaking of wheels, the rattling of harness, the constant cracking of a whip, the constant splashing of horses' hoofs, and the hoarse cries of a man urging a spirited team to renewed exertions. Nearer and nearer came the discordant noises. The man in the shadow of the pine grew more rigid and more alert. His fingers sought the triggers of his gun, and his thumb pressed more firmly over the hammers. His neck was stretched forth like the neck of the condor as it watches herdsmen on the plains below.

"Git along there! What's the matter with ye, Blaze? — the roads!" and the driver threw "the silk into the off leader" at the rate of twenty cracks a minute. The four mustangs plunged furiously, and the stage creaked agonizingly, the harness straining with the spasmodic efforts of the horses to drag the heavily laden vehicle up the grade.

"Hold on, there, Baldy!" It was the man in shadow who spoke. The horses swerved to the right and almost overturned the stage. The driver, however, had presence of mind, and was skillful; he dragged the leader trembling with fright back into the road and turned his attention to the man with the shotgun.

"Moist morning," the latter remarked in a somewhat sympathizing tone.

"Party wet," the driver replied.

"Roads bad?" inquired the man, throwing his gun into the hollow of his arm, so that the muzzle bore directly, though apparently unintentionally, upon the door of the stage, from the interior of which a head had been suddenly projected, when the stage stopped, and which was as suddenly withdrawn when a certain instinctive curiosity had been satisfied in the twin depths of the gun barrels.

"Party bad, stranger, from the Crimea House down," said the driver. "Anything I ken do for ye? I don't mind swappin' a lie or two 'ith o' friends when I meet 'em, but ye see I am a little behind time this morning, an' I haven't got much leeway of I'm goin' to git into Stockton afore night."

"That's so, Baldy, ol' man," replied the man familiarly, "and you needn't put yourself out on my account. Just chuck down that box of mine and we will call it square."

"Which box?"

"That one under your seat there; it's marked 'Wells, Fargo an' Co. I'm Fargo.'"

"O, you're Fargo, eh?" said Baldy, simulating a renewed interest in the adventure.

"Well, I declare, I thought I met you afore, and I'll be d—d if I could place you. How's the family, Fargo?"

"First rate, Baldy."

"Ol' woman's as spry as ever, I s'pose?"

"Never felt better in her life."

"Kids all hunkidori, eh?"

"You bet. Call around and see us, Baldy, when you get a chance; Mrs. Fargo'd be delighted to see you, old man."

"So I will, Fargo; so I will. But I say, Fargo, this yer box o' yours is a valuable package, and goes through to the 'address o' the firm."

"Never mind that, Baldy. You tell I took charge of it. That'll be all right. There's documents in the box that I can't get along without just now—business of the firm you know—and seeing you are behind time maybe you'd better not fool round any more gassing with me."

As he said this the muzzle of the gun gradually lifted, until the yawning barrels covered the driver, inducing two Chiramen on the back seat to shrink nervously toward the opposite side of the stage. Baldy wrapped the lines around the brako and bent over to drag out the box. He had some difficulty in extracting the bulky padlock concern from the pile of mail-bags, but he finally succeeded, and raising the box on the edge of the boot inquired:

"Is this the bizness, Fargo?"

"I reckon—throw it down, and I'll make an inspection. Yes, that's what I'm looking for," he added, after the box had fallen with a jingling crash at his feet. "Want a receipt, Baldy?"

"No, I guess not," said the driver. "I'll tell Wells you took charge o' the valuable package, an'—"

"That'll be all right, Baldy," interrupted the man. "Wells won't kick. Hope you'll make the trip all right, old man."

"Anything else, Fargo?"

"Don't think of anything else just now. I guess you can drive right along."

"No message to inquirin' friends?"

"Nary message."

"Be here when I get back?"

"Most likely I won't be here."

"Well, so long, Fargo; take care o' yerself."

"So long, Baldy; I'll see you later. And so they parted.

