The conversation naturally turned on highwaymen, and our traveller having noticed that each man carried one or two revolvers usually in a belt stuck full of cartridges, inquired about their necessity. The opinion of the driver, to which all assented, was that “now a man seldom had any use for a shooting-iron, but when he did he wanted it powerfully bad.” Since the last “necktie party,” things had been pretty quiet.

The main facts of this affair, as told by one of the passengers, was that Black Bill and his gang having stopped the stage several times, and killed a few men without exciting much comment, had begun to think they could terrorize the district, and accordingly had descended to that greatest of crimes, running off cattle. But this was too much, and a vigilance committee, after several days’ chase, caught two of the thieves, whom they left swinging from a cottonwood tree, and brought back most of the cattle. In the mean time the sheriff had caught another of the gang, hiding in town, and had lodged him in jail. On the return of the vigilants it was decided that this fellow must follow the other two, as the jail was not safe and the law uncertain. Accordingly a small but select party had called on the jailer, but he, not liking the prospect of losing future fees and board bills, was so unkind as to say that he would “start a lead mine in the first man that came in.” Despite his vigorous objections, the prisoner was gotten out, and soon ornamented the telegraph pole by the depot.

One of the passengers, an old miner, said that unless a man was pretty quick and a sure shot, he better not show his gun, and a “tenderfoot” would be safer without one, as he would be more apt to keep out of trouble. He told of a man from the East, who for the first time coming into a mining camp, wore a beautiful pair of revolvers in full sight. The “boys” thought they would have some fun with him and get his guns away. One of them entered into conversation with him, and finally began to tell of an ugly customer who had just arrived in camp, noted as the best shot in the region and a bad man to provoke. After he had given the Easterner a vivid description of the blood-thirstiness of the man, he suddenly started, saying “There he comes, and he looks full.” Just then a small, determined-looking man came up to the group and invited the new-comer to take a drink. The latter tried to excuse himself, when the man pulled out a big revolver and told him to be careful whom he insulted. The Easterner was so startled that he forgot his pistols, and the small man quietly pulled them out of his belt and put them in his own pocket, then making a very polite bow, presented the frightened stranger with the dangerous weapon which had threatened his life. A second glance showed that it not only was empty, but did not have cartridge chamber or lock.

In telling such stories the morning passed rapidly. About four o’clock the stage had got up to the first snow banks, rapidly melting and sending little torrents down along the ruts. By the ice, alternating with mud and running water, the road was so impassible that the travellers walked up the steeper slopes. Soon they reached the highest pass and found themselves apparently in the Arctic regions. On each side vast fields of snow and ice stretched up over the summits, broken only by lines of black cliffs. Behind, down on the flanks of the mountain, was the dark forest through which they had just passed. In front the road wound across a dreary snow-covered plain.

They passed a few carcasses of oxen and mules and occasionally the wreck of a freighter’s wagon.

In a hollow was a little group trying to keep alive a smouldering fire by the twigs of chapparal which they dug out of the snow. It was a miner’s family. Their wagon, through whose torn curtain a woman and child could be seen, was stuck in a big drift. It had been pulled that far by an ox and mule. The ox lay still on the ground, evidently overcome by cold and the light air, while the mule was trying to get nourishment out of the frozen soil.

To our traveller it appeared a desperate situation to be thus stranded in a high mountain pass, miles from camp, but the man made no