

THE LOST CABIN MINE

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THE
**LOST CABIN
MINE**

By

FREDERICK NIVEN

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1929

[image]

title page

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TO MY SISTER

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The Lost Cabin Mine

CHAPTER I

*Introduces "The Apache Kid" with Whom Later
I Become Acquainted*

[image]

he Lost Cabin Mine, as a name, is familiar to many. But the true story of that mine there is no man who knows. Of that I am positive—because "dead men tell no tales."

It was on the sixth day of June, 1900, that I first heard the unfinished story of the Lost Cabin, the first half of the story I may call it, for the story is all finished now, and in the second half I was destined to play a part. Of the date I am certain because I verified it only the other day when I came by accident upon a pile of letters, tied with red silk ribbon and bearing a tag "Letters from Francis." These were the letters I sent to my mother during my Odyssey and one of them, bearing the date of the day succeeding that I have named, contained an account, toned down very considerably, as I had thought necessary for her sensitive and retired heart, of the previous day's doings, with an outline of the strange tale heard that day. That nothing was mentioned in the epistle of the doings of that night, you will be scarcely astonished when you read of them.

I was sitting alone on the rear verandah of the Laughlin Hotel, Baker City, watching the cicadi hopping about on the sun-scorched flats, now and again raising my eyes to the great, confronting mountain, the lower trees of which seemed as though trembling, seen through the heat haze; while away above, the white

wedge of the glacier, near the summit, glistened dry and clear like salt in the midst of the high blue rocks.

The landlord, a thin, quick-moving man with a furtive air, a straggling apology for a moustache, and tiny eyes that seemed ever on the alert, came shuffling out to the verandah, hanging up there, to a hook in the projecting roof, a parrot's cage which he carried.

His coming awoke me from my reveries.

"Hullo," he said: "still setting there, are you? Warmish?"

"Yes."

"You ain't rustled a job for yourself yet?" he inquired, touching the edge of the cage lightly with his lean, bony fingers to stop its swaying.

I shook my head. I had indeed been sitting there that very moment, despite the brightness of the day, in a mood somewhat despondent, wondering if ever I was to obtain that long-sought-for, long-wished-for "job."

"Been up to the McNair Mine?" he asked.

I nodded.

"The Bonanza?"

I nodded again.

"The Poorman?"

"No good," I replied.

"Well, did you try the Molly Magee?"

"Yes."

"And?" he inquired, elevating his brows.

"Same old story," said I. "They all say they only take on experienced men."

He looked at me with a half-smile, half-sneer, and the grey parrot hanging above him with his head cocked on one side, just like his master's, ejaculated:

"Well, if this don't beat cock-fighting!"

Shakespeare says that "what the declined is he will as soon read in the eyes of others as feel in his own fall." I was beginning to read in the eyes of others, those who knew that I had been in this roaring Baker City almost a fortnight and was still idle, contempt for my incapacity. Really, I do not believe now that any of them looked on me with contempt; it was only my own inward self-reproach which I imagined there, for men and women are kindlier than we think them in our own dark days. But on that and at that moment it seemed to me as though the very parrot jeered at me.

"You don't savvy this country," said the landlord. "You want always to say, when they ask you: 'Do you understand the work?' 'why sure! I'm experienced all right; I never done nothing else in my life.' You want to say that, no matter what the job is you 're offered. If you want ever to make enough money to be able to get a pack-horse and a outfit and go prospectin' on your own, that's what

you want to say?"

"But that would be to tell a downright lie," said I.

"Well," drawled the landlord, lifting his soft hat between his thumb and his first finger and scratching his head on the little bald part of the crown with the third finger, the little finger cocked in the air; "well, now that you put it that way—well, I guess it would. I never looked at it that way before. You see, they all ask you first pop: 'Did you ever do it before?' You says: 'Yes, never did anything else since I left the cradle.' It's just a form of words when you strike a man for a job."

I broke into a feeble laugh, which the parrot took up with such a raucous voice that the landlord turned and yelled to it: "Shut up!"

"I don't have to!" shrieked the parrot, promptly, and you could have thought that his little eyes sparkled with real indignation. Just then the landlord's wife appeared at the door.

"See here," cried Mr. Laughlin, turning to her, "there 's that parrot o' yourn, I told him to shut up his row just now, and he rips back at me, 'I don't have to!' What you make o' that? Are you goin' to permit that? Everything connected with you seems conspirin' agin' me to cheapen me—you and your relations what come here and put up for months on end, and your—your—your derned old grey parrot!"

"Abraham Laughlin," said the lady, her green eyes flashing, "you bin drinkin' ag'in, and ef you ain't sober to-morrow I go back east home to my mother."

It gave me a new thought as to the longevity of the human race to hear Mrs. Laughlin speak of her mother back east. I hung my head and studied the planking of the verandah, then looked upward and gazed at the far-off glacier glittering under the blue sky, tried to wear the appearance of a deaf man who had not heard this altercation. Really I took the matter too seriously. Had I only known it at the time, they were a most devoted couple and would—not "kiss again with tears" and seek forgiveness and reconciliation, but—speak to each other most kindly, as though no "words" had ever passed between them, half an hour later. But at the time of the little altercation on the verandah, when Mrs. Laughlin gave voice to her threat and then, turning, stalked back into the hotel, Laughlin wheeled about with his head thrust forward, showing his lean neck craning out of his wide collar, and opened his lips as though to discharge a pursuing shot. But the parrot took the words out of his mouth, so to speak, giving a shriek of laughter and crying out: "Well, if this don't beat cock-fighting!"

