

Out on the Pampas

By G. A. HENTY

CHAPTER XIII.—(Continued.)

"We will, Charley; we will, my boys," Mr. Hardy said earnestly, and rousing himself at the thought. "I must go up and break it to your mother, though how I shall do so I know not. Do you give what orders you like for collecting our friends. First, though, let us question this man. When was it?"

"Last night, signor, at eleven o'clock. I had just lain down in my hut, and I noticed that there were still lights downstairs at the house, when, all of a sudden, I heard a yell as of a thousand fiends, and I knew the Indians were upon us. I knew that it was too late to fly, but I threw myself out of the window, and lay flat by the wall, as the Indians burst in. There were eight of us, and I closed my ears to shut out the sound of the others' cries. Up to the house, too, I could hear screams and some pistol shots, and then more screams and cries. The Indians were all round, everywhere, and I dreaded lest one of them should stumble up against me. Then a sudden glare shot up, and I knew they were firing the house. After a time all became quiet; but I dared not move till daylight. Then, looking about me carefully, I could see no one, and I jumped up and never stopped running until you met me."

Mr. Hardy now went up to the house to break the sad tidings to his wife. Charley ordered eight ponies to saddle horses instantly, and while they were doing so he wrote on eight leaves of his pocketbook: "The Mercer's house destroyed last night by Indians; the Mercers killed or carried off. My sister Ethel with them. Meet at Mercer's as soon as possible. Send this note around to all neighbors."

One of these slips of paper was given to each pony, and they were told to ride for their lives in different directions, for that Miss Ethel was carried off by the Indians. This was the first intimation of the tidings that had arrived, and a perfect chorus of lamentations arose from the women, and of execrations of rage from the men.

Mr. Hardy and the boys kept up as well as they could, in order to inspire the mother and sister with hope during their absence, and with many promises to bring their missing one back they galloped off. They were scarcely out of the gate when they saw their two friends from Canterbury coming along at full gallop. Both were armed to the teeth, and evidently prepared for an expedition.

An exclamation of rage and sorrow burst from them all, as only a portion of the chimney and a charred post or two showed where the Mercer home had stood. The huts of the ponies had also disappeared; the young trees and shrubs around the house were scorched up and burned by the heat to which they had been exposed, or had been broken off from the spirit of wanton mischief.

With clinched teeth and faces pale with rage and anxiety, the party rode past the site of the huts, scattered round which were the bodies of several of the murdered ponies. They halted not until they drew rein and leaped off in front of the house itself.

In half an hour they were able to say with tolerable certainty that no human beings had been burned, for the bodies could not have been wholly consumed in such a speedy conflagration.

"Perhaps they have all been taken prisoners," Hubert suggested, as with a sigh of relief they concluded their search, and turned from the spot.

Not as yet could they see into the ditch. At ordinary times the fence would have been an awkward place to climb over; now they hardly knew how they scrambled over, and stood by the side of the ditch. They looked down and Mr. Hardy gave a short, gasping cry, and caught at the fence for support.

Huddled together in the ditch was a pile of dead bodies, and among them peeped out a piece of a female dress. Anxious to relieve their friend's agonizing suspense, the young men leaped down into the ditch and began removing the upper bodies from the ghastly pile.

First were the two men employed in the house; then came Mr. Mercer; then the two children and an old woman servant; below them were the bodies of Mrs. Mercer and her brother. There were no more. Ethel was not among them.

Charley and Hubert turned toward each other and burst into tears of thankfulness and joy. The suspense had been almost too much for them, and Hubert felt so sick and faint that he was forced to lie down for awhile, while Charley went forward to the others. He was terribly shocked at the discovery of the murder of the entire party, as they had cherished the hope that Mrs. Mercer at least would have been carried off. As, however, she had been murdered, while it was pretty evident that Ethel had been spared, or her body would have been found with the others, it was supposed that poor Mrs. Mercer had been shot accidentally, perhaps in the endeavor to save her children.

