

A Deal in Wild Lands

OF THE
FIGHT FOR THE MUSSELSHELL MILLIONS.

BY LEON LEWIS.

CHAPTER X.

AT RAMSNAKE RANCH.
Let us now take a long step forward and see what is doing in Montana.

At about 8 o'clock on a fine summer morning, Col. Harvey Whipsaw, of Ramsnake Ranch, sat in an easy chair on his front veranda, engaged in looking over a somewhat bulky mail of letters and newspapers, which had just been brought him from the nearest postoffice by a trusted factotum.

"It's strange," he muttered, "that I do not hear from Hiram Skidder. Can he have failed to get my letter? Or have I failed to allow sufficient time for it to reach him?"

A troubled look crept into his countenance as he continued his task.

The appearance of the Colonel was as striking as his name, he being one of those hardy, clean-lined pioneers who are seen nowhere in greater perfection than in the Rockies.

He was not only a renowned Indian-fighter and scout, with an excellent record, but he was a so high toned and cultured gentleman, despite his plain features and his still more primitive way of living.

He had even been more renowned as a magistrate than as an officer of the army, and this fact will attest that he was highly intelligent and many-sided.

"I asked him to telegraph me the moment my letter reached him," added the Colonel, gazing his feet and beginning to walk to and fro on the veranda, "and he must have heard from me some days since. My arrangements to get his telegram are certainly perfect. Why don't he answer?" At this rate, I shall not get hold of those mines on any terms. What can be done?"

A clatter of hoofs suddenly falling upon his hearing from the adjacent trail, he turned his gaze in that direction.

"At last!" he could not help ejaculating. "There is my answer now."

He hardly stirred or drew a long breath until the horseman had ridden up to the ranch, drawing rein.

"A telegram for you, Colonel," announced the messenger, with the air of one who believes in the force of very gratifying intelligence. "I hope it will respond to your wishes."

"A thousand thanks, Tommy," replied the Colonel, receiving the missive. "Won't you come in and have a lemonade or something?"

"No, thank you, Colonel," was the reply. "I expect to tarry an hour with my brother on Golden Creek, and need not bother you."

And with a polite movement of his hat the messenger rode away at the same pace by which he had come.

And now to the business of the matter. The Colonel, after turning the telegram over two or three times in his hands, "I wonder if I am destined to get hold of those Musselshell millions? In any case, I am bound to make a good fight for them."

Reaching the seal, he began reading the somewhat lengthy communication with a look of surprise which deepened rapidly to amazement.

"It's got from Hiram Skidder at all," he ejaculated. "It's from Perry Wynns."

He looked deeply puzzled.

"And who on earth can Perry Wynns be?" he demanded. "The name sounds familiar. Let me see—ah! I have it! He's that clever young clerk from Chicago who passed a couple of days with us three years ago. Well, well, here's the end of my dream, my factotum. It seems, it seems, to be the owner of those wild lands, and is on his way out here to take possession."

He read the telegram again, and gradually the shade lifted from his features.

"How true it is," he resumed, "that there's no greater loss without a gain. If I am disappointed about the mines, I none the less have the hope of soon possessing an excellent neighbor, and one whose presence will be a sort of indemnity for all the annoyance Jerry Skidder has caused me. Yes, yes, I remember the young stranger who, mysteriously, seemed to me at the time to be no common man."

Another clatter of hoofs arose at this moment, and there was a ring about it which at once fixed the Colonel's attention.

"Hello!" he ejaculated, gathering up his letters and papers and stepping into the house with them. "That man rides as if for dear life. From the direction of the mines, too. Can it be that Sam Gaddler or any of his devils would dare come here to make an attack upon me?"

Snatching a fine double-barreled rifle from the wall, he stood it just within the door of his sitting-room, and then stepped out upon the lawn, giving his whole attention to the approaching horseman, who had now appeared in his view, about a hundred rods distant.

"Thunder! What can compel the man?" exclaimed the Colonel. "And who can he be?"

The Colonel's ranch was situated near the mouth of a branch of the Musselshell, and was one of the finest in Montana.

It comprised the who's peninsula between the two rivers, and consisted partly of bottom lands and partly of those "benches" which are esteemed so highly for residences.

The Colonel's abode was one of those dwellings of a nature low which are so admirable in an climate for other summer or winter, they bring as well adapted to keeping out the cold of one season as the heat of the other.

