

FRANK READE JR; WITH HIS NEW STEAM HORSE AMONG THE COWBOYS; OR, THE LEAGUE OF THE PLAINS.



No. 8] While Frank manipulated the reins, Barney and Pemp kept up a steady fire upon the foe. The Cowboys lashed their horses, and tried to overtake the Steam Horse. [1d.

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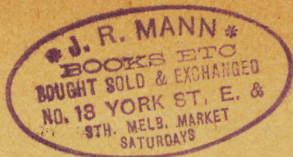
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FRANK READE, JUN., WITH HIS NEW STEAM HORSE AMONG THE COWBOYS;

OR,

THE LEAGUE OF THE PLAINS.

CHAPTER I.

THE STORY OF CAPTAIN BENTLEY.

"I CONSIDER the new Steam Horse the most wonderful yet of all my inventions."

The speaker was a tall, handsome young man, in fact, a boy in years.

Yet in the length and breadth of the land, nobody was better known than he.

Frank Reade, Jun., was his name, and he was the son of Mr. Frank Reade, an inventor before him.

Readestown was a beautiful little city, founded by the senior Reade. Here they had a lovely home, and the machine shops in which were built all of their most marvellous machines.

At the moment Frank Reade, Jun., stood in the large yard which was inclosed with a high wall.

His companion was a tall, finely-formed gentleman about sixty years of age.

Upon the card which he had given in at the office had been the name:

"CAPTAIN JAMES BENTLEY,
New York City."

Frank had welcomed his visitor after reading his letter of introduction.

Captain Bentley had then expressed a desire to see the Steam Horse, and Frank was showing him the new wonder.

"Wonderful—simply wonderful!" declared the captain, emphatically. "How

ever did you invent such a machine as that, Mr. Reade?"

"The inventing part was all right," declared Frank. "The chief difficulty was to construct the machine."

"Ah! you must have skilled mechanics."

"I have some fine ones."

"But you have not yet told me just how the thing works."

"I will do so, then, with pleasure," replied Frank. He advanced to the side of the Steam Horse, and began:

"You see that the horse is made of plates of steel."

"Yes."

"These are firmly clamped and riveted where necessary, or jointed and hinged at other places."

"I see."

"In the Horse's chest I have made the furnace, which is fed with coal carried in the bunkers in the waggon. The body of the Horse holds the boiler, and the escape valve is in the nostrils, and the whistle upon the head, between the ears.

"The principle of the mechanism is the same as that of an ordinary locomotive, but the application is different."

"Ah, yes."

"For instance, the cylinders are fixed upon the shafts of the waggon, and the steam chest is in the horse's hind-quarters. The driving rods connect with the automatic joints of the legs, which are made to play just as a genuine animal's limbs would before and behind.

"There are little armatures and joints which assist the action, the rapidity of which can be easily gauged by means of the pressure of the steam.

"All four legs of the Horse are thus made to work at a rapid gallop, carrying the body along, and the waggon after it."

"Wonderful!"

"Indeed, I think so. Now you will notice that the saddle holds the steam gauge and indicator. The valve is in the Horse's mouth, and is regulated by these long reins, held by the driver in the waggon.

"Now you can see clearly the principle of the Steam Horse, and how it gets its locomotive powers."

"Indeed I can," replied Captain Bentley, "and I regard it as unparalleled."

"Now to the waggon. It is, as you see, square and roomy, with bunkers for coal, and on top of these are long slots to be utilized as bunks at night.

"Under the bunkers we have a large compartment for the keeping of stores. Upon each corner of the waggon are standards upon which rests a top made of plates of steel.

"Curtains made of steel ribs with several loop-holes to fire through, may be pulled down, inclosing the whole interior of the waggon.

"In this vehicle we are wholly safe from the bullets of the foe. The wheels of the waggon I have made with broad and grooved tires, suitable for rough riding over any kind of land."

Captain Bentley drew a deep breath.

"Certainly, you need fear no ordinary foe in that vehicle," he said, turning away. "Now may I see you in private, Mr. Reade?"

"Certainly!" replied Frank. "Just come into this small room."

"I have very important business with you."

"Very good."

The two men entered Frank's private office.

Bentley took a seat at a table opposite Frank. He at once went on:

"Some ten years ago," he declared, "my brother, who had been a roving spirit, died, and left me the title of a large and productive ranch in the Pan Handle part of Texas.

"It was near a range of hills, the land was arable, and running water near.

The buildings were good, as ranch buildings go.

"But I had no heart to run it, so it has lain idle ever since.

"One year ago, my son Arthur, just from Harvard College, wanted to go West.

"I pooh-poohed the idea, and tried to dissuade him, but in vain. Finally, finding him resolute, I acceded, and decided to send him out to Star Ranch. I did so, and from that day to this I have not seen him.

"I received one letter from him, in which he described the ranch as in the hands of squatter cowboys, who claimed possession of the place, and would not move or give up their claim.

"I wrote and directed him to get a posse of officers and oust the villains. I know not whether he did this or not, but from that day to this I have not heard from him.

"I am too old a man to go in quest of him myself. I sent two detectives, but neither ever came back to make a report.

"As you can imagine, I am very anxious to know the fate of my son. I will pay any sum to get news from him.

"Now, Mr. Reade, I do not mean to insult you by attempting to hire you to go to the relief of my boy. But I lay the case before you, and, as God wills, so be it. Do you think you can do anything to help me?"

Frank listened with deep interest to the old man's story.

When he had finished, the young inventor for a time remained silent, while tears were in the old captain's eyes.

"Do you imagine that harm has come to your son?" asked Frank, finally.

"I do not see how it can very well be otherwise," replied the captain. "Of course, I live in hope."

"Of course. I can understand."

Frank arose, and paced the floor.

He thrust his hands deep in his pockets, and stood regarding the old captain a moment.

"Captain Bentley," he said, quietly, "you have approached me in the right way. If you had offered me money, I should have declined. But you have enlisted my sympathies. I am sorry for you, and I will go in quest of your son. If heaven favours me, I will find him, or,

at least, I will free your ranch of its villainous gang."

A great cry of joy welled up from the captain's heart.

"God bless you!" he cried. "You are indeed a benefactor, Mr. Reade. Now I have hope of my son. But you shall lose nothing."

"I shall lose nothing," said Frank, simply, "because I shall ask nothing."

"You are more than kind."

"It is all right, sir. I have been meditating a trip to the West with the Horse, and this now gives me an object in view."

"Then it is mutually satisfactory?"

"Exactly, and if fortune favours me, I will give you some news of your son before my return."

The old captain pressed Frank's hand.

"Heaven bless you!" he said, with emotion.

Then he was gone.

Frank arose and went to an electric bell. Pressing the button, he began to walk up and down the room.

"Yes. I have a mission to enliven my trip to the West," he muttered, "and it is not a bad one either. It will no doubt give us plenty of thrilling experiences, before we return and, after all, that is what we want."

At this moment the door opened, and a comical specimen of a darkie stood on the threshold.

"Pomp," said Frank, sharply, "can you tell me where Barney is?"

The darkie rolled up his eyes.

"Golly! dat am mos'ly a hard fing to do, Marse Frank, but I done fink I kin fin' him fo' yo'!"

"All right! I have arranged for a trip to Texas with the Steam Horse, and I want you and Barney to get ready to go with me at once. Do you understand?"

The darkie cut a pigeon-wing on the threshold, for his delight was apparent.

"Yo' kin jest bet yo' life dis chile is in it," he cried. "I'll hunt up dat fish-man, an—"

"No yez won't, be jabers!" spoke a sharp voice in the rear. "Arrah, yez mislit gorilla, I've me eye on ye. Phwat's up?"

"Bress mah haht!" gasped Pomp, slapping his knees, "if you ain' on hand fo' once in yo' life."

"Come off, yez tarrer!" exploded the Celt. "I'll thump the ear off yez if yez don't threat me with bitter respect."

"Hush! don't yo' git sassy, fish. Fust ob all yo' mus' learn to spell able."

"I'll spell somethin' else for yez," reiterated Barney, making a whack at the darkie. But Pomp dodged the blow.

What the result would have been it is hard to say. These two servitors of the young inventor were faithful fellows and the best of friends, but ever fond of playing practical jokes upon each other.

Barney O'Shea was a genuine type of the Tipperary Irishman. His heart was as large as an ox's, and he was as honest as a new dollar. In all of Frank Reade, jun.'s travels these two servitors, Barney and Pomp, accompanied him.

Frank interposed in time to prevent their carrying their skylarking any further and quickly gave his orders.

"Be sure and have everything ready so that we may start within three days," he declared. "The horse and waggon are to be packed in sections and shipped to a station on the Texas Air Line, known as Lone Tree. Put in provisions for one week and plenty of ammunition. Now, be lively!"

Away went the two servitors all agog with interest in the new trip. A genuine sensation was created in Readestown when the origin of Frank's trip was known.

CHAPTER II.

IN TEXAS.

A FEW predicted that he would fail. It was said that the Pan Handle of Texas held so many hundreds of lawless men that they could not be subdued, and they would be sure to make old iron of the Steam Horse.

But the young inventor only smiled when friends remonstrated.

"There need be no fear!" he declared. "I mean to succeed in my purpose."

The Steam Horse was packed carefully aboard a special train.

When the day for starting came Frank Reade, jun., Barney and Pomp all stood upon the platform of a palace car waving adieu to the vast multitude which had gathered to see them off.

Among the crowd—and the most eager

and excited perhaps of any—was Captain James Bentley. He pressed forward to the car platform and shook Frank's hand.

"Heaven be with you, Mr. Reade!" he cried, fervently; "bring me some news of my son."

"I cannot guarantee to bring him back to you alive!" cried Frank. "But I will bring you news of his fate."

"Heaven bless you!"

The crowd cheered wildly, a band played and then the train moved.

Out of the Readestown depot it ran. The journey was begun. It was a swift run over the plains of Texas to Lone Tree.

This was only a small station right in the wilderness. But it was the nearest point to the Star Ranch. Here the Steam Horse was unloaded.

Skilled mechanics brought along by Frank, and who were to return on the next train, put the Horse together.

Then Frank and Barney and Pomp sprang into the waggon, and as steam was on, Frank pulled the whistle valve.

The Horse gave several prolonged shrieks and plunged away across the plain. Passengers on the special waved their handkerchiefs and the great trip to the Star Ranch was really begun. Barney looked back at Lone Tree station and heaved a sigh. It was so audible and deep that Pomp, who stood near, heard it.

"What am de mattah wif you', Fish?" he exclaimed, in surprise.

"Shure, don't yez interrupt an honest burst av emotion on the part av a gintleman," retorted Barney. "Haven't ye better sinse?"

"Well, I declar'! What fo' yo' hab any 'motion, Fish, eh?"

"Be jabers, an' phwy shouldn't I? Didn't I lave the flower av me heart, the dew av me sowl, and the incinse av me dreams behindt in the par-lour car? Yez haven't sinse, paygur."

"Oh, ho, ho!" roared Pomp. "Yo' mean that red-headed Matildy Ann Maguire, that yo' hab been flirtin' wid all de way, an' who cum on de trip fo' to see yo' off?"

"Well, phwat av that?"

"Huh! don't you take no stock in dat gal, chile. She am playin' yo' fo' a big sucker."

"Be jabers, av yez say that ag'in, I'll break the jaw av ye."

"No yo' won', Fish. I jes' fink dat youse am a fool, dat's all. But 'tain't nuffin' to me."

"Howld an, yez son av a gun!" roared Barney. "I want yez to undherstand that an Irishman always stick to his wife an' his dudeen fer iver."

"A'right!" replied Pomp, with a deprecatory move of his hands. "Don' know as it interests me at all. Fo' mah pahnt, I wud sooner hab a nice leetle m'latter gal I know ob—"

"Come here, Pomp!" cried Frank at this moment. "I want you to relieve me here at the dasher. I want to look over my maps."

"A'right, sah!" This ended the discussion for a time.

The Steam Horse kept on to the northward all that day. Good time was made over the level plain.

A night camp was made on the banks of a creek, and all slept in the waggon as snugly as if at home in Readestown.

It was a beautiful evening, and after the evening meal Pomp brought out his banjo, and sang quaint melodies. It sounded rich and sweet upon the still air:—

"Once I had a little yaller gal,
An' her name was Chloe May.
One time a big brack nigger came,
An tote my Chloe 'way."

"Den good-bye, Chloe, it am done broke mah haht,
But good-bye, Chloe, fo' yo' an' I mus' pahnt."