The landlord looked up quizzically at the bird and then there was an awkward pause. I wondered what to say to break this silence that followed upon the exhibition of the break in the connubial bliss of my landlord and his wife. Then

I remembered something that I decidedly did want to ask, so I was actually more seeking information than striving to put Mr. Laughlin at his ease again, when I said:

"By the way, what is all this talk I hear about the Lost Cabin Mine? Everybody is speaking about it, you know. What is the Lost Cabin Mine? What is the story of it? People seem just to take it for granted that everybody knows about it."

"Gee-whiz!" said the landlord in astonishment, wheeling round upon me. He stretched out a hand to a chair, dragged it along the verandah, and sat down beside me in the shadow. "You don't know that story? Why, then I'll give you all there is to it so far. And talking about the Lost Cabin, now there's what you might be doin' if on'y you had the price of an outfit—go out and find it, my bold buck, and live happy ever after—"

He stopped abruptly, for a man had come out of the hotel and now stood meditating on the verandah. He was a lithe, sun-browned fellow, this, wearing a loose jacket, wearing it open, disclosing a black shirt with pearl buttons. Round his neck was a great, cream-coloured kerchief that hung half down his back in a V shape, as is the manner with cowboys and not usual among miners. This little detail of the kerchief was sufficient to mark him out in that city, for the nearest cattle ranch was about two hundred miles to the south-east and when the "boys" who worked there sought the delights of civilisation it was not to Baker City, but to one of the towns on the railroad, such as Bogus City or Kettle River Gap, that they journeyed. On his legs were blue dungaree overalls, turned up at the bottom as though to let the world see that he wore, beneath the overalls, a very fine pair of trousers. On his head was a round, soft hat, not broad of brim, but the brim in front was bent down, shading his eyes. The cream-colour of his kerchief set off his healthy brown skin and his black, crisp hair. There were no spurs in his boots; for all that he had the bearing of one more at home on the plains than in the mountains. A picturesque figure he was, one to observe casually and look at again with interest, though he bore himself without swagger or any apparent attempt at attracting attention, except for one thing, and that was that in either ear there glistened a tiny golden ear-ring. His brows were puckered as in thought and from his nostrils came two long gusts of smoke as he stood there biting his cigar and glaring on the yellow sand and the chirring cicadi. Then he raised his head, glancing round on us, and his face brightened.

"Warmish," he said.

"That's what, right warmish," the proprietor replied affably, and now the man with the ear-rings, having apparently come to the end of his meditations, stepped lightly off into the loose sand and Laughlin jogged me with his elbow and nodded to me, rolling his eyes toward the departing man as though to say,

"Take a good look at him, and when he is out of earshot I shall tell you of him." This was precisely the proprietor's meaning.

"That's Apache Kid," he said softly at last, and when Apache Kid had gone from sight he turned again to me and remarked, with the air of a man making an astounding disclosure:

"That's Apache Kid, and he's in this here story of the Lost Cabin. Yap, that's what they call him, though he ain't the real original, of course. The real original was hanged down in Lincoln County, New Mexico, about twenty-five year back. Hanged at the age of twenty-one he was, and had killed twenty-one men, which is an interesting fact to consider. That's the way with names. I know a fellow they call Texas Jack yet, but the real original died long ago. I mind the original. Omohundro was his correct name; as quiet a man as you want to see, Jack B. Omohundro, with eyes the colour of a knife-blade. But I 'm driftin' away. What you want to get posted up on is the Lost Cabin Mine."

He jerked his chair closer to me, tapped me on the knee, and cleared his throat; but I seemed fated not to hear the truth of that mystery yet, for Mrs. Laughlin stood again on the verandah.

"Abraham," she said in an aggrieved tone, "there ain't nobody in the bar."

Up jumped Abraham, his whole bearing, from his bowed head to his bent knees, apologetic.

"I was just tellin' this gentleman a story," he explained.

"I 'm astonished at you then," she said. "An old man like you a-telling your stories to a young lad like that! You 'd be doin' better slippin' into the bar and takin' a smell at that there barkeep's breath."

Mr. Laughlin turned to me.

"Come into the bar, sir; come into the bar. We 've got a new barkeep and the mistress suspects him o' takin' some more than even a barkeep is expected to take. I hev to take a look to him once in a while."

Mrs. Laughlin disappeared into her own sanctum, satisfied; while the "proprietor" and I went into the bar-room.

The "barkeep" was polishing up his glasses. In one corner sat a grimy, bearded man in the prime of life but with a dazed and lonely eye. He always sat in that particular corner, as by ancient right, morning, noon, and evening, playing an eternal solitary game of cards, the whole deck of cards spread before him on a table. He moved them about, changing their positions, lifting here and replacing there, but, though I had watched him several times, I could never discover the system of his lonely game.

"Who is that man?" I quietly inquired. "He is always playing there, always alone, never speaking to a soul."

"The boys call him 'The Failure,'" Laughlin explained. "You find a man

like that in the corner of most every ho-tel-bar you go into in this here Western country—always a-playing that there lonesome game, I ’m always scared to ask ’em what the rudiments o’ that game is for they ’re always kind o’ rat-house,—of unsound mind, them men is. I heerd a gentleman explain one day that it’s a great game for steadyin’ the head. He gets a remittance from England, they say. Anyhow, he stands up to the bar once every two months and blows himself in for about three-four days. Then he goes back to his table there and sets down to his lonesome card game again and frowns away over it for another couple o’ months. I guess that gentleman was right in what he explained. I guess he holds his brains together on that there game.”

We found seats in a corner of the room and Laughlin again cleared his throat. He had a name for taking a real delight in imparting information and spinning yarns, true, fictitious, and otherwise, to his guests, and this time we were not interrupted. He told me the story of the Lost Cabin Mine, or as much of that story as was known by that time, ere his smiling Chinese cook came to inform him ”dinnah vely good. Number A1 dinnah to-day, Misholaughlin, ledy in half-oh.”

