ARMSTRONG'S CHANCE.

BY CHARLES MICHELSON.

"Joe," said the superintendent of the Montezuma Copper Company, "you're to take the Kitty mare and go down the road until you meet Manuel Gonzalez' outfit. He started from Lordsburg six days ago, so you ought to find him about York's ranch. Just notice particularly where you meet him, and ask him to hurry up. He's got some flour we need."

Joe Armstrong had been looking for this order. Ever since he had been taken into the employ of the company he had been sent on these missions. Invariably three or four days before the end of the month he and the Kitty mare had been sent galloping down the Lordsburg road to meet this freighter or that and tell him to hurry up.

It was eighty miles to Lordsburg, and all the company's freight had to be drawn in ox-teams from the railway at that point.

The humor of asking that an ox-team hurry was not lost on Joe. He knew it took eight or ten days for the plodding cattle to drag the great wagons across the desert and over hills, and he knew, too, that there was plenty of flour in the warehouse.

But Joe Armstrong also knew enough to hold his tongue and obey orders.

It was not that the mission displeased him; on the contrary, he was delighted—what healthy boy would not welcome the change from the dull routine of the company's store to a ride on Kitty?

It was sunset when he reached York's ranch, where he stopped for supper. There were three other travellers at the ranchman's table. One of them he knew. Mr. Lampson had been a bookkeeper in the company's office, and had been discharged for a reason Joe had never learned, and the two strangers were in his company.

"Going to stop over, Joe?" asked Lampson, as they stood at the washing-trough.

"Why, no, Mr. Lampson," answered the boy. "I've got a bit of business down the road. It's moonlight, and I guess I'll put on a way. Are you going on?"

Lampson thought not, and changed the subject, and the bookkeeper and his two companions were still at York's when Joe saddled up and started on.

Kitty, fresh from her rest and feed of grain, was in as good trim as if she had not already come a score of miles, but Joe would not let her gallop.

Soon she found her stride, the long, swinging lope of the cow ponies that he knew she could hold for fifty miles if necessary. The brilliant moon almost directly overhead cast a shadow like a purple blanket. Except for the hoof-beats, there was no sound.

Joe loved to ride at night. He knew every inch of the way, and each tall, branching cactus that stood out in the moonlight was as good as a mile-post to him.

Soon he noted a shadow in the brush by the roadside keeping pace with him. Half a mile farther a companion shadow on the other side of the road drew his attention.

He knew that they were wildcats, obeying the same instinct that makes their tame congeners follow a man in the city streets in the moonlight. He knew he could send them scurrying away into the brush with a shout, but with the habit of those who live in the wild places of the earth, he had no desire to molest anything that did not molest him. Besides, the leaping shadows were company, of a sort, and their presence was a guarantee that no larger savage beast or savage man was near.

Joe lost the companion shadows at the Gila River, when he and Kitty splashed across it.

He had not yet found Manuel Gonzalez' train of ox teams, but he knew they must be comparatively near—probably camped at the spring half a dozen miles farther on. There was nothing to be gained by coming upon them at this time of night. There are certain rules on the frontier, as in the cities, as to breaking a tired man's sleep unnecessarily. So Joe decided to camp near the river and hurry on at daybreak with his message.

He unsaddled Kitty and turned her loose to graze in the river bottom, knowing that she would remain near by. Then finding a place where the brush was thick enough to screen him from sight of the road, he broke through this leafy wall.

A branch used as a broom sufficed to obliterate the tracks that showed a ride had ended there, and behind his screen of mesquit brush he lay down to sleep, his saddle for a pillow, the soft earth for a bed. He needed no covers, for on that high *mesa* of the Gila there is no dew.

A city boy might wonder that he took pains to hide himself from the road and to disguise the traces of his camp, but to Joe it was as natural as it is to the town-bred lad to lock his bedroom door at a strange hotel.

Joe said his little prayer, taught him by the mother whose death had left him to make his way alone two years before, and closed his eyes. A boy is not likely to forget his prayers when the only roof above him is the sky, and every star seems like a bright eye seeing clear through him. Joe did not have to wait for sleep; he was off as soon as his eyes were shut.