It was reached readily only from the side of the tributary, across which had been thrown a rustic bridge, strong enough to support any weight likely to be placed upon it.

Over this bridge at a furious pace came the stranger, his eyes fixed intently upon Colonel Whipsaw, and in a few moments more had drawn rein beside him.

"Am I right?" asked the newcomer hurriedly. "Is this Colonel Whipsaw?"

"It is, sir."

"Are you the Colonel?"

"I am."

"Then I can do no less," continued the stranger, slipping to the ground, "than appeal to you for assistance. My son and I have barely escaped with my life from Sam Gaddler, and a number of his

men, who have made an attempt to murder me!"

"Why?" asked the Colonel.

"Because I have been spying out what they are doing at the mines," explained the stranger. "My name is Baker—Charley Baker. I am a telegraph expert by profession, and was sent out here by the real owner of the Musselshell mines, a man named Perry Wynns."

"Exactly," interrupted the Colonel, "I shall start to come into the house, Mr. Baker. I'll send your horse to the stable."

Facing a metallic whistle to his lips, the Colonel blew two or three peculiar notes, and then motioned the fugitive to enter.

"My thanks, Colonel," said Baker, "but I must warn you that you will get into trouble if you champion my cause. Sam Gaddler is very bitter against me, and swears that he will kill me!"

"Never mind that," returned Col. Whipsaw, with a look of graceful wear of the hand. "Will Gaddler pursue you?"

"I cannot doubt it."

"That's a good reason, then, for accepting the shelter of my house. Walk in."

The Colonel's factotum had now made his appearance, a bright eyed, herculean young man of one and twenty, and the Colonel proceeded to give him a few rapid orders in a tone too guarded to reach even the newcomer's hearing.

"And put this horse in the stable next to mine," Ned, added the Colonel. "Leave them both saddled and bridled."

Ned nodded obediently, and hastened away with the horse, while the Colonel led the way into the dwelling.

"I'll send you a telegram from Mr. Wynns," he said, motioning his guest to a chair, "and I recall him well as a young man who passed a couple of days with me several years ago. As you will see by this message, he is now at no great distance on his way to us."

Baker, who held the telegram, a sign of relief escaping him.

"I am glad he has taken this stand," he declared. "I have been wishing all the morning I could get a line to him. The truth is, this man Gaddler is one of those rascals that never give up until they are completely broken. He has been robbing Mr. Wynns for months and years, and is now taking out of the two mines about six thousand dollars every day. He has discovered that I have been in the neighborhood ever since last Wednesday, and has been clear and clear of my purpose of my visit. In a word, he is aware that I am in possession of all his nefarious secrets, and he swears that I shall never return to Perry Wynns to tell what I know."

"I see your clothes are badly torn, Mr. Baker," said the Colonel. "Are you seriously hurt?"

"No, sir, thanks to the speed of my horse," replied Baker. "As my assailants were a dozen to one, I would have stood no chance at all if I had not been well mounted. Ah—"

"He is speaking and warningly, listening with an air of keen interest."

"There they are," he remarked as a confused clatter of hoofs resounded from a distance. "The villain has mustered his fore and aw and is coming here to kill me."

"You just sit where you are for the present," Mr. Baker, enjoined the Colonel, quietly slipping a revolver into his right hip pocket. "I'll take a look at these people, and see what is their business in this quarter."

Seizing an ax which stood behind his chair, the Colonel snatched out in the direction of the bridge we have mentioned, with the air of a man who is proceeding in his timber.

CHAPTER XI.

THE FIGHT THAT SUCCEEDED.

The approaching horseman came on so rapidly that they encountered the Colonel as he was crossing the bridge, the little bridge leading to his dwelling.

At their head rode Sam Gaddler, the suitor of Daisy Skidder, and the superintendent of the mining operations which had been carried on in Perry's name by her father.

"Here's the tracks of the fellow now," Sam Gaddler, said to one of the men by whom Gaddler was accompanied, pointing them out. "You see that they lead directly over the bridge to the Colonel's dwelling."

"Sure enough," exclaimed Gaddler, his face beaming with delight. "We are on the right track."

Turning to Colonel Whipsaw, he continued: "You see, therefore, Colonel Whipsaw, that it will not be of the least use for you to deny that you have seen the man in question."

"He made any attempt at denial?" returned the Colonel, quietly enough, although there was a steely gleam in his eyes that might have served his questioners as a warning.