Barney, not to be outdone, brought out his fiddle, and played jigs and Irish airs galore. But at length both tired and dropped to sleep. Another day passed without incident, and the Steam Horse still kept to the northward.

But on the third day, a series of incidents served to relieve the monotony. Frank felt assured that they were far into the Pan Handle now, and that the Star Ranch could not be far away.

It was early in the morning, and Barney was at the steering gear, when he suddenly cried:

"Shure, Misther Frank, phwativer wud yez call that?"

"Where?" asked Frank.

"Shure, out on the plain there, sor."

Frank took a powerful glass and studied a distant moving line upon the plain some miles distant.

"Those are cattle," he finally declared; "this is undoubtedly a cattle ranch."

"Shure, sor, hadn't we oughter be near to the ind av our journey, thin?"

"Oh, yes."

"I'm glad av that, sor." Frank continued to watch the distant herd of cattle.

"Bear down upon them, Barney," he said, finally. "I want to see what they look like."

"All roight, sor."

Barney obeyed orders. The Steam Horse rapidly neared the distant herd. Very soon it was seen that two men with mustangs were watching them.

The men were dismounted, and were of the cowboy type.

They viewed the approach of the Steam Horse with positive alarm and amazement.

Though at first disposed to flee, they finally held their ground.

Frank brought the Steam Horse to a halt not twenty yards from them.

As the two cowboys stood regarding the Steam Horse with astonishment partaking of fear, Frank shouted:

"Hallo, strangers!"

"Hallo!" came back the reply. "What will ye have?"

"What range is this?"

"The Pan Handle range."

There was a moment of silence, and then one of the cowboys shouted:

"Who in thunder are you, an' what kind of a new-fangled arrangement do ye call that?"

"This is the Steam Horse," replied Frank, coolly.

"Steam Horse, eh? Waal, I swar! What'll come next? I s'pose ye can go anywhere with that thing."

The cowboys now approached.

Two tough-looking customers they were, sure enough. One of them ejected a big quid of tobacco from his mouth, and leered at the travellers.

"What the devil are ye after in this part of the kentry, anyhow?"

"I am looking for the Star Ranch," replied Frank; "perhaps you can tell me where to look for it."

"I reckon I could," was the reply. "Do ye see the brand on them cattle out yender?"

Frank looked and gave a start, as he saw a star branded upon the side of each steer.

"Waal," continued the cowboy with a leer, "them cattle belong to ther Star Ranch."

"Ah!" exclaimed Frank, eagerly, "then you belong at the ranch?"

"Waal, yas."

"Who runs it now?" The two cowboys exchanged glances, and then the reply came:

"Waal, I mought as well say that it is run by ther League."

"The League?" repeated Frank.

"Yes, ther Cowboy League, an' thar's enough on 'em to hold it."

"Ah," said Frank. "I thought it was the property of a young fellow named Arthur Bentley."

The cowboys again exchanged glances.

"Look here, gents," said one of them, roughly, "air you friends of that chap?"

"Well, yes," replied Frank. One of the cowboys threw himself into the saddle. He spurred his mustang close up to the Steam Horse, and said, impressively:

"If that's the case, strangers, I'd warn ye to cut sticks for the East again jest as quick as ever ye kin. It won't be healthy fer ye around here. That's all."

The other cowboy had mounted by this time, and both spurred away.

Frank watched their receding forms for a moment, and then muttered:

"I've a good mind to call them back. But let them go. It might not amount to anything, anyway."

The situation now was a most interesting one, for they were certainly in the neighbourhood of the Star Ranch. There seemed no better move than to find it out and reconnoitre.

It was quite certain that they need not expect a warm or hospitable reception at the usurped ranch.

The gang of cowboy robbers in possession would not relinquish it without a struggle.

Of course the Steam Horse was an element of safety and advantage in their favour, and yet Frank knew that it would be folly to attack the cowboys.

Their numbers were such that, in a close combat, the Steam Horse would be torn to pieces.

The Horse now went ahead at a rapid pace.

Skirting the immense herd of steers, a distant range of hills were seen.

"That is the place," declared Frank, with interest. "Captain Bentley told me that it was at the foot of some hills."

"Begorra, I'm glad av that," cried Barney. "Shure, we'll soon 'ave a look at the spalpeens."

On went the Steam Horse with flying strides.

The hills drew nearer, and Frank was looking for the Star Ranch, when Pomp suddenly cried:

"Hi, Marse Frank!"

"What is it?" asked the young inventor, sharply.

"I do fink dat am de ranch ober dere a bit."

Frank gazed in the direction indicated, and saw a collection of roofs visible above a stockade fence, not more than a mile distant. He did not doubt but that it was the Star Ranch.

"That is it!" he cried. "Go ahead, Barney, as fast as you can."

They rapidly drew near to the ranch. Two plainsmen stood by the stockade gate. Frank decided to run up close and hail them. When within speaking distance he shouted:

"Hallo, friends!"

The answer came back in a rich, full voice:

"Hallo, to you!"

CHAPTER III.

AT THE COMFORT RANCH.

"WHAT ranch is that?" asked Frank, in loud tones. "Is it not the Star Ranch?"

"No," came back the reply. "This is the C ranch, or, as we call it, the Comfort Ranch. You're welcome."

Frank was dumbfounded.

"Heavens!" he gasped, "what is the matter? It must be the Star Ranch."

"Golly, dat am queer enuff," muttered Pomp.

"Be jabbers, it's stuffing us they be!" declared Barney, suspiciously. "Look out for a game, Mistor Frank."

An idea occurred to Frank.

"Where is the Star Ranch?" he asked

One of the plainsmen pointed to the northward.

"Six miles in that direction," he replied. "Keep straight on."

"Thanks," replied Frank. "Who is the owner of this ranch?"

"Major Henry Vose," was the reply.

"Won't ye come in?"

Frank was undecided. He was eager for information, but he might be going directly into the lion's den.

Therefore, he was cautious.

"Barney and Pomp," he said, coolly, "keep an eye on those men, and at the least sign of treachery pop them over. Do you understand?"

"Ay, sor!" replied Barney.

Then Frank opened the door, and alighted from the waggon.

From the first, the two plainsmen had regarded the Steam Horse with amazement. As Frank now boldly approached, one of them exclaimed:

"Shake, pard! Ye're welcome. But first tell us what kind of a high falutin' thing ye call that out there?"

"With pleasure," replied Frank. "It is a Steam Horse."

"Whew!" exclaimed the plainsmen. "Wall, that beats me. I've seen plenty of steam engines, but never anything like that. Ye don't have to have a track to run on?"

"By no means," replied Frank. "The Steam Horse will go anywhere."

"Waal, it beats anything I ever saw. Be you the inventor?"

"I am," replied Frank.

"Waal, you're a buster, an' no mistake if you did that. It's a clever thing."

"I'd like to ask you a question," said Frank. "Is this ranch connected in any way with the Star Ranch?"

The two plainsmen whistled and shrugged their shoulders.

"I should say not, cap'n," said one of them. "We're a different tribe over here. It's a hard lot that runs the Star."

"So I have heard," rejoined Frank, discreetly. "What is the name of the principal owner of the Star Ranch?"

"Waal, they do say the real owner was a young feller from the East, named Bentley."

"Bentley!" repeated Frank; "then you know Arthur Bentley?"

"Reckon we did. He made his headquarters at this ranch while he was here. He used to try to eject them vilyuns from the Star, but they call themselves the Cowboy League, and reckon they own it by squatter rights. Thar ain't much law in this section only lynch law. Bentley was allus goin' to bring soldiers here to attack the gang, but one day he turned up missing."

"Ah!" cried Frank, with interest.

"What became of him?"

The other shook his head

"That, nobody knows."

"That is strange!"

"Powerful queer, for a fact."

"I should say so. Was no effort made to find him?"

"Oh, yes; some said he'd gone east, and others, the majority, I opine, laid it to the league that he was killed and his body done away with."

"Horrible!"

"I reckon so. Major Vose, he had taken a liking to the lad, an' so had the major's pooty daughter Helen, an' they did everything they could to find out about him. Thar's unkinmun strained relations between these two ranches, and we're about on shootin' terms with ther boys over to ther Star. I've heern tell that Sid Buxton an' Al Durgin, the highcockalorums over there, hev said they will level Comfort Ranch yit. But we're ready for 'em."

All this was interesting news to Frank Reade, jun.

"Well," he said, "I thank you kindly for all this information. And now I would like to tell you who I am, and what I am here for."

"Waal, we won't refuse to listen to ye, cap'n."

"I am Frank Reade, jun., and I am in this region to find Arthur Bentley, if alive, if not, to hunt down his murderer."

"That's it, eh?"

"Yes."

"Put it thar."

Both of the plainmen gripped the young inventor's hand.

"We want to see the major at once," cried one of them. "He can give ye the information ye want, an' he'll help ye, be sure of it."

"I would like to see him." The two cowboys swung the stockade gates wider open.

A striking scene was revealed beyond them.

To the right was an inclosure of several acres, devoted to cattle pens and sheep yards.

To the left was a scene of great beauty. A small creek flowed through the inclosure, and upon its banks were many trees of all varieties.

Among these trees was a house built wholly of adobe bricks, with wide, rambling piazzas.

A broad, well kept lawn extended down to the waters of the creek.

This was diversified with well gravelled walks, shrubbery, and beds of rich exotic plants. It was a little gem of exquisite beauty set in the dreary sameness of the plain, a relief to the eye and an object of reposeful charm.

One would hardly have looked for such a dwelling in this wild, out of the way part of the world.

It is customary to associate a Texas ranch with rough and dirty surroundings, a concourse of snarling dogs, vicious mustangs and villainous greasers.

But the fifty odd cowboys who belonged to Comfort Ranch, as Major Vose had named the place, were of a vastly better class than the average.

As Frank was escorted up the gravelled walk to the piazza of the house he was impressed with all this.

The cowboy with him seemed to divine his thoughts, for he said with a queer smile.

"Ye'll find it very much different from this up at the Star, sir."

"I have no doubt of it," replied the young inventor.

"Ah, here comes the major and Miss Helen now!" exclaimed the gate-keeper. "They have been riding, as ye'll see."

Up the gravelled path came two handsome horses of the English pattern. A tall, military-looking man with grey side whiskers rode one.

Upon the back of the other sat a young girl of such charming grace and rare beauty of feature as Frank thought he had never seen before.

The young inventor doffed his cap with great politeness.

Both Major Vose and Helen bowed and then dismounted, and the former advanced to meet Frank.

"I am glad to meet you," said the gallant colonel, as Frank introduced himself. "You are very welcome to Comfort Ranch. So you are from the east, and come here to look for Arthur Bentley?"

The colonel here brushed moisture from his eyes, while the young lady turned deadly pale.

"I hope you'll succeed, and myself and all I have is at your disposal."

"A thousand thanks," replied Frank. "I shall hope to succeed."

A sharp convulsive cry escaped the white lips of Helen Vose. She came down the piazza steps.

"Oh, sir!" she exclaimed, with beautiful

eloquence, "I do so hope you will succeed. It is awful to think that his murder should go unpunished. He was such a noble fellow."

Frank divined the anguish in her beautiful eyes.

"I will wager they were lovers," he thought, but said aloud:

"My dear Miss Vose, let us hope that he is not dead, but yet alive somewhere, and that we shall be able to rescue him."

"Heaven grant it may be so," said the young girl, fervently.

"But I hardly believe it," said a cold voice at Frank's right.

All turned in surprise to see a tall, well-formed, but sinister-featured young man in the uniform of a United States Lieutenant of Cavalry.

He had been all the while unobserved in a patch of shrubbery near.

The young girl's form drew up, and Frank saw in her eyes a light of aversion. Major Vose said curtly:

"What are your reasons for doubting it, Lieutenant Harding?"

The tall officer smiled, and twirled the long points of his moustache.

"Arthur Bentley may be alive," he said, coolly; "but if the rascals over at the Star Ranch had anything to do with his disappearance, I don't see what chance he had. If alive, why does he not turn up?"

Helen Vose had turned away, and entered the house.

"I beg to differ with you," said Frank, stiffly. "His foes might for many reasons hold him a prisoner."

"It is hardly likely," returned the lieutenant, coldly.

"Perhaps you are perfectly well-informed upon the subject?"

"Sir!"

The lieutenant turned a glowering glance upon Frank. But the young inventor returned it.

"Your manner would imply that."

"By Heaven! do you mean to insult me?" thundered the lieutenant.

"If you choose to regard that single statement as an insult, you may do so," said Frank, quietly. "It is quite immaterial to me."

Harding was furious. He placed a hand upon the hilt of his sword.

"I've a mind to cut you down for that," he roared, furiously. "Who are you?"