CHAPTER II

Mr. Laughlin Tells the Story up to Date

[image]

r. Laughlin’s suggestion that I should go out and look for this Lost Cabin and, finding it, ”live happy ever after,” made me but the more anxious to hear all that was to be told regarding it.

”Well, about this here Lost Cabin Mine,” he said. ”There’s a little, short, stubby fellow that you maybe have noticed around here, with a pock-marked face,—Mike Canlan, they call him. He was up to Tremont putting in assessment on a claim he has in the mountains there away, and he was comin’ along back by the trail on the mountains that runs kind o’ parallel with the stage road, but away up on the hills, and there he picks up a feller nigh dead,—starved to death, pretty nigh. Mike gets him up on his pack-horse and comes along slow down through the mountain till he hits the waggon road from the Poorman. There a team from the

Poorman Mine makes up on him. That there fellow, Apache Kid, was drivin' the team, and along with him was Larry Donoghue, a partner o' his, with another team. They had been haulin' up supplies for one of the stores, and was comin' down light. They offer to help Canlan down with the dying man, seein' as how the hoss was gettin' pretty jaded with all Canlan's outfit on its back, and this here man, too, tied on, and wabbling about mighty weak."

Laughlin broke off here to nod his head sagaciously. "From what has transpired since, I guess Canlan was kind o' sorry he fell in with them two, and I reckon he wondered if there was no kind of an excuse he could put up for rejecting their offer o' service and continuin' to pack the feller down himself. Anyways, they got the man into the Apache's waggon, and my house bein' the nighest to the waggon road and the mountain, they pulled up at my door and we all carries the fellow up to a room. I was at the door. Canlan was sitting on the bed-foot. Apache Kid and Larry Donoghue was laying him out comf'able. The fellow groans and mumbles something, and Canlan gave a bit of a start forward, and says he: 'There, there now, that 'll do; you 've got him up all right. I reckon that's all that's wanted. You can go for a doctor, now, if you want to help at all.' There was something kind o' strained in his voice, and I think Apache Kid noticed it the way he looks round. 'Why,' he says, 'I think, seein' as you,' and he stops and looks Canlan plumb in the eye, 'seein' as you *found* the man, you had better fetch the doctor and finish your job. My partner and I will sit by him till the doctor comes.' Canlan looked just a little bit rattled when Apache Kid says, lookin' at the man in the bed: 'He seems to have got a kind o' a knock on the head here.' 'Yes,' says Canlan, 'I got him where he had fallen down. I reckon he got that punch then.' And then Apache Kid looks at Larry Donoghue, and Larry looks at him, and they both smile, and Canlan cries out: 'Oh, if that's what you think, why I 'll go for the doctor without any more ado!'"

Laughlin paused, and, "You savvy the idea?" he asked.

"Not quite," I said.

He tapped me on the knee, and, bending forward, said: "Don't you see, Apache Kid and Larry hed no suspicions o' foul play at all, but they was wanting to get alone in the room with the feller, and this was just Apache's bluff to get a move on Canlan. Canlan was no sooner gone than Apache Kid asks me to fetch a glass o' spirits. It was only thinkin' it over after that I saw through the thing; anyhow, I come down for the glass, and when I got up, derved if they did n't hev the man propped up in bed, and him mumblin' away and them bendin' over him listening eager to him. They gave him the liquor, and he began talking a trifle stronger, and took two-three deep gusts o' breath. Then he began mumblin' again."

Mr. Laughlin looked furtively round and then, leaning forward again,

thrust his neck forward and with infinite disgust in his voice said: "And damn me if that wife o' mine did n't come to the stair-end right then and start yellin' on me to come down."

Laughlin shook his head sadly. "Seems her derved old parrot was shoutin' for food and as it had all give out she wants me to go down to the store for some more. But I must say that she had just come in herself and did n't know nothin' about the business that was goin' on upstairs. When Canlan and the doctor did arrive and go up the fellow was dead—sure thing—dead as—dead as—" he searched for the simile without which he could not speak for long. "Dead as God!" he said in a horrible whisper, raising his grey eyebrows.

I shuddered somehow at the words, and yet in such a red-hot, ungodly place as Baker City I could almost understand the phrase. There was another pause after that and then Laughlin cleared his throat again and held up a lean finger in my face.

"There's where the place comes in," said he, "where you says 'the plot thickens,' for I'm a son of a gun if word did n't come down next day that the fellers up at the Poorman Mine had picked up just such another dead-beat. This here corpse of which I bin tellin' you was indemnified after as having been in company with the other. But the man the Poorman boys picked up was jest able to tell them that he had seen the lights o' their bunk-house and was trying to make for it. Told them that he and two partners had struck it rich in the mountains, pow'ful rich, he said, and hed all been so fevered like that they let grub run out. Then they went out looking for something to shoot up and could n't find a thing. One of 'em went off then to fetch supplies, lost his way in them mountains, wanders about nigh onto a week—and hits their own camp ag'in at the end o' that time. Isn't it terrible? You'd think that after striking it luck jest turned about and hed a laugh at 'em for a change. They comes rushin' on him, the other two, expecting grub— Grub nothing! He was too derved tired to budge then, and so the other two sets out then— This fellow what the Poorman boys picked up was doin' his level best to tell 'em where the place was, for the sake of his partner left there, and in the middle of his talk he took a fit and never came out of it. All they know is that there was a cabin built at the place. That's the story for you."

"But what about the man who was brought down here; did he not leave any indication?"

