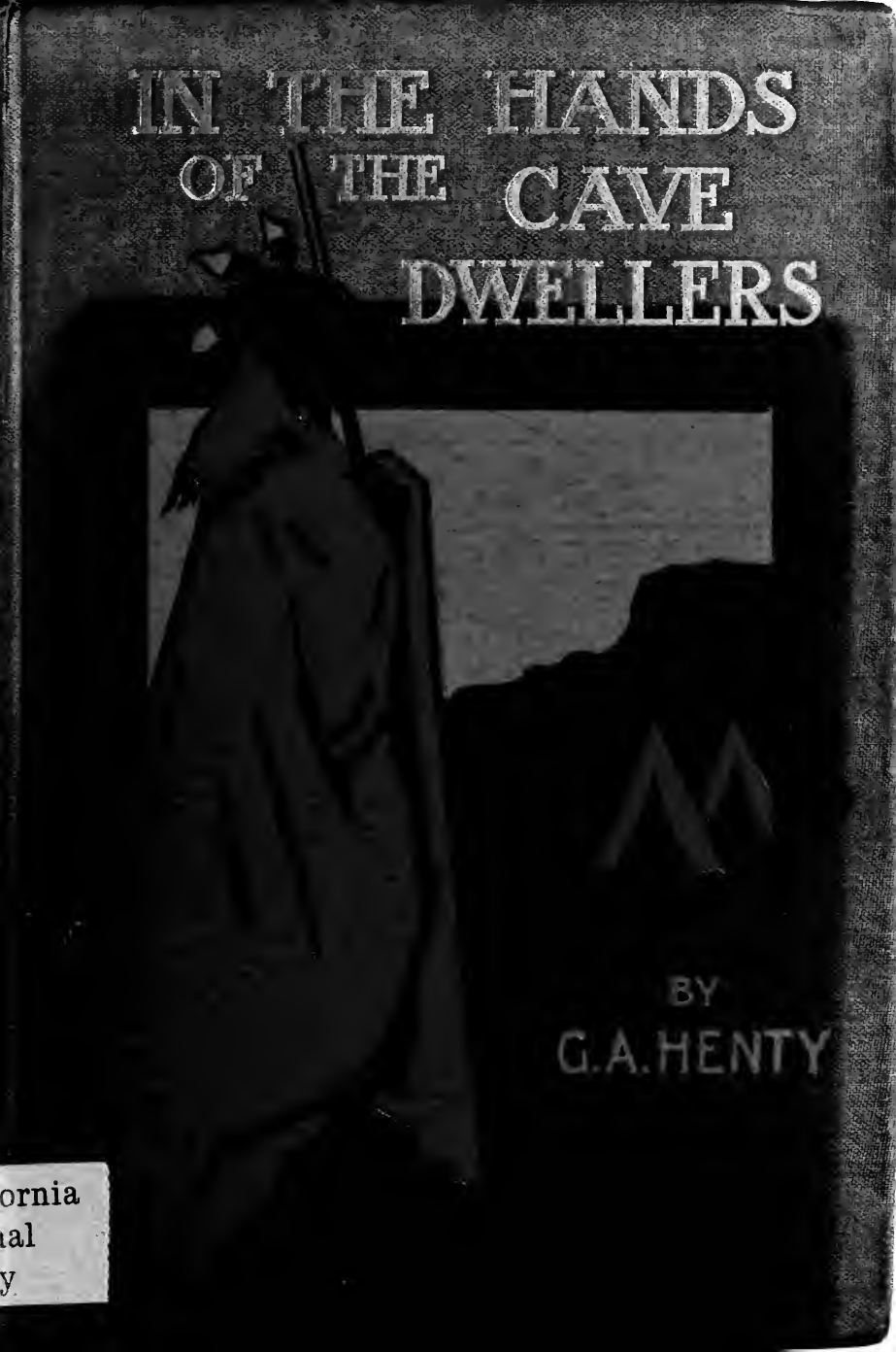
IN THE HANDS OF THE CAVE DWELLERS



BY

G. A. HENTY

In the Hands of the Cave-Dwellers

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"FOUR INDIANS STEPPED FROM AMONG THE TREES"

In the Hands of the Cave-Dwellers

BY

G. A. HENTY

Author of "With Roberts to Pretoria" "Won by the Sword"
"To Herat and Cabul" &c.

ILLUSTRATED BY WAT. MILLER

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IN THE HANDS OF THE CAVE-DWELLERS

CHAPTER I

A MIDNIGHT ATTACK

IT was late in the evening at San Diego, in the autumn of the year 1832; there was no moon, but the stars shone so brightly in the clear, dry atmosphere that it was easy to distinguish objects at some little distance. A young fellow, in the dress of a sailor, was making his way through the narrow streets that bordered the port, when he heard a sudden shout, followed by fierce exclamations and Mexican oaths. Without pausing to consider whether it was prudent to interfere, he grasped tightly a cudgel he

had that day cut, and ran to the spot where it was evident that a conflict was going on. It was but some forty yards away, and as he approached he made out four figures who were dodging round a doorway and were evidently attacking someone standing there. The inequality of the combat was sufficient to appeal to the sailor's sympathies. The sand that lay thick in the street had deadened his footsteps, and his presence was unmarked till his stick descended with a sharp crack on the uplifted wrist of one of the assailants, eliciting a yell of pain, while the knife the man held flew across the street.

One of the man's companions turned upon the new-comer, but the sailor's arm was already raised, and the cudgel lighted with such force on the man's head that he fell stunned to the ground. This unexpected assault caused the other two fellows to pause and look around, and in an instant the defender of the doorway bounded forward and buried his knife in one of their bodies, while the other at once fled, followed by the man

whose wrist had been broken by the sailor's first blow.

"Carambo, señor!" the Mexican said. "You have rendered me a service indeed, and I tender you a thousand thanks. I could not have held out much longer, for I had been more than once wounded before you arrived."

"You are heartily welcome, señor. It was but a slight business—two blows with my stick and the matter was done."

"You are not a countryman of mine, señor," the other said, for the sailor spoke with a strong accent; "you are a stranger, and, as I can see now, a sailor."

"That is so. I am an American."

"Is that so?" the other said, speaking this time in English. "As you see, I know about as much of your tongue as you do of mine. I thought you must be a stranger even before I observed your dress, for street frays are not uncommon in this town, whereas in other ports there are scores of men ready for any villany, and few of my people would care to interfere in a fray in which they have

no interest. But do not let us stay here. It is best to get out of this quarter."

"Shall we do anything with these fellows? The one I hit can only be stunned, and I should think we ought to give him in charge to the watch."

The other laughed. "You might wait some time before we found them, and, besides, it would give us a deal of trouble. No; leave them where they lie. The one I struck at least will never get up again. Now, señor, may I ask the name of my preserver? Mine is Juan Sarasta."

"Mine is William Harland," the sailor replied.

"We are friends for life, Señor Harland," the Mexican said, as he held out his hand and gripped that of the sailor warmly. "Where are you staying?"

"I am staying nowhere at present," the sailor laughed. "I deserted from my ship three days ago, bought a supply of food, and have been some miles up the country. I knew that the vessel was to sail to-day, and I

came back again and watched her go out just before sunset, and have been sitting on a barrel down at the wharf, wondering what I was going to do, and whether, after all, it would not have been wiser of me to have put up with that brute of a captain until we got down to Valparaiso."

"We will talk all that matter over later," the Mexican said. "I am staying with some friends, who will, I am sure, make you welcome when I tell them that you saved my life."

"I thank you very much," the sailor said, "but no doubt I shall be able to find some little inn where I can obtain a night's lodging."

"Such a thing is not to be thought of, Señor Harland, and I shall feel very much hurt if you do not accept my offer."

They were now in a wider street, and, passing a wine-shop from which the light streamed out, Harland saw that the Mexican was a young fellow but two or three years older than himself, and his dress showed him

to belong to the upper class. The Mexican's glance had been as quick as his own, for he said, "Why, you are younger than I am!"

"I am just eighteen."

"And I twenty. Were you an officer on your ship?"

"No. My father is one of the leading citizens of Boston; he absolutely refused to allow me to follow the sea as a profession, although he is a large ship-owner himself; however, my mind was made up, and as I could not go as an officer, I came as a sailor. This is not my first voyage, for two years ago he let me sail in one of his ships as an apprentice, making sure that it would have the effect of disgusting me with the sea. However, the experiment failed, and to his anger I returned even fonder of it than when I started. He wanted me to go into his office, but I positively refused, and we had a serious quarrel, at the end of which I went down to the river and shipped before the mast. I know now that I have behaved like a fool. The captain was a brute of the worst sort, and the first

mate was worse, and between them they made the ship unbearable. I stood it as long as I could, but three days before we got to this port one of the young apprentices, whom they had pretty nearly killed, jumped overboard, and then I made up my mind that as soon as we landed I would bolt and take my chance of getting a berth on board some other ship."

"But you speak Spanish very fairly, señor."

"Well, the last ship I was in traded along the western coast, putting in at every little port, so I picked up a good deal of the language, for we were out here nearly six months. The ship I have just left did the same, so I have had nearly a year on this coast, and having learned Latin at school, of course it helped me very much. And you, señor, how do you come to speak English?"

"I have been down for the past six months in Valparaiso, staying with a relation who has a house there, and my greatest friends there were some young Englishmen of my own age, sons of a merchant. My father had spoken of

my paying a visit to your States some day, and therefore I was glad of the opportunity of learning the language. This, señor, is the house of my friends."

As Harland saw that his companion would take no denial, he followed him into the house. The young Mexican led the way to a pretty room with windows to the ground, opening on to a garden.

"You are late, Señor Juan," a gentleman said, rising from his seat; but before the young man could reply, a girl of fifteen or sixteen years old cried out: "Madre Maria, he is wounded!"

"It is nothing serious, and I had almost forgotten it till just now it began to smart. I have two, or, I think, three stabs on my left arm; they are not very deep, as I twisted my cloak round it when I was attacked. But it would have been a very serious business had it not been for this gentleman, whom I wish to introduce to you, Don Guzman, as the saviour of my life. He is an American gentleman, the son of a wealthy ship-owner of

Boston, but, owing to some slight disagreement with his father, he has worked his way out here as a sailor. I ventured to promise that you would extend your hospitality to him."

"My house is at your service, señor," the Mexican said courteously. "One who has rendered so great a service to my friend Don Juan Sarasta, is my friend also. Christina, ring the bell and tell the servants to bring hot water and clothes, and then do you go to your room while we attend to Don Juan's injuries."

The wounds proved to be by no means serious; they were all on the forearm, and, having to pierce through six or seven inches of cloth, had not penetrated very far. They had, however, bled freely, and although the young man laughed at them as mere scratches, he looked pale from the loss of blood.

"A few bottles of good wine, and I shall be all right again."

"I must apologize for not having asked you before," Señor Guzman said to Harland, when

the wounds were bandaged, "but have you supped?"

"Yes, thank you, señor. I bought some food as I came through the town, and ate it as I was waiting at the port."

"Have you any luggage that I can send for?"

"I have a kit-bag, which I will fetch myself in the morning. It is out on the plain. I did not care to bring it from the town until I knew that the vessel I came in had sailed."

"I can lend you some things for the night," Juan said. "You are a little taller than I am, but they will be near enough."

Some wine and biscuits were now brought in, and some excellent cigars produced.

"Were they thieves that attacked you, think you, Don Juan?" his host asked, after the latter had given a detailed account of his adventure.

"I cannot say, but I own I have an idea it was my life that they wanted rather than my valuables. I had a fancy that a man was following me, and I went to see the man I

had spoken to about the mules. Coming back I heard a whistle behind me, and twenty yards farther three men sprang out, and one ran up from behind, so that I don't think it was a chance encounter."

"Do you suspect anyone?"

The young Mexican hesitated a moment before he answered. "No, señor; I have no quarrel with anyone."

"I do not see how, indeed, you could have an enemy," Don Guzman said, "seeing that you have been here only for a fortnight; still, it is curious. However, I have no doubt there are plenty of fellows in the town who would put a knife between any man's shoulders if they thought he was likely to have a few dollars in his pocket. Your watch-chain may have attracted the eye of one of these fellows, and he may have thought it, with the watch attached to it, well worth the trouble of getting, and would have considered it an easy matter, with three comrades, to make short work of you, though I own that when you showed fight so determinedly I wonder they

did not make off, for, as a rule, these fellows are rank cowards."

Will Harland observed that when the don asked if Juan had any suspicions as to the author of the attempt, Donna Christina, who had returned to the room when his wounds were dressed, glanced towards him, as if anxious to hear his answer. Putting that and the young Mexican's momentary hesitation together, he at once suspected that both he and the girl had a strong idea as to who was at the bottom of this attempt. The subject was not further alluded to, the conversation turning upon the United States, concerning which the Mexican asked Harland many questions.

"It is a pity so great a distance divides us from them," he said. "It is more effectual than any ocean, and yet perhaps if we were nearer neighbours your people would disturb our quiet life here. They are restless, and forever pushing forward, while we abhor changes, and live as our fathers did three hundred years ago. You see, the mountains

act as a barrier to us, and we have never even tried to extend the territory we occupy beyond the strip of land between the coast and the mountains, and, indeed, that is ample for us. Our population has decreased rather than increased since Mexico declared its independence in 1821, and took what I have always considered the ill-advised step of expelling all the Spanish residents about six years ago.

"Not that we in this province took any very active part in the civil wars that for ten years raged in Central Mexico; but although the Spanish authorities were bad masters, it must be granted that, while they were here, there was more trade and commerce than there has since been, and that the advantages all expected to secure from the revolution have by no means been obtained. It is curious that the same has been the case in the other countries that gained their independence. In Central America there are constant troubles, in Peru things have gone backward rather than forward, and Chile alone shows signs of enterprise and advancement. However, these

things do not concern us greatly; we live by the land and not by trade; we have all we want, or can desire, and subsist, like the patriarchs of old, on our flocks and herds.

"Don Juan's father, a man of vigour and courage, has shown more enterprise than any of us, for before the beginning of the troubles he moved far up a valley running into the heart of the mountains, and established himself there. He had large flocks and herds, but his land was insufficient to support them, and, in spite of the warnings of all his friends, he determined to move. So far he has proved himself a wise man. He began by making a sort of treaty with the Indians of that part, by which he agreed to give them a considerable amount of blankets and other goods if they would bind themselves not to interfere with him in any way. These people have generally proved themselves faithless in such matters, but this has been an exception to the rule, and I believe that he has not lost a single head of cattle since he went out there, and he is now undoubtedly one of the richest

men on this coast. The fact that he should send his son on to Chile to enlarge his mind and prepare him for a trip to the United States, and even to Europe, shows the energy of the man, and how far removed his ideas are from those of the hacienderos in general. I can assure you that Juan's departure caused quite a sensation in this part of the province."

"Does your father often come down here himself, Don Juan?"

"He generally comes down once a year to arrange for the disposal of the increase of his cattle—that is to say, of the tallow and hides; as to the meat, it is practically of no value. Of course the bullocks are killed on the estate; the daily consumption is large, for he has upwards of fifty peons and vaqueros, but this is a comparatively small item, for he generally kills from eighteen thousand to twenty thousand animals; the carcasses are boiled down for the fat, and that and the hides are packed on great rafts and sent down to the coast. His place is only a few miles from the Colorado River. When

he comes down here, he takes up a ship, which he sends round to Loreto, and thence up to the mouth of the Colorado."

"How far is this place from here?"

"About two hundred miles."

"I should have thought it would have been better to have them here."

"No, there is a range of hills about half-way between his place and the coast, across which it would be difficult to get them. Another thing is, that there is scarce any food by the way; rain seldom falls here, and although the land is very rich when irrigated, it affords but a scanty growth in its wild state. A herd of twenty thousand bullocks could scarcely exist on the road, and even if they got here, they would have lost so much fat that they would scarce pay for boiling down."

They sat smoking in the veranda until nearly midnight, and Don Guzman then conducted the young sailor to the chamber that had been prepared for him.

CHAPTER II

A HEARTY WELCOME

EARLY as Mexican households are awake, in order to enjoy the comparatively cool hours of the morning, William Harland was the first up, and, dressing hastily, he started out to fetch his kit-bag. At the bottom of this he had stowed away, before he went on board, the clothes that he had worn when he left home, and also the contents of a small trunk that he had taken with him, buying an outfit for use on board from a slop-shop. He was back in an hour, for he had hidden the bag in a clump of bushes but two miles from the town. The servants were moving about, but, with the exception of Juan, none of the others were yet down. The latter met him as he entered.

"I have been to your room, and when I found it empty, guessed the errand on

which you were away. Why did you not tell me last night? You could have had a negro slave to go with you and carry that sack of yours back."

