CHAPTER X.

OVERLAND TO MARLIN.

As I walked towards home from the postoffice, I thought of all that I had heard concerning the Worth family. Mrs. Worth was older than her husband by a few years, and I had been told that she was a widow when she married Worth. They were comparatively wealthy, and the lady was esteemed as an energetic, business like woman, kind to her husband and to everyone else, and of a quiet unassuming disposition. Her husband on the contrary was accused of having a base mercenary turn, meddlesome, gossiping, idle, indolent, and very indulgent indeed to his own appetites and desires. Whether this was true or not, it was notorious that he was in constant trouble over something that he had said, or had threatened to say, and was freely accused of slandering everyone against whom he cherished enmity or dislike.

I had not yet reached the minister's when I heard the swift roll of wheels behind me, and the very couple of whom I was then thinking drove up, hailed me, and stopped.

"You are a stranger to us, sir," began Mrs. Worth, (she looked weak and ill, but spoke with considera-
ble strength; "but your conduct this afternoon (she flushed as she spoke this,) has convinced us that you are not a bad man, and that you can aid us."

I assured her that I was quite willing to do so if it lay within my power.

"Well," she proceeded, more firmly, "myself and Mr. Worth here," she indicated him by a wave of her hand, but did not look at him, "have been intending for some days past to go on a fishing excursion in a two-horse wagon overland. We want some reliable person to drive this wagon, loaded with our outfit, and leading a couple of animals behind, across the country to Marlin. We will follow later in our buggy. Can you do this for us?"

"When should you wish me to start?"

"To-morrow morning, as early as possible."

"Then I can go."

"Very well," she replied. "We thank you, and here is the money for your trouble." She handed me a bank-bill and drove off, after asking me to come to their house early on the morrow. As they disappeared around a distant corner I glanced at the bank-note, and observed, with no little astonishment, as well as pleasure, that it was ten dollars. I walked onward in high good humor, for I thought that perhaps I might yet accumulate sufficient money to purchase a ticket to California. Dr. Herf had told me that so long as I had diabetes, I might live for years in the mild and salubrious climate of the Pacific coast, while my span of life could not last long in any climate less mild. In short, a sojourn in California
meant life to me, while a stay in Texas meant death. It had therefore been my chief aim for the past few months to acquire means to make my way to the Pacific coast, and every cent I obtained was treasured and hoarded to this end.

I went on home immediately, and put the money into the hands of the Rev. Mr. Rowland. I informed him of the conversation between Mrs. Worth and myself, and he advised me by all means to go, as he could see no objection to my doing so. Promptly, therefore, the next morning I presented myself at the home of the Worth's, and was met at the door by the lady herself.

"Ah! Mr. Nall," said she, with a smile of satisfaction, "you have come. Walk in, sir, until we are ready for you."

But as we were entering the parlor Mr. Worth came striding through the hall to say that the wagon was prepared for me. He then led the way into the back yard, where the vehicle stood. I went up and examined it curiously. The bed of the wagon had a substantial covering of white duck stretched over a frame, and a large mare, not in the best condition, with a young colt standing by her side, was hitched to the back end of the running-gear. On the inside of the wagon were a number of articles—cooking utensils, cooking materials, and other things that a couple of well-to-do young people might carry with them on a six weeks' jaunt about the country.

"Now what we want you to do, Mr. Nall," said the lady, who had followed us into the yard, and who
seemed to be the real business man of the establishment, "is to drive this wagon and team, and the mare and colt behind it, to Marlin and, deliver them to Mr. Jones, proprietor of the Jones Hotel. The mare may not be very easy to lead, but by all means take her there. Say to Mr. Jones that we shall follow in our buggy, in case you reach there ahead of us. We shall more than likely get to Marlin as soon as, or before, you do; but if we do not, please wait for us."

While she was speaking Mr. Worth had opened a large gate near at hand and driven the team outside. I waited a moment to receive a few additional instructions, and then, mounting the driver's seat, I drove off down the road. Recent and copious rains had swollen all the streams in that section and, indeed, had made brooks, creeks and rivulets where none had been for years. My road led me over the left fork of the Brazos and other streams. The thoroughfares were muddy, slippery, and really unfit for travel.

The mare came along behind the wagon with very good grace for a time, but finally she became obstinate, and worried me exceedingly. I determined however, to be delayed no longer than was necessary by the blind contumacy of an animal, and so when the mare hung back, and did not follow fast enough, thus causing the team in front to stop altogether at times, I whipped them up vigorously. Upon this they would make a desperate plunge forward, and the obstinate mare was compelled to break into a sullen unwilling trot.
After worrying along in this manner for some hours, the mare, on starting down a steep declivity, as usual, declined to advance further than the top, and in causing the team to lunge forward, the rope was broken. When this catastrophe occurred, the mare made no attempt to run away, but stood stiffly on the top of the ridge.

A farmhouse was fortunately near at hand, and taking two boxes of axle-grease from among the store in the wagon, I went to the gate and shouted "halloa!" A rope which would suit my purpose, and which was nearly new, hung on the fence. In answer to my cry a man came out of the house and approached the gate.