"Now you 're askin'," said Laughlin. "But I see you bin payin' attention to this yere story. Now you're askin'. Nobody knows whether he did or not. But this I can tell you—that Apache Kid and Larry Donoghue has done nothing since then but jest wander about with the tail of an eye on Canlan, and Canlan returns the compliment. And here 's miners comin' in from the Poorman and stoppin' in town a night and trying to fill Apache Kid and his mate full, and trying the

same on Canlan to get them to talk, and them just sittin' smilin' through it all, and nobody knows what they think."

"But," said I, "if they do know, could the three of them not come to some agreement and go out and find the place? If the third man is dead there, I suppose the mine would be theirs and they could share on it. Besides, while they stay here doubtless other men will be out looking for the cabin."

The landlord listened attentively to me.

"Well," said he, "as for your first remark, Canlan is too all-fired hard a man to make any such daffy with them, and there's just that touch of the devil in Apache Kid and that amount of hang-dog in Donoghue to prevent them making up to Canlan, I reckon. Not but what they pump each other. Sometimes they get out there on the verandah nights, and, you bein' in the know now, you 'll understand what's running underneath everything they say. As for the other men goin' out and looking for a cabin! Shucks! Might as well go and look for that needle you hear people talk about in the haystack. Not but what a great lot has gone out. Most every man in the Poorman Mine went off with a pack-hoss to hunt it, and plenty others too. And between you and me," said the landlord, "I reckon they 're all on the wrong scent. They 're all away along Baker Range, and I reckon they must be on the wrong scent there or else them three others wouldn't be sittin' here in Baker City smiling; that is, if they dew know where the location is."

Just then the Chinese cook arrived quietly on the scene to inform Mr. Laughlin of the progress of dinner. Then a laugh sounded in the passage and Apache Kid entered the bar-room accompanied by a heavy-set, loose-jawed man of thirty years or thereby, a man with a slovenly appearance in his dress and a cruel expression on his face.

"That's them both," said Laughlin, prodding me with his elbow as they marched through the bar and out to the rear verandah where we heard them dragging chairs about, and the harsh voice of the parrot, evidently awakened from his reveries in the sunshine:

"Well, well! If this ain't—" and a dry cackle of laughter.

"They 're lookin' right lively and pleased with themselves," said the proprietor. "I reckon if Canlan comes along to-night it will be worth your while, now that you know the ins and outs of the business, to keep an eye on the three and watch the co-mical game they keep on playin' with each other. But it can't go on forever, that there game. I do hope, if they make a bloody end to it, it don't take place in my house. Times is changed from the old days. I 've seen when it was quite an advertisement to have a bit of shooting in your house some night. And if there was n't enough holes made in the roof and chairs broke, you could make some more damage yourself; and the crowd would come in, and you 'd point out

where so-and-so was standing, and where so-and-so was settin', and tell 'em how it happened, and them listening and setting up the drinks all the time. It certainly was good for business, a little shooting now and then, in the old days. But times is changed, and the sheriff we hev now is a very lively man. All the same, we ain't done with Lost Cabin Mine yet—and that ain't no lie."

CHAPTER III

Mr. Laughlin's Prophecy is Fulfilled

[image]

sense of exhilaration filled me, as I strolled down town that evening, which I can only ascribe to the rare atmosphere of that part of the world. It was certainly not due to any improvement in my financial condition, nor to any hope of "making my pile" speedily, and to "make a pile" is the predominating thought in men's minds there, with an intensity that is known in few other lands. I was pondering the story of the Lost Cabin Mine as I went, and in my own mind had come to the decision that Apache Kid and his comrade knew the whereabouts of that bonanza. Canlan, I argued, if he knew its locality at all, must have come by his news before he fell in with his rivals on the waggon road, for after that, according to the hotel-keeper's narrative, he had had no speech with the dying man.

I was in the midst of these reflections when I turned into Baker Street, the main street of Baker City. There was a wonderful bustle there; men were coming and going on either sidewalk thick as bees in hiving time; the golden air of evening was laden with the perfume of cigars; indeed, the blue of the smoke never seemed to fly clear of Baker Street on the evenings; and the sound of the many phonographs that thrust their trumpets out from all the stores on that thoroughfare, added to the din of voices and laughter, rose above the sounds of talk, to be precise, with a barbaric medley of hoarse songs and throaty recitations. So much for the sidewalks. In the middle of the street, to cross which one had to wade knee-deep in sand, pack-horses were constantly coming and going and groaning teams arriving from the mountains. To add to the barbarous nature of the scene, now and again an Indian would go by, not with feathered head-dress as in former

days, but with a gaudy kerchief bound about his head, tinsel glittering here and there about his half-savage, half-civilised garb, and a pennon of dust following the quick patter of his pony's hoofs. I walked the length of Baker Street and then turned, walking back again with a numb pain suddenly in my heart, for as I turned right about I saw the great, quiet hills far off, and beyond them the ineffable blue of the sky. And there is something in me that makes me always fall silent when amidst the din of men I see the enduring, uncomplaining, undesiring hills. So I went back to the hotel again, and without passing through the bar but going around the house, found the rear verandah untenanted, with its half dozen vacant chairs, and there I sat down to watch the twilight change the hills. But I had not been seated long when a small set man, smelling very strongly of whisky, came out with his hands thrust deep in his pockets, and, leaning against one of the verandah props, looked up at the hills, spitting at regular intervals far out into the sand and slowly ruminating a chew of tobacco.

"Canlan, for a certainty," I said to myself, when he, looking toward the door from which he had emerged, attracted by a sudden louder outbreak of voices and rattling of chairs within, revealed to me a face very sorely pock-marked, as was easily seen with the lamplight streaming out on him from the bar. On seeing me he made some remark on the evening, came over and sat down beside me, and asked me why I sat at the back of the hotel instead of at the front.