"Oh, I am not too proud to carry it myself, Don Juan, and I was really anxious to get it the first thing this morning, for I certainly should feel very uncomfortable sitting down to breakfast with your friends in this rough sailor suit. Luckily, I have some decent clothes in my bag, and half a dozen white jean jackets and trousers, which I bought for wearing ashore when I was on my last voyage; for then, as an apprentice and in a ship chiefly belonging to my father, I had a good many privileges in the way of leave when we were in port."

"You look desperately hot, and if you would like a swim, there is a pond in that clump of trees at the end of the garden—I have had a dip there myself this morning."

"Thank you, I should like it extremely, and I can then finish my toilet there."

The pond was an artificial one, the sides and

bottom being lined with stone; a thick band of trees and undergrowth surrounded it; it had doubtless been formed for the purpose of a bath, and also, as was shown by two or three seats placed around it, as a shady retreat during the heat of the day. In half an hour Will rejoined Juan, looking cool and comfortable in his white jacket and trousers, and a white flannel shirt, with turn-down collar and black silk handkerchief around his neck.

"That is a good deal better," Juan said; "you only want a sombrero to complete your costume. Sit down here; I told the servant to bring chocolate for us directly I saw you coming out from the trees. Don Guzman and Christina take their chocolate in their room. I don't suppose that we shall see them till breakfast, which will not be served for an hour and a half yet."

"How is your arm, Don Juan?"

"Drop the Don, please; I was always called simply Juan by my English friends at Valparaiso. It is much more pleasant than our ceremonious way of addressing each other.

So call me Juan, please, and I will call you Will."

"Now, Juan," Harland said, as they sipped their chocolate, "who do you believe set those ruffians on to you? I could see plainly enough that both you and the señorita had suspicions, though you did not choose to mention them to her father."

"You are a sharp observer," Juan laughed. "Well, yes, I will tell you frankly upon whom my suspicions fell. I must tell you first that Don Guzman is a connection of mine, my father having married a first cousin of his. When my father went out to this new ranch of his, twelve years ago, he left me behind, under my cousin's charge, and I lived here for five years, going to the mission to be educated by the fathers. Since then I have generally spent a month or two here, and not unnaturally, as you who have seen her will doubtless admit, I have grown to be very fond of Christina. Of course till lately she has simply looked upon me as her big cousin, but when I was last here, before going down to

Valparaiso, she was a little changed; she had grown to be shy with me, which she had never been before, and I hoped that she had begun to return my affection. Naturally enough, when I returned the other day, I spoke out to her, and learned, to my delight, that this was so, but of course she could say nothing until our parents had been consulted—an indispensable step, as you of course know, for in Mexico, although young people may have some voice in the matter, the parents' consent has to be obtained, and the preliminaries are, in fact, settled by them. In this case, happily, there is no fear of difficulty arising on that score. Don Guzman and my father are firm friends, and the alliance would be a suitable one in all respects, as, although my father may be more wealthy than Don Guzman, Christina is an only child, while I have a sister who is about her age."

"But I still do not see, Juan, how this explains anyone having an enmity with you."

"No, I am just coming to that. You must know that the military commandant of San

Diego, Colonel Pedros Melos, has a son Enriques, who is a captain in the regiment stationed here. Christina told me before I went down to Chile that Captain Melos was a frequent visitor, and that he was very attentive to her father, and frequently brought bouquets of choice flowers. She added that, although he was very civil to her, as far as the customs of the country permit a caballero to be civil to any young lady not related to him, she did not like him. Well, it happened the other day, that, just as Christina and I were coming to an understanding, exactly where we are sitting now, this Captain Melos stepped out from the window of the drawing-room. I should imagine that he had no great difficulty in understanding the situation. A young couple who have just declared their love for each other are apt to look a little awkward when suddenly interrupted.

"The sound of his foot, as he stepped out on the veranda, caused us to look round sharply. As his eye fell on us he turned as pale as if he had received a blow, and if ever

man's face wore for a moment an expression of intense rage his did then. However, he checked himself, murmured a word or two about believing that Senor Guzman was in the veranda, and then turned on his heel and went back into the room. Christina caught my arm. 'Beware, Juan, that man will be your deadly enemy!' And I felt that she spoke truly. She said that his attentions of late had been very marked, and she had been in constant fear that his father would call on hers to ask for her hand for his son. We agreed that I should, without loss of time, speak to her father on the subject of my suit, and I did so on the same day.

"He was good enough to say that when a request from my father reached him to that effect, he should most willingly accede to it. Colonel Melos did, in fact, call the day before yesterday, and formally proposed the alliance, to which Don Guzman replied that his daughter's affections were already engaged with his perfect consent and approval. The colonel, of course, had nothing to do but to bow himself

out with as good a grace as he could muster. I fancy from what I have heard that he is a good officer and an honest man. He has played a part in all the civil wars that we have had here, but, unlike most others, he always stuck to the same side, which, fortunately for him, turned out in the end to be the successful one. His son bears an altogether different character. Here, indeed, there has been nothing much against him; the fact of his father being commandant has no doubt acted as a check upon him, and possibly the hope that he may have entertained of winning Christina's hand may have helped to render him discreet, but I have heard that in other places where his regiment has been in garrison, he bore the worst of characters.

"Thus, you see, as a bitterly-disappointed man and as an unscrupulous one, he might well have been the author of this attack upon me; and, as you noticed, the idea occurred to Christina as well as myself, remembering as we did the expression of his face when he saw us together. That the affair was his work,

however, we have no shadow of proof, and I should not think of whispering my suspicions to anyone. Still, I shall take every precaution for the three or four days that I remain here, and shall not be out in the unfrequented streets after nightfall. And now about yourself; tell me, frankly, what are you thinking of doing? Do you intend to continue at sea, or are you thinking of returning to your home, where, no doubt, you would be gladly received by your father?"

"I have not thought it fully over yet, but I certainly shall not go back to my father with the tale that I found my life unbearable and deserted my ship. When I go it must be with a better record than that. He may have objected most strongly to my taking to the sea, but I think it would be an even greater annoyance to him to find that having, in defiance of his wishes, done so, I had so soon backed out of it. He himself is a man who carries through anything that he undertakes, no matter if he incurs loss in so doing. I do not say that if I saw some other opening and

made a success of it, he would mind; but when I do go back it must not be as a returned prodigal, but as a man who has done something, who has in one line or another achieved a certain amount of success. As far as I have thought it over, my ideas have been to take a passage down to Valparaiso, which seems to me the most go-ahead place on this coast, and there look round. I have money enough to last for some little time, for my father, on my return from my last voyage, gave me a cheque for five hundred dollars, and, beyond twenty or thirty dollars expended on my sea-kit, I still have it all in my belt."

"But what do you think of doing in Valparaiso?"

"I would take anything that turned up except a clerkship. Then, if in two or three months I could see nothing that seemed likely to lead to a good thing, I would ship again."

"Well, you will not embark on any such wild-goose chase for some time, for I intend to take you off with me to my father's hacienda for a long visit. You will receive the heartiest

of welcomes when I tell them what you have done for me. I can promise you, I think, a pleasant time there, and you will see what will be quite a new side of life to you, and learn something of the ranching business, which, let me tell you, is as good as another, though I admit that a considerable amount of capital is required for making a fair start."

"I should like it extremely," Harland said, "but—"

"There are no buts in it, Will," the other broke in. "You don't suppose that after what has happened you are going your way and I am going mine in the course of a few days, as if we were but two passengers who had made a short voyage together. My father would never forgive me if I did not bring you up with me. I expect to-morrow or next day we shall have three or four of the men down with horses, blankets, and other necessities for travel. I sent a messenger off on the day I arrived. There is generally a wagon or two that comes down every month for groceries, wine, and other matters, and as

I find that it is fully that time since the last trip, I expect that the carts and men will both arrive to-morrow. Travelling comfortably, we shall take the best part of a week to get there; of course, with relays of horses it could be done in less than half that time. The wagons take ten days, and that is good travelling, especially as there are three days' heavy work over the first range of hills. Here the mules will have a few days' rest and then start again."

"You find mules better than horses for wagons?"

"Beyond all comparison better; the value of a mule is six times that of a horse, except for exceptionally good and fast animals. Feed a mule well, and there is no better beast in the world. Of course the mules are big animals, being bred from the finest donkeys that can be imported from Spain, and can drag as much as oxen and go half as fast again."

Acting under his friend's advice, Will purchased the necessaries for his journey, the

principal item being a Mexican poncho; this, in appearance, was like a large blanket made of a long, soft wool that was practically waterproof. A hole edged with braid was cut in the middle. This was slipped on over the head, and a long riding-cloak, reaching to the stirrups, was obtained, while at night it served all the purposes of an ordinary blanket. Juan presented him with a rifle, a brace of handsomely mounted double-barrelled pistols, and a sword.

"We always ride armed across the hills; we are on good terms with the Indians near us, but might fall in with some wandering bands, or possibly a party of white cut-throats, fugitives from justice. Besides," he added significantly, "there may possibly be dangers on this side of the first range of hills."

"You think—" Will began.

"Yes, I think it possible that the organizer of the first attempt on my life may try again. It is not probable that he likes me any better for the failure he then made."

Some high riding-boots, a couple of pairs

of fringed Mexican trousers, and a few other necessaries completed the equipment, most of which was to be sent up in the wagon with the kit-bag. Will was in high spirits. Nothing could be more pleasant than the trip promised to be, and he looked eagerly forward to the start. The wagons had arrived, and with them four mounted men who had overtaken them on the day before they reached San Diego. They brought down with them two riding horses, intended for Juan's use.

"My father always sends two down," Juan said, "so that I can have a change each day, and be beyond the reach of such accidents as a horse straining himself or casting a shoe. Besides, on more than one occasion I have brought back a friend with me, as I am going to do now."

"I suppose you breed a good many up there?"

"We breed enough for the wants of our vaqueros, and a few high-class animals for our own riding. We don't care about having more than is necessary, for a good horse is

a temptation that an Indian can scarcely withstand. Cattle they don't care so much for, for up in the mountains feed would be scarce for them; besides, they have no difficulty in getting meat—game is plentiful enough, deer and bear, while at times they go down into the great plains on the other side of the Rockies and kill as many buffalo as they please, jerk the meat, and bring it up to their villages. In point of fact, we never refuse half a dozen or a dozen cattle to any party of Indians who come down and ask for them. It keeps us on good terms with them, and practically costs us nothing, for they do not often take the hides, preferring greatly deer-skins for their hunting-shirts and leggings, for which bullock hide is too heavy, while for their lariats and heel ropes, and so on, they use buffalo hide, which is stronger and tougher. So practically, you see, it is only the value of the fat that we lose."

Three days later Juan and Will said good-bye to Señor Guzman and his daughter and set out, the four mounted men riding behind

them with two led animals carrying provisions and water-skins.

"How far is it before we get beyond the settled country?"

"The country is cultivated as far as the Chocolate Hills, as there are several small rivers, whose water is used for irrigating the fields. Beyond these hills there are scattered villages and haciendas, their positions being determined by the existence of streams coming down from a great mountain range, for although rain seldom falls near the coast, there are heavy showers there occasionally. Except in the rainy season, the beds of these streams are dry, but wells sunk in them at all times yield a plentiful supply of water. It is drawn up by the labour of bullocks, and the ground irrigated; and they grow oranges, bananas, grapes, melons, and all kinds of fruit, in fact, in abundance. Some of these irrigated estates are of considerable size. For the last fifty miles we shall come across no settlements until we reach our own hacienda, for the country is too much open to Indian forays.

Though we do not suffer as much as they do on the other side of the Colorado; still the risk is great—too great for men who embark their capital, to say nothing of risking their lives. We are fortunate in the fact that the tribe immediately in our neighbourhood is a small one, and far less warlike than many of their neighbours. The goods they receive from us, and the cattle, make them comparatively rich, and they have never shown any signs whatever of enmity against us. We have promised them that if they are attacked by any of their savage neighbours we will, if they come down to us, assist them, and as the hacienda is strongly built and we have a supply of arms sufficient for all our men, we could resist any attack. I think this understanding has quite as much to do with their friendly feeling towards us as the benefits they receive from us."

"It must be a large valley to be capable of sustaining so vast a herd as that of your father?"

"Yes; the valley is not very wide at the

lower end near the river, but the hills open out and form a basin some ten miles wide and twenty miles long. Beyond that it extends a considerable distance, but narrows fast; a stream runs down the centre, and during the rainy season and at the time of the melting of the snows there are innumerable rivulets coming down from the hills, and in consequence the grass is sweet and long. Our herds amount to about forty thousand head, and we do not let them exceed that number. We do not use the upper part of the valley. By our agreement with the Indians that is to remain untouched as a hunting-ground for them."

That night they slept at the hacienda of some acquaintances of Senor Sarasta, where they were most hospitably entertained; the next day they halted for a few hours at San Felice, and rode on as soon as the sun had lost its full power. They were now beyond the region of general cultivation; the plain was, however, fairly green, as a short time before the unusual circumstance of a heavy rain had occurred, with the result that in the course of a few days the

whole face of the country was changed. As soon as the horses were unsaddled the men scattered to collect dead brushwood, and in a short time a fire was blazing, and a slice from a hindquarter of venison that had been presented to them by their host of the night before was skewered on a ramrod and placed over it. They had made sixty-five miles in two days' journey. They had not been following any beaten track, but the men had all made the journey so often that no path was needed. In the morning they would begin the ascent of the lower slopes of the mountains, whose crest rose some thirty miles ahead of them, although, seen in the clear air, they did not seem to Will Harland to be more than a fifth of that distance. Rather to the surprise of the men, Juan ordered that a watch should be kept, a precaution they had never taken before.

"I have an idea," he said to Will, "that we shall be attacked either to-night or while mounting the hill to-morrow. It is just as well to take the precaution to set a guard

to-night, but I do not really think that if a party are out after us they will trouble us to-night. They could not know exactly the road we should take, but will be sure that we shall cross the hills and come down on the north side of the Great Dry Lake, and probably stop at Martinez. From there the country is better cultivated, as we go along the Chatenezonais Valley, in which there are several villages. To-morrow's journey is, therefore, the most lonely and dangerous, and they would have no motive whatever in going farther, so I think that for to-night we can sleep tranquilly. To-morrow we shall have to be on our guard."

CHAPTER III

AN AMBUSH

THE night passed quietly. The soil was soft and sandy, and, rolled in his poncho, Will slept as comfortably as if in a hammock.

They were in the saddle early, for the day's ride would be a very long one, and Juan intended to give the horses a day's rest at Martinez.

"We don't consider sixty miles to be a long journey here," Juan said, as they started, "and, indeed, if one starts on fresh horses it is a mere nothing; but when one rides the same, day after day, forty is as much as one has a right to expect from them after one is once fairly on his way. We shall meet with no water to-day, and it is specially for this part of the journey that we brought the water-skins with us."

"I noticed that you did not fill them half full at the last stream we crossed."

"No, it was not necessary; the horses will have a good drink at a stream we shall cross in a couple of hours, and we shall fill the skins there; beyond that we enter the mountains and travel through an extremely difficult pass, or, rather, I should say, passes, till we come down into the valley. The carts do not come this way; they strike the Colorado River

many miles down and follow its bank. It is at least a third longer, but if it were three times as long they would have to go that way; the passes are difficult enough for horses, but they would be impossible for wheeled carriages."

After riding for thirty miles they halted for half an hour; the horses were watered, and the men ate some of the meat they had cooked overnight and some cold pancakes that had been fried in deer's fat. They were now far up on the hillside and following a regular track.

"Another hour's sharp climbing and we shall be on the top summit of the pass. See to the priming of your rifles and pistols. If we are not attacked before we reach the top I shall admit that I have been wrong, and that the attack upon me was, after all, the work of street ruffians."

The four vaqueros were ordered to look to their pistols before remounting; they did not carry guns.

"Do you expect an attack, master?" one

asked. "I have not heard of there being any bands on the road just lately, but of course there may be some, and this bit of road is their favourite lurking-place, as the traffic between San Filepi and the Chatenezonais Valley all comes this way."

"I do not know that I expect to be attacked, Lopez, but I have grounds for suspecting that it is possible. If we should be ambushed, dismount at once, and take up your position behind the rocks and fight them in their own way. If the road were good enough I should say gallop on, but it is too steep and too rough for that."

Will Harland soon found that his friend had not exaggerated the difficulty of the pass. On both sides the hills sloped very steeply and were covered by boulders. The track in the middle of the ravine was just wide enough for a cart, but at distances of two hundred or three hundred yards apart the rock had been cut away for some twenty yards, so that two or three carts could draw aside there to allow others coming the other way to pass.

As it was inconvenient for two to ride abreast, Juan said: "We had better go in single file."

"Yes, and I will ride first," Will replied. "If there should be a fellow hiding among these rocks, it will be you they are after, and, riding first, you would present an easy mark for them; whereas, if I am first, they won't be able to aim at you till you are pretty nearly abreast of them."