Suddenly he was broad awake again. The moon was gone, but the stars were still shining, and by them he knew day was yet far distant. A moment to collect his wits, and Joe was conscious that somebody was talking on the other side of the bushes. The first words made him pull attention.

"Gonzalez' outfit," he heard the voice say, "will come on as soon as it is light, and we had better meet him right here. To strike him tonight might make the bull-driver suspicious; and besides, that boy Joe knows I'm not with the company any more. I want to get the money without having to hurt anybody."

"But, say, Lampson," Joe heard another voice, "won't the boy be there just the same in the morning?"

"Not a bit of it," said Lampson. "He'll just give Gonzalez his message and start back. He doesn't know why he is sent. Nobody but the Lordsburg agent and the superintendent is supposed to know there is twenty-five thousand dollars in bills rolled up in a bale of blankets. That much comes every month to pay off the men at the mines on the first. The company is afraid to send it by the stage, for the stage is held up by the rustlers too often. Nobody would ever think of hunting through the freight for money. The freighter himself hasn't an idea of what he is carrying. They have been doing this for a long time and have never had any trouble, but the boss can't help feeling a little anxious, so he always chases the boy off down the road to make sure where the money train is."

Joe's first impulse had been to shout a greeting, but as the words reached him he realized in a flash what they meant. The mystery of his monthly mission that had so puzzled him was a mystery no longer.

"I don't see why we should have a bit of trouble," said Lampson. "I'll just tell Gonzalez that the company is in a hurry for the blankets for some prospecting parties, and has sent me with the buckboard to fetch them on ahead of him. He knows me from seeing me in the office, and will probably not ask a question."

"But," asked one of the others, "suppose the boy has told him you were thrown out?"

"If I can't convince him the boy lied, we will have to make a 'gun-play.' Now quit talking. We'd better all get some sleep."

Soon there was silence, broken only by the regular breathing of the three men.

So cautiously that not even a rustling leaf betrayed him, Joe raised his head and peered through the bushes. He saw three men lying asleep, the buckboard standing at the side of the road, and the horses unhitched and picketed by it.

His first thought was to slip the stake ropes and stampede the horses; but he realized that the sleepers might be awakened by the plunging animals, and the thought of what they might do in their anger made Joe feel lonesome for the first time.

As silently as a fox stalking a wild fowl, Joe skirted the cleared patch and made for the river buttom. He was soon beside the Kitty mare. There was an anxious moment when he was afraid Kitty would greet him with a neigh, but she only raised her head from the tall grass and put out her nose to be petted.

He had ridden her bareback as often as with a saddle, and in a moment he was on her, making his way by a wide detour past the sleeping men. As soon as he was beyond earshot he gave Kitty her head and sped away.

His idea had been that all he had to do was to tell Gonzalez of Lampson's plot. Now the words of Lampson himself occured to him. "Nobody is supposed to know the money is there but the agent at Lordsburg and the superintendent." It was the company's secret, and Joe dared not betray it even to the freighter.

At last a sparkle far ahead showed him the embers of a dying camp-fire, and soon he was near enough to make out the big white prairie-schooners. He had found Gonzalez' outfit.

The voice of timidity whispered that he might discharge his commission with safety to himself. All he had to do was to deliver his message to the freighter as it was given to him, turn round' and gallop back home and say nothing of what he had overheard by the river. The company would lose twenty-five thousand dollars but no one would blame him. But another voice—the voice of duty—spoke louder, insisting that taking care of himself was not all he was there for.

