



(Continued)

CHAPTER II.

To neither Felix nor me did sleep come at once. With each there was the foreboding that something out of the ordinary course would happen to us that night, and it was with an expectant feeling, serious enough, yet with somewhat of curiosity, that we waited for what the turn of events might bring us. That it was liable to be an ugly sort of visitation, if it fulfilled the import of those smoke spires on the mountains, we both were well aware.

We had taken the usual precautions that plainsmen take in a hostile Indian country; had paused in the darkness and listened, after turning off from the trail, to find if we were followed, and before rolling up in our blankets had reconnoitred the space about us for a considerable distance on every side. There had been revealed no sign of danger. Neither of us had so much as mentioned the topic of Indians, since we first had seen and remarked the smoke of the Apache fires. But it was a thought we both shared which Felix voiced when he said:—

"That old Mexican outfit seemed fixed as if he intended to go into camp on the plain to-night. I hope he's changed his mind and pushed on for the stage station. It's too bad to think of what might happen to that girl if the Apaches should jump his camp."

"You know how it is with those old Dons born and bred in the south-west country," I said. "Hostile Indians have been so everyday thing with them that they accept the situation as a matter of course. If they are attacked by Apaches, they believe it is the will of God, but they make the best fight they can. If they get the best of the savages, they bless their patron saints. But while they live they go about and attend to their business and pleasures, near and far, as freely as if they had never an Indian to trouble them."

"They live long lives, too, many of them, and die in their beds at last," commented Felix. "All don't have that fortune, however, by a long shot. I know prominent New Mexican families in which for generations nearly every man has, soon or later, been killed by the Indians. Some of the Mexicans of the old stock are great Indian fighters—the old Roman Baca, of San Mateo, and Colonel Miguel Chavez, for example."

"Yes, such men as these remind us of what their ancestors, the old conquistadores, must have been, who came up into this country with their arquebuses and lances and coats of mail three centuries ago, and held their own against the Indians. Their blood tells in some of the men as well as the beauty of the women."

"Hello! What's stampeding the horses?" Felix and I jumped to our feet in haste. With a loud snort, Bill, my riding horse, had dashed at a gallop as far as his lariat would permit, and now stood at the end of the rope with ears erect and head and tail in the air. I went to the picket pin, saw that the end of the rope was securely fastened and then walked toward the house. The sharp whistling rattle of a snake that I almost trod on checked my steps and caused me to start back in a hurry. The sound was twice repeated, each time further away, as the unseen reptile that had startled the horse glided off under cover of the darkness. Bill, at my approach, became quiet, went again to feeding, and I returned to my blanket.

But we were not to fall asleep without being again aroused. The horses presently pricked their ears and looked toward the east. I turned in the direction of their gaze and saw the edge of the round, full moon rising above the Peloncillo mountains. From the same direction came the faint sound of swift trampling hoofs, growing louder, and soon their noise was intermingled with the rattling of light wheels. Felix lay between me and the trail, rolled in his blanket, the barrel of the long sharp rifle by his side glinting dully in the moonbeams. He had taken off his neckerchief and spread it beside his face on the rubber coat on which he lay. From beneath it peeped the butt of his No. 45 revolver. He, like myself, was awake and listening.

"It is the stage," he said. I raised my head and looked over him toward the sound of the trotting hoofs, now near at hand. A short stretch of the trail was visible opposite our position, and four mules drawing a buckboard came into view, moving rapidly. The driver sat on the front seat, erect and watchful beneath his wide-brimmed hat, with reins and whip in hand, the mail bags piled on the floor beside him. On the rear seat a sleepy passenger, lurching and nodding. The vehicle whirled by and in a few moments was far down the trail. From where we lay we could see in the growing moonlight its indistinct outlines, as it moved onward, for some time after the sound of wheels and hoofs had died away. We watched it until in the distance it merged indistinguishably with the dark clumps of mesquite that obscured the trail.

The buckboard had passed from sight, but we were still looking in the direction in which it had gone, when far down the trail there came a succession of flashes, larger and brighter than the scintillation of fireflies could account for. With one accord we leaped to our feet and gazed with eyes intent upon those distant outbursts of flame.

"It's shooting," said Felix, in a tone as low as a whisper. "The Apaches have attacked the stage."

The names gave place to darkness. The distance was too great for any sound of shots or human cry to come to us. What had happened we might learn on the morrow, but there was nothing to be done to-night but wait. "Our turn next, perhaps," said Felix, grimly, as he buckled on his cartridge belt and then seated himself coolly upon his blanket. "We can do no better than to stay where we are. If we are not attacked in the next half hour, it will show that the Indians don't know where we are, and we'll be pretty safe against being troubled by them before daybreak. In any event, we'd best sit down and take it easy."

For an hour we sat in silence, with weapons in readiness, but there was no further disturbance or any sign of danger. The horses fed peacefully, and we felt that we could rely on them to discern the approach of an Indian to our camp. Felix and I had been too many months afield in the Apache country to be long impressed by any danger that did not force itself importantly on our attention. With the slight weariness after our day's ride, the balmy coolness of the night brought an irresistible drowsiness, which soon merged into sound and dreamless slumber.