"I don't like that," Juan began, but Will pushed his horse forward. Both had unslung their rifles from their shoulders, and were carrying them in readiness for instant use.

"Keep your eyes on the rocks," Juan said to the men behind him; "if one of you sees the least movement give a shout, and all throw yourselves at once off your horses."

It would, however, have been no easy matter to distinguish a man's head among the masses of rock and boulders through which in many places brushwood and small trees had sprung up, and, although all kept scanning the hillsides minutely, nothing suspicious was

heard, until suddenly a shot was fired from a spot some forty feet up the rocks on the left-hand side. Will instantly swung himself to the ground, gave a sharp slap on his horse's quarters, and ensconced himself behind a rock, while the animal, relieved from the weight of his rider, made his way rapidly along the path. The first shot had been followed by half a dozen others. These came from both sides of the ravine, and a ball striking the rock close to Will's head, showed him that his position was no more safe there than it would have been on horseback. He therefore made a rush upward, and took up a position between two rocks which covered him from either side. Then he took advantage of some bushes and crawled some yards farther along, until he came to a spot where he could lie in shelter, and yet obtain a view through the bushes both above and below him.

"Are you all right, Juan?" he shouted.

The answer came from rocks on the other side. "Yes; the ball aimed at me has killed my horse, but I am unhurt. Lopez is killed."

For some time shots were fired at intervals. Juan shouted to the vaqueros not to use their pistols.

"You would have no chance of hitting them," he said, "and they would only pick you off one by one. Lie quiet for the present; keep your shots till they come to close quarters. Now, Will," he said in English, "you watch the rocks above me, and I will watch those above you. Mark, if you can, where a shot is fired; lie with your rifle pointed at it until the fellow stands up to fire again, and then let him have it."

Four shots were fired almost together from Will's side, the assailants aiming in the direction from which the voice had come, but Will had no doubt that Juan had foreseen this and was in shelter when he spoke. Presently he saw a puff of smoke shoot out from the side of a large rock. He brought his rifle to bear upon it and watched intently. Three minutes later a head appeared cautiously round the rock, then a shoulder appeared, and a rifle was pointed towards the spot behind which he had

first sheltered. He fired, there was a sharp scream, and the rifle went clattering down, exploding as it fell. The moment that he had fired, Will drew back into the shelter of the stone. Two other shots rang out, and the balls cut up and scattered the small pebbles on which he had been lying. He was able to observe, however, the position of one of his assailants. While he was reloading he heard the crack of Juan's rifle, followed by an exclamation of satisfaction.

"That is two of them, Will. They will soon get tired of this game."

The distances were so short, in fact, that it was almost impossible for even an indifferent shot to miss his aim when he once caught sight of the head of an enemy. Presently another shot struck the rock close to Will. It was fired some paces from the stone that he was watching, and showed that the assailants were using the same tactics that he had done, and were shifting their positions after firing. He moved a few yards away, and did not answer to the next two or three shots that were fired.

"He is done for," he heard one of the men on the other side of the ravine say. They were but some fifty feet away from him, and it was, therefore, easy to catch their words as they shouted from one to the other.

"Well, then, go down and attack the man we want," another voice said. "No one but the Englishman had a rifle over there, so you are quite safe."

"You had better come and show us the way. We did not bargain for this sort of thing. You said we should settle it all in one volley."

"So you would have done, you fools, if you could have shot straight. Who could have supposed that you were all going to miss at that distance. Why, a child of ten years old would have fired straighter. However, I am ready to lead the way. You, over there, make a rush when we do."

Will marked the exact position of the speaker. It was behind a large boulder some fifteen yards up the hill and as much ahead of him; he saw that to join the men who had

been firing he would have to pass an open space between that and some other large masses of rock, and he laid his sights on that spot. The speaker, who was evidently confident that he was killed, and that therefore there was no danger of a shot being fired at him while he moved to join the others, appeared half a minute later. He was stooping, and held a pistol in each hand. The moment his body appeared in the line of fire Will pressed the trigger, and the man rolled over like a log. A cry of dismay burst from the hillside above Harland, where the men had evidently been watching also for their leader to join his comrades and give the signal for a rush.

"I have shot Melos, Juan!" Will shouted. "At least if he is, as you suppose, their leader."

"Well done, indeed! We shall have no difficulty with the rest of them if their paymaster is dead; they will think of nothing now but saving their own wretched lives."

The parties on the opposite sides of the

ravine now shouted to each other. Two or three of them urged their companions to make a general rush, but the majority were altogether against this.

"Why should we throw away our lives?" one said. "They have all got pistols, and even if we got the better of them, four or five of us would be likely to go down before we had finished with them. Indeed, they would shoot us down directly we showed ourselves, and half of us would never reach the bottom."

There was a silence which showed that there was a general feeling that he was right. Then the same speaker went on:

"Caballeros, we have been cruelly misled; we are poor men, and have been led into this. Two of us have been killed; we ask your mercy."

As he ceased there was a general cry of "Mercy! mercy!"

"You dogs!" Juan shouted back, "if it were not that all of your lives are not worth as much as a drop of the honest blood of those with me, I would not move from here until I

had put an end to the last of you. However, you have had a lesson now. Come down one at a time into the road. When you get there drop your pistols and knives to the ground, and then go down the hill. When one man has started let the next man come down. How many are there of you?"

"There are six of us alive," the man answered. "We were eight besides our leader. My brother was killed by you in San Diego the other night, and if it had not been for that I should not have come."

"Look here," Juan said, "I shall see every one of your faces plainly as you come down, and when you have thrown down your arms you will stand and face this rock so that I may have a good look at you. I warn you to leave San Diego as soon as you get back, for when I return I will have the town searched for you, and any of you found there will pay for this with your lives. Now you come down first."

One by one the six men came down, placed their weapons upon the ground, turned to the rock where Juan was lying, and then went

down the pass without a word being uttered. When the last had gone Juan stepped down into the road, and was at once joined by Will, who had kept his rifle pointed on each man as he reached the road, in case he should intend treachery against Juan. Two of the vaqueros also stepped out.

"Where is Pedro?" Juan asked.

"He is dead, sir. He was shot through the body, but had just strength to throw himself in among the rocks. I heard him groaning just at first, but he was soon silent; I could see him from where I lay, and he has not moved since."

"See if he is dead, Sancho. This is a bad business."

The man returned in a minute.

"He is quite dead, señor."

"Where is the man you shot, Will? Let us see if my suspicions are correct."

Will led the way to the spot, followed by the others. Juan glanced at the dead man.

"It is as I thought," he said. Then he

turned to the vaqueros. "You may as well search him. It is likely he has money upon him."

"He has a bag, and a heavy one, sir," one of them said, as he lifted a canvas bag from the dead man's sash.

"Let us see what he valued my life at," Juan replied.

The two vaqueros counted over the gold pieces.

"There are eighty of them."

"Ten apiece," Juan remarked. "Put aside sixty for the widows of Pedro and Lopez, and take ten each yourselves."

"Shall we do anything with the body, señor?"

"Fetch some big stones and pile them over it. There will be no search for him, for you may be sure he has not mentioned to anyone in the town what he was going to do, or where he was going. He probably asked for a week's leave of absence, and would likely enough say that he was going up to Los Angeles or Santa Barbara, and when he does

not return it will be supposed that he has been murdered on the way. When you have done with him you had better do the same thing with the bodies of your two comrades. The ground is too rocky to dig graves, and they will sleep as well there as elsewhere. It would be impossible for us to carry them home."

An hour's labour and the work was finished. Will assisted the men in the work. Juan did not offer to do so.

"I have a bullet in my shoulder," he said. "Another fellow fired the instant that I shot his comrade. He luckily hit my shoulder instead of my head. I will get you to fetch Pedro's sash and make a sling for my arm. We can do nothing for it until we go down to Monterey."

"Have the horses gone far, do you think, Juan?"

"No, we shall probably find them a few hundred yards up the pass. They are trained not to go on without riders, and when their first alarm at the firing has ceased they will halt."

When the cairns were finished the vaqueros cut down two saplings and made a couple of rude crosses, which they fixed above their fallen comrades. Then they all proceeded up the pass, and soon came upon the horses, and, mounting, continued their way down into Monterey, where they arrived just as the sun was setting. Here Juan's wound was attended to. The injury was to the left arm, which had been thrown forward in the act of firing. The ball struck just above the elbow, and had cut a groove from that point nearly up to the shoulder.

"This is evidently my unlucky arm at present, Will," he said, with a smile; "after having had three gashes below the elbow a week ago, it now gets ploughed with a rifle-bullet."

"I should call it a lucky limb, Juan, considering that they are nothing but flesh wounds, and that had not the arm received them, both knife and bullet might have given you a vastly more serious wound elsewhere."

"Yes, that is true enough. There is one

comfort in being wounded in this country. You can't go into the smallest village without finding half a dozen people capable of dressing an injury, more especially a knife wound. In fact, knife fights are so common that very little is thought of them unless really dangerous injury is inflicted."

"Will not this prevent your riding for a day or two, Juan?"

"Not a bit of it. We had intended to stop here to-morrow to give a rest to the horses, but the next day we will push on. Happily, we shall not have to be on our guard against danger, for the risk of falling in with marauding red-skins is too slight to be thought of. Our next day's ride will be an easy one, across a cultivated country. Then we have a long day and a half of mountain work."

The passes which they had to traverse before arriving at Señor Sagasta's ranch astonished Harland, who had no previous experience of such scenery. Sometimes they were travelling up ravines so deep and rugged that it was almost twilight below, while at

others they wound along on natural ledges on the face of precipices where a stumble of the horse would mean certain death to it and its rider. Higher and higher they wound, until, crossing a narrow shoulder of bare rock, they looked down into the broad valley owned by Juan's father.

"Do you see that white speck in front of the dark patch of trees? That is the hacienda. As the crow flies, I do not suppose it is more than seven or eight miles away, but by the way we have to go it is five times that distance, and if we are there by this time to-morrow we shall have every reason to be satisfied."

When they started the next morning, Juan sent one of the vaqueros on with the news that he would arrive two hours after his messenger.

"It is just as well to give them notice," he said to Will. "I told him to mention that I have my arm in a sling, but that I have no serious injury. It has been hurting me a good bit for the past two days, and as I have not

got much sleep I expect that I am not looking what you call very fit, therefore it is as well that they should not think me in a very bad way when I ride up; besides, I dare say they are getting anxious about me. You see, they will have calculated upon my having ridden a good deal faster than we have done, for with the two horses one can push on rapidly, and, knowing when the horses would have arrived at San Diego, they have, I am sure, been on the look-out for me for the past three or four days. Of course the wound was nothing in itself, but in such rough riding as we have had one gets sudden jerks that do not improve its condition. You have bathed it for me night and morning, but there is no doubt it has become a good deal inflamed, and I shall have to keep quiet for a few days after we get there."

Will himself was by no means sorry that the journey was approaching its end. Wholly unaccustomed to riding, he had been so stiff at the end of the second day's journey that he could scarcely dismount unassisted from his

horse. This had to some extent worn off, but he still felt that every bone in his body ached. The last ten miles were performed at a canter. The horses seemed as glad as their riders at being on level ground again, and were doubtless well aware that they were close to their home once more. They were within three miles of the hacienda, when they saw two mounted figures riding to meet them.

"It is my father and sister," Juan said. "I thought that they would lose no time in starting after Antonio arrived with the news that I was close at hand."

CHAPTER IV

A GREAT RANCH

ANTONIO had indeed been charged to make light of the fight in the pass.

"My father is almost sure to mount and ride out to meet me," Juan said to him before starting. "You can say we had a skirmish

with some brigands in the hills, and that I have a slight flesh wound in the shoulder, but don't say more about it until he has started to meet us. Then you can go to the huts and break the news of the death of Lopez and Pedro to their wives, but keep them from going anywhere near the house till I arrive. I don't wish my mother to know anything about it till I see her. If she heard that two of the men had been killed she would at once imagine that I had been badly wounded and that you were concealing the truth from her. Of course you will tell them, Antonio, that I am bringing a friend with me."

Señor Sarasta and his daughter came up. Will Harland reined in his horse a little so as to allow his companion to meet his friends alone. Juan checked his horse and dismounted as they came up to them, and they, too, leaped from their horses.

"Welcome home again, Juan!" his father said, embracing him in Spanish fashion; while the girl kissed him with warm affection.

"So I hear from Antonio that you have

had trouble on the way and have lost some blood."

"'Tis only a flesh wound, sir, but just at present it is smarting a good deal. Riding over those mountains is not the best thing in the world, even for a trifling wound. Now I wish to introduce you to my friend, Don William Harland, an American gentleman, who has done me vital service, as I will presently relate to you."

Will had also dismounted, and was standing by his horse, some fifteen yards away. Juan's father walked across to him, and, lifting his sombrero, said:

"As the friend of my son, señor, I welcome you most warmly, the more so since he tells me that you have rendered him a signal service, though of what nature I am not aware, but in any case, as his friend you are mine, and I beg you to consider my house as your own. This is my daughter, Donna Clara."

Will removed his sombrero and bowed deeply, while the girl made a ceremonious salute.

"Now let us mount and ride on," Señor

Sarasta said. "Your mother will be anxiously expecting you, Juan. We have been looking for you for the past two days. But where are your other two men?"

"I am sorry to say, father, that they are both killed," Juan replied.

"Killed!" the haciendero repeated; while the girl uttered an exclamation of horror.

"Why, Antonio only spoke of the attack upon you as a trifle!"

"I told him to do so, sir. I did not wish for you or my mother to be alarmed. She might well have imagined that the wound was much more serious than he reported; but it was a serious affair. We were ambushed by a party of nine men in the upper part of the pass in the hills beyond Monterey. The two men were killed by their first fire. We took to the rocks. My friend here shot their leader and one of the men. I shot another, but should not have been much further use, for one of them fired almost at the same instant that I did, and his bullet cut my arm from the elbow to the shoulder. It is not at all a

serious wound, but it disabled the arm for a time. However, the fall of their leader settled the affair. The other six men, finding that they could not get away without a certainty of being shot, surrendered, coming out one by one and throwing down their weapons in the road and then going down the pass singly. I was obliged to let them go, for they were still superior to us in number, and we could no more show ourselves out of shelter than they could. Some at least of us might have fallen had the fight gone on."

"Well, let us mount," the don said. "You must tell me all about it later on. The first thing to do is to have your wound seen to. Padre Hidalgo is a famous hand at such matters."

"Well, señor," he went on to Will, as they cantered along, "I can quite understand now that the service that you rendered to my son is a valuable one, for had you not shot the leader of these rascals, to say nothing of some of the others, the fight might have terminated very differently."

"That is certainly so," Juan said, "but that was not the service to which I alluded. Don William and I made our first acquaintance in the streets of San Diego after nightfall. I was returning through the quarter by the port when I was attacked suddenly by four cut-throats. I was defending myself as well as I could, but should certainly have been killed had not this gentleman, who was an entire stranger to me, ran up and levelled one of my assailants to the ground with a blow from a stick he carried, and broke the wrist of another. The third, turning to defend himself, I disposed of, and the other ran away."

"By the saints! you seem to have had a hot time of it, Juan, and, indeed, we have all good reason to be most grateful to your preserver. Señor Harland, my obligations to you are infinite—such as I can never repay."

"Really, señor, you are making more of the matter than it is worth," Will said earnestly. "I was going quietly along when I heard shouts and exclamations, and felt that some-

one was being attacked. I ran forward, and, seeing four men attacking one, had no difficulty in deciding who were the aggressors, and without hesitation joined in. As I took them by surprise, and, in fact, disposed of two of them before they could attack me, while almost at the same moment Juan killed another, the affair was over almost before it began. It was not a quarter of a minute from the time I came up to that in which the fourth man was running off at the top of his speed. I have already benefited very largely by the affair, having gained thereby the friendship of your son, the hospitality of his friend, Señor Guzman, and the opportunity of making this journey and paying you a visit. As to the affair in the mountains, I was defending my own life also, and our success was as important to me as to him."

"It is well for you to make light of it, sir, but whether the first affair lasted a quarter of a minute or a quarter of an hour, the result was the same. Your quickness and courage in thus plunging into a street fray on behalf

of a stranger saved my son's life, as doubtless did the shot that killed the leader of the party attacking you. It is strange, indeed, that he should have met with two such adventures in the course of a week. Possibly, Juan, the one was a sequel to the other, and those engaged in it may have been the comrades of the men who attacked you at San Diego, and who thus assaulted you to obtain revenge for their mishap there."

"That was so, father. Both attacks were the work of one man, who, I am happy to say, will trouble me no more, as he was the leader of the second attack—the man whom Señor Harland shot."

"But who is the man, and what could have been his motive for thus attacking you?"