"To be sure—no, you haven't," Gaddler avowed frankly. "Then you mean to say that you have seen him?"

"I do."

"Where is he?"

"He is just now under the shelter of my roof."

"Out of my path, then," enjoined Gaddler. "You cannot keep us parleying here while the rascal escapes. We must have him!"

"You won't have him till you have told me what he has done," remarked the Colonel, as quietly as before. "What do you want of him?"

"What do you propose to kill him?"

"What for?"

"Because he has been sent out here from Chicago to interfere with me," declared Gaddler, with the air of finding it a serious task to restrain his impatience.

"In a word, he's a sneaking, meddling spy."

"He's nothing of the sort," affirmed the Colonel. "He is an honorable man, who was sent out here by another honorable man, to learn what you are doing with a valuable property to which you and Jerry Skidder do not have the slightest claim! I may add that he has found out all he desires to know, and that he and his employer will soon put an end to the lawless career you and your intended father-in-law have been running in this region."

Sam Gaddler sat glaring at the Colonel as if at a loss to find words in which to express his anger.

"So you dare to champion this man, do you?" he at length demanded.

"I do, sir, and I must now ask you to

state these premises, they being mine. You'll advance another step in this direction at your peril!"

The reader can readily imagine what sort of a tumult was occasioned by this unexpected risible outburst.

"Ride him down!" shouted another.

"Get off this bridge, all of you," commanded the Colonel, retreating quietly, across it, as he brandished his axe warily.

"Not a step more!" cried another.

"Oh, you're a wretched sort of a fellow," interrupted Gaddler, putting spurs to his horse. "We'll not only have our man but we'll take you with him, if necessary, and have you both as make-weights from the same limb!"

"Hold!" shouted the Colonel, flourishing his axe again. "You cannot cross this bridge."

"And why can't we?" asked Gaddler.

"Because it has been keyed and braced in such a way that one blow from this axe will send it tumbling into the river."

"If you take another step, therefore—"

"Head him off, Gilly," interrupted Sam Gaddler, addressing one of his followers, with a significant gesture.

The blow from the Colonel's axe descended at the very instant he reached the inner end of the bridge, and in that same instant the whole structure went down with a tremendous crash into the deep and narrow gorge below equally dammed.

The confusion and confusion that arose from the Colonel's assailants can be imagined.

A couple of horses were killed and two or three limbs were broken, in addition to which every man was obliged to struggle out of the stream as he could, and the confusion upon their respective sides was accomplished made up a scene resembling pandemonium.

The Colonel did not wait, however, to note the results of the measure he had taken, but beat a rapid retreat to his residence, shutting himself in.

"What a rascal!" he announced.

"The rascal's having begun a war, I have given them a touch some of them will doubtless remember, tumbling them into the river. That bridge, you see, was built in the early days, when redskins and road agents were as low equally dammed.

It could be instantly demolished without losing a single timber, they being all fastened together. He took it down repeatedly, but this is the first time I have had occasion to do so."

"Of course they will be furious," returned the colonel, perceiving, seizing his rifle.

"Doubtless," admitted the Colonel, as he also armed himself. "But I have scored a first advantage by letting down that bridge and we will score others before they drive us from the peninsula."

By three times the couple had made all their arrangements for the night, and several of his chosen spirits struggled up the bank, and took their way cautiously toward the house, at length gaining the shelter of a large pile of wood between it and the river.

"And now to give it to them hot and heavy," muttered the leader of the assailants. "If we don't kill them both, it will be because there is no virtue in bullets."

We need not linger upon the details of the fight that succeeded. Thanks to the shelter both parties had secured, not the least injury was accomplished during the first night's struggle, and that every wound with most of the assailants had been broken out of the Colonel's dwelling.

"This will never do," at length growled Sam Gaddler. "We must set the house afire, whatever the cost or risk."

"Can you manage it, Dakin?"

"I can leave it to you."

The ruffian tried so well, taking advantage of certain shelters and angles afforded him, that it was not long before he had kindled two fires at the side of the dwelling and in his roof.

"That will do the business, Cap," he reported, when he returned to the shelter of the wood-pile, despite the bullets that were sent after him. "We can shoot them if they come out to extinguish the fire, and if they don't come out they'll be roasted."

The rascal had, indeed, become a bad omen for the gallant defender.

"The house is sure to go," remarked the Colonel, after listening a moment to the roar of the flames.