By this time the morning was well advanced. The clouds hung low and the air was moist and uncomfortable. Snowflakes drifted through the pines and great masses of vapor shifted along the slopes of the distant mountains. The highwayman dragged the express-box into the ravine, where he would be free from observation and sheltered from the growing inclemency of the weather. Here he broke open the box with a hatchet which he carried in his belt, and in a few minutes he had transferred all the coin packages to his pockets. As he arose, the superscription of a letter caught his eye—the letter lay half buried in the mud, where it had been flung by the robber when he rifled the box. The impress of the highwayman's heel was upon it, but the address was clearly legible: John R. Richmond, Columbia, Tuolumne Co., Cal.

The robber stood for a moment as if spell-bound, contemplating this letter as Robinson Crusoe contemplated the footprint in the sand. Then he picked it up and rubbed the mud from the envelope upon his sleeve. He examined it with deep interest. The superscription was in the handwriting of a woman—small, delicate, but faltering, as if the fingers that held the pen trembled when the writing was done. The envelope was postmarked "Utica, N. Y." The robber slowly tore the end of the envelope and withdrew a sheet of note paper, closely written. As he read he smiled, and when he had finished he returned the letter to its envelope and placed it in his pocket. Glancing swiftly around, he stood for a moment irresolute. Having decided what direction he should take, now that flight was necessary, he climbed to the ridge above the canon, and with a swift stride pressed steadily forward. During the morning he tramp-

ed through unfrequented paths, avoiding the habitations of men, and seemingly heedless of the storm that now whirled and roared around him. He had discarded his mask and hatchet beside the express box, but he carried his shotgun, not so much for personal protection as to afford an excuse for prowling through the hills. To the casual passer-by he was simply a hunter, whose luck or skill had been bad, returning empty-handed through a driving snow-storm.

At noon the snow fell so thick that he could scarcely follow the trail. An hour later he stopped. He began to doubt whether he was pursuing the right course. He strained his eyes to catch some familiar landmark, but the snowflakes fell around him like a floocy, shifting curtain. He strode forward once more, this time slowly—feeling his way. He was beginning to be confused. Again he paused. This time he realized the dangers which this circumspect entailed. He had but one recourse at that moment. He would descend the first gulch and follow it to its outlet. As he hurried forward, floundering through the deepening drifts, he found that he was traversing a broad plateau. While speculating what "flat" this could be he plunged headlong into a lush fence. He was saved. As he arose he heard voices. Guided by this welcome sound he soon reached a barn. Sheltering himself under the lee of the barn, he waited until the men retired and then he crept into the building. Several horses occupied stalls in the stable, and farming implements and harness were scattered about. The robber climbed into the loft, and, burying himself in the hay, was soon sleeping soundly.

When he awoke it was night, and the stars were shining clear and bright in the cloudless sky. The snow lay thick in every direction, and the only sound that broke the silence was the dripping of water from the eaves of the barn. He looked out and saw a horse a short distance from his place of concealment. No one was stirring and no lights were visible. Descending to the lower floor of the barn the highwayman lighted a lantern and began to search for something among the implements scattered about. In a few moments he found a saddle, which he carried to one of the stalls, and, speaking low to one of the horses, placed it on the animal's back. Having secured the saddle he took down the bridle and adjusted it in the horse's mouth. Then he listened. The silence reassured him. He opened the door and led the horse out into the starlight. Choosing a path that led away from the house, he was making good progress toward a gate when his plans were disturbed by the sudden, fierce outcry of dogs. They came at him from every direction, yelping, barking, baying. There was not an instant to be lost. To hesitate meant an unequal struggle with the dogs and ultimate capture by the inmates of the house. Leaping to the saddle the desperate man urged his horse at the fence. The animal was game, and answered the hoarse cry of its rider by rising at the fence and clearing it at a single bound. He thought he heard an answering shout from the farmhouse, but he was not certain and he had no desire to solve this doubt. In two hours, by hard riding, he had left danger miles behind and reined his horse into a rapid walk.