"I only suspected the first time, father, and until I looked at the man Harland had shot I was not sure of it. Happily none of the men who acted for him are likely to open their lips on the matter, and no one else will have a suspicion. Had it been otherwise we might

have had a good deal of trouble over it, for the man was Captain Enriques Melos."

Sarasta looked grave.

"As you say, that would lead to serious trouble were it known, although, clearly, you were not to blame in the matter; but what was the reason of his enmity against you?"

"He was a suitor for Donna Christina Guzman's hand, father."

"Ah, ah, that explains it! Well, we will think no more of it at present; but what did you do with his body?"

"We piled rocks over it; there is no fear of his being discovered, and as he certainly would not have mentioned to anyone his intention of murdering me on my way home, no search is likely to be made in that direction."

"That is well. Of course I received your letter, Juan, and sent off a messenger at once to Señor Guzman, giving my and your mother's hearty consent to the match, which indeed pleased us much."

Two or three minutes later they arrived at

the hacienda, in front of which a number of servants and peons employed in the gardens and stables had gathered to welcome their young master back after his nine months' absence. As they dismounted, Donna Sarasta appeared at the door. Juan ran up the steps and tenderly embraced her; Señor Sarasta then led Will up.

"Your first welcome, my dear, should have been given to this gentleman, Señor William Harland, for had it not been for him you would not have Juan by your side now. He has twice saved his life."

"Twice saved his life!" Donna Sarasta exclaimed incredulously. "Is it possible, Philip?"

"It is quite true," her husband said gravely. "Had it not been for him Juan would never have returned to us. Do not be alarmed; the danger is over, for the author of these attacks has fallen by Don William's rifle."

The lady held out both hands to Will. The tears were streaming down her cheeks.

"Señor," she said, "I cannot thank you now. Remember that it is our only son's life that

you have saved. Think of what we should have felt had he not returned, and our men had brought us news of his death. May the Blessed Virgin reward you and bless you! Give me your arm, Philip, I am faint."

Her husband and son supported her into the house and placed her on a couch.

"Look after your mother, Clara," the Mexican said, as two female attendants came in.

"Sancho, go and call Father Hidalgo down from his study. Doubtless he is unaware that my son has returned. Tell him that he is to bring bandages and salves, for there is a wound to be dressed. He will find my son in the dining-room. Do one of you fetch basins of hot water and sponges there. Now, Señor Harland, I will lead you to your room. Doubtless a bath will be agreeable to you after your journey."

Will was glad to be out of the way during this family meeting, and willingly followed his host, who took him to a large chamber on the first floor. A bath stood ready filled, with towels and all conveniences.

"I told them to put a suit of Juan's clothes in readiness. I did not know whether they would fit, but I have no doubt they will do so. They will save you the trouble of opening your bag till evening. And now, if you will excuse me, I will go down and look at the boy's wound."

"Well, luck has favoured me, indeed," Will said to himself, as he looked round the room before proceeding to undress. "A fortnight ago there was I, a runaway lad without plans, in a strange country, with nothing but my kit-bag and some ninety pounds to rely upon. Now I am in clover, with a good friend, a welcome assured as long as I choose to stay here, and an amount of gratitude that seems to me almost ridiculous, considering that it is all the result of my interfering in a street row, just as I might have done in any other port. At any rate, I shall have some new experiences to tell about when I get home. I shall certainly like the señor; he has been so long out here that he has shaken off the indolent air and the formal constraint that almost all these Spanish

people have, and is much more like an American than an Englishman. The mere fact of his having settled in this out-of-the-way valley is a proof that he has a lot of go and pluck.

"Of course I can't tell much about his wife yet; she is naturally upset at the thought of Juan's danger. As to his sister, she is ever so much prettier than his sweetheart, though certainly Christina Guzman is pretty, too. She hardly said a word after her first welcome to him—I suppose she was too upset to talk, and will brighten up when she finds that Juan's wounds are really trifling. Well, I expect I shall have a jolly time of it here, and get some shooting and hunting. It will be great fun among all these herds of wild cattle. The first thing to do will be to learn to ride properly. I should not like to have all these Mexican fellows laughing at me. At any rate, I have learned something on our way here. I will get Juan to go out alone with me for a bit till I can be sure of sticking on. From what he was saying, some of their horses must

be brutes to sit, especially those who jump straight up into the air, and keep on doing it until they get rid of their riders."

Having taken a bath and dressed very leisurely, he went downstairs again, feeling pleased that Juan's clothes fitted him so well, and that it was not necessary for him to get out his own, for, although new, they would certainly not look so well after their journey in the kit-bag as did the spotless white garments that had been provided for him. He found Clara alone in the patio. This hacienda, like most of its kind, was a large square building with a courtyard in its centre. In this case the patio had been transformed into a shady little garden, with orange-trees, bananas, and other tropical productions. Grape-vines climbed round the light pillars that supported the veranda that surrounded it, and covered its roof with a mass of foliage dotted with great purple bunches of grapes. Two or three little fountains were half-hidden among the trees, and the air was heavy with the scent of the orange and citron flowers.

"My father and mother will be down directly, señor," she said; "the bell will ring for the mid-day meal in a few minutes."

"What a lovely little garden this is!" Will said cheerfully, for he saw that the girl was nervous and embarrassed. "You would not see anything like this in the east, even under glass."

The girl was silent for a few moments, and then broke out:

"I hope you do not think me ungrateful, señor, that I have said nothing to thank you for what you did for my brother, but it was not that. It was because I felt that if I were to say a word I should break out crying. We love each other dearly, Juan and I, and it was so awful to think that I might never have seen him alive again;" and she stopped, with her eyes full of tears.

"I quite understand, señorita," he said; "and, indeed, I have been very much more than sufficiently thanked by your father and mother. As for my share in the matter, it was really not worth talking about. I am a sailor, you know, and I am sorry to say that

sailors when in port are often in the habit of getting into rows, and I have half a dozen times at least, when in foreign ports, taken part in a scrimmage when I saw drunken sailors engaged in a broil with others, and have had to fight very much harder than I did at San Diego, where, in point of fact, so far as I was concerned, there was really no fighting at all. I do not say that your brother might not have come off very badly if I had not happened to come along, but there was really no shadow of risk to myself. A couple of blows and it was all over; and I do hope that no one will say any more in the way of thanking me."

At this moment Señor Sarasta, his wife, and Juan, all came out together.

"Well, Juan, how do you feel now?" Will asked, well pleased at their arrival.

"I feel a different man altogether," the young Mexican replied. "A warm bath first and then the padre's salves have done wonders for me, and in a week I shall have forgotten all about it."

The rest of the day was spent in sauntering or sitting in the gardens round the house. They were of the Spanish fashion, containing but few flowers except those borne by the fruit-trees, and resembling shrubberies and orchards rather than gardens, shade being the principal object aimed at. During the afternoon Will told his friend of his desire to become a good horseman.

"I will put you in charge of Antonio; we have no better rider on the ranch. He will put you through a course, beginning with comparatively well-broken bronchos, until you can sit the worst buckers on the plains; but you must not mind a few heavy falls at first."

"I shall not mind that a bit, Juan. Sailors have the knack of falling lightly."

"Ah, well, he will choose a spot where the grass is long and the ground soft for your lessons, and I can tell you it makes a good deal of difference whether you come off on ground like that or on a spot where there is next to no grass, and the ground is as hard as a brick. I have no doubt that in the course

of two or three weeks you will, if you stick to it, be able to ride almost anything."

"You need not be afraid of my not sticking to it, Juan. I certainly should not like to look like a fool to your vaqueros, still less before your mother and sister."

Accordingly next morning Will's lessons began in a meadow close to the stream, and half a mile away from the house. At first he was thrown an innumerable number of times, for he had told Antonio to bring with him some fairly restive horses.

"It is of no use my spending my time on quiet animals," he said. "I have just had a week's riding on one of them. I may as well begin with a fairly bad one at once; it only means a few more throws. I have got to learn to hold on, and the sooner I begin that the better."

"With beginners we sometimes put a strap for them to hold on by, señor."

Will shook his head. "I don't want anything of that sort," he said. "I want to be able to stick on by my knees."

"It is more by properly balancing yourself than by holding on," the man said. "If you always keep your balance you will come straight down again into the saddle, no matter how high he throws you, and there is no doubt that the tighter you hold on by your knees the more heavy are the throws that you will get."

"I can understand that, Antonio. Now I am ready to begin."

Will had expected to find it difficult, but he was fairly astounded by the rapidity and variety of the tricks by which he was again and again thrown off. After a time Antonio urged him to give it up for the day, but he insisted on continuing until he was so absolutely exhausted that he could do no more.

"Well, señor, the man said, "you have done wonderfully well for a beginner, and I will guarantee that in another week you will be able to ride any ordinary horse, and in a month you will be able to mount fearlessly any animal that you may come across, except, of course, a few brutes that scarcely

a vaquero on the ranch would care to back."

Antonio's opinion was justified. It was ten days before Juan was able to ride again, and by that time William Harland was so far accustomed to the saddle that he was able to accompany him and his father on their excursions to visit the herds and see that all was going on well. He did not, however, give up his lessons with Antonio, devoting three or four hours a day to the work, and at the end of the month he was able to sit any ordinary bucker without difficulty. After that he practised for an hour a day on vicious animals, and at the end of three months Antonio said:

"Now, señor, I can do no more for you; that brute that you have been riding the last week is the terror of the ranch, and after sitting him as you have done for the last three days, without his being able to get rid of you once, you can ride anything without fear."

CHAPTER V

AN INDIAN RAID

THE time passed very pleasantly; Will had become a great favourite with both Señor Sarasta and his wife, and was treated as one of the family. Donna Clara often accompanied the party on horseback, and when her first shyness with Will had worn off, he found that she was lively and high-spirited. Accustomed to horses from her infancy, she was an admirable rider, and, although both Juan and Will were mounted on some of the best horses on the ranch, she could leave them behind on her favourite mare, a beautiful creature that she herself had broken in. At the end of three months Will felt that, much as he was enjoying himself, he must not outstay his welcome; but, upon his broaching the subject of leaving, the whole family protested so indignantly against such an idea, that he felt they really

desired him to stay with them. Juan spoke to him on the subject as soon as they started on horseback together that afternoon.

"The idea of your leaving us is altogether preposterous, Will; do you think that we should for a moment let you go? Where, indeed, would you go? What ideas have you in your mind? Are you not one of us completely?"

"You are awfully good to me; I was never so happy in my life," Will replied, "but there is reason in all things; I cannot spend my life here. I must be doing something for my living. As I told you, I do not want to return home until I can say to my father, I have been a success, I require no favours, and am in a position to keep myself."

"I understand that," Juan said, "but how do you propose doing it?"

"I should do it somehow. I can at least ride now, and have more ways of making a living open to me than I had before."

"My dear Will, you are talking nonsense, and if you suppose that we are going to let you

go out into the world in that sort of way you are altogether mistaken. At any rate, leave the matter alone for the present; we may see our way more clearly in time;" and had Will happened to glance at his companion's face, he would have been puzzled by the slight smile that glanced across it.

Two months later all hands were busy on the ranch. It was the season at which the herds were weeded out, the old bulls and some of the young ones slaughtered, skinned, and boiled down. Will only once accompanied Señor Sarasta and Juan to the scene of operations. He was interested in the Indians, who, with their squaws and young ones, had come down and established a camp of their own. They were free to take as much meat as they pleased, not only for eating, but for drying for future consumption; broad, thin slices of flesh were cut up and hung on ropes between poles to dry in the sun. Three days sufficed for the operation. The meat, now almost as hard as leather, was pounded by the women between heavy stones, and then

mixed with a little salt and packed tightly in bags made of skins. In this state it would keep for an indefinite time. Will Harland often went there, but could not be induced to approach the spot where the animals were slaughtered. He was much rallied by Señor Sarasta and Juan on what they called his faint-heartedness.

"I admit all you say," he replied. "I don't mind going into a fight myself, but I cannot stand seeing those poor brutes killed. I know that it is necessary, and that your vaqueros do it almost instantaneously; at the same time, it is not necessary for me to see it. I would very much rather stay away and watch the natives, with the shrivelled old women, and the funny little papooses."

Clara nodded approvingly. "You are quite right, Don William," for although the others all, like Juan, called him simply by his Christian name, Clara still continued the more formal mode of address. "I never go near the yard myself when it is going on."

"Ah! it is one thing for a girl not to like

it," Juan said, "but for Will, whom I have seen as cool as possible when his life was in danger, and who fired at a man as steadily as if he had been shooting at a target, it seems odd. However, one does not go to see the animals killed; no one can take pleasure in that. The interest lies in the skill and courage of the vaqueros, who are constantly risking their lives; and, indeed, there is scarcely a season passes in which one or two of them are not killed."

The work occupied nearly a month; then Juan started with his father for San Diego, where the formal betrothal of the former was to take place. At this his father's presence was necessary, and the latter would make his usual arrangements for chartering a ship to go down to receive the hides and skins full of tallow at the mouth of the river. Will had again proposed that he should accompany them and say good-bye to them there. As before, his proposal was scoffed at.

"It will be time enough to think of that when I go down three months hence to be married," Juan said; "and now you must take

our places here, and look after my mother and sister. You will have to play the part of my younger brother, and keep things straight. When we come back, we will have a serious talk about the future."

Will was indeed now quite at home in the work of the ranch, and not infrequently rode in one direction to give orders respecting the herds, while Juan rode in the other, and the vaqueros all regarded him as being invested with authority by their master. The report of Antonio and Sancho of what had taken place at San Diego and on the road, had greatly predisposed them in his favour, and the manner in which he had succeeded in sitting a horse that few of them would venture to mount had greatly increased their respect for him. Don Señor Sarasta settled the matter by saying, "If you were to go with Juan I could not leave at the same time, Will, and I particularly wish to be present at his betrothal. It would be strange and contrary to all custom if one of his family were not there; still, we could hardly be away together unless

there were someone here to take our place. You know questions are constantly referred to us. One herd strays into the ground allotted to another, disputes arise between vaqueros, and, in fact, someone in authority must be here."

"Very well, sir. Then, if you think that I can be really useful, I shall be only too glad to stay. You know that my own inclinations are all that way. I have already been here five months, and I feel that this delightful life must come to an end before long. However, since you are good enough to say that I can really be of use in your absence, I will gladly remain here until Juan goes down again to fetch his bride."

Two days later the Mexican and his son rode off, accompanied by six well-armed horsemen. Will found plenty to do, and was out the greater part of the day. Two days after the others had started he saw one of the Indians talking to Antonio. As soon as the latter saw him he left the Indian and came up to him.

"This Indian, who is one of the chiefs of

our tribe, señor, tells me that there is a report that the Indians on the other side of the river are preparing for an expedition. It is supposed that it is against another tribe farther east. They have not raided on this side of the river for many years, but he thought that it was as well to let us know that they are at present in an unsettled state. He says that he will have some of his warriors down near the river, and that he will let us know as soon as he has any certain news."

"Is there anything to be done, do you think, Antonio?"

"No, señor; wars are frequently going on between the Indians to the east, but we have never had any trouble with them since we came here. If our Indians thought that there was any danger, they would very soon be flocking down here, for they have always been promised that they should be supplied with firearms were anything of that sort to happen, and they know that, with the aid of our people, they could beat off any number of these red-skins."

"I have no doubt that we could defend ourselves, Antonio; however, you see that in Don Sarasta's absence I have a very heavy responsibility, and I think that it would be as well to take some precaution. Will you ask the chief to send down a dozen of his warriors? They shall be paid, in powder and in blankets, whatever is the usual sum. I want them to establish themselves round the hacienda, to keep guard at night. I don't mean that they shall stay close to the house, but scout down towards the river, so that in case of alarm there would be time to get you all in from the huts. How many sleep there?"

"There are about thirty of us who look after the herds in the lower parts of the valley, and eight or ten peons who work in the garden round the house."

"Well, that force, with the half-dozen servants in the house, would be able to hold the hacienda against almost any number of Indians, and you could all be here in ten minutes from the alarm being given."

"Very well, señor, I will tell the chief."

He talked for a few minutes with the Indian.

"He will send twelve of his braves down to-morrow," he said, when he rejoined Will.

"Very well, let him do so; I shall certainly feel more comfortable. What tribe do these Indians on the other side of the river belong to?"

"They are a branch of the Tejunas, who are themselves a branch of the Apaches. The head-quarters of the tribe lie on the east side of Arizona, between the Gila River and the Little Colorado. The Tejunas lie between them and the Colorado; they are just as bad as the Apaches themselves, and both of them are scourges to the northern districts of Mexico."

"What are our Indians?"

"They are a branch of the Genigueh Indians. They live among the hills between Iron Bluff, sixty miles below us, and those hills you see as many miles up. A good many of them hunt during the season on the other side as far east as Aquarius Mountains, in

what is known as the Mohave country, but they never go farther south that side than the river Santemaria, for the Tejunas would be down upon them if they caught them in what they consider their country."