"What a pity that I have got you into this trouble!" was Baker's answer.

"Never mind that," said the Colonel.

"Another thing, however, must be done if we make our escape, and those claps can all be sent to prison for a good long term when we once get hold of them. I think now is a good moment to give them the slip and go the stable. With a start of a few moments we may be able to get out of here before the rascal has bridled, and so make our escape across the river."

The attempt was duly made, the couple slipping out by a side door, and they had the good fortune to reach the stable before the assailants caught sight of them.

"They see us," exclaimed Baker, as the cries of the enemy announced the fact. "We must be lively!"

Fortunately there was a side door to the stable, and no time was lost by the couple in availing themselves of this door to make a bee-line for the river at full gallop, leaving behind them a trail of suit and the shower of bullets by which their flight was accompanied.

"Of course there is a chance against us while we are crossing the stream," exclaimed the Colonel, as he led the way to the water. "Keep close to me, Baker, and don't let me hear of your not doing it. We don't miss it. These horses have often practiced this swim, and will make a no trouble."

He dodged involuntarily as a number of balls whistled past the couple, some of them striking the water, but the start had been well taken, and the fugitives were out of the river before their assailants had reached the opposite bank.

"We might dispute their passage," said the Colonel, "and could certainly reduce their number before they reach this bank, but it would be a waste of time to try to make a stand here. It will be better for us to resort to guerrilla tactics, making a stand only when every thing is in our favor."

"Set fire to that shanty," Sam Gaddler was heard shouting, with a gesture toward the stable, "and be quick about it. I want to run the mill during the next twenty minutes," he added, in a lower tone, addressing one of his favorites. "In order that I may go to Custer to intercept a couple who are coming to the Musselshell. Be lively now, all of you, and I shall soon be able to start upon my proposed journey."

A hearty response was given him, and in another minute his ruffians had crossed the stream and were galloping furiously after Colonel Whipsaw and Baker, who had dashed away with the air of

one who knew that they are menaced by a terrible peril.

CHAPTER XII.

INTO EVIL HANDS.

By the time Elie Tower and Perry Wynns, accompanied by the motherly Mrs. Rankle, were well out of Chicago, their souls had become joined in the tenderest respect and affection.

"How odd it seems, Mr. Wynns," the former could not help saying, "for me to be going on such a long journey with you!"

"Just not so odd as pleasant—for me, at least," was the reply. "I hope that the journey will be as profitable as it has been as long as we live."

Elie's face grew more intense in its coloring, a glad, tender light appearing in her soulful eyes.

"I hope so, too," she said, simply.

The silence which succeeded was so full of happiness that it lasted many minutes, during which the train continued to roll onward.

"And all this time we forget that Jerry Skidder is on the same train with us," at length murmured the latter.

"And his daughter," suggested Mrs. Rankle.

"Not to speak of Hiram Skidder and his two hopefuls," remarked Perry, with a smile of content. "How very little we care for them."

"Perhaps the two brothers will make up their differences before the night is ended," pursued Elie. "I dare say they are in a good way to unite all their forces against us."

"In any case, we need not give them a thought," Elie said. "Fortunately they are not in the same car with us, and if they were we could remain in the state-room."

He reflected a few moments intently, and then resumed:

"I told you about Colonel Whipsaw, didn't I?—I thought he was to meet me during my visit to the Musselshell, although I didn't give him any very definite idea of my business in that quarter? Well, I must send the Colonel a few lines by telegram before our arrival, and it will be well to also send him a note, too, by Charley Baker, that we shall soon be with him. Charley is one of my old schoolmates, with whom I have always remained more or less closely associated, and I am sure you will be pleased to make his personal acquaintance."

They did not linger upon their journey to St. Paul, nor upon the longer one between St. Paul and their destination.

Let it suffice to say that the lovers and Mrs. Rankle remained the most of the time in the seclusion of their own state-room, and they did not so much as catch a glimpse of their assailants during the whole trip Westward.

At about 1 o'clock in the morning on the fourth day after leaving Chicago, the little party alighted from the train at Custer.

"It's an awkward hour for one's arrival," remarked Perry, with a glance at the covered sky, as he drew Elie's arm within his own on reaching the ground; "and there is a still more awkward ride before us. I wonder if there will be a hack in waiting at such an unseasonable hour?"