"I am Frank Reade, jun.," replied

Frank, coolly. "I can see what you are without any explanation upon your part."

"Come, come, gentlemen!" interposed Major Vose, "this is too bad. Harding, you have forgotten yourself. I shall not easily pardon this intrusion upon our conversation. Mr. Reade is my guest."

The lieutenant had been upon the point of replying to Frank, but he cowered beneath Major Vose's indignant gaze, and with a low bow said:

"Your pardon, major. I go, but I shall see Mr. Reade again."

He vanished beyond the barrier of shrubbery. Could Frank's gaze have penetrated it at that moment, he would have beheld the fellow standing, the incarnation of hatred and fury, shaking his fist savagely.

"Frank Reade, jun., eh? I have heard of you and your Steam Horse. So you have come here to look up the fate of Arthur Bentley, eh? It might not have been necessary had not the young fool tried to come between me and Helen. Ha! ha! ha! nobody knows the fate of Arthur Bentley better than I do, and I shall keep it to myself."

CHAPTER IV.

A FAIR WARNING.

"**M**AY I ask who that fellow is, Major Vose?" asked Frank.

"Certainly; he is a retired lieutenant of the United States cavalry," replied the major.

"Probably court-martialled, and drummed out of the company," muttered Frank.

"What?"

"I beg your pardon. He is your friend, yet I have taken a keen dislike to him."

"You may be excused," said the major. "Very few people take to Harding. I tolerate him, as his father was an old companion of mine."

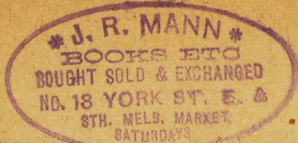
"I beg your pardon, then, for my great discourtesy."

"It was his fault, not yours. Now, Mr. Reade, I want you to make Comfort Ranch your headquarters."

"I thank you," replied Frank. "I am tempted to accept your offer."

"Pray do so."

"You see, it will be quite convenient for me to rendezvous here."



"You shall." Bring your Steam Horse here in the yard, and make yourself at home. I shall give you all the help in my power."

"Thank you."

Frank went down to the stockade gate, and beckoned to Barney and Pomp to come in with the Horse.

They did so, and the wonderful invention came into the ranch yard.

The cowboys from all quarters flocked about to gaze upon the wonderful piece of mechanism. Even Helen Vose came out of the house, and Frank gallantly showed her the mechanism of the invention and treated her to a little ride out upon the prairie.

"It beats all the wonders I ever saw," cried Major Vose, excitedly. "Barnum's curiosities are nowhere."

"How grand to have a horse that will go by steam," said Helen, rapturously.

Various were the comments made by the employes of the ranch.

"If the lads over at the Star see that cantankerous critter comin' arter 'em," said one, "I reckon they cave at once, an' be willin' to eat humble pie. I wudn't hev it chase me if I hed the best mustang in the Pan Handle range."

But darkness was at hand, and Major Vose insisted on Frank's coming up to the house to supper.

Barney and Pomp were to remain in the waggon.

Frank was to return later, and with these arrangements, he went up to dine with the hospitable major.

After the meal, they conversed for some time, and then Frank started to go down to the stock yard.

But as he was crossing the lawn, he heard excited voices near him.

Parting some shrubbery he beheld a startling sight.

In the middle of the walk stood Helen Vose. There was sufficient light for Frank to identify her form and features.

Before her stood the lieutenant to whom Frank had taken such a dislike that day.

The young inventor would have passed on, deeming it rude and improper to listen. But the words which followed were couched in such heated terms that he was constrained to hear all.

"Then you refuse my offer?" said Harding, in a hoarse, constrained voice.

"I do," replied Helen's voice, firmly.

"Let this end it, once for all, Jack Harding."

What was like a curse dropped from the villain's lips.

"I understand it all," he ground out between his teeth. "You looked upon me with favour before that upstart of a Bentley came here. Since then you have treated me like a dog."

"Arthur Bentley was a gentleman," said Helen, firmly. "Whatever his fate, I shall always feel that you know something about it."

Harding gave a violent start.

"That is unjust," he cried. "Here is abuse heaped upon contumely. In refusing me you might, at least, be ceremonious."

"I do not feel that it is necessary to stand upon ceremony with you, Jack Harding, any longer. Your presence here has become odious to my father and myself. You will take the hint and leave to-morrow."

Words are inadequate to express the effect of this upon the villain.

Fury seethed in his bosom, a deadly hatred thrilled his being. He took a step forward.

"Curses on that upstart of a Bentley," he hissed. "He has poisoned your heart against me. You have said it. I will go. To-morrow I shall leave here. You may deny me your love, but, by Heavens, I swear it, no other man shall have it. Remember, if you are not mine, you shall never be anybody's bride. I swear it."

One moment the young girl seemed to shrink before his impassioned attitude.

Then she said quietly, but strongly:

"That is an idle threat, Jack Harding. I do not fear you, I know you to be a coward!"

"By Heaven, I'll show you for the future that I will be your master," he hissed. "I've a mind to tear you from this place now."

He sprang forward like a panther, and gripped her wrist.

This was too much for Frank.

He saw the slender form swaying in the villain's grip, heard the little scream of anguish, and in a moment he left his covert.

Swift as an arrow he descended upon the assailant.

"Hold," he thundered. "I'll have your life if you dare to harm her."

Harding turned, and Frank caught him

by the shoulders and hurled him yards away. Then he lifted his hat to the young girl.

"Miss Vose, at your service," he said, gallantly. "I came just in time."

"Mr. Reade," exclaimed Helen, in fluttering tones. "Oh, I cannot thank you enough."

"It is nothing. You need not heed that brute. Come to the house."

Frank cast one apprehensive glance over his shoulder.

But Harding had not returned to resent the attack.

He had slunk away silently in the gloom, while Frank escorted Helen to the house.

"I thank you for your kindness, Mr. Reade," said the young girl, sincerely.

"It is nothing," replied Frank; but I would ask a favour from you,"

"What is it?"

"That you beware of that fellow. Do not trust yourself with him again."

"I will heed your warning," Frank lifted his hat and then went back over the lawn.

Very soon he reached the Steam Horse, where Barney and Pomp had a circle of the cowboys about, and were entertaining them with songs and solos on the fiddle and banjo.

With Frank's coming the cowboys returned to their quarters.

Barney and Pomp served alternately as sentries that night. The next morning at an early hour Frank was astir.

Pomp approached the young inventor, and said:

"If you please, Marse Frank, dar am a young chap here what purtends fo' to know a good deal about dat ranch."

"Is that so?" exclaimed Frank. "Who is he?"

"Dar he comes yender, sah. I jes' calls him up to talk wif yo'."

A slender lad with a dark type of features, and evidently of Mexican birth, was approaching.

He came and bowed respectfully to Frank.

"Si, senor!" he said, politely, "I know much about the Cowboy League. It is not confined to this spot, senor, but takes in a large country and many other ranches."

"Indeed," exclaimed Frank. "Who is at the head of it?"

"I know not, senor."

"Did you know anything of the mysterious disappearance of Arthur Bentley?"

"Si, senor. I doubt not that he is now alive, and I have heard from a friend who was told by one of the Cowboy League that he is now a prisoner in the old Spanish mine."

"The Spanish mine?"

"Si, senor."

"Where is that?"

"In the hills just behind the Star Ranch, senor."

"Do you know this for a fact?"

"I cannot take my oath. Nevertheless, I believe it true."

"How can you find this mine?" asked Frank, excitedly.

"That I do not know."

"But you say it is in the hills behind the Star Ranch?"

"Si, senor."

"Then it shall be found."

"One word, senor."

"Well?"

Frank looked in the dark eyes of Juan Almado, the Mexican boy. He saw in them only truth and candour.

"You must go well prepared. The League of the Plains is powerful."

"I thank you, Juan," replied Frank, sincerely. "I will heed your warning."

But the boy drew nearer and lowered his voice while his handsome eyes flashed.

"Heed what I say, senor. The league is everywhere. It is even right here, although Senor Vose may not suspect it."

"What do you mean?" said Frank, with a thrill.

"I mean that even in this very stockade are traitors—are secret spies of the League. I warn you, be on your guard. Trust no man."

With this the Mexican lad glided away. Frank was deeply impressed.

He had turned to enter the waggon, when a great cry came from the stockade gate. A number of the cowboys were gathered there.

"Be jabers, wud yez cum up here a minnit!" cried Barney.

Frank hastened to obey.

When he reached the gate he beheld the object which had caused a sensation.

Upon the gate post was placed a large square piece of buckskin.

Upon it was traced a huge black hand.

Underneath it was an inscription which read as follows:

"TO THE BOUNDER WHO HAS DARED TO CUM
INTER THESE PARTS WITH A STEAM HOSS."

"FAIR WARNING.

"If he don't vamoose within Forty-eight Hours, he will be made Sick and Sorry. This is Fair Warning! Take it and git! Git!

Signed,

"LEAGUE OF THE PLAINS,
"BY THE BLACK HAND."

The cowboys were regarding the deadly warning with something like awe and terror. But Frank walked coolly up to it and pulling it down tore it into minute fragments.

"That sort of thing does not work," he cried. "And if there is anybody here in hearing, who is in collusion with the cowardly cur who put that thing up there let him take the warning that I mean to hunt this dastardly League of the Plains to the death."

CHAPTER V.

A RUNNING FIGHT.

SOMETHING like an awe-struck silence followed Frank's declaration.

One or two even essayed faint applause.

The faces of the others were indexes to their feelings. It was plain that they stood in fear of the deadly league.

Frank went back to the waggon and sprang aboard.

"Come, Barney and Pomp," he cried, "we are out for business, now."

"A'right, Marse Frank."

"Be jabbers, we're wid yez." The two faithful servitors sprang aboard the waggon, and Frank pulled the Horse's jaw back with a tug at the reins.

The horse responded, and started on a gallop for the stockade gate.

But just at this moment a horseman galloped in.

It was Major Vose.

At a motion from the ranch owner, Frank stopped the Steam Horse.

Major Vose dismounted, and came to the door of the waggon.

"Mr. Reade!" he cried, earnestly, "I want to express to you my gratitude for so nobly defending my daughter last night."

"Indeed, it was nothing," remonstrated Frank.

"Yes, it was a good deal. She told

me all about it, and I have given orders to have Harding seized and locked up for a maniac if he shows up around here again."

"I am satisfied that he is not a safe companion for your daughter," said Frank.

"So am I. But whither now?"

"I am going to pay a reconnoitring visit to the Star Ranch."

"I advise you to move with caution!"

"I shall do so."

"Can I help you in any way?"

"I think not."

With this, Frank told the major of the cowardly message placed on the stockade gate.

The ranch owner looked serious, and lowering his voice, said:

"Do you know, I am worried over the situation? Thus far, the league have not troubled me. But now I fear the worst."

"You must be prepared."

"I mean to. But the worst of it is that I suspect traitors in my midst, and don't know who they are."

"Is that true?"

"It is."

"Well," said Frank, thoughtfully, "I would keep a careful watch upon all."

"I shall."

"I will see you later in the day."

"Very well. Good luck to you."

Frank pulled on the reins, and the Steam Horse went on out of the yard. Across the plain the horse galloped, and Comfort Ranch was soon a speck upon the horizon.

Then the topography of the country began to change.

They were nearing a range of hills. As this became apparent Barney suddenly espied an object in the distance, which at once interested him.

"Be jabbers, Misther Frank, an' wudn't yez call that the Star Ranch?" he cried.

"Where?" asked Frank.

"Shure away yender ferninst the high hill." Frank gazed in the direction indicated. At once he saw that Barney was right.

"Upon my word I believe it is," he muttered. "Strike out that way, Barney."

The Steam Horse was turned in that direction, and at every moment the ranch buildings grew more distinct. It was without doubt the famous Star Ranch.

Frank was aware of the fact that, in approaching the headquarters of the League of the Plains, that it would be well to exercise caution.

Accordingly he proceeded to do so.

The Star Ranch was seen to be a much larger establishment than Major Vose's place.

Large numbers of mounted men were seen in and about the place.

The ranch was situated a slight distance upon the side of the mountain slope.

Frank, having carefully studied the situation, then said :

"I think the best thing we can do is to try and approach the rear of the ranch through a pass which I see."

"All right, sor," replied Barney. "It's jist as ye say, sor."

The Steam Horse avoided direct approach to the ranch, and crept along in the shadow of the mountain range.

The pass was nearly reached when Barney suddenly put on the brake.

"What's the matter?" asked Frank, sharply.