"I wish the señor was back," Will said; "though I dare say it is all right, and that, as the Indians haven't made a raid across here for many years, they will not do so now. How would they get across the river?"

"They would swim across, señor. An Indian thinks nothing of swimming a wide river; he simply slips off his horse, and either puts his hands on its back, or more generally holds on by its tail."

"Have these fellows guns?"

"A great many of them have. They capture them from the Mexicans, or, in peaceable times, trade skins or their blankets or their Indian trumpery for them. It is against the law to sell guns to the Indians, but most Mexicans will make a bargain if they have the chance, without the slightest regard to any law."

"How is it that the Mexican government does not try and get rid of these Indians? I see by the map that the frontier line is a long way north of the Gila."

"Yes, señor; they may put the line where they like, but there is not a white man for a couple of hundred miles north of the Gila, except on the Santa Fé River, and even there they are never safe from the Apaches and the Navajos. Why, it would want an army of twenty thousand men to venture among the mountains north of the Gila, and they would all die of starvation before they ever caught sight of an Apache. No, señor; unless there is an earthquake and the whole region is swallowed up, I don't see any chance of getting the better of the red rascals."

After entering the house, Will said nothing of the news which he had heard. It seemed that there was no real ground for alarm, and yet he could not but feel very uneasy. The next morning he rode down to the river, where a number of peons were engaged in loading the rafts with hides and tallow. He

had told Donna Sarasta that he should be down there all day, as he wanted to get the work pushed on. He had been there but two hours when Antonio rode up at a headlong gallop.

"What is it, Antonio?" Will exclaimed, for it was evident from the man's appearance that his errand was one of extreme importance.

"The hacienda has been attacked by Indians, señor; I was with the herd two miles this side of it when I heard some shots fired. I galloped to see what was the matter, but when I got within a quarter of a mile I saw that the Indians were swarming round it. A dozen started in pursuit of me, but they did not follow me far."

Will stood as one thunderstruck.

"But how can they have got there, Antonio?"

"They must have come by what is called the little gap. You know it, señor,—that valley that runs off from the other nearly abreast of the hacienda. Following that and crossing a shoulder, you cross down on to the

river some ten miles higher up. They must have crossed there by swimming in the night."

"But the chief said he had scouts there."

"They could hardly watch thirty miles of the river, señor; besides, the red-skins would have sent over two or three swimmers to silence anyone they found near the place where they were to cross."

By this time a dozen other vaqueros, who had been warned by Antonio as he came down, joined them.

"We must ride for the hacienda at once," Will said, leaping into the saddle.

"No use, señor, no use. I should say there must be four hundred or five hundred of the red-skins, and we may be sure that there is not a soul alive now at the hacienda or at the huts. They will be here in a short time, of that there is no doubt; probably half will come down the valley and half will go up. We must ride for it, sir; follow the river down till we are past the hills; there is not a moment to be lost."

The peons who had gathered round gave a

cry of despair. "You can go if you like, Antonio; I see we can do nothing at present, but I will not leave the place."

"What will you do then, señor?"

"We will take the rafts and pole them across the river; there are no signs of Indians there, and it is not likely there will be now." Then he turned to the peons. "You have heard what I said. Get to the rafts at once, there is not a moment to be lost. Look at that herd galloping wildly; you may be sure that the red-skins are after them."

"The señor's advice is good," Antonio said, "and there is not a moment to be lost. Get on board all of you, comrades; tie your bridles to the rafts."

All hurried on to the rafts, the ropes that held them to the shore were cut, and the peons, putting out the poles, pushed them into the stream. The rafts were already heavily laden, by far the greater portion of the cargo having been placed on board. Most of the vaqueros had their rifles slung across their shoulders, as they had heard from Antonio what the Indian

had said, and had, on starting out, taken their guns with them.

"One never can tell what will happen," Antonio said; "it is always well to be on the safe side."

Although the peons exerted themselves to the utmost, the rafts moved but slowly, and they were but seventy or eighty yards from the shore when a large band of Indians rode down to the bank and at once opened fire. As they approached, Will shouted to all the men to take their places on the other side of the piles of hide, and, using these as a breast-work, those having guns at once returned the Indian fire. Five or six of the red-skins fell, and the plunging of many horses showed that they were wounded. A chief, who seemed to be in command, waved his hand and shouted to his followers, who were evidently about to urge their horses into the river, when Will, who had held his fire, took a steady aim at the chief, and the latter fell dead from his horse.

"Will they take to the water, Antonio?" he

asked the vaquero, who had taken his place on the raft with him.

"I do not think so, señor; it is not in Indian nature to run such a risk as that. We should shoot down numbers of them before they reached us, and they would have a tough job then, for the peons would fight desperately with their long knives, and it is no easy matter to climb out of the water on to a raft with two or three men with long knives waiting for you. This band are Apaches, señor; they have evidently joined the Tejunas in a big raid."

The Indians for a few minutes continued their fire, but as those on the rafts only showed their heads when they stood up to fire, and every bullet told in the crowded mass, the Indians sullenly rode off.

The peons then resumed their poles, and in ten minutes reached the opposite shore. Will sat down as soon as he had seen the horses landed, with a feeling of despair in his heart. In the hurried arrangements for the safety of those with him he had scarcely had time to

think. Now that there was nothing to do, the full horror of the situation was felt, and the thought of Donna Sarasta and of Clara being murdered altogether overpowered him, and his cheeks were moistened with tears. What would the señor and Juan say on their return? They had left him in charge, and although he could hardly be said to be to blame, yet he might have taken greater precautions. He should not have relied upon the Indian scouts, but have kept at least enough of the men up at the house to offer a serious defence. Antonio, who was at the head of one of the parties in charge of a herd, came up to him presently.

"Well, señor, 'tis no use grieving, and assuredly if anyone is to blame it is I rather than you, for I assured you that there was no danger. I shall tell the señor so when he comes. Had he been here he would, I feel sure, have waited for further news before regarding the matter as serious. Now, señor, what do you propose to do next? You are our leader."

"The first thing to do is to go to the hacienda after dark, and to find out what has happened there. How long do you think that the Indians will remain in the valley?"

"Some days, I should say, señor. They will no doubt kill a number of cattle and jerk the meat. Then they will drive off as many as they think they can take with them, and probably slay the rest out of pure wickedness."

"The principal point is to find out if all at the hacienda have been killed."

"That you may be sure of, señor; but still it is right that we should know. There may be one exception, although I can hardly hope."

"How do you mean, Antonio?"

"I mean, señor, that the señorita may have been spared for a worse fate—I mean, may have been carried off by them. The Indians, while sparing no one else, old or young, always carry off the young women."

"Great heavens!" Will exclaimed, stepping back, as if he had been struck. "You do not say so! A thousand times better had she been murdered by her mother's side. It is

maddening to sit here and be able to do nothing, not even to be able to find out if this dreadful thing is true. How many men have we with guns?"

"Thirteen besides myself and you, señor."

"Those who have no rifles will be useless; they had better go down with the rafts as soon as it becomes dark."

"Yes, señor, that would be best. The Indians are sure to swim across to-night, and the four rafts would do well to push off as soon as they can no longer be seen from the other side. The four head men, who will go down with them, are all here."

"Call them up."

The four white men came to him.

"As soon as it is dark," he said, "you must push off; do not make the slightest noise; when you get out in the middle of the stream let the current take you down, only using the poles when it is absolutely necessary to keep you from approaching either bank. The twelve vaqueros who have not guns had better go with you; that will give three to each raft.

We will pick out thirteen of the best horses, the others you must kill this afternoon for food. Have you fishing-lines?"

"Yes, señor, we always carry them with us; and we have spears and can fish by torch-light."

"Good! then you will manage very well. The vaqueros and what peons you do not require must be landed as soon as you have passed the mountains; they had better strike up to Monterey and wait there for orders. I will give money to one of them to buy a horse there and ride with the news to Don Sarasta at San Diego."

CHAPTER VI

HOPEFUL NEWS

WHEN all the arrangements had been made for the departure of the raft, Will Harland said to Antonio: "Do you

think that it will be absolutely impossible to approach the hacienda by daylight?"

"It could not be done, señor, and, indeed, I don't see that any good could come of it, for even if we could get in unobserved, there would be no one of whom we could ask questions or find out anything as to what has taken place. It is just possible that in the confusion of the attack some of the peons employed in the house, the stables, or our huts may have escaped and hidden themselves. The Indians are good searchers, but just at first they would be anxious to make their success as complete as possible, and doubtless a large party rode up the valley at once while the others started down it. It was important that they should surprise the men with the various herds before they could gather together, for even if twenty or thirty could have rallied they would have made a hard fight of it before they lost their scalps. Therefore, any who escaped in the attack on the house may have hidden themselves from the first search, and we may possibly come

across them at night. They would assuredly never leave their hiding-places until darkness had fallen.

"I have some hopes of Sancho. If anyone has got out safe he has. He had a good deal of experience in Indian fighting some fifteen years ago, when he was farther east, and is sure to have his wits about him. He was at our hut when I came along this morning. As you know, he got hurt by a young bull in the yard ten days since. He was nearly well again, but the padre said he had better keep quiet for another day or two. I fancy that he was the only man there except the peons, for it is a busy time. At the first war-whoop he heard he would make for shelter, for he would know that it was no use his trying to fight the whole tribe. There is a thick patch of brush twenty or thirty yards from the huts. I expect that he would make for that straight. There is a tank in the middle that was used at one time, but the water was always muddy, and the master had a fresh one made handy to the huts, and since then the path to the old

tank has been overgrown, and no one ever goes there. If Francisco is alive, he is lying in that pond under the bushes that droop over it all round."

"He would not be able to give us any information us to what was done in the house."

"No, señor. But he would be of great assistance to us if we follow the red-skins. He is up to all their ways, and is a good shot with the rifle. At any rate, if we go down to the house I should like to try to find him. We have been comrades a good many years now."

"Certainly, Antonio, you shall see if you can find him. He is a good fellow, and, as you say, would be of great assistance to us. Do you think that we could make a circuit and come down on the river again two or three miles higher up, and cross there and get anywhere near the house?"

"We might do it, señor, but as we cannot get near enough to do any good, I think we should be wrong to move from here. You

may be sure that there are some of the redskins hiding on the opposite bank, keeping a sharp watch on us. If any of us were to ride away, one of them would carry the news at once, and they would be on the look-out for us. If we all stay here till it is dark, they would suppose that we have all gone down with the rafts. That will be good for the rafts, too, for the Indians would be unlikely to attack them, believing that there were some fifteen or twenty men with guns on them; and, in the next place, they will think that they are clear of us altogether and be less cautious than they might be if they were to suppose that we were still in their neighbourhood."

"You are right, Antonio, and I will try and be patient."

As soon as it was dark the little party of fifteen men started, moving as noiselessly as possible. They rode two miles up the river to a point where Antonio said they were opposite a path by which they could keep along at the foot of the hills until in a line with the hacienda.

"You don't think that there is any fear of there being any red-skins on the farther side?"

"Not the slightest, señor. Long before this they will have their fires lighted and be gorging themselves with meat. They know how small our force is, and will never dream of our venturing back into their midst."

As they rode into the river they slipped off their horses as the latter began to swim, holding on with one hand, and with the other keeping their guns, pistols, and ammunition above the water. The river at this point was some two hundred yards wide, and flowing with a quiet current. In a few minutes they were across. Antonio soon discovered the path, and, following it, they rode in single file for an hour. Then they reached a spot where there was an opening among the trees, and Antonio said that they were abreast of the hacienda, which was some four miles away; the building itself was not visible, but the number of fires which blazed round it was a sufficient indication of its position. At vari-

ous other points up and down the valley fires also blazed, but there was none much nearer their side of the valley than those round the hacienda.

"Do you mean to go with me, señor?"

"Certainly I mean to go. How had it best be done?"

"I should say that we had better ride to within two miles; it would not be safe to go with so large a party nearer than that; then we will take one of the others with us to hold our horses, and, going at a foot-pace, we might get within half a mile of the house without their hearing us. There will be a good deal of movement in the valley; the cattle will be restless, having been chased all day, and the herds broken up, so I think that we can reckon on getting pretty close. Then we will go forward on foot. We had better make for the huts first; you see, the Indians are thick round the house; I don't think there is any chance of anyone being saved there, because that would be the first point of attack. If we do not find Sancho, possibly we may

come upon one or two of the peons, who would be likely enough to make for the same shelter; if not, we can try round the stables. Still, I am afraid there is no chance of hearing what has happened at the house—I mean, whether the señorita is killed or a prisoner. If there is no other way we must get hold of an Indian and kill him; I will then dress up in his clothes, and see if I can get into the house. As there are two tribes engaged, one would have more chance of passing unsuspected than if they all knew each other personally. At any rate, it must be risked. I know the Indian ways pretty well, and might pass muster, but you would have no chance, señor."

When they dismounted Antonio said:

"We had better leave our jackets and sombreros here; their outline would show on the darkest night that we were not Indians."

Before leaving the raft Will had obtained from one of the head men a pair of the Mexican fringed leggings, as their own white trousers would betray him at once, and now,

with a dark blanket thrown over his shoulder, he might at a short distance be easily mistaken for an Indian. He had already left his riding-boots behind him, and had obtained a pair of moccasins from one of the peons.

"I will lead the way, señor, as I know every foot of the ground," Antonio said.

Moving along noiselessly they came down upon the huts of the white employés of the hacienda. As there were no fires burning here, they had but slight fear of encountering any of the Indians. Each, however, carried a long knife ready for instant action. They had left their rifles and pistols behind them, for if it was necessary to fight, the combat must be a silent one.

They crossed to the clump of bushes of which Antonio had spoken.

"You stop outside, señor; it is of no use two of us making our way into the tangle."

As he parted the bushes before entering, a slight sound was heard.

"Good! there is someone here," he muttered; and then, making his way a few paces

forward, he uttered Sancho's name. There was no reply, and he repeated it in a louder tone. At once there was a low reply: "Here am I. Is it you, Tonio?"

"Yes; I have come to look for you. I thought you would have made a bee-line here as soon as you heard the red-skins."

"You were right, and there are two peons here. We were just going to start to make our way down to the river. Are you alone?"

"I have the young señor with me."

"That is good. I was afraid that we had all been wiped out."

In a couple of minutes the four men emerged from the bushes.

"I am glad to see that you are safe, Sancho," Will said warmly. "Now can you tell me what has happened?"

"I know nothing whatever, señor. I was eating my breakfast when I heard a sudden yell, and knew that it was the Apache war-whoop, and that there must be a big force of them. There was evidently no fighting to be done, so I caught up my rifle and pistols and

made for the bush. These two peons who were outside followed me. I told them to hide as best they could, and I went on into the pool, found a good place under some thick bushes, hid my powder-horn and weapons handy for use close by, and lay down with my head out of water, listening. Already they were down at the huts, and I heard the cries of the peons they caught there. Luckily I was the only Mexican above. A few shots were fired up at the hacienda, and I thought I heard screams, but, owing to the yells of the Indians, I could not be sure. Presently it all died away. I don't fancy they suspected that anyone had got away, the attack being so sudden; at any rate, they made no search here. I made up my mind to lie down till most of them would be asleep and then to make for the river, and I told the peons that we must each shift for ourselves, as we had more chances of getting away singly than if together." All this was spoken in a low voice.

"The principal thing that I wanted to ask

you is, do you know whether the señorita was killed, or whether they have kept her to carry off? But, of course, you don't know."

"They would not kill her," the man said confidently; "but so far as I know, they have not even caught her. I was at the stables maybe half an hour before the señorita came down and had her horse saddled. She had a basket with her, and told me she was going to ride up the valley to that wigwam that remained when the Indians went away, carrying as much meat as their ponies could take. There were an old Indian and his wife left there—she had got a fever or something, and was too ill to travel, and the señorita was going to take a basket of food and some medicine that the padre had made up for the old man. I have been thinking of her all day. I should say she was coming back when the red-skins rode up the valley after the cattle. She could hardly have helped seeing them, and I wondered whether she would take to the trees and ride on this way until after they had passed, or whether she had turned and ridden

on. If she did the first, she is pretty sure to have been captured when she got down near home; if she went the other way, she gave them a mighty long chase, for there is not a horse on the estate as fast as hers, and as for the Indian ponies, she could leave them behind as if they were standing still."

"Thank God, there is a hope, then!" Will exclaimed. "Now we must move farther off and chat it over."

When they had gone a quarter of a mile from the house they stopped. Antonio told the two peons that the rafts had started fully two hours before. "The current is only about a mile and a half an hour, and if you cross the river and keep on, you ought to catch them up before morning, and can then swim off to them. Don't keep this side of the river, there are red-skins on the bank; but if you stay on this side of the valley, among the trees, down to the river, you will meet none of them. We have come that way."