The foothills of the Sierras are thickly wooded with white, black, and live oak, thus relieving the monotony of an otherwise barren landscape. Even in the depth of winter these oaks retain their foliage, and one never sees in California the gnarled branches and leafless boughs so conspicuously wintry in their nakedness in less favored climes. Standing beneath one of these oaks, the day following his escape from the mountain ranch, the highwayman watched the approach of a party of horsemen. The horse he had stolen stood beside him, covered with mud from neck to fellock—foundered. The horsemen in the distance rode furiously, and they were heading directly for the tree beneath which the fugitive stood. There was a smile upon his lips, and he seemed in an unusually cheerful mood.

"Those fellows mean business," he muttered. "They wouldn't have followed me so close if they didn't. Looks as if the game was up on this side of the board—hoo-

deal and a handful of small cards. I guess I'll have to peg out." The rude realism of the simile amused the stage-robber and his eyes twinkled humorously. "When I started on this risky enterprise I tried to look ahead into the future a day or two. I wondered where I'd be about this time. I took my chances on two losing cards—a jail and a rope—and I reckon I won the rope. The gang don't look like a crowd of missionaries chasing me to save my immortal soul. It ain't the Sheriff, because the Sheriff don't hunt coyotes with a brass band. I think it is this horse that has settled my business. Well, what of it? I played it for all it was worth, but two little pair don't beat a king full, and I don't think my bluff is going to work."

By this time the pursuers were thundering up the slope, their horses reeking with sweat and panting with their exertion. There were ten men in the crowd, and their stern, bearded faces wore an expression anything but reassuring to the man who so calmly awaited them. They circled the tree without a word and hastily secured their animals to the branches. One of them, a tall, bronzed, muscular young man, uncoiled a lariat from the horn of his saddle and flung it defiantly and with ominous significance at the feet of the robber. The leader of the horsemen then approached.

"Good mornin', stranger, he remarked, in that easy, familiar tone peculiar to the mountaineer of California, with whom the time of day is always morning until night.

"Good morning," the highwayman answered, extending his hand with a cordiality that was ironical in its effusiveness. The leader grasped the proffered hand half mechanically, his face indicating surprise at the coolness of the man they intended to hang.

"Belong in these parts?" he asked.

"No; can't say I'm exactly a residenter of this quarter-section just now."

"Maybe you're thinkin' o' pre-emptin' a claim?"

"You've struck it, pard. I've been running pretty free of late, and I've about concluded to settle down, quiet-like and easy." The man looked steadily into the eyes of his executioner, his cheek unblanched and his voice as calm and passionless as if the idea of a painful death at the hands of these determined men was the last thought in his mind. The leader of the horsemen whispered softly. Then he said:

"Been here long?"

"Halt an hour."

"Haven't seen anything of a claybank mare branded 'J. C.' on the left flank, have you?"

"Pacer?"

"That's her gait."

"White spot in her forehead?"

"You know her, stranger."

"I guess I've seen the mare. Belong to you?"

"I paid \$160 for the brute, an' I haven't sold her yet."

"Had an offer?"

"No."

"Want to sell?"

"Well, I can't say I do—not just now, anyhow. Why? You wasn't thinkin' o' buyin' the mare, was ye?"

"O, I didn't know but we might make some sort o' trade. I've been traveling pretty lively the last two days, and this mare of mine is petered."

"Pears to me your mare's a claybank, too," and the leader approached the animal, patting her gently on the neck.

"That's her color, pardy," said the other, "and she's a dandy. I wouldn't take \$300 for her if she was in condition."

"White spot in her forehead, too. Stranger, of this warn't your mare I'd swear she was mine." He walked slowly around the horse, examining the animal in detail and commenting upon her various points of resemblance to his own. Yes, sir; this yer mare o' yours, stranger, is the dead image of one I lost yesterday mornin'. I shouldn't be surprised if she was my mare's twin sister."

"You say you've lost your mare?"

"Sartin."

"Broke out o' the corral, I s'pose."

"With a man on her back."

"Ah!"

"You say you've seen the critter, stranger?"

"Perhaps."