"Shure, sor, I seen a couple av the spalpeens hiding behind a rock up thar, sor."

Frank gave a start of surprise.

"Are you sure of that, Barney?"

"Av coorse I am, sor."

"Where?"

Frank was now by Barney's side. The Celt pointed to an angle of the canyon wall. At that moment Frank saw the head of a man appear above a boulder and then disappear.

"You're right, Barney!" he exclaimed.

"There is somebody there."

"Shure, sor, phwativer will we do?"

"Go ahead, of course."

"But, sor—"

"Never mind. Always do what I tell you."

"All roight, sor."

Barney would go through fire and brimstone now. He pulled on the reins and sent the Steam Horse galloping at a mad rate up into the pass. The result was thrilling. There was a rattling of rifle shots from all parts of the canyon.

Every boulder and crag concealed a cowboy, and fire leaped from each.

The bullets rattled against the steel lattice sides of the waggon like hail.

"Give it to them back!" cried Frank, seizing a rifle. Fire was opened upon the cowboys.

But it had not much effect, as they were concealed, and a good aim was uncertain.

On up the pass went the Steam Horse. Suddenly the canyon began to wind, just as Frank had expected.

He knew that it would soon come out behind the ranch.

In that event a lively scrimmage was to be expected there.

No doubt a large band of the cowboys would be in waiting, and even Frank began to have misgivings.

He was not sure that it had been the very wisest sort of a plan to come into the canyon.

The outcome of it could not yet be foreseen.

It might be ruin and death, and again there was a chance that it would result in a benefit.

A perfect fusillade of bullets now came raining down upon the Steam Horse.

But this did not deter the iron steed from keeping on through the canyon.

But what Frank had feared now came to pass.

Suddenly he saw the gorge ahead filled with armed men.

They were directly in the path of the Horse, and seemed determined to stop its progress.

"Begorra, Mither Frank, it's caught we are," cried Barney.

"It looks like it," muttered the young inventor.

An impulse was upon Frank to charge right into the midst of the cowboys. But sober second thoughts induced him to refrain.

He saw at a glance how dangerous a thing it would have been.

He would be almost certain to come to grief. Such overpowering numbers would smash the machinery of the Steam Horse, and then they would be literally at the mercy of the desperadoes.

There was but one safe move to make, and that was to retreat.

Frank realized it with full force, and his mind was quickly made up.

Retreat was something not in keeping with his impetuous disposition. But this was not to be considered now. He instantly brought the Steam Horse to a stop.

A shower of bullets swept up the gorge like a hailstorm.

But they rattled harmlessly against the steel sides of the waggon.

There was just room for the Steam Horse to turn round.

Frank then started back down the canyon at full speed, while the mad yells of the cowboys followed them. But in a few moments the Steam Horse had swept out of range.

Down the canyon they went, and then out upon the plain.

But as they emerged, a band of mounted cowboys swept in pursuit from the direction of the ranch.

Frank only smiled.

"Nothing could work better," he muttered. "I'll give them a good lesson now."

He kept the Steam Horse at such a speed as to hold the pursuing cowboys just within range.

"Now, Barney and Pomp!" he cried. "You know what to do."

"That we do, sor!" cried the Celt, grabbing his rifle. "Come on wid yez, naygur."

While Frank manipulated the reins, Barney and Pomp kept a steady and rapid fire upon the foe.

One after another the cowboys dropped from their saddles.

The fire was most deadly.

Barney and Pomp seldom missed their aim. In vain the cowboys lashed their horses and tried to overtake the Steam Horse.

They might as well have tried to catch an *ignis fatuus*, or will-o'-the-wisp. Frank allowed them to draw near at times, and then would speed away from them.

Further and further from the Star Ranch, Frank led them.

He did not intend that many of the rascals should get back to their den alive.

In vain did the cowboys, in their reckless anger, try to overtake the Steam Horse.

Their numbers were rapidly growing less, and all of a sudden they realized what a death chase they were making.

As this dawned upon them, they pulled up their horses in dismay.

Then, whirling, they started madly back to the ranch.

Spurring their horses they rode for safety. But Frank now turned the Horse about and pursued them, so that the pursuers thus became the pursued. Almost to the very gates of the ranch was the pursuit carried.

Hardly a score of the band of cowboys lived to reach the shelter of the stockade. It was a very Waterloo for them.

Barney and Pomp were exultant.

"Huh!" cried Pomp; "I jes' reckon we gib dem a good 'un dat time."

"Be jabers, that's thru!" cried Barney.

"I fink dey don' want no mo' ob dis gang."

The plain was literally strewn with the bodies of the foe. It was not likely that they would venture to attack the Steam Horse in the open again.

CHAPTER VI.

RESCUED FROM THE SECRET MINE.

FRANK did not venture to attack the stockade. This he knew would be foolhardy. Victory did not make him rash or thoughtless.

He started the Steam Horse off across the plain and in the direction of Comfort Ranch.

Indeed, it was his intention to return to Major Vose's place for a time.

"We have given them a good lesson," he declared. "Let them have time for reflection upon it."

But three miles from the Star Ranch Frank saw a black pony galloping toward him. Upon the pony's back was a slender lad. He at once recognized him as Juan Almado, the Mexican boy.

A few moments later, Juan came up and appeared much excited.

"Buenos, senior!" he exclaimed. "I saw your fight and I am glad. I hasten to give you some news."

"News!" cried Frank. "What is it?"

"If the senior will trust Juan, he will take him through a secret pass to the mine where Senor Bentley is imprisoned."

Frank was astounded.

"Do you mean that?" he cried.

"Si, senior."

"How did you get the information?"

"I have told you of my friend who knows the secrets of the league."

"Yes."

"I obtained my directions from him."

Frank hesitated, as he gazed keenly at the lad for a moment. Surely he was not the one to be suspected of treachery.

"Enough!" he cried. "I will trust you, Juan. Shall we go now?"

"Si, senior."

"Lead the way."
 "Senor will follow?"
 "Yes."

The boy touched his mustang and dashed away across the plain, while Frank followed him with the Steam Horse at a gallop.

Around an angle of the mountain range they went.

Here, to Frank's surprise, they passed directly into a small chaparral, and thence into a narrow pass.

Up through the hills it led for several miles.

Then, where the mountain walls seemed to converge, making a vast amphitheatre, Juan drew rein.

He went straight to the smooth wall of the defile.

Picking up a huge stone he pounded upon the wall.

A hollow sound came back.

Frank was now by his side.

"The mine is beyond that wall, senor," he declared. "Listen!"

Frank placed his ear against the wall by Juan's direction. To his amazement a voice came to him through the stone.

"God be praised, you have come back to talk with me!"

"It is the prisoner," said Juan, in reply to Frank's questioning glance. "Senor may talk with him."

Frank put his lips to the wall and shouted:

"Who are you?"

"I am Arthur Bentley, a prisoner in this awful place," came back the reply.

"Who are you?"

"I am a friend!" replied Frank. "Keep up your courage. We are here to rescue you."

"Heaven be praised!"

"Frank turned to Barney and said:

"Bring me from the wagon one of those dynamite tubes. Be lively."

"All roight, Mистер Frank."

Barney obeyed the command in double quick time.

The tube of dynamite was the invention of Frank's own, and he knew how it would work.

Searching a few moments, he found a crevice in the wall, into which he thrust the tube.

Frank, having connected a fuse with the tube, lit it.

Then he cried:

"Back, all of you, for your lives!"

Whereupon, all sprang back and sought shelter beyond a distant angle of the canyon.

Pomp ran the Steam Horse down the gorge for some distance.

There was a brief interval of most oppressive silence.

Then there came a sudden roar, an explosion that shook the canyon walls.

Tons of broken rock fell into the canyon.

A mighty aperture was revealed, beyond which, the dark depths of the secret mine could be seen.

And now, barely had the smoke and dust cleared away, when down over the heap of rocks there came the tall, slender figure of a young man.

His face was pale, and he showed signs of long-continued mental distress.

It was Arthur Bentley, the prisoner of the secret mine.

For a moment he stood with radiant face and drinking in the pure air of the canyon.

Then Juan Almado, the Mexican boy, sprang to his side, with a rapturous cry.

"Faithful Juan," cried Arthur Bentley, joyously, "this is your work. You have brought these people here to rescue me."

"And you are saved!" cried the boy, joyously. "The Virgin be praised!"

Frank came forward extending his hand.

"So this is Arthur Bentley," he said, pleasantly. "I am glad to meet you."

"And I am glad to meet you," cried young Bentley, fervently. "You can hardly realize as fully as I can what it means to be released from that fearful place.

"I can imagine what it means," replied Frank, "but let me introduce myself: I am Frank Reade, jun., and I am from your father."

"My father. Is he well?"

"He is, and sends you his love. But he has feared the worst for a long time, not having heard from you."

"I could not communicate with him," replied Arthur. "I have been a prisoner for nearly a year in that awful place. Do I not look like one of the victims of the Bastille?"

Indeed, that was a fact.

Young Bentley was a sorry-looking spectacle. His clothing was tattered and bedraggled, his skin was pallid, his hair and beard very dishevelled.

In fact, he showed all the evidences of his long confinement. His emaciated frame and ghastly pallor were sadly in contrast with his usual health and physical beauty.

"A year in that dark hole?" cried Frank, with horror. "Mercy on us! How did you ever subsist?"

"Oh, I was fed regularly, by order of Jack Harding. Every day large pieces of meat were thrown down the shaft. There was a spring in the cave and I managed with this to keep soul and body together."

"I can hardly conceive it," exclaimed Frank; but pardon me, did you not mention the name of Jack Harding?"

"I did; he was my captor."

Frank gave a great start.

"Then Harding really is in collusion with the League of the Plains?"

"He is more—he is the recognized leader."

"Just as I suspected!" cried Frank. "He is responsible for your confinement here?"

"Yes."

"What—what was his motive?"

"I hardly know, unless it is that he bitterly hates me."

"If so, why did he not kill you outright?"

"For some inexplicable reason or other, I know not what. Perhaps he thought it was better revenge to torture me with irksome confinement."

"Ah! very likely. But does not this same Lieutenant Harding claim friendship with Major Vose and family?"

A great shiver ran over Bentley. He turned deadly pale, and cried:

"Oh, Heavens! now it comes to me. Something must be done at once. Major Vose and Comfort Ranch are in deadly peril."

"What do you mean?"

"It is frightful. We must lose no time. I tell you before midnight the ranch will be in ashes."

Frank was amazed.

"What are you talking about?" he cried. "How do you know that?"

"I know it well. I overheard Harding, Durgin and Buxton talking it over last night."

"What, that an attack was to be made upon Comfort Ranch to night?"

"Yes."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course I am. Horrors! the deadly plot is to burn the ranch, massacre the faithful cowboys and carry Helen Vose away captive."

"Great Heavens!" cried Frank, "what a fiendish plan!"

"It is awful!"

"But will not Major Vose be forewarned?"

"Impossible! More than half the band at Comfort Ranch are traitors."

"Ah!"

"They will see the major hanged before they will betray the truth to him."

"Then all depends upon us!" cried Frank. "We must take action, and at once. There is no time to lose."

"Give me weapons!" cried young Bentley, rigidly. "I will lay down my life before Jack Harding shall carry off Helen."

"He must be a treacherous villain!"

"He is, and unless Major Vose is warned at once he will lose all."

"Ah!" exclaimed Frank, "but I know that Helen had fathomed Harding."

The young Easterner turned an inquiring as well as joyful gaze upon Frank.

"What do you mean?" he cried. "Is that really so?"

"Of course it is. I overheard her reject his offer of marriage with scorn, and she then and there accused him of knowing something of your disappearance."

"Thank God!" whispered young Bentley, fervently, "Helen is true to me."

Frank gripped the young man's hand.

"Be sure of that, sir. Also accept my services and those of the Steam Horse in the righting of your wrongs."

Arthur looked bewildered; but at this moment, around an angle in the canyon wall, came Pomp with the Steam Horse.

Young Bentley stood like one stupefied gazing at the, to him, strange spectacle.

"Upon my word!" he gasped. "What manner of invention is that?"

"It is a Steam Horse," replied Frank.

"Come and see my invention."

Like one in a dream, Bentley allowed himself to be led up to the side of the wonderful Steam Horse, while Frank showed him its wonderful workings, until gradually the feasibility of the machine dawned upon him.

Then he declared:

"Well, sir, you certainly are the most wonderful man on earth to invent such a

machine as that. My father could not have sent anyone to my rescue better qualified to cope with the perils of this region."

Frank looked gratified with this warm tribute to his genius.

CHAPTER VII.

A NARROW ESCAPE.