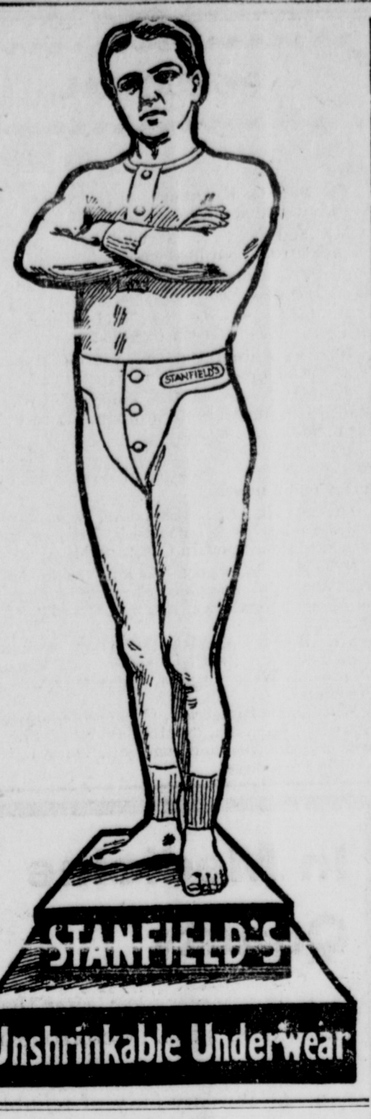
"The boss wants you to hurry up; he needs that flour," said Joe to the head freighter, when he had roused him.

Gonzalez grumbled at being wakened for such a message, but he was too sleepy to blame the boy, and finally told him he had better spend the night with him.

I'll sleep in the wagons if you don't mind,' aid Joe, to whom a plan had occured.

"Just as you like," yawned the freighter. "There's a big bale of blankets in the trailer."

So Joe tethered Kitty to the wheel of the trailer and crawled in on top of the blankets



—a rough bale covered with burlap and laced with ropes.

Before dawn he got a [illegible] the camp cook, borrowed a saddle, and [illegible] a bundle rolled in his coat and tied on [illegible] hind, started on his long ride home while Gonzalez and his men [illegible] oxen to the wagons.

Five miles up the road [illegible] and the two big men [illegible] buckboard. His heart [illegible] he was past, but the discharged bookkeeper merely waved him a greeting.

Joe galloped on. He felt safe enough now to chuckle at the scene that would [illegible] back there, when the robber, after carrying off the heavy bale, would open it and find nothing.

Kitty was a very tired mare when she brought Joe into town that night.

The superintendent hailed the boy as he rode up to the office of the copper company: "Did you find Gonzalez?"

"Yes, sir?" shouted Joe. "He said he'd hurry." Then Joe pulled his coat from behind the saddle, handed over the bundle of bank notes, and blurted out his adventures.

"It wasn't much of a trick to untie the bale, sir," he said, "and I tied it up again while Gonzalez thought I was sleeping; but" he added, "I'm afraid the company loses the blankets."

"It's willing to lose them," said the superintendent.

The superintendent talked the matter over with the manager, and at first they thought one of the biggest bank-notes in the package was the proper reward for the messenger whose presence of mind had saved the money. But when the superinteedent mentioned it to his wife, she gave him a better plan, and that is how it came about that for several years the item of a boy's schooling appeared on the expense account of the copper company, with the bills for freight and smelting.

This happened twenty years ago.

If you happen to be interested in the story and ever go out to Arizona, the present superintendent of the Montezuma Copper Company can give you the details of the boy's subsequent career.

The present superintendent's name is Armstrong.

Papa—"Tommy, you mustn't eat so much. Everybody will be calling you a little 'glutton.' Do you know what that is?"

Tommy—"I suppose it's a big glutton's little boy."—[Philaqalphia Ledger.

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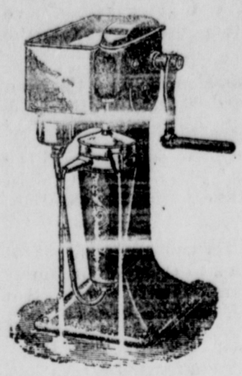

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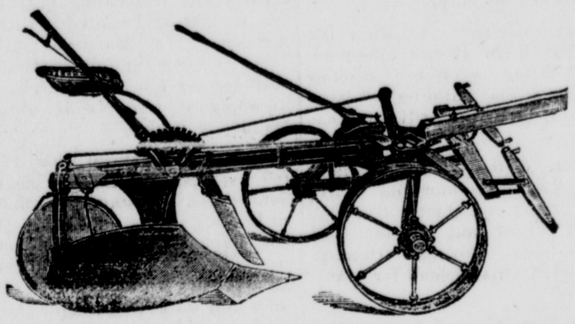

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