"Because one can see the hills from here," said I.

He grunted and remarked that a man would do better to sit at the front and see what was going on in the town. Then he rose and, walking to and fro, flung remarks to me, in passing, regarding the doings in the city and the mines and so forth, the local gossip of the place. He had just reverted to his first theme of the absurdity of sitting at the rear of the house when out came Apache Kid and Donoghue and threw themselves into the chairs near me, Donoghue taking the one beside me which Canlan had just vacated. If Canlan thought a man a fool for choosing the rear instead of the front, he was evidently, nevertheless, content to be a fool himself, for after one or two peregrinations and expectorations he drew a chair to the front of the verandah and seated himself, half turned towards us, and began amusing himself with tilting the chair to and fro like a rocker. The valley was all in shadow now, and as we sat there in the silence the moon swam up in the middle of one of the clefts of the mountains, silhouetting for a brief space, ere it left them for the open sky, the ragged edge of the tree-tops in the highest forest.

Apache Kid muttered something, Donoghue growled, "What say?" And it surprised me somewhat to hear the reply: "O! I was only saying 'with how sad steps, O moon, thou climb'st the skies.' It's lonesome-like, up there, Larry."

"Aye! Lonesome!" replied Larry with a sigh.

A fifth man joined us then, and, hearing this, remarked: "A man thinks powerful up there."

"That's no lie," Donoghue growled, and so the conversation, if conversation you can call it, went on, interspersed with long spaces of silence, broken only by the gurgling of the newcomer's pipe and Canlan's "spit, spit" which came quicker now. Men are prone in such times as these to sit and exchange truisms instead of carrying on any manner of conversation. Yet to me, not long in the country, there was a touch of mystery in even the truisms.

"I never seen a man who had spent much time in the mountains that was just what you could call all there in the upper story," said the man with the juicy pipe.

"Nor I," said Donoghue.

"They 're all half crazy, them old prospectors," continued the first, "and tell you the queerest yarns about things they 've seen in the mountains and expect you to believe them. You can see from the way they talk that they believe 'em themselves. But I don't see why a man should lose his reason in the hills. If a man lets his brain go when he 's up there, then he don't have any real enjoyment out of the fortune he makes—if he happens to strike it."

The moon was drifted far upward now and all the frontage of the hill was tipped with light green, among the darker green, where the trees that soared above their neighbours caught the light. "And there must be lots of fortunes lying there thick if one knew where to find them," continued the talker of truisms.

"Where?" said Apache in a soft voice.

"In the mountains, in the mountains," was the reply.

"Why do you ask where?" said Donoghue sharply. "Do you think if this gentleman knew where to find 'em he would be sitting here this blessed night?"

I felt my heart take a quicker beat at that. Knowing what I knew of three of these men here I began to see what Mr. Laughlin meant by the "game" they were playing.

"O, he might," said Canlan, now speaking for the first time since Apache's arrival.

"That would be a crazy thing to do," said Donoghue. "That would—a crazy thing—to set here instead of going and locating it."

"O, I don't know about *crazy*," said Mike. "You see, he might be waiting to see if anybody else knew where it was."

The soft-footed Chinese attendant appeared carrying a lamp which he hung up above our heads, and in the light of it I saw the face of the man whose name I did not know, and he seemed mystified by the turn the conversation had taken. I was looking at him now, thinking to myself that I too would have been mystified had I not been posted in the matter that afternoon, and suddenly I heard

Donoghue say: "By God! he knows right enough, Apache," and a gleam of light flashed in my eyes. It was the barrel of a revolver, but not aimed at me. It was in Donoghue's hand, and pointed fairly at Canlan's head. With a sudden intake of my breath in horror I flung out my hand and knocked the barrel up. There was a little shaft of flame, a sharp crack and puff of bitter smoke, and next moment a clatter of feet within and a knot of men thronging and craning at the door, while the window behind was darkened with others shouldering there and pressing their faces against the glass.

"O you——" began Apache, and "What's this?" cried Laughlin, coming out, no coward, as one might imagine, but calm enough and yet angry as I could see.

"What in thunder are you all rubber-necking at the door there for?" cried Apache Kid, springing up.

"Was it you fired that gun?" challenged the landlord.

"No, not I," cried Apache so that all could hear. "Not but what I was the cause of it, by betting my partner here he could n't snap a bat on the wing in the dusk. I never thought he'd try it, but he's as crazy——"

"I crazy!" cried out Donoghue; and to look at him you would have thought him really infuriated by the suggestion; but they knew how to play into each other's hands.

All this time I sat motionless. The stranger rose and passed by, remarking: "This ain't my trouble, I guess," and away indoors he went among the throng, and I heard him cry out in reply to the questions: "I don't know anything about it—saw nothing—I was asleep—I don't even know who fired."

"Haw! Did n't even wake in time to see whose pistol was smoking, eh?"

"No," cried he, "not even in time for that."

"Quite right, you," cried another. But the trouble was not yet quite over on the verandah, for Laughlin, with his little eyes looking very fierce and determined, remarked: "Well, gentlemen, I can't be having any shooting of any kind in my hotel. Besides, you know there 's a law ag'in' carrying weapons here."

"No there ain't!" cried Donoghue. "It's concealed weapons the law is against, and I carry my gun plain for every man to see."

Canlan had sat all this while on his seat as calm as you please, but suddenly the crowd at the door opened out and somebody said: "Say, here 's the sheriff, boys," and at these words two men sprang from the verandah; the one was Donoghue, and Canlan the other. I saw them a moment running helter-skelter in the sand, but when the sheriff made his appearance they were gone.