ARTHUR BENTLEY was carried away with the wonderful mechanism and workings of the New Steam Horse.

Its like he had never dreamed of, and several times he pinched himself to make sure that he was really awake.

The time consumed in his conversation with Frank, however, had been considerable, and neither had stopped to think of the risk they were incurring in remaining upon the spot.

Neither did they make a move to leave until Juan Almado suddenly gave a warning cry:

"Beware, senors! There is danger!"

Instantly both were recalled to their senses.

"Be jabers, the inimy are comin'," cried Barney.

"Golly, Marse Frank!" yelled Pomp, "dar ain' no time fo' to lose."

Frank saw this at a glance. The sound of the explosion had reached the ears of the outlaws in the hills beyond, and they had at once entered the secret mine.

They had poured into the gap now made in the canyon wall by the dynamite, and then opened fire upon the party in the canyon, and they had barely time to get beyond range.

"Into the waggon!" cried Frank, excitedly.

Juan Almado fled down the canyon upon his fleet mustang.

The others, however, sprang into the waggon, and down the gorge went the Steam Horse at breakneck speed.

The cowboys could not pursue, for they were on foot, and to keep up with the Steam Horse would have been an utter impossibility.

The Horse was soon out of range, and kept on for the prairie.

Frank Reade, jun., was greatly elated. He had accomplished the object of his mission a great deal easier, and in much less time, than he had reckoned upon.

Arthur Bentley had been rescued, and it now only remained to drive the usurpers from the Star Ranch.

Frank considered that in order to do this, it might be necessary to send to the nearest fort for reinforcements.

With the aid of the United States soldiers, there could be no doubt about ousting the league from the ranch.

Thus philosophizing, Frank held the Horse on its course down the canyon. Upon reaching the plain, his purpose was to at once strike out for Comfort Ranch.

There, the first move would be to weed out the element supposed to be in favour of the league.

Then measures should be taken to establish a kind of fortress at the ranch so that any attack might be repulsed. All this, and much more, was passing through Frank's mind.

Suddenly the Steam Horse emerged from the canyon.

But just as the Horse was about to pass through the chaparral which led to the prairie, Frank applied the brakes and closed the valve.

So sudden was the stop made, that all on board were thrown to the floor of the waggon.

"Och hone, it's kilt intoirely I am," cried Barney, wildly rubbing his bruised skull.

"Golly, dis chile am clean done fo'!" shrieked Pomp.

"By Jupiter! What was that?" gasped Arthur Bentley.

But the explanation was visible just ahead, and Frank had seen, just in time, a number of forms in the chaparral path.

Nearer view had disclosed them as a strong body of the cowboys. The passage through the chaparral was completely blocked.

"We are cut off!" cried the young inventor, by way of explanation, "and that is why I stopped so suddenly."

"We've got to fight our way out!" cried Arthur Bentley.

"It looks like it."

"All right; give me a gun."

A shower of rifle-balls rattled against the mailed sides of the waggon. But they did no harm.

In return, Barney, Pomp and Bentley began to work with the Winchesters. In rapid succession they sent volley after volley into the chaparral.

But the cowboys did not seem to suffer greatly; at least they stood their ground well, and made answer.

Frank dared not charge for fear of getting into close quarters.

The Steam Horse would be badly handicapped in a position like that. A fight at long range was best.

But at this moment, dauntless little Juan Almado rode up, and cried:

"Follow me, senors, there is a path this way!"

Frank saw the plucky Mexican lad ride away to the right, along a level stretch of ground between the mountain and the chaparral.

At once the young inventor turned the Steam Horse in that direction.

Very quickly the horse was galloping away on a new course.

Loud and baffled yells came from the cowboys.

They came thundering in pursuit.

But this was just what Frank wanted. He motioned to Barney.

"All roight, sor, I know!" cried the ready Celt. "We'll give it to the spalpeens!"

Fire, destructive and rapid, was opened upon the pursuers.

From the rear of the waggon it was an easy matter to pick them off. Arthur Bentley had entered into the spirit of the movement with great zest, and was doing his part.

"I've no compunction in shooting them down," he cried; "they're a pack of murderers and thieves."

Juan Almado was leading the way far in advance, when suddenly the boy halted, and threw up his hands with a gesture of dismay.

Then he suddenly vanished into the chaparral at the left.

The Steam Horse came to a halt.

It did not seem at this point as if it could go any further. A high rocky wall shut down in front, and the chaparral to the left seemed too thick to penetrate.

The cowboys seemed to realise this, and gave loud yells of triumph.

Some of them dismounted, and began to block the passage in return.

It looked as if the Steam Horse was literally hemmed in. It was a desperate situation. No one realised this more than did Frank Reade, jun., himself.

What was to be done?

Of course there was the desperate

chance of attacking the foe, and fighting their way through to the prairie.

But it seemed hardly likely to be successful, even if attempted.

The cowboys, however, did not venture to attack the Steam Horse.

They held off at a respectful distance. But Frank fathomed their plans very quickly, for he caught sight of one of them riding down the path to the exit through the chaparral.

At once he guessed what this meant.

They were going for reinforcements, when, no doubt, a successful attack would be made.

Frank smiled grimly, and he was not the one to lose heart.

He had been in desperate predicaments before, and none knew better than he how to pull out.

But before he could make up his mind as to the proper move to make an incident transpired.

One of the cowboys, bearing a white flag, rode forward.

Frank respected the flag of truce by opening the door of the waggon and stepping out. The outlaw, who was a burly, villainous-looking fellow, rode up quite near.

He doffed his sombrero and affected politeness, as he said:

"Ah, is this Mr. Reade?"

"It is," replied Frank.

"Waal, I'm Al Durgin, an' I'm one of the boss cowboys over ther Star."

"All right. What do you want?" asked Frank, tersely.

"I want ter tell ye that ye are in tight quarters."

"Indeed?"

"If ye don't believe it now, ye will later."

"Perhaps so."

"I reckon we're all fair, square men. We will accept yer surrender on unconditional terms." Frank laughed quietly.

"That is most fair, I must say," he replied, with sarcasm.

"Waal, what do ye say?"

"Do you want to know?"

"Yas."

"That Frank Reade, jun., dies, but never surrenders."

Durgin sat motionless in his saddle for a few seconds.

"Waal," he muttered, "that's a reckless way ter talk. How do ye expect to get outen this place?"

"I may not get out of it," replied Frank, "but at least I would rather die here than to surrender."

"Then that's yer ultimatum?"

"Once and for all."

"Settled, stranger."

Durgin struck spurs and rode back to his companions. They received his announcement with yells of derision and anger.

Frank began to fear an attack, and all were in readiness. But the cowboys did not venture it. But at this moment a thrilling thing occurred.

Suddenly Juan Almade appeared at a break in the chaparral at a point just beyond.

He beckoned wildly, and shouted:

"Come, senors, quickly! You may make the prairie here!" It was a startling announcement.

It is needless to say that Frank Reade, jun., started the Steam Horse ahead on the instant. Down to the break in the chaparral went the Horse.

Then Frank perceived a thrilling fact. By pushing through a thin veil of foliage the Steam Horse entered a clearing which led over solid ground to the prairie beyond, and a wild cheer went up.

Barney and Pomp took a last long shot at the cowboys, who were now coming in pursuit.

Then through the chaparral galloped the Steam Horse.

Frank shouted to Juan Almade:

"Won't you come aboard?"

But the Mexican boy only shook his head, and vanished in the depths of the chaparral. It would have been a wily foe indeed that would have caught him there.

The Steam Horse thundered out on the prairie, and in a twinkling the cowboys were distanced. The Horse was headed for Comfort Ranch.

But, as they made the top of a rise in the prairie, a thrilling cry escaped the lips of Frank Reade, jun.

"My God! the ranch is in flames!"

CHAPTER VIII.

THE FIGHT AT THE RANCH.

IT required but a glance for the others to see the appalling truth of this awful statement.

Far away across the prairie, where the buildings of Comfort Ranch should be, there was a fearful column of flames and smoke.

That the cowboys under Harding had attacked and fired the ranch was a synchronous conclusion.

"My God!" gasped Arthur Bentley, with livid face. "Let us get there as soon as possible, Mr. Reade."

"We will," observed Frank, with set teeth. "And the dogs who have done this dark deed shall be punished."

"I am with you to the death!" said Arthur, tensely.

With burning gaze fixed on the distant tragical scene, Arthur Bentley gripped the lock of his rifle and waited for the Steam Horse to cover the intervening distance. On and on fled the Steam Horse.

Those who took it never forgot that exciting ride.

The waggon seemed to leap over the ground, and with frightful speed. The fastest railroad train would have been eclipsed.

Nearer and nearer drew the scene.

Now the outlines could be better seen, and a cry of relief went up when it was seen that the main body of the ranch had not yet been fired. Even at that distance the rattle of firearms could be heard.

It was evident that the loyal ones at the ranch had fortified themselves in Major Vose's house, and were making a tremendous fight.

"Faster — faster!" cried Frank, as Barney climbed out on the shafts and opened the furnace door to pile on more coal.

Every moment they drew nearer the ranch. Soon only a mile intervened.

This was run in less than a minute by the Steam Horse.

A large band of the cowboys could be seen trying to storm the palisade which divided the ranch buildings from Mr. Vose's residence.

"Give it to them, boys!" cried Frank.

Down upon the thin ranks of the cowboys galloped the Steam Horse.

Frank took care not to plunge into close quarters, but rode down small parties of two and three.

The ponderous iron monster, in striking the horses of the cowboys, would knock them off their feet, and crush them under the grooved wheels of the waggon.

It resembled a miniature car of Jugernaut in this respect.

Barney and Pomp and Arthur Bentley worked the repeaters just as fast as they could. The effect, of course, was immense.

The mighty iron monster, crashing down amongst them, demoralized the cowboys greatly, for it broke up their attack upon the stockade, and wild cheers came from the defenders.

The voice of Major Vose could be heard giving off orders in a thundering volume.

Suddenly the stockade gates opened, and the defenders made a sally.

The result was that Harding's gang were utterly routed. They could not possibly stand before such an attack.

Put to flight, they galloped away over the prairie.

The fight was ended.

The ranch was saved, or at least a good part of it, and there was good reason for mutual congratulations.

Frank opened the door of the waggon, and Arthur Bentley sprang out and into the arms of Major Vose.

The bluff old major was wild with delight.

"Thunder and guns!" he cried. "You did save my boy."

"It was the work of Providence," replied Frank.

"And your coming demoralized the villains so that they were obliged to abandon their attack," cried the major. "Oh, that treacherous Harding! I just want to see him stretch hemp."

"He deserves it," cried Arthur, "for he is a traitor; but how is Helen?"

"Heaven bless you, lad! Up at the house," replied the major. "You shall come up with me this moment."

He turned to Frank.

"And you, too, Mr. Reade. We will break a bottle of good old wine for this. Come along!"

Frank could not refuse.

So up to the house they went, but just as they reached the piazza a terrible thing happened.

A woman, with shrieks of terror, came rushing out on to the piazza.

In a moment Major Vose was by her side.

He saw at once that it was the house-keeper.

"Why, Mrs. Floyd," he cried, excitedly.

"What is the matter?"

"Major Vose!" she screamed. "Thank God you have come! Oh, I have awful news for you!"

"For me?"

"Yes—oh, I cannot tell it!"

"Speak!" commanded the major, hoarsely. "What on earth do you mean?"

"Miss Helen—she—"

The woman pitched forward in a dead faint.

But the major in that moment comprehended and realized the worst.

Several of the servants were present, and two of them proceeded to carry her into the house.

"Where is Helen?" asked the major, in a voice of thunder. "Tell me all."

"Oh, sir, she is gone!" replied one of the servants, in tones of horror.

"Gone?"

"Yes, sir."

"Where?"

"Oh, we don't know; but some rough men broke into her room, and we smelled chloroform, and broke open the door—"

Major Vose waited to hear no more.

"My God! they have stolen my Helen away!" he moaned, rushing from the piazza. "Bring me my horse. Quick—quick! If I have to ride into the jaws of death to-night, Helen must be rescued!"

Arthur Bentley had stood like one dazed. But now he was aroused.

"This is Harding's work," he ground out, hoarsely. "If it be to the ends of the earth, I will pursue him."

"Amen!" cried Frank Reade, jun.

"My Steam Horse is at your disposal."

"A thousand thanks," replied Arthur.

"Oh, Mr. Reade, this is terrible."

Major Vose was storming up and down the walk.

In another moment his horse came. The alarm was given, and a call made for men.

In response to the command, a score of armed cowboys rode forth.