The peons at once started.

"Now, señor, will you go on to where the

horses are? Sancho and I will go back to the house; he understands the Apache language. We will crawl up near the fires, and I should think that we are pretty certain to hear if they have caught the señorita or not. However, we may be some time, so do not be anxious, and don't move if you hear a sudden row, for we might miss you in the dark. We shall make straight to this tree, and for a bit my horse must carry double; you had better hand your jacket to Señor Harland, Sancho, and take his blanket."

"How far are the horses?"

"There are three of them about two hundred yards farther on."

"I will go there first, then," the man said. "This is a terrible business, señor."

"Terrible, indeed. I am afraid there is no doubt that Donna Sarasta has lost her life."

"I reckon," the man said, "that except ourselves and any you may have with you, there ain't a dozen alive in the valley; it is a clean wipe out. I never knew a worse surprise. How about the party by the river?"

Antonio related what had taken place there.

"Well, that is something saved," he said, "and with sixteen of us all well armed we can manage to make a decent fight of it. We must get another horse, but that won't be very difficult; most of the others are sure to have their lassos with them, there are a score of horses running loose on the plains, and they cannot have roped them all in yet."

When they reached the horses he went on: "You had better stop here, Tonio; you are not accustomed, as I am, to them Injuns, and as you don't know much of their lingo, you would not understand much of their talk. I would much rather go alone."

"All right, old man!" the other said.

"Now for my toilet," Sancho went on; and, going up to one of the horses, he pricked it with his knife. "Steady, boy, steady!" he said, as the horse plunged.

"It is for your good as well as mine, for you would not find life in an Indian village as pleasant as the life you have been used to." He dipped his fingers in the blood, drew a

broad line across his forehead and round his eyes, placed a patch on his cheek; then he cut off two handfuls of long hair from the animal's tail, tied these together with string and fastened them in his hair, so that the horse-hair fell down on to his shoulder on each side and partially hid his face.

"It is rough," he said, "but it will pass in the darkness. It is lucky you have got a 'Pache blanket; that will help me wonderfully."

"Yes; I bought it from the Indians when they traded here a few weeks since. The man I got it of said that he had traded a good pony for it when he was hunting in the spring on the other side of the river."

"I will take your rifle, Tonio," Sancho said. "I must either have that or a bow and arrow. Now, good-bye!"

Without another word he turned and strolled away towards the hacienda. It was nearly two hours before he returned.

"The señorita has got away so far," he said. "The red-skins came across her half-way up

the valley; she turned and rode straight up; a dozen well-mounted men were sent after her. I heard that they sent so many because they were afraid that they might fall in with a party of the Genigueh Indians, who would certainly attack them at once."

"Thank God!" Will exclaimed fervently. "There is a chance of saving her, after all, for if they overtake her—and they won't do that for some time—we can attack them as they come back again."

"Now let us join the others at once, and make up the valley."

During the time Sancho had been away he had been questioning Antonio as to the extent of the valley.

"It goes a long way into the heart of the mountains, señor, but none of us know it beyond what we have learned from the Indians, for we were strictly forbidden to go beyond the boundary for fear of disturbing the game in the Indian country. They say that it runs three hours' fast riding beyond our bounds. After that it becomes a mere

ravine, but it can be followed up to the top of the hill, and from there across a wild country, until at last the track comes down on a ford on the Colorado. From there there is a track leading west at the foot of the San Francisco Mountain, and coming down on the Little Colorado, close to the Moquis country."

"How far would that be from here?" Will asked.

"I have never been across there, señor, and I doubt whether any white man has—not on that line. I should think that from what the Indians say it must be some fifty miles from the end of our part of the valley to the ford of the Colorado, and from there to the Little Colorado it must be one hundred and fifty miles in a straight line, perhaps two hundred by the way the track goes—that is to say, if there is a track that anyone can follow. These tracks mostly run pretty straight, so that I should say that it would be about as far to the Moquis country as it would be to San Diego from here; however, we may be sure that we are not going to make such a journey as that;

the Apaches are not likely to follow her farther than the end of this valley, or at most to the Colorado ford."

As they rode along Will learned from Sancho how he had obtained the news.

"There was no difficulty about that," the other said carelessly. "I waited till the fires were a bit low, and then sauntered about near those of a party of the Tejunas, and heard them talking about it. I learned that they had, as they believed, wiped out all our people except those who crossed the river on rafts, and the señorita, though they allowed that a few of the men with the herds might have got away, and they were going to search the valley thoroughly to-morrow. Not a soul in the hacienda escaped. The red-skins were exultant over the amount of booty they had taken, and were glad that the cattle were amply sufficient for both tribes, so that there would be no cause for dispute as to the division; and were specially pleased with the stores of flour and goods of all kinds in the magazines."

When they joined the main body Sancho

was heartily welcomed by his comrades, who were delighted to hear that there was at least a chance of saving the señorita, of whom all hands on the estate were fond. It was arranged at once that Sancho should ride by turns behind the others, and then they started at a gallop up the valley, keeping close within the edge of the trees that covered the hillside.

CHAPTER VII

THE PURSUIT

BUT few words were spoken until the party arrived at a spot where the valley began to narrow in near the boundary of the ranch. They were now considerably beyond the Indian fires.

"There is no fear of our meeting with any of the red devils now," Sancho said. "They know well enough that our Indians would not venture to attack them, and that there are no

other enemies near. A quarter of a mile and we shall be at the wigwam where the señorita went this morning."

"We will stop there for a moment," Will said; "it is not likely that we shall find anything that will give us useful information, but at any rate the horses may as well have a short rest there as well as anywhere else."

They had come fifteen miles now at a smart pace.

The men all dismounted. One of them struck a light with his flint and steel, and then lit the end of a short coil of cord that had been soaked in saltpetre, and waved it round his head till it burst into a flame. As they expected, they found the two Indians lying dead; both had been tomahawked and then scalped. On the ground lay a broken medicine bottle and a portion of some soft pudding.

"That does not tell us much," Will said.

Sancho made no answer, but looked all round the wigwam. "The basket is not here," he said. "I noticed that it was pretty full."

"I suppose the red-skins took it, Sancho?"

"They would not bother about a basket; it is the last thing they would think of taking. My idea is that the señorita came back here. I expect she came to warn the Indians. She would, to begin with, if she rode at full speed, have distanced the 'Paches, who would not be able to get through the herd, which must have been between them and her when she first saw them. If she were half-way down the valley she might have been here some minutes before them. Of course the two old Indians knew that there was no escape for them, and made no effort to avoid their fate. I expect they had only taken that pudding and medicine out of the basket when she got back. Now, seeing that the basket and all that was in it are gone, it seems to me possible enough that the señorita may have caught it up and ridden off with it, knowing that she had a long ride before her, and through a country where there are no posadas."

"I hope, indeed, that it may be so, Sancho, for I have been wondering what she would do

if she were lost in these mountains. What would she be likely to put in the basket?"

"I handed it up to her, señor, when she had mounted; there were two bottles of milk, a bottle of wine, and a pile of cakes. There were a few other things, but I did not notice what they were."

"I only hope that your idea is correct, Sancho; it would be a great comfort to know that she had enough provisions to last her for two or three days."

"I expect you will find that it is so, señor; the señorita is quick-witted and cool. I saw her once when a dozen bulls stampeded when we were trying to drive them into the yard; she was sitting her horse a short distance from the gate, and was just in their line. She didn't try to dash aside across their path, as many would have done, but turned and started, keeping her horse in at first, and then letting him out gradually and edging off out of their line, and she came cantering back laughing as she joined her father, who was looking pale as death at the danger she had

been in. I have very little doubt that it has been as I said; she galloped at first at full speed, then when she got near this hut she saw that she was well ahead of the red-skins. She rode up here, jumped off to warn the Indians, and when she found they would not go she took the basket, knowing the things could be of no use to them, and might be worth a hundred times their weight in gold to her. Maybe the old Indian may have suggested it to her; at any rate, I feel sure she took them."

"Well, we will ride steadily on. Is there any place where she could have left the valley?"

"Not beyond this, señor; at least, I know of none; but, as I told you, we know very little of the valley beyond this point. Certainly she could have known no path; no doubt she went straight on. Well mounted as she was, she would feel sure that the red-skins could not overtake her, and I expect she did not press her horse much, but contented herself with keeping out of rifle-

shot. I don't know whether she knew of the ford across the river, but she would naturally plunge in at the point where the track comes down on it, and would, no doubt, be surprised at finding that the horse was able to cross without swimming."

"She would not be able to turn, after she had crossed, and come down on the opposite bank?"

"No, señor; that would not be possible; there are high mountains there, and the river at some places runs through deep gorges."

"How far do you think the Apaches would follow?"

"I think that they would keep on for some distance beyond the river; when they found at last that they had no chance of catching her, they might turn and come back and cross the river, and camp on this side. By that time their horses would be done for; you see, they most likely had a long ride yesterday; maybe they were travelling all night, and, of course, it gave the señorita an immense advantage that her horse was fresh, while theirs

had anyhow a great deal taken out of them before they set out in pursuit. I should recommend that we halt, as soon as it becomes light, in some clump of trees and wait for them as they come back. We are pretty well matched in numbers, and with the advantage of a surprise we ought to be able to wipe them out altogether. We might go as far as we can up the valley to the point where it becomes a mere ravine, before daylight breaks, and our horses will be all the better for a rest of a few hours. They will have gone over forty miles since they left the river, and we may probably have a very long journey to do again to-morrow. There is no saying how far the señorita may have gone; she would not know whether the red-skins might not follow all night, and I should think that she would keep on till daybreak, though, of course, she would only go at a walk."

"It is difficult to say what she is most likely to do."

"It is, indeed, señor; if I myself were in her place I should be puzzled. I should

reckon that all in the valley had been wiped out. The red-skins would assuredly first make a rush for the hacienda, because it was most important that they should carry that before the men could rally round and make a defence. I should reckon that the red-skins would remain there for four or five days before they had jerked as much meat as they could carry, and that, when they started, a party would like enough be placed in ambush to catch me as I came back. I should know that it was next to hopeless to try and find my way down across such mountains as there are ahead, through which, so far as I know, there are no tracks, and I am not sure that I should not push on in hopes of reaching the Moquis, who are peaceful Indians, as I have heard, with their villages perched on the top of hills, and having flocks and herds, and being in all ways different from all the other tribes except the Zunis.

"The red-skins say that these people were here before them, and that they really belong to the tribes of Central Mexico, and came from

there long before the white man ever set foot in America. From there one could travel north, strike the Santa Fe trail, and possibly make one's way through safely, though the Navajoes are pretty nearly as bad there as the Apaches are here. Whether the señorita has ever heard of the Moquis I cannot say, but if she finds that she is on a trail she will follow it, thinking anything better than going back and falling into the hands of the Apaches."

"Are there any other tribes she would have to pass through on the way?"

"I think not. It is a great mountain track, where even red-skins could not pick up a living. As far as I have heard, the track from the ford leads through a series of passes between lofty hills. It is not the course of a river, and, therefore, there are not likely to be any villages. I should say that there would be forest on the lower slopes, and we are sure to meet with enough game to keep us."

They now proceeded at a walk, for the trees in most places grew thickly, and the ground

here and there was broken by boulders that had rolled down from the hillside. At last they came to a point where the valley was but a hundred yards wide. Here they halted, took off the horses' bridles to allow them to pick what grass there was, and threw themselves down, and most of them were asleep in a few minutes.

"Is it necessary to keep watch?" Will said.

"No, señor, the 'Paches will assuredly not start to come back until morning. The country is as strange to them as it is to us. I should say, from what I have heard, it is about ten miles from the river, and in an hour or an hour and a half after daylight they are likely to be here."

Will took a seat by the trunk of a tree. He had no inclination for sleep. His thoughts were busy with the girl—alone in these mountains with an unknown country before her and a band of relentless savages who might, for aught she knew, be still pressing after her. It was difficult to conceive a more terrible situation. She might lose the trail, which

was sure to be a faintly-marked one, and in some places indistinguishable save to an eye accustomed to tracking. If so, her fate was sealed. She must wander about till she died of hunger and thirst. It was maddening to be waiting there even for an hour or two and to know that she was alone. As soon as daylight broke, Sancho sent four of the men back to hunt for game. If they did not come upon something in the course of three-quarters of an hour, they were to return. They had been gone, however, half that time when the crack of a rifle was heard, and ten minutes later they rode back, bringing with them a stag they had shot. Already a fire had been lighted one hundred yards behind the camping-ground. Antonio had collected some perfectly dry wood for the purpose.

"There will be no smoke to speak of," he said to Will, "and what little there is will make its way out through the leaves. It is unlikely in the extreme that the Indians will notice it, and if they do, they will think that it is a fire made by one of our Indians."

A couple of the hunters at once set about skinning and cutting up the carcass. They were to go on cooking it until a signal was made to them that the Indians were approaching. The horses had now been collected, and the men disposed themselves behind trunks of trees, each with his horse a few yards behind him. All these were well trained to stand still when the reins were thrown over their heads. In front of them was a clear space some thirty yards across. After half an hour's anxious waiting, Sancho, who was lying with his ear to the ground, raised his hand as a signal that he could hear the Indians coming. The men from the fire ran up and took their places with the rest. The rifles were thrown forward in readiness. All could now hear the dull tread of the horses, with an occasional sharper sound as the hoofs fell upon rock. As the Apaches rode out from the wood their leader suddenly checked his horse with a warning cry, but it was too late.

Sixteen rifles flashed out, half the Apaches

fell, and before the others could recover from their surprise at this unexpected attack the vaqueros charged down upon them. Hopelessly outnumbered as they were, the Apaches fought desperately, but the combat was short. The pistols of Will and Sancho were used with deadly effect, and in a couple of minutes the fight was over and the last Indian had fallen.

"Now, let us waste no time," Will said. "Ten minutes must do for our breakfast; then we will be off."

None of the party was seriously hurt, and the wounds were soon bandaged. The joints hanging above the fire were soon taken down, cut into slices, and grilled. They were being eaten when four Indians stepped from among the trees, one of them being evidently a chief.

"You are breaking the rules," he said to Will, whom he recognized as the leader of the party. "We shall lay a complaint before the great master."

Will did not answer, but Antonio, who spoke their language fairly, replied, "Have you not heard the news?"

"We have heard no news," the chief said. "We heard a gun fire when we were hunting two miles down the valley. We came to see what it was. Then we heard many guns, and, not knowing what it could be, hid our horses and came on."

"Then do you not know that there are three or four hundred Apaches and Tejunas in the valley below; that the hacienda has been attacked, all within it killed, and that the herds have been destroyed? So far as we know, we alone have escaped."

The Indians uttered deep exclamations of surprise.

"What was the firing?" the chief asked.

"If you go on a hundred yards farther up, you will find the dead bodies of twenty Apache braves; they have been riding in pursuit of Donna Clara, the daughter of the señor, who was fortunately at your end of the valley, having gone there with food and medicine for the old Indian of your tribe who was too ill to leave with the rest, a fortnight since."

"I saw her often then," the chief said, "and

this young brave"—and he motioned to Will —"he was often in our camp, and the girl visited our wigwams and gave many little presents to our women. Did she escape them?"

"She did, but where she is we know not. We are going in search of her. If you and your warriors will go with us, we shall be glad, for your eyes are better than ours, and could follow the footmarks of her horse where we should see nothing."

"Teczuma, with one of his warriors, will go," the chief said. "The other two must go and carry the news to our people, and, though they are not strong enough to fight so large a force, yet they will not be idle, and many of the Apaches and Tejunas will lose their scalps before they cross the river again."

He spoke a few words to the three men, who at once left, and in ten minutes one returned with two horses. The chief had already eaten two slices of deer's flesh, and he mounted and rode on with the others, while his follower waited for a minute to eat the flesh that had already been cooked for

him. Sancho had chosen the horse that had been ridden by the Apache chief, and, without stopping, they rode on until they were, a few minutes later, joined by the other Indian. They now pushed on rapidly, ascending the ravine, and on reaching the top Will saw with satisfaction that high hills on both sides bordered what was, in fact, a pass between them, and that Clara must therefore have kept on straight.

The chief with his follower rode a little ahead of the others, Will, with Antonio and Sancho, following closely behind him. Once or twice the chief pointed down to marks on the rocks, with the remark, "A shod horse".

"That is all right," Antonio said. "The Indians do not shoe their horses, so we may be sure it was the señorita."

The path soon began to descend again, and in an hour from the time of starting they emerged from the pass within one hundred yards of the river; the ground here being soft, a well-marked track was visible.

"Made by our people," the chief said,

turning round. "They often cross ford to hunt on the other side—large forests there, two hours' ride away—good hunting-ground. Apache not come there. Hills too big to cross."