The bodies were now taken from the ditch and laid side by side until the other settlers should arrive. It was not long before they began to assemble, riding up in little groups of twos and threes. Rage and indignation were upon all their faces at the sight of the devastated house, and their feelings were redoubled when they found that the whole of the family, who were so justly liked and esteemed, were dead. The Edwards and the Jamiesons were among the earliest arrivals, bringing the gaucho Martinez with them. Perez, too, shortly after arrived from

Canterbury, he having been out on the farm when his master left.

A grave was dug in the center of the space once occupied by the house. In this the bodies of Mr. Mercer and his family were laid. And Mr. Hardy having solemnly pronounced such parts of the burial service as he remembered over them, all standing by bareheaded, and stern with suppressed sorrow, the earth was filled in over the spot where a father, mother, brother and two children lay together. Another grave was at the same time dug near, and in this the bodies of the three servants whose remains had been found with the others were laid.

By this time it was 11 o'clock, and the number of those present had reached twenty. The greater portion of them were English, but there were also three Germans, a Frenchman and four gauchos, all accustomed to Indian warfare.

Each man, with the exception of the young Hardys, who had their Colt's carbines, had a long rifle; in addition to which all had pistols—most of them having revolvers, the use of which, since the Hardys had first tried them with such deadly effect upon the pampas, had become general among the English settlers. Nearly all were young, with the deep sunburned hue gained by exposure on the plains. Every man had his poncho—a sort of native blanket, used either as a cloak or for sleeping in at will—rolled up before him on his saddle. It would have been difficult to find a more serviceable looking set of men; and the expression of their faces, as they took their last look at the grave of the Mercers, boded very ill for any Indian who might fall into their clutches.

CHAPTER XIV.

There was no difficulty in following the tracks. Mr. Mercer had possessed nearly a thousand cattle and five thousand sheep, and the ground was trampled in a broad, unmistakable line. Once or twice Mr. Hardy consulted his compass. The trail ran southwest by west.

At nightfall there was a general unrolling of ponchos, and soon afterward only sleeping figures could be seen by the dim light of the smoldering fire. Mr. Hardy, indeed, was the only one of the party who did not fall to sleep. Thoughts of the events of the last twenty-four hours, of the best course to be adopted, and of the heavy responsibility upon himself as leader of this perilous expedition, prevented him from sleeping. He heard the watch rouse the relief and lay down in their places. In another half hour he himself rose, and walked out toward the sentry.

It was a young man named Cook, one of the new settlers to the east of Mount Pleasant. "Is that you, Mr. Hardy?" he asked, as he approached. "I was just coming in to wake you."

"What is it, Mr. Cook?"

"It strikes me, sir, that there is a strange light away to the southwest. I have only noticed it the last few minutes, and thought it was fancy, but it gets more distinct every minute."

Mr. Hardy looked out anxiously into the gloom and quickly perceived the appearance that his friend alluded to. For a minute or two he did not speak, and then, as the light evidently increased, he said, almost with a groan, "It is what I feared they would do; they have set the prairie on fire. You need not keep watch any longer. We are as much separated from the Indians as if the ocean divided us."

Cook gave the two short whistles agreed upon to recall the other men on guard, and then returned with Mr. Hardy to the rest of the party. Then Mr. Hardy roused all his companions. Every man leaped up, rifle in hand, believing that the Indians were approaching.

"We must be up and doing," Mr. Hardy said cheerfully; "the Indians have fired the pampas."

There was a thrill of apprehension in the bosom of many present, who had heard terrible accounts of prairie fires, but this speedily subsided at the calm manner of Mr. Hardy.

"The fire," he said, "may be ten miles away yet. I should say that it was, but it is difficult to judge, for this grass does not flame very high, and the smoke drifts between it and us. The wind, fortunately, is light, but it will be here in little over half an hour. Now, let the four gauchos attend to the horses, to see they do not stampede. The rest form a line a couple of yards apart, and pull up the grass by the roots, throwing it behind them, so as to leave the ground clear. The wider we can make it the better."

All fell to work with hearty zeal. Looking over their shoulders, the sky now appeared on fire. Flickering tongues of flame seemed to struggle upward. There was an occasional sound of feet, as herds of deer flew by before the danger.