The sheriff had to get as much of the story as he could from the proprietor, who was very civil and polite, but lied ferociously, saying he did not know who the men were who had been on the verandah.

"I know you, anyhow," said the sheriff, turning on Apache Kid. "Allow me,

sir," and walking up to Apache Kid he drew his hand over his pockets and felt him upon the hips.

Then I knew why Canlan, though entirely innocent in this matter, had fled at the cry of "sheriff." He, I guessed, would not have come off so well as Apache Kid in a search for weapons.

At this stage of the proceedings the Chinese attendant passed me, quiet as is the wont of his race, and brushed up against Apache Kid just as the sheriff turned to ask Mr. Laughlin if he could not describe the man who had fired the shot. "I ain't been out on the verandah not for a good hour," began the landlord, when Apache Kid broke in, "Well, Sheriff, I can tell you the name of one of the men who was here."

"O!" said the sheriff, "and what was his name?"

"Mike Canlan," said the Apache Kid, calmly.

"Yes," said the sheriff, looking on him with narrowing eyes, "and the name of the other was Larry Donoghue."

"Could n't very well be Larry," said Apache Kid. "Larry was drunk to-night before sunset, and I believe you 'll find him snoring in room number thirty at this very moment."

The sheriff gazed on him a little space and I noticed, on stealing a glance at Mr. Laughlin, that a quick look of surprise passed over his colourless face.

There was a ring as of respect in the sheriff's voice when, after a long, eye-to-eye scrutiny of Apache Kid, he said slowly: "You 're a deep man, Apache, but you won't get me to play into your hands."

So saying he stepped over to me and for the first time addressed me. "As for you, my lad, I have n't asked you any questions, because it's better that the like of you don't get mixed up at all in these kind of affairs, not even on the right side." He laid his hand on my shoulder in a fatherly fashion, "I 've had my eye on you, as I have my eye on everybody, and I know you 're an honest enough lad and doing your best to get a start here. I ain't even blaming you for being in the middle of this, but you take the advice of a man that has been sheriff in a dozen different parts of the West, and when you see signs of trouble just you go away and leave it. Trouble with a gun seldom springs up between a good man and a bad, but most always between two bad men."

"Is that my character you are soliloquising on?" said Apache Kid. The sheriff turned on him and his face hardened again. "For Heaven's sake, Apache," he said, "if you and Canlan both know where the Lost Cabin is, why can't you have the grit to start off? If he follows you, well, you can fix him. It'll save me a job later on."

"Well, for the sake of the argument," said Apache, "but remember I 'm not saying I know, suppose he followed up and shot me out of a bush some night?"

"I'd be mighty sorry," said the sheriff, "for I think between the pair of you he 's a worse man for the health of the country."

A boyish look came over Apache Kid's face that made me think him younger than I had at first considered him. He looked pleased at the sheriff's words and bowed in a way that betokened a knowledge of usages other than those of Baker City.

"Thank you, Sheriff," he said. "I'll see what can be done."

Off went the sheriff smartly then, without another word, and Apache Kid turned to me.

"I've got to thank you for preventing——" he began, and then the Chinaman appeared beside us. "Well, Chink?"

"Maybe that littee jobee woth half a dollah, eh?"

"Did Donoghue give you nothing for bringing the message?"

"Oh, no," and a bland smile. "Mishadonah think you give me half a dollah."

"Well, it was certainly worth half a dollar; but remember, if I find out that Donoghue gave you anything,——"

"Oh yes," said the Chinaman, with a slight look of perturbation, "Mishadonah he gave me half-dollah."

Apache Kid laughed. "Well," he said, "you don't hold up your bluff very long. However, here you are, here's half a dollar to you all the same—for your truthfulness."

I experienced then a feeling of great disgust. Here was this Chinaman lying and wheedling for half a dollar; here just a few minutes gone I had seen murder attempted—and for what? All occasioned again by that lust for gold. And here beside me was a man with a certain likableness about him (so that, as I had observed, even the sheriff, who suspected him, had a warm side to him) lying and humbugging and deceiving. I thought to myself that doubtless his only objection to Larry Donoghue's attempt at murder was because of the prominence of it in this place and the difficulties that would have ensued in proving Larry guiltless had the attempt been consummated. "This man," said I to myself, "for all that likableness in his manner, the kindly sparkle of his eyes, and the smile on his lips, is no better than the hang-dog fellow he sought to shield—worse, indeed, for he has the bearing of one who has had a training of another order." And then I saw Mrs. Laughlin's red head and freckled face and lean, lissome form in the doorway. She was beckoning me to her, and when I made haste to see what she wanted with me she looked on me with much tenderness and said: "You want to remember what the sheriff said to you, my lad. Take my advice and leave that fellow out there alone for to-night. He's a reckless lad and from the way he is talking to you he seems to have taken a fancy to you. But you leave him alone. He 's a deep lad, is Apache Kid, and for all his taking way he leads a life I 'm

sure neither his mother would like to see him in, nor your mother (if you have one) would like to see you taking up. There's some says he's little better than the fellow he gets his name from. I'm sorry for you lads when I see you getting off the trail."

So what with the words of the sheriff and this well-meant talk and my own disgust at all these doings, I made up my mind to keep clear of these three men and not permit my curiosity regarding the Lost Cabin Mine to lead me into their company again. But when I went up to my room, before going to bed, I counted my remaining money and found that I had but seven dollars to my name. I thought to myself then that the Lost Cabin Mine would be a mighty convenient thing to find. And in my dreams that night I wandered up hill and down dale seeking for the Lost Cabin and engaging in hand-to-hand conflicts with all three of these men, Canlan, Donoghue, and the Apache Kid. It was on awakening from one of these conflicts that I lay thinking over all that I had heard of that mysterious Cabin and all that I had seen of the three principally connected with it. Revolving these thoughts in my mind, it occurred to me that it was an unaccountable thing, if all three knew the situation of the mine, that the two who were "partners" should not simply start out for it and risk being followed up and shadowed by Canlan. They were always two to one and could take watch and watch by night lest Canlan should follow and attempt to slay them from the bushes; for that, it would appear, was the chief danger in the matter.