"Carriage, sir?" said a man, who came hurrying up to the couple, with a dull-bronzed lantern.

"Yes," replied Perry; "where is it?"

"Yonder, sir."

The man not only pointed out the vehicle but led the way toward it.

"That's all right," said Perry, after a glance at the carriage. "This way, Mrs. Rankle."

He hastened to assist his companions into the vehicle, and then sprang in lightly himself, shutting the door.

"Where to, sir?" asked the driver.

"I'll tell you that later, after we have crossed the river," replied Perry.

"Shall we be able to ferry across at this hour of the night?"

"Certainly, or at any other hour, so long as you are willing to pay well for the service."

"Drive on, then," ordered Perry.

"Our first trip will be across the Yellowstone at the junction."

The driver looked the party over a moment, with an air of suppressed jubilation and excitement, and then mounted briskly to his box and drove away into the darkness, concealing his lantern behind a bush.

"It's not far to the river, I suppose," queried Perry, after a brief silence.

"No, sir; a mere step."

The "step" proved to be a long one, but at length the carriage was driven upon a low pier, and from the pier cautiously assisted to ready boat of those same, shabby ferry boats which are still so commonly in use on Western rivers.

"That's all," said the driver; "there's no one else coming."

The ferry boat proceeded to get under way, and hardly a word was spoken until they had discharged its passengers upon the opposite side of the river.

"Is it not strange that we saw nothing of the Skidders?" asked Mrs. Rankle.

"Rather," replied Perry. "I can only suppose that they have gone on to Billings, because we talked of going there."

"But that would have been at the most as handy for us, as far as the mines are concerned, but my objective point is the county seat, where I propose to place those deeds on record."

"Where to, sir?" asked the driver again, appearing at the side of the carriage.

Perry reflected a moment.

"Your horses are fresh?" he then asked.

"Yes, sir; really for anything."

"You do not care how far you go, I dare say?"

"Certainly not, so long as you are ready to pay me liberally."

"Then take the road to Musselshell, and do not let the grass grow under your feet for the next two hours."

"All right, sir."

TO BE CONTINUED.

ICE IN WHEAT FIELDS.

GLOOMY REPORTS FROM THE NORTHWEST.

Efforts to Dissipate the Frosts by Building Fires—The Damage Widespread, Affecting Minnesota, Dakota, and Manitoba—Harvesting Hardly Fairly Commenced.

Seven Degrees Below Freezing.

The reports which come from the North Dakota wheat fields are of a discouraging character.

At Coeur d'Alene, Griggs County, there was a heavy freeze, ice forming in a quarter of an inch thick. Late grain is cooked, and wheat in shock and in process of cutting is damaged. The thermometer reached the freezing point at 10 o'clock, and at 11 o'clock the morning cold to 25 degrees. Farmers generally had placed straw on the north side of the fields, and most everybody sat up all night and tended their smudges, but it was of no use, for what little breeze there was came from the south and carried the smoke in the wrong direction. About 25 per cent. of the grain is in shock. The thermometers ran down to 28 at several points in Ramsey County, and ice was found on the heads of wheat in many places. Smudge fires were not started until late in the night, and it is feared they did little good.

About 50 per cent. of the grain is cut in that region.

Villages along the northern border report that the temperature was in places as low as 23 at 10 o'clock, at Pembina, 24 at 10 o'clock, at Fargo, and 30 at St. John. It was cloudy, however, at the last two points named.

Manitoba reports are black. Every point in the province shows that the temperature was from 22 to 27.

At Coeur d'Alene, it is still in the milk, and a large percentage of it will be a total loss. Oliver Daulton, North Dakota's great wheat-grower, said, on the condition of the crops, that he estimated the frost had destroyed about one-seventh of the entire wheat and oats crop in the Red River Valley from Fargo to the British possessions. The last freeze would, of course, reduce the figures, and he feared one-sixth of the crop would be destroyed. On the night of the first frost one-half of the wheat acreage had been overtaken by the frost. He says that all the wheat sown at that time has had what is called a "brand" frost. This wheat will be equally as good for milling purposes as No. 1 hard, but the farmers will receive a grade lower. In explaining the action of the frost on the wheat crop in the Red River Valley, he would destroy its brightness and cause it to lose a grade. The wheat in the milk would be an entire loss whenever there was a frost below 32 degrees. The straw would turn to yellow and might develop even the most experienced farmer, but the grain would never pass out of