The major headed them, with Arthur Bentley by his side.

Frank Reade, jun., and Barney and Pomp went ahead with the Steam Horse.

There was no doubt that the abductors of Helen Vose had gone straight to the Star Ranch.

It was natural, therefore, that the pursuers should go thither. Straight for the Star Ranch they bore.

After a hard and swift ride, they rode down a little slope, and approached the stockade gate.

It was closed, and armed men were seen at the loop-holes.

Frank advised Major Vose to halt his men just out of range, while he rode up with the Steam Horse to within parleying distance of the ranch.

Halting the Steam Horse near the stockade gate, Frank shouted:

"Hallo! the ranch!"

The answer came back:

"Hallo!"

"I want to talk with Harding."

A harsh voice answered:

"I am Harding. What do you want?"

"Do you hold Helen Vose in your custody?"

"What's that to you?"

"A good deal. I represent her outraged father," replied Frank.

A mocking laugh came back.

"What do you suppose I care for her father? He is an old fraud. I will officiate at his funeral yet."

"Spare your cheap talk," replied Frank.

"We want to know upon what terms you will surrender her."

"I'll never surrender her."

"Why?"

"She is my prize. I have worked a long time, hard and well, to secure her."

"You must be a villain."

"All right. Let it go at that."

"Then you won't give her up?"

"No."

"Not even on payment of a heavy ransom?"

"Nothing will do it."

"Then beware! If harm comes to her, there is an awful punishment in store for you."

"Bah! spare your threats."

"You are a traitor, a murderer and a

coward, and you shall suffer a well-merited fate," cried Frank.

"Pshaw! that is idle talk. What can you do? I mean to make old iron of that rig of yours yet."

"Be jabers, yez can't do it, yez blather-skite," shouted Barney.

The Celt had literally boiled over.

He had listened to the villain's tirade with anger, and could control his feelings no longer.

But Frank spoke to him reprovingly.

"Enough of that, Barney!" he said, sharply. "Never do that again."

"I beg yure pardon, Mистер Frank," said Barney, humbly, "but the blather-skite made me that mad av meself that I cudn't help it, sor."

"All right. We'll let it go this time."

The Steam Horse returned to the spot where Frank had left the major and his men, where a surprise was in store for him. The major was making a speech to the men.

"You are all a set of poltroons and cowards!" he roared. "Every man of you deserves a court-martial."

"What is the matter?" asked Frank, in surprise.

"Matter!" thundered the major.

"Every one of these cowardly fellows refuses to go any further."

The young inventor was astonished. Here was a contretemps little anticipated.

What was to be done?

To be deserted at this juncture was fatal to every interest at stake.

CHAPTER IX.

A SCOUTING TRIP.

"CAN that be possible, major!" exclaimed Frank, as he faced the men. "What is the reason for it?"

"Nothing except that they're a set of cowards."

"I beg yer parding!" said one of the cowboys. "It ain't that at all, gents. But we wuz hired to herd cattle, a' not ter fight."

"That's right!"

"We want fair play."

"It is only our rights."

Frank saw the point at once, although the major was not quite so keen.

"All right, boys!" he cried, seized with a sudden inspiration. "We will

allow that you were hired to herd cattle."

"Correct, boss."

"You are not cowards!"

"Waal, I guess not."

"You can see that your employer is in hard lines just now."

"That's all right, friend."

"Now there is not a man of you afraid to fight, I'll venture to say."

"Now yu're talkin' sense!"

"All right! You can see just now that the major wants fighting men and not herders."

"Exactly!"

"Now he will hire you for fighters. You must stick by him to the death."

"That's all right, pilgrim," cried the spokesman of the party, "but if we're goin' ter fight, we want fightin' wages."

"Oh, that's it, eh?" said Frank. "You want more pay?"

"Jes' so!"

Major Vose turned and waved his hand to enjoin silence.

"You shall have the increase," he cried.

"But I want you to fight."
A wild cheer of approval went up from the cowboys.

"Show us ther way, boss!"

"Lead us on!"

"We'll foller yer over Jordan!"

The difficulty was settled. But Frank was not altogether satisfied.

Major Vose wanted to head an impetuous attack on the stockade of the Star Ranch. However, Frank said, coolly:

"Wait a moment, Major Vose. I want to talk with you!"

"What is it, Mr. Reade?"

"Come this way."

The major complied.

"It is very evident to me," said Frank, somewhat brusquely, "that it would be a foolhardy and dangerous thing to attempt to attack the ranch with our limited numbers."

The major became grave in a moment.

"I am aware of that, Mr. Reade. But what can we do?"

"I have been thinking out a plan. Suppose we besiege them?"

"That would be all right, but it would mean a long and tedious wait. I think some determined move should be made at once to rescue my daughter."

"It would be absolutely fatal, and a sacrifice of all our lives."

"Do you think so?"

"I do."

"Very well," said the major, desperately. "I will leave it to you. Do as you please."

"Then I would counsel the siege."

"So be it."

"Perhaps we can work some little stratagem to get into the enemy's stronghold and rescue Helen. It would seem to be our only hope unless we sent for reinforcements from the fort."

"That is the plan!" cried the major. "I will send to Fort Phillips for soldiers. Until they come we will hold the Star Ranch in a state of siege."

"That is exactly my idea."

"Then it is settled?"

"Yes."

"I will send for all the men at my ranch. Then I will send messengers at once for the troops. I know that Colonel Hamlin will not refuse me."

"That is good!"

The major rode back to his men, and Frank went to the waggon, where Arthur Bentley was, together with Barney and Pomp.

Frank told them what had been decided upon.

"Well, I hope it is for the best," said Arthur, "but I wish that there was some way to get Helen out of the villain's power at once."

"Perhaps there is!" said Frank.

"How?" asked Arthur, eagerly.

"Have you the nerve to attempt a trip into the place disguised?"

"I have nerve enough for anything," declared Bentley, earnestly.

"Then it is settled. We will try it. Barney and Pomp, you are to remain here with the Steam Horse. Take no chances, and keep where you are until I get back."

"A'right, sah."

"We'll obey ordhers, Misther Frank." Then Frank and Bentley at once began to make their plans.

It was decided to go at night, and enter the stockade from the rear, by going through the deserted mine.

They were to be disguised as cowboys, and would commingle with the cut-throat gang of the Star Ranch.

With the exception of Major Vose and Barney and Pomp, nobody knew of the scheme.

Frank rigged up some clever disguises,

and, mounting mustangs, they galloped away.

By the time they reached the chaparral, darkness had settled down. Passing through this, they entered the canyon.

Thus far they had encountered not one of the Star Ranch gang.

At this point they set their ponies loose, and sent the sagacious animals back to camp. Then they pushed forward on foot.

It was not long before they came to the opening in the mountain wall made by the dynamite.

Arthur now knew the way well.

"If the bucket is down," he declared, "we can go up through the shaft. It is safer."

"Let us go the safest way."

"So say I."

"We must take no chances."

"No."

Arthur led the way through intricate passages.

Suddenly he paused, and struck a match. Frank saw walls about him, and a huge bucket at his feet.

"Good!" whispered Arthur. "The bucket is down. I hear nobody about, and I think we can get inside the lines without a question."

"That is good news," whispered Frank.

Though the darkness was most intense, Arthur clambered into the bucket quickly.

"Wait here," he said, simply, "and I will pull you up later."

Frank was quite willing to wait.

Arthur caught hold of the bucket-rope, and began to pull himself up.

Up, up he went, the rope creaking dismally; but, after a time, the rope ceased creaking.

Then Frank knew that the bucket was coming down through the gloom. When it struck the bottom of the pit he stepped into it.

Arthur was at the windlass above, and quickly pulled Frank up.

They stood upon the brow of the hill overlooking the stockade and all the buildings of Star Ranch.

"Here we are," said Arthur, jubilantly.

"We are in splendid luck."

"I should say so."

"We are now right inside the enemies' lines."

"Whist!" Both slunk into the shadows.

Two men were coming up the path to the shaft, talking earnestly to one another.

Every word was heard by the two interlopers, and, as it happened, was of vast information to them.

"I tell ye, Bill," one of them was saying, "that Harding is a cool cuss, ain't he?"

"Yew bet!"

"Who'd ever think of catching a pooty gal like her, an' locking her up until she agrees to marry him?"

"I dunno. I reckon it's pesky mean bizness."

"I dunno. If the gal won't agree no other way, what's he going to do different?"

"I never seen no luck come from it yet."

"Jest ther same, it's a clever trick."

"He's a dare devil."

"Yew bet!"

"Where's the girl kept?"

"In that small lodge nigh their main house. Ther doors ain't locked, an' she could come out, but he keeps a man right at the door all the time."

"Foxy cuss!"

"Yew bet."

"D'yer think them suckers from the Comfort Ranch are gwine ter lick us?"

"Not for nix!"

"That Steam Hoss is a cussed funny arrangement, ain't it?"

"Waal, yas."

"Cur'us invention. I wonder what'll cum next? They'll hev a walkin' buffler on stilts made out of polliwog skins yit!"

Their voices died away as they ascended the mountain side.

But Frank and Arthur had listened with the deepest interest.

The disclosure was of vast interest and value to them.

"She is confined in the lodge near the main house," whispered Arthur. "That is luck for us."

"You're right!"

"How shall we get rid of that fellow who stands at the door?"

"Leave it to me," said Frank, grimly.

"I'm willing."

"All right! Let's go down into the ranch."

"I think we'd better keep low."

"Certainly."

They carelessly strolled down the mountain side.

Several of the cowboys were met, but they paid no heed to Frank and Arthur, as they easily passed for members of the gang.

Both were surprised at the number of the defenders of Star Ranch.

"My goodness! Harding has brought together a big band, hasn't he?" declared Arthur.

"I suppose all this property belongs to you?" said Frank.

"Yes."

"It shall be restored to you!"

The words were barely out of Frank's mouth when a dark form sprang up from the ground almost at their very feet.

"Treachery!" yelled a startled voice. "Spies are in camp!"

In an instant a score of armed men were on the spot.

"Heavens! we are lost!" groaned Arthur.

Frank Reade, jun., pulled his revolvers. His first impulse was to fight.

But second thoughts restrained him. They were surrounded by their foes.

The cowboys were intensely excited. Cries went up:

"They're spies!"

"Hang 'em up!"

"Give 'em cold lead!"

But one of the gang clutched Frank's arm, and, peering into his face, asked:

"Who are ye?"

CHAPTER X.

IN THE ENEMY'S POWER.

"I'M one of the gang!" replied Frank, imperturbably. "What the devil ails you fellows?"

"One of the gang, eh?"

"Yes."

"When did ye jine?"

An uproarious laugh went up at this.

"Look here, pard," said Frank, coolly, "don't get off your nut. There's no flies on me. I'm straight goods."

This amount of slang, an uncommon thing for the young inventor to use, ought to have had its effect.

But it did not. The cowboys were not to be so easily deceived.

"That won't work, cap'n!" cried the spokesman. "We're on to yer. Hands up!"

But Frank knew that their only hope lay in a daring bluff game.

So he insisted:

"Come pards, this ain't no kind of a joke. I'll treat."

"I reckon ye will."

"Ye don't actually imagine I'm one of the enemy?"

"We don't think anything about it—we know it."

"Don't make a mistake."

"You bet we won't."

"My soul! it is all up with us!" whispered Arthur to Frank. "There is no way out of it; we are lost!"

There was a world of despair in the young man's declaration.

"Tie 'em up!" said one of the cowboys. "Give us a lariat."

Then one of the gang made a grab at Arthur's false beard and pulled it off.

Then, of course, the game was up.

The light of a lantern was flashed in the young Easterner's face. The result was a sharp cry of recognition.

"By Jupiter, pards!" yelled the cowboy leader. "It's Bentley, the young cuss who escaped from the mine. We're in luck, and Harding will promote us for this."

"An' this chap—Great guns, it's the covey that runs the Steam Hoss!"

There was no use to attempt further concealment.

Frank realised this at once, and did not attempt it.

The two prisoners were led down to the ranch yard, where they stood revealed in the light of several fires.

A great crowd gathered about them, and the excitement was most intense.

"Hang 'em up!"

"Shoot 'em at ten paces!"

"Drag 'em on a lariat!"

These were the excited cries vengefully uttered by the crowd. But suddenly a tall, dark-featured man pressed forward.

The others fell back. Arthur Bentley gave a gasp of horror, as he recognised him as Jack Harding.

"Ha!" gritted the villain, with savage accent. "You've wound yourselves up with your own rope, haven't you, my fine birds? Ah, Mr. Frank Reade, jun., who has the upper hand now? And you, Arthur Bentley, I shall not be so gracious as to spare your life, even underground, for another year."