Canlan's dread of starting alone I could understand. Then suddenly I sat upright in bed with the sudden belief that the truth of the matter was that Canlan, and Canlan only, knew of the mine's situation. "But that again can't be," said I, "for undoubtedly Donoghue meant murder to-night and that would be to kill the goose with the golden eggs." I was no nearer a solution of the mystery but I could not dismiss the matter from my mind. "I believe," said I to myself, "that instead of having nothing to do with this Lost Cabin Mine I will yet find out the truth of it from these men. Who knows but what I, even I, may be the one for whom the mine with all its treasure waits?"

CHAPTER IV

I Take My Life in My Hands

[image]

fter breakfast on the day following the incident of the verandah I was journeying down town to post two letters, the Lost Cabin Mine still uppermost in my mind, when I came, at the turning into Baker Street, face to face with the man Donoghue. It was clear that he saw me,—he could not help seeing me, so directly were we meeting,—and I wondered if now he would have a word to say to me regarding the part I played on the preceding evening. Sure enough, he stopped; but there was only friendliness on his face and the heaviness of it and the sulkiness were hardly visible when he smiled.

He held out his hand to me with evident sincerity, and said that he had to thank me for preventing what he called "an accident last night."

I smiled at the word, for he spoke it so easily, as though the whole thing were a mere bagatelle to him. "It was right stupid of me," he said. "But Laughlin keeps such bad liquor! Canlan, too, had had too much of it, or he would never have tried to irritate me with his remark." I was trying to recollect the exact words of that remark which Donoghue classified as "irritating" when he interrupted my thoughts with: "The Apache Kid and me has quit the Laughlin House."

"Yes, I did n't see you at breakfast there," said I.

"Was Canlan there?" he asked eagerly.

"Not while I was breakfasting, at any rate," I replied.

He nursed his chin in his hand at that and stood pondering something. Then: "Quite so, quite so," he commented as though to himself. Then to me: "By the way, would you be so kind as to come down this evening to Blaine's? The Apache Kid asked me to try and see you and ask you if you would be good enough to come down."

"Blaine's?" I asked. "Where is Blaine's?"

"Blaine, Blaine, Lincoln Avenue; near the corner of Twenty-second Street."

It amazed me to hear of a Twenty-second Street in this city that boasted only one long street (Baker Street) and six streets running off it. But of course, a street is a street in a new city even though it can boast only of a house at either corner and has nothing between these corner houses but tree-stumps, or sand, or sage-bushes, and little boards thrust into the ground announcing: "This is a sure-thing lot. Its day will come very soon. See about it when it can be bought cheap from —, Real Estate Agent, office open day and night."

But Donoghue, seeing that I did not know the streets of the city by name, directed me:

"You go right along Baker Street,—you know it, of course, the main street of this progressive burgh?—straight ahead west; turn down third on the right; look up at the store front there and you read 'H.B. Blaine. Makes you think o' Home and Mother.' It's a coffee-joint, you see. There 's a coffee urn in the window

and two plates, one with crackers on it and t' other with doughnuts. You walk right in and ask for the Apache Kid—straight goods—no josh." He stopped to give emphasis to the rest and after that pause he said in a meaning tone: "And—you—will—hear—o' something to your advantage."

He nodded sedately and, without giving me time to say anything in reply, moved off. You may be sure I pondered this invitation as I went along roaring Baker Street to the post-office. And I was indeed in two minds about it, uncertain whether to call in at Blaine's or not. Both the sheriff and Mrs. Laughlin had cautioned me against these men, and I had, besides, seen enough of them to know myself that they were not just all that could be desired. The word the sheriff had used regarding Apache Kid's nature, "deep," came into my mind, along with reflections on all his prevarications of the previous day. It occurred to me that it would be quite in keeping with him to pretend gratefulness to me, at the moment, for my interference, and to post up Donoghue to do the same, with the intention in his mind all the while of "getting me in a quiet corner," as the phrase is. I think I may be excused this judgment considering all the duplicity I had already seen him practise. A story that I had heard somewhere of a trap-door in a floor which opened and precipitated whoever stood upon it down into a hole among rats came into my head. Perhaps H. B. Blaine had such a trap-door in his floor. One could believe anything of half the men one saw here, with their blood-shot eyes, straggling hair, and cruel mouths. Still, I had felt real friendliness, no counterfeit, in both Apache Kid last night and Donoghue to-day.

A wave of disgust at my cowardice and suspicion came over me to aid me toward the decision that my curiosity was already crying for and so, when the day wore near an end, I set forth—for Blaine's, the "coffee-joint."

When I got the length of Baker Street I was to see another sight such as only the West could show. The phonographs, as usual, it being now evening, were all grumbling forth their rival songs at the stalls and open windows. The wonted din was in the air when suddenly an eddy began in the crowd on the opposite sidewalk. It was in front of one of the "toughest" saloons in town, and out of that eddy darted a man, hatless, and broke away pell-mell along the street. Next moment the saloon door swung again, and after him there went running another fellow, with a tomahawk in his hand, his hair flying behind him as he ran, his legs straddled wide to prevent him tripping up on his great spurs. Where the third party in this scene sprang from I cannot tell. I only know that he suddenly appeared on the street, habited in a blue serge suit, with a Stars-and-Stripes kerchief round his slouch hat in place of a band, and a silver star on his breast. It was my friend the portly, fatherly, stern sheriff.