"My friend," I began, without any other preliminaries, "I am driving that team yonder, and am having some trouble with a horse I am leading—in fact, have just broken the only rope I had. This rope here on your fence would suit me. I have in my hand two boxes of good axle-grease which I will give you for the rope."

"Very well," said he, without betraying the least surprise, or emotion of any kind, "take the rope along and leave the axle-grease."

This I did, and having thanked him, hurried back and tied my new rope to the long wiry neck of the mare and fastened the other end to the wagon.

I then mounted the seat and drove off, the farmer watching me from his gate. The mare behaved very well for a time, as she had done at first, for she seemed to realize that I had secured a stouter rope.
But just as I had begun to delude myself with the hope that my trouble with the obstinate creature was over, she paused on the side of a slight declivity and refused to advance a step. I found myself under the necessity of stretching her lean neck to an extraordinary length before she consented to come along.

Matters went on in the usual way for a number of miles until, almost without warning, the second rope snapped like a thread. Fortunately this occurred directly in front of a farmhouse standing on the roadside. The farmer himself was sitting on the piazza, and an immense chain, with huge steel links, known as a log-chain, was stretched at length on some hooks upon the wall. I resolved instantly to purchase the chain if possible, as I knew that whatever else it might do, it certainly would not break. Casting my eyes hastily over the contents of the wagon I selected a keg of molasses, and lifting it into view, addressed the man on the piazza and offered him the molasses for the chain.

"All right," said he, "I'll trade anything I've got. Bring the molasses here and get the chain."

This I did very eagerly, and I could not suppress the slight feeling of triumph which came over me as I fastened the chain around the neck of the mare and thence to the wagon. The gentleman on the piazza looked on curiously as I performed this task, and when it was done, he observed, sententiously:

"You have got her now."

"Why, I think I have, and it rejoices me to think so," I responded. "She has given me trouble enough."
With that I climbed up to the seat and drove off, looking back to see how the mare would behave under the circumstances. Very little urging was needed to make her trot on stiffly after the wagon, and I had no trouble with her for near half an hour. Then she became, or seemed to become, more obstinate than ever. We had a great many small pools of muddy water to cross and other bad spots in the road. At all such places she pulled back with all her might, but the contest between the lean and obstinate mare and a vigorous team under the lash, was short, and invariably resulted in a decisive victory for the team. I thought, however, more than once that we should infallibly pull her head off, but we did not; and the only visible result seemed to be that the offending head became very large and very much swollen. Towards the end of the journey she took to lying down in the middle of the road, and I always dragged her until she changed her mind and rose to her feet.

I reached Marlin awhile before dark, and the mare by that time presented such an extraordinary appearance that the people stared at her in wonder as I passed. Her head and neck were so greatly swollen that all semblance of their real shape was lost, and she was covered with mud and dirt from head to foot. When I drove up to the Jones House and called for the proprietor he came out immediately, and his eye falling upon the miserable object at the end of the wagon, he exclaimed:

"Great Gad, man, what is that?"

By way of reply I gave him a brief account of the day's incidents, and he laughed boisterously.
"I had fully determined," I added, "to bring her head even if I brought no more."

The Worths had not arrived. I turned the team over to Jones according to instructions, and stopped with him for the night, as I could not return to Bremond until the morrow.

On the following morning when I came down to breakfast, I ascertained that the Worths had not come yet, and as by train time they were still absent, I did not wait for them. I reached Bremond early in the afternoon. After supper that night someone called for me at the minister’s gate, and on being invited to enter, refused to do so, at the same time requesting that I should come out to the gate.

On reaching the yard I found myself in the presence of Mr. Smith, the one-armed man. He greeted me very politely, and requested me to walk with him a short distance. When we had gone out of earshot of the house, and not before, he spoke:

"I suppose you know, Mr. Nall," said he, "that no one but yourself witnessed that little affair of yesterday?"

I told him that I did.

"Well," he resumed, "I have understood that you are in a low state of health, and are very anxious to get a new lease upon life by going to the Pacific coast. May I ask if that is not true?"

Wondering, I nevertheless assured him that it was.

"Now then," he continued, "if you are anxious to get off as soon as you can, and you can make it convenient to leave at once, please accept this money
from me,” and he placed five-and-twenty dollars in greenbacks in my hand.

“Hold a moment,” said I, “and let me fully understand you. You do not want me to appear as a witness against you, and are willing to assist me as far on my way to California as this money will pay if I will leave at once?”

“Yes,” returned he; “that is my desire.”

“Very well, then,” I responded, taking the money and placing it securely in my pocket, “I shall leave to-morrow.”

With that he shook hands and parted.

I secured the ten dollars Mrs. Worth had given me from the good-hearted parson, and added it to my twenty-five. The next day I was speeding away as fast as steam could carry me. I had a brother, Mr. W. E. Fleming, residing in western Texas, and it was to him that I now went for an additional supply of money. He gave me what I asked for,* and I purchased a ticket for San Francisco, and in the beginning of summer began my long journey to the Pacific coast.

* It is but just to state that this was not the first time that Mr. W. E. Fleming had given money to his brother, Mr. E. B. Fleming, during his illness.