

For a week or two after the adventures just described, Jack Halliday lived a peaceful, though lonely and dreary, life. The irrational blind sort of terror experienced the first night in camp soon died away, but in its place came a dull, callous recklessness, bred by the unvarying monotony and utter loneliness of the life. Oh, for some human companion! How gladly would he do any drudgery, any overwork, if he could but live with his fellow-creatures again! But there was no help for it. Some one must take the sheep into camp, and why not he? All those who called themselves "Western men" had done it before him. Once a week his employer rode down, bringing provisions and any letter or papers from home. These, together with his Bible, hymn book and Randall's "Sheep Husbandry," were all the literature with which to pass the weary time. Novels were not allowed, nor, in fact, continued reading of any kind, as it might take his attention off the sheep.

So day after day went by, and this hard indifference grew steadily upon him; he had become more and more careless of exposing himself to an attack from the mountain lion, and had he seen it would have fired instantly, though, even if it were mortally wounded, there would be small chance of his escaping with his life.

Even the rough, careless observation of his employer—rough and careless because he had lived this life for months at a time, and had forgotten the effect of his first few weeks in camp—noticed a change; a grim compression of the lips and sullen lowering of the eyebrows not seen before. But these were satisfactory signs to the experienced ranchman, who knew what qualities most required fostering in the embryo "Western man." "The boy's getting considerable toned down," he soliloquized, as he rode home. "Not much left of the tenderfoot now; he has a lot more 'get up' to him than he had before he went into camp. There's jest one more thing he's got to know about, which I'd half a mind to tell him of, only they can't be around yet. And if he stands that all right, why he'll do."

The "one more thing" that was to complete Jack's education occurred about a month after his first arrival in camp.

The sun had just set, and the young herder had kindled his fire and put the coffee pot on to boil. According to custom, when he reached this stage in his cooking, he went outside and climbed to the brow of the hill behind to see how the sheep—left about half a mile off—were getting on; whether they were dutifully turning their heads toward camp, or perversely going another way. This evening he had hardly made sure that they were coming in the right direction when, sweeping the horizon carelessly with his eye, he saw two men on horse-back riding at full gallop and striking straight for camp. Jack instantly descended to the house, and buckling on his loaded revolver, and placing the coffee pot at a safe distance from the fire, he strolled out to meet the newcomers, now rapidly approaching.

The strangers, to judge from their personal appearance, were "cowboys," *i. e.*, men employed to drive and

handle the wild Texan and half-bred cattle that roam the Western prairies. They wore the usual dress of their profession—broad-brimmed grey hats, blue flannel shirts, buckskin riding-trousers, with a fringe running down the sides (Indian fashion), and long boots.

Two peculiarities were noticeable about these men—firstly, their horses were without saddles; secondly, they were continually looking behind them, as if expecting pursuit of some kind. They did not speak a word until they had pulled up close to Jack, when one, apparently the elder of the two—with a red face set in lines of iron, especially about the mouth, but somewhat redeemed by a kindly pair of blue eyes—rolled off his horse, and after shaking Halliday's hand for a moment or two in silence, to get breath after his hard gallop, said:

"Say, stranger, can you put us up to-night at yer camp? We're both dead-beat, and I don't b'lieve our horses can git another step."

"Oh, yes," was the reply, "if you don't mind bacon and beans. But what's the matter, boys? you look kind of wild, your ponies' bare backs, too, and—"

"You bet we've not been skinning along at this rate for nothing, cap'n. But wait till we've put the horses out, and had a bit of supper, and I'll tell yer all about it. The brutes won't be 'round for the next hour or two, Jim, will they?" he added, addressing his companion, a quiet, taciturn-looking lad of nineteen, who, replying with a shake of the head, and a curt "I guess not," moved toward the hut.

The two strangers then, without further ceremony, borrowing a picket rope from Jack, put their horses out to feed, and followed him into the cabin. The younger man, Jim, flung himself on the ground without a word, but the other man, taking hold of the frying pan, began to help Jack to prepare the supper.

No further conversation passed between the young herder and his strange guests, except a question or two concerning the whereabouts of the food or utensils. Soon a substantial meal was prepared, and the three sat down to devour it with butcher knives and fingers. After he had demolished the best part of a panful of beans, several slices of bread and bacon, and drank some deep draughts of coffee, the elder stranger, who was addressed by his companion as "Luke," raised his head, and, without further preface, began his story in these words:

"You would like to know, cap'n, what me and Jim here were loping along in such a cussed hurry for, eh? Well, young man, don't get more scared than you can help, but I guess by the time the moon rises, at ten o'clock to-night, there may be something like one hundred Indians around this 'ere dug-out."

"Indians!" exclaimed Jack. "Good God! what do you mean?"

"What I say, I *guess*," replied Luke, drily, helping himself to the last slice of bacon. "The facts is these. Me and two other boys, Jim here, and another, Tom Lakin, were hunting up some beef steers, supposed to be in this locality somewhere, belonging to our boss, old man Williams—I don't know whether you're acquainted with