Beyond the river the track was for some time perfectly distinct, but it presently became fainter. However, as the Indians rode on rapidly, Will had no doubt that, although he could not see the tracks on the ground, they were plain enough to the eyes of the Indians.

"It is a mighty good job we have the chief with us," Antonio said. "The trail is plain enough at present, but it is sure to get fainter when we get into these forests they speak of. Probably it goes straight enough there, but once among the trees it will break up, as the Indians would scatter to hunt. We should have lost a lot of time following it. Now we have got these two red-skin fellows, they will pick it up almost as fast as we can ride."

The road, indeed, after passing over a rocky plateau, dipped suddenly down into a deep valley running up from the river, and

extending as far as one could see almost due east among the hills. The track they were following turned to the right at the foot of the hill. For miles it was clearly defined, then gradually became fainter, as the Indians who had followed it turned off in search of game. The footprints of the shod horse continued straight up the valley, until, ten miles from the point at which they had entered it, they turned to the left.

"It has been going at a walk for some miles," the chief said, "and the white girl has been walking beside it. I saw her footprints many times. We shall find that she halted for the night at the little stream in the middle of the valley. It must have been getting dark when she arrived here. She must be a good horsewoman and have a good horse under her, for it is nearly eighty miles from here to the hacienda."

By the stream, indeed, they found the place where Clara had slept. The Indian pointed to spots where the horse had cropped the grass by the edge of the stream, and where it had

at last lain down near its mistress, who had, as a few crumbs showed, eaten some of the cakes.

"I wonder we don't see one of the bottles," Will remarked.

Antonio translated his remarks to the chief, who said, "Girl wise; fill bottle with water; not know how far stream come. We halt here; cannot follow trail farther; soon come dark."

This was evident to them all; men and horses alike needed rest. They lit a fire and sat around it for a short time; all were encouraged by the success so far, and even the fact that they were supperless did not affect them.

"Teczuma and Wolf go out and find game in the morning," the chief said confidently. "Plenty of game here."

Long before the others were awake, indeed, the chief and his follower were moving. Just as daylight broke, the latter ran into camp.

"Come," he said, "bring gun; grizzly coming down valley. Teczuma watch him."

The men were on their feet the instant Antonio translated the Indian's words, and followed the Indian on foot.

"Was the bear too much for the two Indians?" Will asked Sancho.

"If they had been alone they would have fought it, but the chief was right to send for us. It was like enough they might have got badly hurt, and that would have been a bad thing for us."

Presently the Indian stopped. It was still twilight under the trees, but they could make out a great gray form advancing towards them. When within twenty yards it scented danger, and stopped with an angry growl. Almost at the same moment a rifle flashed out behind a tree near its flank. With a furious growl it turned, exposing its flank to the watchers. Antonio had warned five of these not to fire; the other ten rifles were fired simultaneously, and the bear rolled over and over. It scrambled to its feet again, and stood rocking itself, evidently wounded to death. The other five men ran forward together, and when three

yards distant poured in their fire, and the bear fell dead. The vaqueros lost no time in skinning it. A portion of the flesh was carried to the fire, cut up into strips, and at once cooked. As soon as the meal was finished, the rest of the meat was cut off and divided between the party, who then mounted and rode on, the two Indians again leading the way.

CHAPTER VIII

THE CAVE-DWELLERS

THREE days later the party stood on the brow of a steep bluff looking down upon the Colorado Chiquita river. It had been a weary journey. It was evident that the girl had, after the second day's riding, allowed the horse to go its own way, trusting perhaps to its instinct to make for some habitation, should there be any in the region. There had been no difficulty in following its footsteps until

the third day, when they were passing over a stony plateau. Here even the keen sight of the Indians sometimes failed them, and hours were lost in taking up the trail. There was no water to be met with here, and the Indians agreed that the horse was going slowly and weakly, and the girl for the most part walking beside it, as they pointed out by a crushed blade of grass or flattened lichen by the side of the horse's track. Later in the day the trail was straighter, and the chief said confidently, "The horse smells water; the river cannot be many miles away."

It was an hour after starting, on the third morning, that they reached the bluff opposite to them. For a distance of a couple of miles rose a steep island of basalt, some hundreds of feet above the plain around it, and on the summit a large village could be seen.

"Moquis," the Indian said, pointing to it.

"Then she must have got there in safety!" Will exclaimed in delight. The chief shook his head. "Horse not able to swim river, must stop a day to eat grass. There horse!"

and he pointed to an animal seven hundred or eight hundred feet below them.

"That is its colour, sure enough," Antonio exclaimed, "but I don't see the señorita."

"She may be asleep," Will suggested.

"Likely enough, señor; we shall soon see."

Dismounting, they made their way down the steep descent. Then all leaped into their saddles and galloped forward to the edge of the stream, a quarter of a mile away. The mare, which evidently scented that the newcomers were not Indians, cantered to meet them with a whinny of pleasure. There were no signs of the girl, and all dismounted to search among the low bushes for her, Will loudly calling her name. Presently the Indian, who, with his follower, had moved along the bank, called them.

"She slept here yesterday," he said, and the level grass close to a shrub testified to the truth of the exclamation. The two Indians looked serious.

"What is it, chief?"

"Indians," he said. "White girl come

down to river to drink; then she lay down here; then Indians come along; you see foot-prints on soft earth of bank; they catch her when asleep and carry her off. Teczuma and the Wolf have looked; no marks of little feet; four feet deeper marks than when they came along; Indian carry her off."

"Perhaps they have taken her along the river to some ford, and carried her up to their village."

"Soon see;" and he and the Wolf moved along the bank, the others following at a short distance, having first taken off their horses' bridles, allowing them to take a good drink, and turned them loose to feed.

"Small men," the chief said, when Will with the two chief vaqueros came up to him. "Short steps; got spears and bows."

"How on earth does he know that?" Will said, when the words were translated to him. Sancho pointed to a round mark on the ground.

"There is the butt end of a spear, and I dare say the chief has noticed some holes of a different shape made by the ends of bows."

Half a mile farther the bluffs approached the river and bordered it with a perpendicular cliff, which had doubtless been caused by the face of the hill being eaten away by the river countless ages before. The stream was here some thirty yards from the foot of the cliff. More and more puzzled at the direction in which Clara had been carried, the trackers followed. They had gone a hundred yards along the foot of the cliff when a great stone came bounding down from above, striking the ground a few yards in front of the Indians, who leaped back. Almost instantly a shrill voice shouted from above, and, looking up, they saw a number of natives on a ledge a hundred feet above them, with bows bent threateningly.

"Back, all of you!" Sancho shouted. "Their arrows may be poisoned."

Seeing, however, that the party retreated in haste, the Indians did not shoot; when a short distance away a council was held, and all returned to their horses, mounted, and swam the river; then they rode along to

view the cliff. Three or four openings were seen on the level of the ledge on which the Indians were posted, and Will was astonished to see that above, the cliff, which was here quite perpendicular, was covered with strange sculptures, some of which still retained the colour with which they had in times long past been painted.

"They are the old people, the cave-dwellers," Sancho said. "I have heard of them; they were here long before the Moquis were here. They were a people dwelling in caves. There are hundreds of these caves in some places. They have always kept themselves apart, and never made friends with the Moquis. In the early times with the Spaniards there were missionaries among the Moquis, but they could never do anything among the cave people, who are, they say, idolaters and offer human sacrifices."

"How do the people live?" Antonio asked.

"They fish, and steal animals from the Moquis when they get a chance, and they

dwell in such inaccessible caves that, once there, they are safe from pursuit.

"If you like, señor, I will go up to the Moquis village, and try to find out something about them. I don't know the Moquis language, but I understand something of the sign language, which is understood by all Indians, and I dare say that I shall be able to learn something about these people."

Will dismounted as the vaquero rode off, and, bidding Antonio do the same, told the man to take their horses a quarter of a mile away, and there to dismount and cook a meal.

"Now, Antonio," he said, "we have to see how this place can be climbed."

Antonio shook his head. "I should say that it was altogether impossible, señor. You see there is a zigzag path cut in the face of the cliff up to that ledge. In some places the rock is cut away altogether, and then they have got ladders, which they would no doubt draw up at once if they were attacked. You see the lower ones have already been pulled up. Like enough sentries are posted at each

of those breaks when they are threatened with an attack. Besides, the chances are that if they thought there were any risk of our getting up, they would kill the señorita."

"I see all that, Antonio, and I have no thought of making my way up by the steps; the question is, could it be climbed elsewhere? The other end of the ledge would be the best point to get up at, for any watch that is kept would certainly be where the steps come up."

Antonio shook his head. "Unless one could fly, señor, there would be no way of getting up there."

"I don't know that," Will said shortly; "wait till I have had a good look at it."

Lying on the ground, with his chin resting on his hands, he gazed intently at the cliff, observing even the most trifling projections, the tiny ledges that here and there ran along the face.

"It would be a difficult job and a dangerous one," he said, "but I am not sure that it cannot be managed. At any rate, I shall try. I am a sailor, you know, Antonio, and am

accustomed, when we have been sailing in the gale, to hold on with my toes as well as my fingers. Now, do you go back to the others. I shall want two poles, say fifteen feet long, and some hooks, which I can make from ramrods. Do you see just in the middle of that ledge, where the large square entrance is, the cliff bulges out, and I should say the ledge was twenty feet wide; this is lucky, for if there are sentries on the steps they would not be able to see beyond that point. If they could do so, I should not have much chance of getting up, for it will be a bright moonlight night. When I get to the top—that is, if I do get there—I shall lower down a rope. You can fasten the lariats together. They would hold the weight of a dozen men. The lightest and most active of you must come up first. When two or three are up we can haul the rest up easily enough. Now you can go. I shall be here another half-hour at least. I must see exactly the best way to climb, calculate the number of feet along each of those little ledges to a point where I can reach the

one above with my hook, and get the whole thing well in my mind."

Antonio went away shaking his head. To him the feat seemed so impossible that he thought that it was nothing short of madness to attempt it. Such was the opinion of the rest of the vaqueros and the two Indians when, on arriving at the fire, he told them what Will proposed doing. Their leader, however, when he joined them, had a look of confidence on his face.

"I am more convinced than ever that it can be done," he said. When the meal of bear's flesh had been eaten, he lit his pipe and began to smoke quietly. The chief came up and spoke to him.

"What does he say, Antonio?"

"He says that you are a brave man, señor, but that no man could do what you are talking of, and that you will throw away your life."

"Tell him I will bet my horse against his that I shall succeed, and you shall be witness to the bet in case I don't come back again."

The chief nodded gravely when the offer

was made to him. Indians of all tribes are given to wagering, and as the horse Will was riding was a far better one than his own, he regarded the matter rather as a legacy than a bet.

An hour later Sancho came down, accompanied by several of the Moqui Indians, leading four sheep as a present, and followed by women carrying pans of milk, baskets of eggs, and cakes of various descriptions. Sancho presented the chief to Will.

"They are quite friendly, señor; they hate the cave-dwellers, who are constantly robbing them, and who compel them to keep guard over the animals at night. I can understand them pretty well; they bid me tell you that they would gladly assist you against the cave-dwellers, but that it is impossible to reach the caves."

Will shook hands with the chiefs, and asked Sancho to explain by signs that he was much obliged for their presents.

"Tell them, Sancho, that I am going to try to scale the cliff to-night."

"You are going to scale the cliff?" the vaquero asked incredulously.

"I did not say that I was going to scale it, but that I was going to try; and I may add that I hope that I shall succeed. Will you ask if the cave-dwellers poison their arrows?"

"I have already asked that, señor, but he said no. The cattle have often been wounded by them, and unless the wound is a mortal one, they recover."

"That is very satisfactory," Will said, "for I own I have more fear of being hit by a poisoned arrow than I have of scaling the cliff."

"The chief says that if you will go up to their village he will place a house at your disposal, señor."

"Tell him that I am much obliged, and that to-morrow I may accept their invitation. Our horses will require three or four days' rest before starting back, and I can hardly hope that the señorita will be fit to travel for a good deal longer than that."

Although they had but just eaten a meal, the vaqueros were perfectly ready to begin another. A number of eggs were roasted in the ashes, and washed down by long draughts of milk. The chiefs then left them, but a number of the villagers came down and watched the proceedings of the strangers with great interest. Will at once proceeded to carry out his plan of bending the ramrods: a hot spot in the fire was selected, and two of the vaqueros increased the intensity of the heat by fanning it with their sombreros. Three others went down to the river and brought up a large flat boulder and two or three smaller ones, and, using the large one as an anvil, the ends of the hooks were hammered into sharp, broad, chisel-shaped blades. Sancho had explained to the chiefs that two poles, some fifteen feet long, were required, and when these were brought down the ramrods were securely bound to them with strips of wetted hide. Other strips were, by Will's directions, bound round the pole so as to form projections a foot apart.

"That will greatly assist me in climbing it," he said. "I don't say I could not do without it, but it will make it very much easier."

In order to lull the cave-dwellers into security, the camp was shifted in the afternoon to the foot of the Moquis hill, and there Will gave his men instructions as to the operations.

"We will cross the river on the horses a mile above the cave," he said; "we must use them, or we could not keep our rifles and pistols dry. You must all remove your boots as soon as you dismount, and we will now tear up two or three blankets, and twist strips round the barrels of the guns, so that, should they strike against the rocks, no sound shall be made. You had better do the same with the barrels of your pistols."

Then he chose the lightest of the vaqueros to follow him. Another light-weight was to be third. Antonio was to follow him, and then Sancho, and the order in which all the others were to go was arranged. Lariats were securely knotted together, and the knots tied with strips of hide, to prevent the possibility

of their slipping. The men carried out his orders, but it was evident from their manner that they had not the slightest hope that his attempt would be successful. An hour after sunset they started. It was two days after full moon, and they had, therefore, as many hours to reach the foot of the cliffs before it rose.

An hour was sufficient to traverse the distance, and they therefore rested for that time, after darkness set in, before starting, swam the river, and after removing their boots made their way noiselessly along, keeping some distance from the river bank until they reached the spot where the cliff rose perpendicularly; then, keeping close to its foot, they held on until they arrived at the spot Will had fixed upon. There all lay down among the boulders close to the rock wall, and remained there until the moon rose.

There had been several discussions as to the best way to get the lariat up, as it was agreed that, whether carried in a coil over the shoulder or wound round the body, it would ham-

per the climber's movements. The question was finally solved by his taking a coil of thin hide, which, while little thicker than string, was amply strong enough to support the weight of the lariat. Four or five bullets had been sewn up in a piece of skin and attached to one end. A strap was fastened to each pole so that these could be slung behind him, so permitting him the free use of both hands where it was not needful to use them.

"The saints watch over you, señor!" Antonio whispered, as Will prepared to start, and he and Sancho gave him a silent grip of the hand, while the Indian chief laid his hand on his shoulder and muttered, "Ugh, heap brave!"

For a short distance the ascent was comparatively easy. Then he arrived at the first of the ledges he had noticed. It was some ten inches wide, and, keeping his face to the wall and using his hands to grip the most trifling irregularity, or to get a hold in small crevices, he made his way along until he arrived at a projection which barred farther progress. Slipping one of the slings from his shoulder,

he reached up until the hook caught the next ledge, and obtained a good hold there. He then climbed the pole until his fingers got a grip of the ledge, when he hauled himself up to it. It was some fifteen inches wide here, and without difficulty he obtained a footing, again slung the pole on his shoulder and went on. The ledge narrowed rapidly, and he was now at one of the points which appeared to him the most difficult, for from where he had been lying the ledge seemed almost to cease, while the next ledge above it was also so narrow that he knew he could not obtain standing room upon it.

As he approached the narrow path he took the poles, one in each hand, and obtained a grip of the upper ledge. He now made his way along on tiptoe, having his weight almost entirely on the poles, shifting them alternately. To a landsman this would have been an extraordinary feat, but, accustomed to hang to the ropes by one hand, it was not so difficult for him, especially as he obtained some slight support from his feet. Without the poles it

would have been impossible for him to have passed, as the ledge in some places was only three inches wide. At the end of some thirty feet it again widened; the next forty or fifty feet upward were comparatively easy, for the rock sloped to some extent inward, and there were many fissures in which he was enabled to get a firm grip with his fingers. Then came several difficult places, but he was confident now in the hold the hooks had on the rocks, and, always working with great caution and using sometimes his hands, sometimes the poles, he reached the top in half an hour after starting.

CHAPTER IX

RESCUED

HE threw himself down on the platform, which was entirely deserted, and lay there for five minutes; then he unwound the coil of leather-thong, and threw the weighted end over.