How long I slept I know not, but it must have been hours, when my repose was invaded by the phantasmagoria of a troubled dream. From a swift succession of incongruous sensations, the rocking of boats, the jolting of wagons, and menace from man and monsters, I awakened to the reality of the sound of soft footsteps and the light rustling of the prairie grass. Someone was stealing upon us, so close at hand that my opening eyes fell upon the advancing shadow. With the first appalling thought that the Apaches had surprised us, I seized my revolver, and as I cocked it started up and turned to face the intruder.

But it was not the evil face of Indian or of white "rustler" that confronted me. The starlight and moonlight illumined the face and kneeling form of a beautiful Mexican girl, whose dark eyes, upturned to mine, swam in tears behind her upheld, clasped hands. In the musical Spanish tongue a melodious voice implored plaintively:—

"Senor, no me mates te lo ruego! roy, Carmen!" ("Senor, do not kill me, I pray! It is only I, Carmen.") I had risen with the impulse instantly to fire, and my revolver, with hammer raised and my finger at tension on the trigger, was pointing straight at the head of Carmen, who at my motion had fallen on her knees, panting with fear and fatigue. Behind her, near at hand, her little maid, Dolores, crouched and whimpered. I turned my weapon away and lowered the hammer upon the cap.

Felix's pistol had clicked at my first movement, and, revolver in hand, he was crouched on one knee, listening. He accosted Carmen in Spanish.

"How came you here, senorita?" "Senor, we were encamped beyond the arroyo. The mules ran away in the night. Manuel followed them and did not return. My father went after Manuel, and he, too, did not come back. Everything looked strange and fearful to us who were left alone. When after a long time Manuel and my father did not appear, we left the camp in search of them. We soon lost our way, but by favour of heaven we at last saw your horses, and so were guided to you. Ah, I fear misfortune has befallen my father!" And at the thought Carmen wept piteously, while Dolores sobbed in sympathy and addressed to the glided medal of the Virgin of Guadalupe that hung from her neck her prayers, in a semi-Indian dialect, for protection from the Apaches.

Well, this was a strange and not unpleasant episode of a night's camping upon this plain of sinister repute. Much better it was than to be routed out by Apaches. Felix and I did the best we could under circumstances so novel and unexpected. Failing to console Carmen with assurances of our belief in her father's safety, we folded the blankets so as to make a sort of divan for her and the Indian maid. Leaving them to their sorrow, we started out to see how our horses were faring. They had fed well and were lying down. Finding them all right, we seated ourselves in the shadow of a clump of mesquite to await the coming of daylight.

Carmen had thrown herself on the blankets, with her face in the lap of her maid. She seemed overcome by her grief, and did not speak or look up at our approach. The Indian girl had recovered her composure, and with stoical face sat immovable by her mistress. The little grove of scattered mesquite clumps in which we had camped was about 100 feet in diameter. In its centre was a smooth, grassy plat about thirty feet across. About the group of low tree clumps there were no others near, and we were separated by fully 100 yards of level, open prairie from anything that might furnish cover by which an enemy could approach.

Especially we noticed our horses' behaviour, knowing that they were good sentinels against the approach of hostile Indians, and that if the Apaches should come near them, to the windward, the ear and resonance that the animals had to the Indian would be displayed in their alarm and restlessness.

CHAPTER III.

For a long time nothing occurred to disturb us. The horses grazed quietly. Except for the occasional rustle of a passing breeze the prairie was still. In the soft, clear moonlight distant mesquite clumps and their shadows lay as masses of black. Presently I fell to examining the level ground between me and the lone camp. Between me and it upon the open ground something impressed me as having taken place. On the hither side, ten yards from these detached trees, there seemed to be some appearance that I had not noted before. Was it a bowlder that lay there in the moonlight barely distinguishable from the brownish green herbage of the plain? As I looked more closely I could discern another and another of these almost invisible protuberances which appeared in some mysterious manner.

Surely that foremost object was nearer by five yards than it had been when I first saw it, and where I had first seen it, against the background of gray bodies I now could count seven or eight, and behind them others were coming into view and were advancing. My senses were unusually alert, and, with the great attention that I paid, I could now detect the cautious, steady, yet rapid approach of these crawling bodies, and the full sense of the meaning of their appearance and of the danger which they signified fully dawned upon me.

The Apaches were stealing upon our position, and the attack we had dreaded was upon us. My Winchester rifle was at half cock. I silently drew back the hammer, took careful aim at the nearest of the gray objects and fired. Without waiting an instant to see the result of my shot, I worked the lever back and forth, aiming quickly and sending shot after shot among the figures then clinging to the ground.

Simultaneously with my first shot there rose a yell and tumult of yelps and screeches so frightful that, prepared as I was for such a result to follow my shot, it startled me for an instant.