"How far will it go, papa, do you think?" Hubert asked his father, next to whom he was at work.

"I should say that it would most likely stop at the stream where we halted to-day, Hubert. The ground was wet and boggy for some distance on the other side."

The horses were now getting very restive, and there was a momentary pause from work to wrap ponchos round their heads, so as to prevent their seeing the glare.

The fire could not have been more than three miles distant, when the space cleared was as wide as Mr. Hardy deemed necessary for safety. A regular noise, something between a hiss and a roar, was plainly audible; and when the wind lifted the smoke the flames could be seen running along in an unbroken wall of fire.

Birds flew past overhead with terrified cries, and a close, hot smell of burning was very plainly distinguishable.

Starting about half way along the side of the cleared piece of ground, Mr. Hardy set the dry grass alight. For a moment or two it burned slowly, and then, fanned by the wind, it gained force, and spread in a semi-circle of flame.

The horses were already unpicketed, and half of the party held them at a short distance in the rear, while the rest stood in readiness to extinguish the fire if it crossed the cleared space.

Over and over again the fire crept partially across—the clearing had been done but roughly—but it was speedily stamped out by the heavy boots of the watchers.

The spectacle as the fire swept away before the wind, was fine in the extreme. The party seemed inclosed between two walls of fire. The main conflagration was now fearfully close, burning flakes were already falling among them, and the sound of the fire was like the hiss of the surf upon a pebbly beach.

"Now," Mr. Hardy said, "forward with the horses. Every one to his own animal. Put your ponchos over your own heads as well as your horses."

In another minute the party stood clustered upon the black and smoking ground which the fire they had kindled had swept clear. There, for five minutes, they remained without moving, unscorched by the raging element around them, but half-choked with the smoke.

Then Mr. Hardy spoke: "It is over now. You can look up."

There was a general expression of astonishment as the heads emerged from their wrappers, and the eyes recovered sufficiently from the effects of the blinding smoke to look round. Where had the fire gone? Where, indeed! The main conflagration had swept by them, had divided in two when it reached the ground already burned, and these columns, growing further and further asunder as the newly kindled fire had widened, were already far away to the right and left, while beyond and between them was the fire that they themselves had kindled, now two miles wide, and already far in the distance.

The fires in the pampas, although they frequently extend over a vast tract of country, are seldom fatal to life. The grass rarely attains a height exceeding three feet, and burns out almost like so much cotton. A man on horseback, having no other method of escape, can, by blindfolding his horse and wrapping his own face in a poncho, ride fearlessly through the wall of fire without damage to horse or rider.

At daybreak they were soon in the saddle and on their way. They had many an hour's ride before they came upon the trail. They followed it all that day. Towards sundown one of the gauchos told Mr. Hardy that he knew that at a short distance further to the west there was a spring of water much used by the Indians. Finding that it was not more than half an hour's ride, Mr. Hardy, after a brief consultation, determined to go over there to water the horses and breakfast, before retracing their footsteps across the burned prairie.

In a little over the time named they came to a small pool of bright water, from which a little stream issued, running nearly due north across the plain. After drinking heartily themselves, and filling the water skins and kettle, the horses were allowed to drink; and Dash plunged in with the greatest delight, emerging with his usual bright chestnut color, whereas he had gone into the water perfectly black.

After he had come out and shake himself, he commenced hunting about, sniffing so violently that Hubert's attention was attracted. Presently the dog ran forward a few paces and gave a sharp bark of pleasure, and Hubert, running forward, gave so loud a cry that all the party rushed up.

Hubert could not speak. There, half buried in the ground, and pointing west, was an Indian arrow, and round the head was twisted a piece of white calico, with little blue spots upon it, which Mr. Hardy instantly recognized as a piece of the dress Ethel had worn when she left home.

"Oh, papa, papa," cried Hubert, "I know this arrow!"

"Know the arrow?" he repeated.