He knew that he had allowed ample length, and drew it in until he felt a slight strain; then came three jerks. The party below had hold of the thong; two more jerks told that they had fastened the end of the lariat to it; in a couple of minutes it was in his hands. There was a parapet some eighteen inches high along the edge of the platform, intended doubtless to prevent the children from falling over. Seeing no place to which he could fasten the lariat, he tied it round the middle of the two poles, laid these on the ground close to the parapet, put his feet upon them, and then leaned over. Two pulls on the lariat told him that the next man was tied on, and he began at once to haul upon it. He found the weight much less than he had expected. Not only was the vaquero short and wiry, but he was using both his hands and feet with such effect that in five minutes he stood beside Will.

The work went on quickly now. One after another the men were pulled up, and in less than an hour all were assembled on the platform, where, save three engaged in pulling

their comrades up, they had laid down as soon as they reached it. Will had been glad to relinquish the work to others, for his hands were cut and bleeding. He had crawled along, keeping by the wall of rock until he reached the point where the bulge or bend in the face of the cliff enabled him to see to the other end of the platform. To his surprise not a soul was visible, but, peering over the parapet, he saw four figures standing as sentinels at the points where there were breaks in the path, and the moonlight enabled him to make out that the ladders had been pulled up and laid beside them.

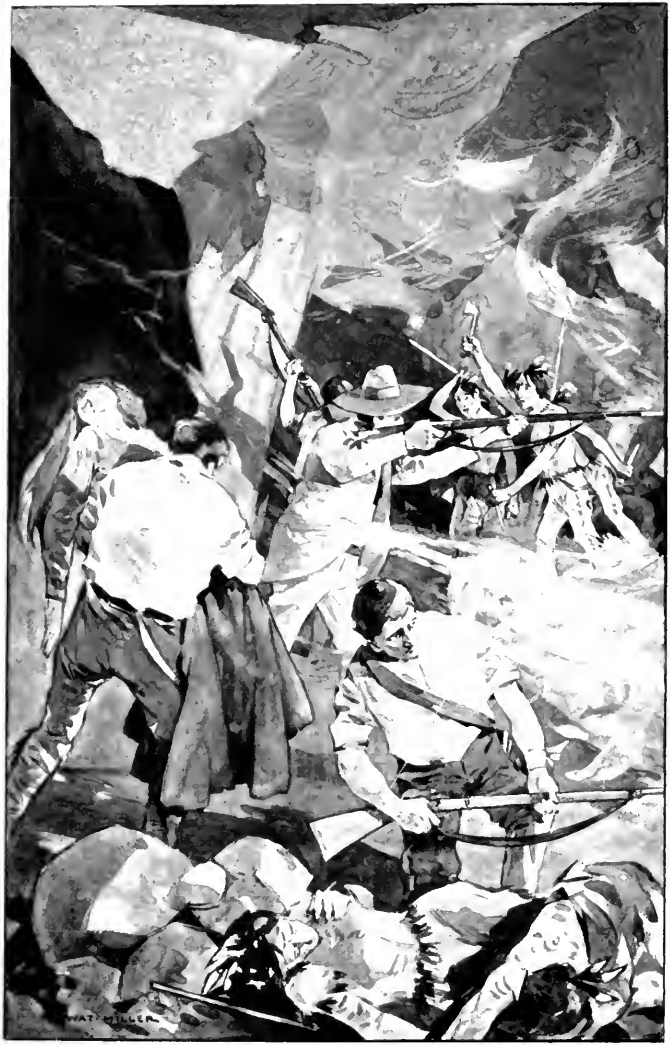
He could hear a confused hum of voices from the principal cave, but, though most anxious to know what was going on there, he dared not venture farther until all the men were up, as anyone coming out of the cave would at once see him. He therefore rejoined the others. Each man as he came up gave him a silent grip of the hand, and the Indian chief muttered something which Sancho whispered meant "heap great brave". As soon as the

last man was up they moved silently forward. Every man knew the part he had to play. Sancho and three others crept forward on hands and knees, under shelter of the parapet, to the other end of the platform, where they were to await the signal, the rest halting at the front of the main entrance to the cave.

Here a sight met their eyes that filled them with horror. The entrance opened into a wide hall, which was lighted by a dozen torches. At the farther end was a hideous idol carved from a solid rock; in front of this was a sort of altar, upon which lay a figure, which they at once recognized as that of Donna Clara. Beside her stood two men, naked to the waist, with their bodies painted with strange figures. They had knives in their hands, and, rocking themselves to and fro, were uttering some sort of prayer or incantation.

"You take the fellow to the left, Antonio, I will take the other."

The shots rang out together—the distance was but sixteen or seventeen yards—and with-



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THE FIGHT IN THE CAVE

out a cry the two priests or executioners fell dead. A terrible cry of astonishment and dismay broke from the crowd, and before they could recover from their surprise, the vaqueros and the two Indians, headed by Will, burst their way through them. Will had given strict orders that there was to be no general firing, as men, women, and children were likely to be mixed up together, but as they entered they caught the sound of four rifles outside, and knew that the sentries had been disposed of. Will caught up the girl, who was evidently insensible, and threw her over his shoulder, and, surrounded by his men, made his way outside the cave. Here he handed her over to Antonio, who was a very powerfully built man, and the latter, without a word, started for the steps.

"Now, my men," Will shouted, as with cries of fury the Indians followed them, "don't spare one of these bloodthirsty wretches, but don't touch the women."

The fight was short, half the Indians being shot down as they poured out on to the plat-

form; the others, however, maddened by the loss of their expected victim and the capture of their stronghold, fought desperately to the end, the Mexicans using the butt ends of their rifles, while the savages fought with knives. After the fight was over, the cave was thoroughly searched; many of the women had fallen, for they had joined in the fight as fiercely as the men, and in the darkness and confusion it was impossible to distinguish them apart. The rest, with the children, were forced to descend the steps. The ladders had been replaced by Sancho and his party, who, having finished their work, had run off at once to bring up the horses.

Clara was still unconscious when they returned. Will mounted, and Antonio handed her to him. Sancho and two of the men accompanied him, while the rest in charge of the captives followed more slowly. Fires were blazing high at the Moquis village, and it was evident that the attack had been eagerly watched, and that the firing on the platform had shown that the caves had been taken, for

on the still night air came the sound of horses, drums, and loud shouting. Will at once urged his horse into the water, his companions swimming by their horses close to him so as to render assistance, if necessary; but the distance was short, and it was not long before the horse felt the bottom again. The sudden chill of the water had roused the girl from her faint.

"Where am I?" she murmured.

"You are safe in my arms," Will said. "We have got you safely out of the hands of those wretches. All danger is over."

"Is it Will," she asked, "or am I dreaming?"

"It is I, sure enough, Clara," he said; "and I am glad that for once you have dropped the don. I followed you with Antonio and Sancho and thirteen other vaqueros. We were joined by the Genigueh chief, Teczuma, and one of his tribe, who have been invaluable in following your track."

"Holy Virgin, I thank you!" the girl murmured, and then lay silent for a time.

"Where are you going now?" she asked presently.

"To the Moquis village, where you will be most kindly received, and where we shall stay till you have got your strength again."

"Zona, my gallant Zona! Is she safe?"

"Yes. She seemed pretty nearly recovered from her fatigue when we found her this morning, and will be ready to carry you back again."

As they approached the hill they saw a number of people coming down the zigzag path, with torches, who welcomed Will on his arrival with loud cries of triumph. The horses could go no farther, as the path, like that up to the caverns, was at several points cut away, the breaks being in the daytime filled with long planks. As the girl was altogether unable to walk, some of the boys ran up the hill, and in a quarter of an hour returned with some poles, with which a litter was speedily improvised. In this she was laid, and four Moquis carried her up the hill, Will walking beside her and holding her hand.

The whole of the villagers were assembled on the top of the hill, shouting and dancing with joy at the destruction of their enemies, for Sancho had already made the chiefs aware that all the men had been killed, and the women and the children were being brought in as prisoners.

The Moquis houses surprised Will, as they had neither windows nor doors on the ground floor, and entrance was only obtainable by a ladder to the upper story. Clara was here handed over to the care of the principal women of the village. Half an hour later the rest of the party came up with the prisoners. These were for the time confined in one of the houses, two armed Moquis keeping guard over them. The women would, Sancho explained to Will, be used as servants and to fetch water from the springs at the foot of the hill. The children would probably be adopted into the tribe.

It was ten days before Clara was strong enough to think of starting. She had for twenty-four hours been in a high fever, but

the care lavished upon her, and her fine constitution, speedily brought her through this, and two days later she was able to see Will.

"Tell me all that has happened," she said. "I feel sure that mother has been killed, for the valley was full of Indians, and I know that there were but few men at home."

"I am afraid that there is no doubt about that," Will said gently. "We may be thankful, Clara, that your father and Juan were both away, or they, too, might have fallen."

Then he related very briefly how those by the river had been saved, how they had learned from Sancho that she had been away at the end of the valley, and how they had started in chase; and then, in a few words, told how he had scaled the face of the cliff, had assisted his followers up, and had arrived just in time.

"I will tell you about my journey another time," she said. "I do not like to think of the last part of it; we were both worn out, Zona and I, and if we had not come down upon the river we should have both died. I took a long drink, and then fell down and went to

sleep. I was awakened by being lifted up, and found that I was being carried by two Indians, and that others were all round me. I was too weak even to struggle, but I remember being carried up a very steep path on the face of the cliff. As soon as I was laid down I went to sleep, and I suppose slept all night. In the morning they gave me food and water, but left me alone till it was dark again; then they led me into a large cave lit up by torches, with a horrible idol at the end. They laid me down on a great stone in front of it, and two men with knives came beside me. Then I suppose I fainted, and I remember nothing more till I woke up feeling strangely cold as we were swimming across that river."

Almost the whole of the inhabitants of the village paid a visit to the cave on the morning after the fight, and when shown the ropes, still hanging, by which the party had been drawn up, could at first hardly believe Sancho and the two Indians who assured them that Will had climbed up there unaided. After Clara's

illness had taken a turn, and there was no longer cause for anxiety about her, Will was greatly interested in the Moquis village. He was taken into one of the underground rooms that served as temples, and was horrified at finding that hundreds of rattlesnakes and other venomous serpents were kept there, and still more astonished when he saw the priests handle them carelessly and take them in their mouths. He could not believe that they had not been rendered harmless until shown that they still retained their poison-fangs. He was told that once a year there was a great festival in which all the men in the village took part and performed dances, holding the snakes in their mouths.

The villagers endeavoured to show their thankfulness at the destruction of their enemies by profuse hospitality to their guests, and the latter thoroughly enjoyed their stay. On starting on the return journey Clara rode with Will, the two vaqueros, and the Indian chief to the foot of the cliff, and was shown the spot where Will had climbed

up. After looking at it for some time she suddenly burst into tears.

"It is dreadful even to think of your going up there, Will," she said. "I should never have forgiven myself if you had been killed when risking your life in that way to save me."

"You would never have known it," he said.

"I should have known it," she said earnestly, "when we met in the Hereafter."

The journey home was conducted in easy stages. Wolf, the Indian, and one of the vaqueros had been sent off the day after Clara rallied from her attack of fever. If they found the Apaches still in the valley, they were to return to warn them; if not, they were to ride on until they met Señor Sarasta and told him of his daughter's safety.

When half-way back they met Juan with ten well-armed vaqueros. The meeting was a joyful one, although saddened by the loss, now confirmed, of their mother.

"Ah! Will," Juan exclaimed, after his first tender embrace of his sister, "you are tenfold

my brother now. You have saved Clara's life as well as mine; your messengers have told me how you scaled a cliff that seemed to all of them so impossible that none had the slightest hope that you could succeed."

"And how are things in the valley?"

"Better than might have been hoped. The red-skins only remained three days; some ten thousand of the cattle have been recovered; many were found in the woods in the hillsides, more still had gone right up the valley, and when the red-skins tried to follow them they were assailed with such showers of arrows by the Geniguehs that they fell back, having indeed already as many cattle as they could drive away. Two of the men from the raft brought us the news to San Diego, and the commandant at once told off one hundred cavalry to accompany us, and in future a fort is to be built near the hacienda, and fifty soldiers are to be stationed there. The commandant was rather reluctant to agree to this until he had received orders from government, but on our undertaking to supply the

garrison with bread and meat, he consented, seeing that it would be a distinct saving of expense. So we need have no fear of the red-skins meddling with us again. My father has already sent down to Monterey to arrange for the purchase of ten thousand head of cattle from the ranches there, so in two or three years we shall be in full working order again. We found twenty of the vaqueros assembled at the hacienda; they had taken to the woods at the first attack, and had remained in hiding until they found that the red-skins had gone."

A messenger was at once sent on ahead to inform Señor Sarasta of the time at which the party would arrive, and he met them at the upper end of the valley. The meeting was an affecting one. After embracing his daughter the Mexican threw his arms round Will with as much affection as if he had been his father.

"I did not think," he said, when the first emotion was over, "when I left you in charge that the duty would be such an onerous one, but you have nobly fulfilled your trust, most

nobly, and I thank you from the bottom of my heart."

On arriving at the hacienda they found that great efforts had been made to remove all signs of the visit of the Apaches. Donna Sarasta had been buried in the little chapel near the house. The broken and torn-up shrubs had been replaced, and although inside the rooms were bare, for the furniture had been hacked to pieces by the red-skins, everything was spotlessly clean. Will did not enter with Señor Sarasta into the house, but went straight to the stables with the vaqueros and saw his horse and Zona cared for. When he went to the house, Don Sarasta and Juan went out to him.

"We have been talking together, Will," the Mexican said, "and the result is this: I do not know what your sentiments may be, but I have ascertained those of my daughter. We have been as one family for seven or eight months. We all wish that we shall continue to be so in reality, and I now offer you formally the hand of my daughter, Donna Clara

Sarasta, in marriage. I know that I can intrust her happiness to you, and the match will afford both myself and Juan the most lively satisfaction."

"It would be altogether beyond my hopes, señor," Will said, greatly moved. "I will not deny that I have from the first had a profound admiration for your daughter, but I should never have spoken of it, seeing that I am at present a penniless man, and am, indeed, much below the age at which we think of marriage in the States."

The Mexican smiled. "According to Spanish law, and our own policy, the legal age for marriage is fourteen for the man and twelve for the woman, and although it is not often that marriages take place quite so young as that, they are very frequent when the man is sixteen and the girl fourteen or fifteen; therefore, that is no obstacle whatever."

"Then, señor, I accept your generous offer most gladly and thankfully, and shall consider myself the most fortunate man alive in winning such a bride as Donna Clara."

"Well, you had better go in and tell her so," the señor said. "I think that that will be more in accordance with your American customs than for me to go in and formally hand her over to you."

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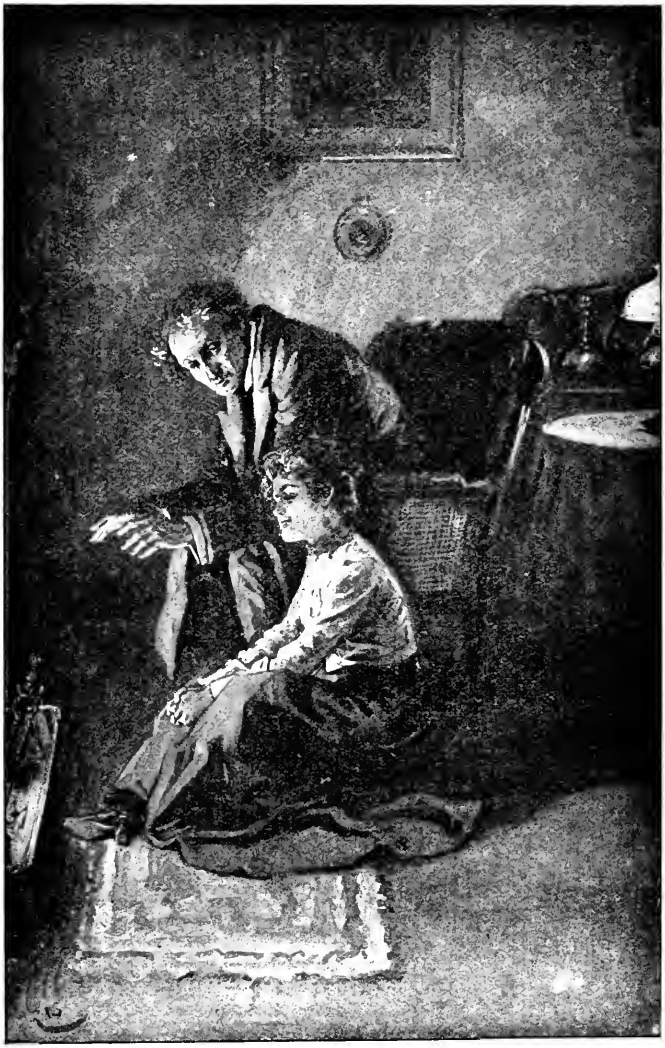

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(See page 32)

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