"Scoundrel!" exclaimed Arthur, hotly. "You have much to answer for."

"Not to you, though!"

"I defy you to do your worst."

"You will not say that when you come to face death."

"I am not afraid to die."

"That will do very well for you to say. I know better."

"Do your worst, Jack Harding. I will haunt you after death."

The villain shivered, but turned to his men and said, authoritatively:

"Lead them out twenty paces, and six of you with rifles may riddle them until they are dead."

The order was partly obeyed.

The two prisoners, with hands tied behind them, were stood side by side near the corner of the ranch building.

Six of the cowboys with Winchesters stood twenty paces distant.

Harding stood by, ready to give the word to fire.

It certainly looked as if the fate of the prisoners was sealed.

"God help us!" murmured Arthur Bentley. "We are surely done for, Frank."

But the young inventor accepted the situation stoically. He made no reply, but faced the deadly rifles in silence.

One thing was certain, the two victims had clearly determined to meet death like men of nerve and courage.

Harding, with a cruel smile upon his face, stood by.

"Ready!" he cried.

The six cowboys threw their rifles to their shoulders.

The command to fire was already trembling upon Harding's lips, when a thrilling thing occurred.

There was a sudden shrill scream of agony and terror, and a light form came flying through the gloom.

The next moment the astounded crowd of spectators saw the figure of a beautiful young girl clinging to the form of Arthur Bentley.

Instinctively, the six cowboys dropped the muzzles of their rifles to the ground.

"Arthur, they shall not kill you!" was the wild, agonised cry which pealed from the lips of Helen Vose, for she it was.

"Helen," cried Arthur, hoarsely, "you bring me joy, that I shall see you once more before I die."

Jack Harding's face was black as a thunder cloud.

He saw the affectionate attitude of the lovers, and it maddened him.

"Perdition!" he hissed. "Pull them apart! Take that hussy back to the cabin."

The order was heard by the cowboys, and a couple of them sprang forward to lay hands upon the girl.

But she turned like a tigress.

"Hold!" she cried, with flashing eyes, "do not dare to lay hands upon me."

The men instinctively shrank back.

There was a fiendish light in Harding's eyes as he took a step forward.

"Helen," he cried, hoarsely, "this will avail you nothing. You cannot save the lives of these men."

"Wretch!" exclaimed Helen, with virtuous indignation. "Would you blacken your soul with murder?"

"I am a desperate man. These men are my enemies."

"And you seek their lives?"

"They seek mine."

"If you kill them you will first kill me!" she cried, with a ring of defiance. The villain shrugged his shoulders.

"Come, *ma chère*," he said in a softer tone, "listen to reason. I do not wish to use force to take you from here."

"You had better not."

"Will you listen to reason?"

"There is nothing reasonable to me but the sparing of the lives of these men."

A sudden light came into the villain's eyes.

"I have it!" he cried. "I will spare the lives of these men since you desire it!"

A light of joy leaped from Helen's eyes.

"You will?" she cried.

"Yes; but upon one condition."

For a moment the young girl was silent. Then she drew herself up with dignity, and said, slowly:

"What is that condition?"

"That you accept my proposal of marriage."

"Scoundrel!" cried Arthur Bentley, hotly, "do you think I would consent to such a sacrifice?"

But Helen Vose raised her hand.

"Wait!" she said, in a clear, distinct voice. "Let me have time to think."

For a moment her head was bowed upon her breast. Then she raised it, and looked straight at Harding.

"Are those your only terms?" she asked, quietly.

"They are," replied the villain.

"If I consent to marry you, their lives will be spared?"

Harding bowed his head.

The young girl drew a deep, convulsive breath. Then she turned to Bentley.

"Arthur!" she said, in a tense voice,

"I would die for you!"

"Then you agree?" asked Harding, eagerly, stepping forward.

Helen put up one hand.

"Hold!" she said, tersely. "I must have time to think it over."

An exclamation of impatience escaped Harding's lips.

"Well," he said, curtly, "how much time do you want?"

"Give me until to-morrow."

"You will give me your answer then?"

"Yes."

"Enough; it shall be so. Men, take the prisoners to Room 4 in the ranch. Double bar the door, and leave them there. You, Miss Helen, will return to the lodge."

She bowed her head, and glided away.

Arthur Bentley had stood like one benumbed. He would have now launched a fierce denunciation at Harding, but Frank Reade, jun., restrained him.

"Wait," he whispered; "do not do anything rash."

"But how can I listen to such an infamous proposal?"

"It will be all right! The girl is working a fine point."

"What do you mean?"

"Wait and see. She will never accede to his terms. She is shrewdly gaining time for us."

A great light broke across Bentley's face.

"You're right!" he whispered. "I am dull not to have seen it."

The cowboys led the two prisoners into the main building of the ranch, in one corner of which there was a room with barred windows.

This was their prison cell.

The door was heavily barred, and they were left to their own reflections. But for a time let us leave them and follow the adventures of Helen Vose.

The young girl glided back to the

lodge or cabin, with its single room, which had been her prison cell.

Not much of a watch had been kept upon her, for it seemed almost impossible for her to escape alone from the stockade.

Of course watch was kept upon the cabin, but no armed guard held the door.

Reaching the cabin, Helen staggered through the door, and sank down upon a couch of fur skins.

Her mind was in a chaotic state, and she was at a loss to know what course to pursue now.

She had gained time for the captives, but whether it would amount to anything or not was the question.

Thus musing, she became oblivious of her surroundings, until suddenly a noise in the rear caused her to spring to her feet.

A dark form stood in the doorway.

Despite the gloom, Helen recognised Jack Harding.

The villain indulged in a chuckling laugh, and said:

"You did not expect a call from me?"

Helen stood like a statue in the centre of the room.

"No," she replied, coldly. "I did not expect it."

"Well, pardon me for surprising you, but I thought it a good time to step in and see you."

"Indeed! Please state your business as soon as possible."

"Why the haste?"

"I wish to be alone."

"Now, Helen, look here. Talk sense. You know that I am master of the situation. To the victor belong the spoils. You are mine now by all rights."

He took a step towards her.

"Stand back!" she said, with a repellent attitude. "Don't come nearer."

"Why do you reject me?"

"It is not necessary for me to say."

"Then you have not changed your mind yet!"

"No. I told you to wait until to-morrow for my answer."

"May I hope, then?"

"If I do consent to marry you it will be to save Arthur. I do not, and never can, love you."

"Time will do much."

"Enough! we will not talk further."

"But I insist on knowing to-night."

"If I were to answer you now it would be in the negative. I demand time to struggle with myself."

The villain was shrewd enough to see that his point could not be carried further.

"Well," he said, tersely, "I will wait until morning."

With this he turned and left the cabin.

When he had gone Helen paced the floor, wringing her hands with exciting emotions.

"Oh, what shall I do?" she moaned, "what shall I do? Is there no way out of this awful predicament?"

Suddenly a thought came to her as a sudden inspiration. She gave a little cry.

"I will do it!" she exclaimed. "Nothing venture, nothing win. I will try."

She crept to the door and looked out. The ranch yard seemed deserted. Guards were at the stockade, but the immediate vicinity was unwatched.

Only a moment did she hesitate, and then silently she crept out of the cabin. Like a shadow she flitted through the gloom to the long row of cattle sheds.

"An axe, a hatchet, a tool of some kind is what I want!" she thought. "I must find one here."

Fortune favoured her voiceless prayer.

Just here she found a small shed which was used as a tool-house. She entered it and began a search.

It was easy to find a keen hatchet and a saw. These she took, and then flitted out into the night.

She knew that the room in which the two men were imprisoned was upon the north corner of the ranch.

Suddenly she paused and slunk into deep shadows.

Voices had sounded near, and two men engaged in conversation passed her by. They were a couple of guards, but she was unseen.

When they had gone, she crept forward and reached the corner of the ranch.

The window was six feet above. As chance had it, she looked up to see a white face pressed against the iron bars.

"Arthur," she whispered, "is it you?"

"My soul; Helen, my love! What has brought you here?"

It was Arthur Bentley.

"I have come to save you"

"But—you cannot mean it! How can you do it?"

"Here is a saw and also an axe. I found them in the tool-house. If you are cautious and shrewd, you can saw your window bars out and escape."

Frank Reade, jun., was now by Arthur's side. Both men were intensely excited.

"God bless you, Helen!" whispered Arthur, fervently. "You are an angel."

"Hush! work with great care."

"Where will you be?"

"I will wait here in the shadows and warn you if anybody comes."

Silently and swiftly the two prisoners worked with the saw.

The framework of the window was of wood, and this was sawed out quickly enough. Then Frank first crawled through the window and dropped to the ground, and Arthur Bentley followed.

But just as Arthur reached the ground, the door of the room opened and a guard sprang in.

In an instant a loud yell pealed from his lips.

There was the sound of rushing feet in the ranch, and Frank clutched Bentley's arm, crying:

"The alarm is given. There is no time to lose."

They started to flee, but at that moment a tremendous uproar sounded at the stockade gate.

The rattle of firearms and the din of battle burst upon the air.

CHAPTER XI.

SENDING FOR REINFORCEMENTS.

POMP and Barney, left alone with the Steam Horse, had not been idle.

It was not long after Frank and Arthur had left that Major Vose had ridden up to the waggon and said:

"What were your orders from Mr. Reade, boys?"

"Our orders were to stay right yer, sah, till he come back," replied Pomp.

"That's roight, sor," agreed Barney.

"Well," said the major, uneasily, "I wish I could have seen Mr. Reade before he went away."

"What fo', sah?" asked Pomp.

"You see, we are in a bad fix. Every messenger we have sent to Fort Phillips has been shot by cowboys who are play-

ing the part of skirmishers out on the plain."

"Am dat so?"

"Yes; now I thought that if you were not under orders to remain here, you might escort a couple of the boys beyond the skirmish line and to a point of safety."

At once Barney and Pomp were all interest.

"Well, sah!" cried Pomp, after a discussion with Barpey, "I don' believe but dat Marse Frank would be all agreeable to dat."

"Begorra, he couldn't find no fault wid it, sor,"

"Well," said the major. "I am of your opinion. So if you think best I wish you would go."

"A'right, sah!" cried Pomp. "We'll go wif de messengers."

A couple of the cowboys were selected for the ride to Fort Phillips, and they rode alongside of the Steam Horse.

Barney went to the dasher, and Pomp, with four Winchester rifles loaded full, stationed himself at the loopholes.

Out upon the plain went the Steam Horse.

Not until well beyond the lines of Major Vose's men did the outlying cowboys venture to make an attack.

The two coarriers rode alongside the wagon at full gallop.

Suddenly Barney espied a body of horsemen emerge from the chaparral, a mile distant, and ride down towards the Steam Horse.

That they were a part of the Star Ranch gang was evident.

They bore down upon the Steam Horse at full speed.

"Kape yer eye peeled, naygur," adjured Barney. "Shure, the inemy is comin'."

"A'right, 'Fish," replied the darkey. "I'se ready fo' 'em."

And when the cowboys came within range Pomp opened fire.

As fast as he could aim and pull the trigger, Pomp fired at the foe.

Empty saddles quickly became the order, and the pursuers, who were not more than a score in number, pulled up.

Pomp was elated.

"Ki-yi, 'Fish!" he howled. "Did yo' see de dose I gib dose chickens?"

"Begorra, ye are doin' well. Now give them some more!"

"I will dat, as soon as eber dey cum nigh enuff!" cried Pomp.

But the cowboys did not venture to come again within range. Soon they were left far behind upon the prairie, and nothing more was seen of them.

After going ten miles the couriers felt safe enough to proceed alone.

Accordingly the Steam Horse took leave of them, and returned to the camp. Major Vose was highly pleased at the result.

"Things look brighter," he declared. "Before midnight we shall have the military on hand to help us."

All of the attacking party were now in high spirits.

Darkness was fast coming on, and a picket line was put out. But none of Harding's men ventured to make a sally from the stockade. Their game seemed to be a waiting one, though a crisis was near at hand.

Major Vose once sent a flag of truce to the stockade gate, the truce bearer carrying a summons to surrender.

But Harding appeared and returned an answer, couched in vile and vulgar language. This settled the matter of terms.

All now began to look anxiously for the coming of the military.

It was not deemed safe to venture an attack until they should come.

Time passed slowly, and gradually the shadows of night settled down over the prairie with deep blackness.

Major Vose kept a signal light burning, but it was not until the hour of midnight that any sign of the soldiers was seen.

Then through the darkness there came a dull, thunderous sound like the breaking of waves upon a beach.