"Yes, I am quite, quite sure I know it. Don't you remember, Charley, the day that those wounded Indians started, as we were taking the quivers down to them I noticed that one arrow had two feathers which I had never seen before, and could not guess what bird they came from. They were light blue, with a crimson tip. I pulled one off to compare it with my others. It is at home now. I remember that I chose the one I did because the other one had two of the little side feathers gone. This is the feather. I can almost solemnly declare, and you see the fellow is gone. That arrow belongs to one of the men we recovered."

All crowded round to examine the arrow, and Mr. Hardy said solemnly: "Thank God for His mercy. He has decided our way now. Undoubtedly, as Hubert says, one of the men we aided is of the party and wishes to show his gratitude. So he has managed to get a piece of Ethel's dress, and has tied it to this arrow, hoping that we should recognize the feather. Thank God, there is no more doubt, and thank heaven, too, that Ethel has at least one friend near her."

All was now joy and congratulation, and Hubert rubbed his hands and said triumphantly: "There, Charley, you were always chaffing me and wanting to know what was the good of my collection, and now you see what was the good. It has put us on the right trail for Ethel, and you will never be able to laugh at me about my collection again."

(To be continued.)

The State of New York has more savings bank deposits than Austria-Hungary, France or the United Kingdom.

Advertising Did It.

He didn't have a dollar; he didn't have a dime. His clothes and shoes were looking just as though they'd served their time. He didn't try to kill himself to dodge misfortune's whacks. Instead, he got some ashes and he filled five dozen sacks. Then, next he begged a dollar. In the paper in the morn he advertised tin polish that would put the sun to scorn. He kept on advertising, and, just now, suffice to say, he's out in California at his cottage on the bay.—The Lyre.

Confession.

"Do you make much out of your library work?" asked the inquisitive person.

"Yes, replied the man who scribbles occasionally, "much more out of it than I do in it."

Canada Is Building Railroads.

The number of miles of railroad completed in the Dominion of Canada is 18,868, an increase of 574 miles over the previous year.

The Inference Obvious.

District Attorney Jerome tells of a prisoner recently brought to a Harlem police station whose condition was so uncleanly that he was advised by the desk sergeant to take a bath.

"What!" exclaimed the hobo, indignantly, "me go into the water?"

"Certainly; you need it. How long is it since you had a bath?"

The hobo grinned. "I never was arrested before."—New York Times.

He Knew One.

"I have here," said the industrious book agent, "a volume which is especially helpful to business men. I'm certain it would benefit you if"—

"Can you mention any businessman it has benefited?" broke in the skeptical one in the office chair.

"Sure. There's me, for instance. I get a big commission."—Kansas City Journal.

Woman Given Piece of Honor.

Mrs. James R. Hopley of Bucyrus, O., is the only woman who has been given a place upon the centennial program commemorating the 100th anniversary of the admission of Ohio to the union. The theme of her address will be "The Value of Good Women in Influencing Civilization." Mrs. Hopley is a former president of the Ohio Federated Clubs.

Great Demonstration.

"They say when the great pianist played in this town the people went wild," remarked the comedian.

"They did the same when I played," remarked the young lady who blows the cornet.

"Were they demanding that you come back?"

"No, they were demanding their money back."

Not So Warm.

"I say, Miss DeWitt," remarked young Sapleigh, "you're weeping beauty sets me bawlin on fish, doncher know?"

"Never mind, Mr. Sapleigh," replied Miss DeWitt, "the conflagration will be too insignificant to necessitate the calling out of the fire department."

The Camera's Eccentricities.

"All nature is beautiful," said the enthusiast.

"I used to think so," answered the young man with discolored fingers. "But since I took up amateur photography I begin to have my doubts."—Washington Star.

Queen Alexandra's Epigram.

"It is a pity," said Queen Alexandra to the late Bishop of London, one day, "that women are not as devoted to the birds in the air as they are to the birds in their hats."

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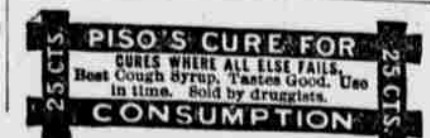
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