A score of tongues of flame spouted from the grass, mingled with the wailing, and twenty bullet whizzed through the mesquite trees with their rushing scream. The horses reared and plunged, and, turning from the Indians, dashed into the mesquite thicket, in which was our camp, and were quickly tangled among the trees, which served in a measure to screen them from the bullets. Carmen and her maid had both fallen asleep, and at the sound of shots and the Indian yell they awakened with a scream. But in a moment their cry of fear was hushed and they lay silent, close to the ground, while the rifles were cracking near and away and balls tore through the sheltering trees about them. Before I had fired my fourth shot I heard on my right the heavy, vicious crack of Felix's rifle, which fell to work in earnest with a celerity which almost rivaled the quickness of my repeating rifle.

The Indian who had evidently counted upon a gleaming unobserved upon our position, taken wholly by surprise, sprang upward, fired his rifle and flattening upon the ground backed away like centipedes into the obscurity of the light. Several of them, with astonishing quickness, caught and dragged into the detached clump of mesquite one or two fallen comrades, but the one at which I had first fired lay as he had lain when I pulled the trigger. From the mesquite, and from the grass at a greater distance away, the others kept up a quick fire for several minutes with an accompaniment of frightful yells, while we worked our rifles as rapidly as we could, firing at the flashes as they discharged their pieces.

We directed our fire into the detached mesquite clump, and quickly cleared it of the Indians. From the more distant line of cover their shots were necessarily at random. Evidently they got tired of wasting ammunition on us, and perhaps they thought their position dangerous, for their fire slackened and soon ceased.

Felix and I were glad to pause to let our rifle barrels cool. We waited five minutes, but no further sound of

attack came, and at last Felix spoke in a low tone:—

"Are you hurt?" The question suggested something that I had not thought of since. I had for an instant realized a quick pain, such as I should fancy that the sudden brushing over the skin of a white hot iron would produce. It had made my shoulder tingle for a moment, and then it had passed from my mind in the excitement of firing. I examined my shoulder and saw that the sleeve of my shirt was torn and was damp with blood. I tore it open and perceived the raw and blackened furrow where the hot bullet had grazed the muscle of the shoulder. Although it had drawn considerable blood, the wound was not serious, although it called for far more than I had expected. I carried an unpleasant sense of the closeness of what might have happened.

"I believe I got scratched on my shoulder," I answered, when I had made my examination and ascertained that I was hit in no other place. "It's of no importance. Are you all right?" "Sound as a dollar," Felix replied. "But some of 'em came mighty close. I think I got a ventilating hole in my hat, for a bullet, or the wind of one, took it off my head. What do you think? Will they come again, or have the Apaches drawn off for good?" "I believe they've got enough of us," I said. "They have no reason for staying around here and losing time trying to take us in. Their only hope was to surprise us. Now that they've failed of that I think they'll get away as quickly as possible."

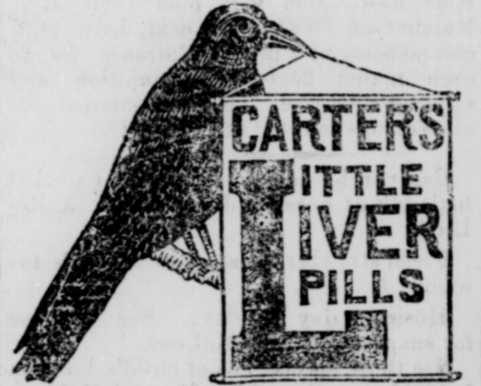
"That's my idea," said Felix. "If you'll keep watch, I'll slip back and reconnoitre on the other side of our camping place, and see if the rest of our company are all right."

It was near daybreak, the chosen time of Indian attack, and we anxiously watched for what the lifting of

darkness might bring. The gray light of dawn was bringing into view the darkened plain and the sky was reddening in the east when the sound of a rapid volley of shots came faint in the distance from the direction of the Mexican's camp. The shooting ceased and quickly a fire blazed up where it had occurred. We sat in expectancy with weapons in readiness, waiting for the attack on us which now seemed certain. But it did not come. We were left undisturbed, and soon our attention was attracted to a weird and ominous apparition in another quarter. The sky beyond the Peloncillo mountains was now flaming with the dawn, and through a cleft the level sunbeams came in a wide shaft of light upon the plain. Across this illumined space, like shadows against a screen, a procession of horsemen passed in single file between us and the mountains. Their forms, muffled in blankets, and their attitude in riding, showed them to be Indians. We counted nineteen in the party. Nearly all were leading horses behind the mounted animals. They passed beyond the light into the duskiness, and were lost to sight in the shadow against the dark continuation of the mountains.

Dawn brightened into sunrise, and the San Simon plain in the daylight looked fresh, fair, and peaceful. Some dark moving objects could be seen near the playa, but there were no signs of danger to us. We offered the girls the last of the water in the canteens, and then, having packed our limited equipment, we all, by common consent, started to visit Don Ramon's camp, which, in the daylight, was now distinguishable about a mile away. I gave Carmen my horse to ride, and walked in company with Dolores, who looked thoroughly unconcerned, and munched a piece of bread as she trudged along. Carmen's face was stern-stained and melancholy, and she seemed unconscious of the rents and tatters in her dress, which testified woefully to the thorns and briars that had lain in her path the night before. But her nantilla was becomingly arranged, and she looked the lovely incarnation of grief and strife.

(To be Continued.)



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