Major Vose knew very well what it meant.

It was the hoof-beats of many horses, and he knew that reinforcements were at hand.

At once all became excitement in the camp.

Major Vose issued orders, and all of his men were quickly under arms.

Suddenly into the light of the picket fires there burst a cavalcade whose glittering uniforms told the story.

The cavalry had come from Fort Phillips, and the downfall of Harding's gang seemed near at hand.

The next moment a tall, handsome officer on a white horse galloped into the camp. He dismounted and gripped hands with Major Vose.

"Colonel Hamlin, you have come in good time!" cried the major, warmly. "I knew you would respond."

"For the sake of old friendship if nothing else, major!" laughed the colonel; "but what is the trouble?"

Major Vose quickly told the story.

Colonel Hamlin's face clouded.

"We will give these rascals a bit of a lesson!" he declared. "You say you have summoned them to surrender?"

"Yes."

"And they will not surrender?"

"No."

"Then let them take the consequences. Come, we will take action at once."

Together the two men rode forward to reconnoitre the field.

Then Colonel Hamlin said:

"The proper move is to storm the gate. If you can carry that we can invest the ranch."

"Have you brought a good force?"

"One hundred and fifty men."

"You will need them, everyone of them."

"Indeed!"

"I tell you Harding has quite a large band of fighters with him."

"So it is Lieutenant Harding who runs the ranch?"

"Yes."

"Well, I should smile."

"You know him, eh?"

"I should say I did. I was on hand at his court-martial, when he was kicked out of the service in disgrace."

"You don't mean it!"

"Yes, I do."

"Then he is a bad egg."

"You are right. Are your men ready for action, major?"

"All ready!"

"Then let us go ahead at once."

The order was given, and a wild cheer went up from the squad of cavalry as it came.

CHAPTER XII.

RUN TO EARTH.

THE attack was on, and Colonel Hamlin's cavalymen dashed forward on the full gallop.

The distance to the ranch gates was quickly covered.

A hot fire came from the stockade, but this did not deter the cavalry, for on they charged with brilliant valour. The gate was reached and efforts made to break it down.

For a time it resisted stubbornly.

But a battering-ram was speedily rigged, and with a few blows the stockade gate was shattered from its hinges.

The gateway was filled with a determined squad of cowboys.

A deadly hand-to-hand fight followed right there. But the brave boys in blue, with sabres in hand, made a valiant charge and carried the gate.

A foothold was now obtained within the stockade.

Matters began to look blue, indeed, for the cowboys. But they fought desperately, urged on by Durgin and Buxton.

Had one looked for Jack Harding they would not have found him at his post of duty by any means.

The villain had been aroused by the firing, and rushed from his quarters to find the stockade attacked.

True, at first he had attempted to rally his men, but catching sight of the soldiers, all courage left him.

He knew instinctively that his defeat would be the result, and in this extremity thought only of his own interests.

To get out of the vicinity was now his main impulse. He lost no time in rushing to his room in the ranch, and collecting everything of value that belonged to him or to anybody else.

He did not scruple to take money that he knew belonged to Durgin and Buton.

"They'll never come out alive!" he muttered, "and they'll never need it. Now for the girl and then to be off."

His plan was to take Helen along with him.

But when he rushed into the cabin where she was a prisoner he found the place empty. The bird had flown!

His sensations were indescribable. Curses loud and deep burst from his lips.

"They've let her escape!" he yelled. "Curse them for a pack of fools! But I'll have her yet."

He rushed out into the yard, which, to all appearance, was deserted.

A desperate battle was in progress at the gate of the stockade.

It was quite likely that all the cowboys were there engaged in defending the ranch.

Harding made a brief search of the vicinity for Helen. Then it occurred to him to look in upon the prisoners.

But he found the bars of the window sawed out, and they were gone.

His fury knew no bounds. Then he raved like a maniac, and rushed from the ranch.

"Ten thousand curses on the fools!" he hissed, "they should have kept a better watch. It is likely the girl has got away and is with her lover."

The thought made him furious.

"Curse him! I will have his life if I have to follow him to the end of the world."

It was a vengeful declaration.

But it was a threat which Jack Harding was destined never to execute.

The fighting at the gate was furious.

He saw that the soldiers had forced their way through.

"That settles it," he muttered. "It is all up with the boys now!"

His personal safety was now all that Harding thought of. He knew that the only avenue of escape open was through the secret mine.

Accordingly, he started up the hill. But when he had reached a point near the shaft he came unexpectedly upon three persons who were watching the fight.

In the gloom the villain saw that one of them was a female form.

He knew at once that it was Helen Vose, and that her companions were Frank Reade, jun., and Arthur Bentley.

The thought made the wretch fairly insane with rage and hate.

He pulled a revolver and fired point-blank at Bentley.

The bullet went wide of its mark, and the next moment Frank Reade, jun., knocked the pistol from his grasp.

The young inventor grappled with the villain, and a desperate struggle followed.

Helen Vose screamed with terror, and Arthur went to Frank's assistance.

The villain fought like a tiger.

But two against one were odds not to be despised. The result was that Harding was overpowered and borne to the ground. Arthur had a lariat, and they bound him securely hand and foot.

"It will do you no good to struggle, Jack Harding!" cried Arthur, with triumph. "Your career is run."

"Curse you!" roared out the villain.

"I'll come square yet!"

"I don't believe it."

"Let me up!"

"No, I think not."

Harding fumed like a maniac and tried to break his bonds. But it was all of no use. They held firmly, and his efforts were in vain.

Frank and Arthur were elated.

"We have got the ringleader in our power!" declared Frank. "The soldiers will drive the others from the ranch, and your property will be quickly restored to you."

"It seems too good to believe," cried Arthur.

And all the while Helen Vose clung to her lover's side.

The battle in the yard below was nearing the end.

Step by step the cowboys were forced back, for they could not stand before the disciplined valour of the troops.

And now through the gates came thundering the Steam Horse.

The iron steed plunged into the fight and did deadly execution with his spiked hoofs.

The cowboys were driven back to the cattle sheds, and then to the base of the mountain.

Here their retreat was cut off, and, completely surrounded, they seemed certain to be cut to pieces.

But discretion asserted itself as valour's better part, and they threw down their arms and wisely surrendered.

The battle was at an end.

The soldiers quickly disarmed and corralled the prisoners, and then proceeded to take possession of the ranch.

Frank Reade, jun., now joined Barney and Pomp with the Steam Horse.

A guard was sent up to bring down the captured leader, Jack Harding.

Colonel Hamlin was a man of rapid action.

The grey light of dawn was just breaking when he called a court-martial, and Al Durgin, Sid Buxton, and Jack Harding were arraigned before it.

Nothing could be said by Durgin and Buxton in defence, and sentence was pronounced upon them.

They were taken out upon the plain, and, at twenty paces, were shot by a squad of soldiers.

Thus were the plains freed of two atrocious ruffians.

Harding was now brought before the tribunal.

Coward that he was, the villain was the picture of abject terror and despair. He begged piteously for his life.

"I'll swear to reform," he pleaded to Colonel Hamlin. "I will agree to do any thing if you will spare my life."

"Jack Harding!" said the colonel, sternly, "why didn't you think of that some time ago?"

The villain could not answer.

"If you had you might not have come to this."

"I was driven to it!" replied Harding.

"Driven to it?"

"Yes."

The colonel was amazed.

"How?" he asked.

"Why, my court-martial and discharge from the service did it."

"It did, eh?"

"Yes."

"Don't you think you deserved discharge?"

"No."

"I do, and so does every other fair-minded soldier. I tell you, Jack Harding, you had a good chance."

"A mighty hard one."

"I repeat, a good one. You have shown yourself a villain throughout. You must meet your punishment."

"Now, look here, Hamlin," pleaded the wretch, "you are one of the service, just the same as I. You won't see a comrade shot."

"I have my duty to execute. Sentiment has nothing to do with that."

A wail escaped the prisoner's lips.

"Oh, I'll swear to reform!"

"It is too late."

"I beg you not to kill me."

"You have had a fair trial."

The prisoners face became ashy pale.

"And what was the sentence?" he asked, with awful terror.

"Death!"

A shriek of agony burst from Harding's lips. It revealed plainly what a thorough coward he was.

"Don't—don't kill me!" he screamed. "Give me my life."

But Colonel Hamlin motioned to a file of soldiers near.

They sprang forward and placed hands on him. Harding now made a miserable scene.

He refused to walk, and the soldiers were obliged to carry him bodily from the ranch.

CHAPTER XIII.

WHICH IS THE END.

THE sun was just peering above the horizon line, when Jack Harding was carried out upon the plain to meet the just punishment of his crimes.

The squad of soldiers carried him to the brink of a third grave dug in the prairie.

Durgin and Buxton already filled the other two.

As Harding would not stand up, a stake was driven into the plain, and he was bound to it.

Then the squad of soldiers at twenty paces awaited the order to fire.

Shrieks and curses rolled from the doomed villain's lips, but all to no purpose. His fate was sealed. The order came quick and sharp:

"Fire!"

There was a crash of rifle reports, a volume of smoke, and Jack Harding's head lay motionless upon his breast.

He had expiated his many crimes in a just manner.

Within the stockade quite a different scene was being enacted.

The re-union between Major Vose and Helen was most affecting.

The old major was so delighted, that he could hardly control himself.

"How the tables have turned!" he cried; "and it's all owing to Mr. Reade and his wonderful Steam Horse."

Frank bowed modestly.

"You do me too much honour," he replied.

"Not a bit of it," reiterated the jolly major. "We'll never forget you. Three cheers for the Steam Horse!"

They were given with a will.

Cowboys and soldiers had all mixed up for a good time.

The prisoners, or the remnant of Harding's band, were kept under guard to be sent to Fort Phillips for trial.

Everybody was in high spirits.

Frank Reade, jun., seemed to partake of this, for he suddenly turned to Arthur, and said:

"Can you not prove your claims to the Star Ranch now?"

"This very moment," replied Arthur.

"Good! I call for three cheers for the new proprietor of the Star Ranch."

They were given lustily.

"Begorra, it's a foine toime all around," cried Barney. "Eh, naygur?"

The Celt tripped the darkie up, and Pomp retorted.

"Ki dar, I'ish, don' yo' try no skylarkin' on dis chile."

Then the two friends gripped for a friendly old-time wrestle.

But Major Vose, who was in high spirits, slapped Arthur on the back.

"So you're to run the rival ranch, are you, friend Bentley? Well, I wish you luck."

"No," cried Arthur, suddenly. "I think that the Comfort Ranch and the Star Ranch will have to be run as one institution hereafter. Eh, Helen?"

The young girl blushed, and her eyes were downcast.

The major looked from one to the other keenly, and exclaimed:

"Eh? What the deuce do you mean? So, that's the game, is it? And you would leave your old father, Helen—"

"No," cried Helen, throwing her arms about his neck. "I will not, for—"

"We shall consolidate the two ranches, Major Vose," said Arthur, bluntly. "And now, I know of no better way than to clinch matters right here. In the new West, nothing can be too abrupt and

sudden, so I am sure we shall shock no sense of propriety."

Arthur motioned to a clerical-looking man. It was the chaplain of the regiment. He advanced and opened a prayer-book.

Major Vose stood inactive a moment.

Then he took the hands of the two young people and joined them.

"My blessing goes with my children!" he declared, earnestly.

* * * * *

Once more we will take the reader back to Readestown.

Frank Reade, jun., Barney and Pomp are safely at home, and the Steam Horse is in winter quarters.

Frank Reade, jun., the wonderful young inventor, is in his library when the door opens and a gentleman enters.

"Why, Captain Bentley, I am glad to see you!" exclaimed Frank, looking up. "Pray be seated."

The old captain's eyes were beaming with joy.

"I have simply come in to express my gratitude for the rescue of my boy," he declared. "But why did you not bring him back to me?"

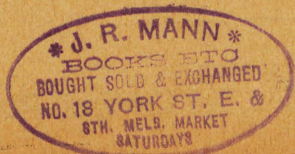
"You must ask him," said Frank. "He is far too happy, I imagine, in his Western home to come back here. You ought to go to him."

"I will do so," replied the captain.

And he kept his word. On all the Texas ranges there is no ranch now so prosperous as the Star. Arthur Bentley and his fair bride attribute their great happiness wholly to the efforts of Frank Reade and his wonderful Steam Horse.

But, arrived home for a rest, Frank suddenly found it cut short by being called forth upon a new mission, the details of which may be found in thrilling form in No. 9 of the **YOUNG INVENTOR'S LIBRARY**, entitled:

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