"Stop, you!" he cried.

But he with the tomahawk paid no heed, and out shot the sheriff's leg and

tripped the man up. The tomahawk flew from his hand and buried itself almost to the end of the handle in the dust of the road.

"Stop, you!" cried the sheriff again to the other fellow, who was still posting on. But the fugitive gave only a quick glance over his shoulder and accelerated his speed. It looked as though he would escape, when down flew the sheriff's hand to his belt, then up above his head. He thrust out his chin vindictively, down came his revolver hand in a half-circle and—it was just as though he pointed at the flying man with his weapon—"flash!" The man took one step more, but not a second. His leg was shot, and he fell. A wagon had stopped on the roadway, the teamster looking on, and him the sheriff immediately pressed into service. The man of the tomahawk rose, and, at a word from the man of law-and-order, climbed into the wagon; he of the shot leg was assisted to follow; the sheriff mounted beside them, and with a brief word to the teamster away went the wagon in a cloud of dust, and whirled round the corner to the court-house. And then the crowd in the street moved on as usual, the talk buzzed, the cigar smoke crept overhead.

"Would n't that jar you?" said a voice in my ear, and turning I found Donoghue by my side. "Just toddling down to Blaine's?"

"Yes," I said, and fell in step with him.

Certainly this little incident I had witnessed on the way reassured me to the extent of making me think that if I was to be shot in the "coffee-joint," there was a lively sheriff in the town, and unless my demise was kept unconscionably quiet he would be by the way of making inquiries.

With no trepidation at all, then, on reading the sign "H. B. Blaine. Makes you think of Home and Mother," I followed Donoghue into the sweet-scented "joint" with the gleaming coffee urn in the window.

He nodded to the gentleman who stood behind the doughnut-heaped counter—H. B. Blaine, I presumed—who jerked his head towards the rear of the establishment.

"Step right in, Mr. Donoghue," he said. "Apache Kid is settin' there."

CHAPTER V

I Agree to "Keep the Peace" in a New Sense

[image]

It was at once evident that I was not to be murdered in H. B. Blaine's place, and also evident that I had been invited to meet Apache Kid to hear some matter that was not for all to hear; for immediately on our entering the little rear room he flung aside a paper he had been reading and leaped to his feet to meet us. He put a hand on Donoghue's shoulder and the other he extended to me.

"We'll not talk here," he said. "Walls have ears:" and so we all turned about and marched out again.

"Going out for a stroll?" asked Blaine.

"Yes," said Apache. "Fine night for a stroll." And we found ourselves on the street down which we turned and walked in silence.

Suddenly Apache Kid slowed down and swore to himself.

"I should n't have said that!" he remarked angrily.

"Said what?" Donoghue interrogated.

"O! mocked Blaine like that—said we were going for a stroll."

"What do you mean?" asked Donoghue, whose ear did not seem very acute. Apache looked at him with a relieved expression.

"Well, that's hopeful," he said. "Perhaps Blaine would n't catch it either. Still, still, I should n't have mocked him. You noticed, I bet?" he said to me.

"Stroll?" I inquired.

He sighed.

"There 's no sense in trying to make fun of anything in a man's clothes or talk or manner. Besides, it's excessively vulgar, excessively vulgar."

"Here 's an interesting 'bad man,'" I mused; but there was no more said till we won clear of the town, quite beyond the last sidewalks that stretched and criss-crossed among the rocks and sand, marking out the prospective streets. There, on a little rising place of sand and rocks, we sat down.

It was a desolate spot. A gentle wind was blowing among the dunes and the sand was all moving, trickling down here and piling up there. Being near sunset the cicadi had disappeared and the evening light falling wan on the occasional tufts of sage-brush gave them a peculiar air of desolation. Donoghue pulled out a clasp-knife and sat propping in the sand with it, and then Apache Kid jerked up his head and smiled on me, a smile entirely friendly. And suddenly as he looked at me his face became grave.

"Have you had supper yet?" he asked.

"No," I said. "It's early yet."

He looked at me keenly and then: "You 'll excuse me remarking on your appearance, but you look extraordinarily tired."

"Oh," said I, lightly, "I have not been feeling just up to the scratch and—well, I thought I 'd try the fasting cure."

He hummed to himself and dived a hand into his trousers pocket and held out a five-dollar bill under my nose.

"There," he said, "go and eat and don't lie any more. I've been there myself—when I was new to the country and could n't get into its ways."

There was something of such intense warm-heartedness behind the peremptory tones (while Donoghue turned his face aside, running the sand between his fingers and looking foolishly at it) that to tell you the truth, I found the tears in my eyes before I was aware. But this sign of weakness Apache Kid made pretence not to observe.

"We'll wait here for you till you get fed," said he, examining the back of his hand.

"No, no," I answered hastily, "I had rather hear what you have to say just now." Thank him for his kindness I could not, for I felt that thanks would but embarrass him. "To tell you the truth, the mere knowledge that I need not go to bed hungry is sufficient."

"Well," said he, looking up when my voice rang firm. "The fact is, I am going to offer you a job; but it is a job you might not care to take unless you were hard pressed; so you will please consider that a loan, not a first instalment, and the fact of settling it must not influence."

This was very fairly spoken and I felt that I should say something handsome, but he gave me no opportunity, continuing at once: "Donoghue here and I are wanting a partner on an expedition that we are going on. We're very old friends, we two, but for quite a little while back we had both been meditating going on this expedition separately. Fact is, we are such very old friends and know each other's weaknesses so well that, though we both had the idea of the expedition in our heads, we did n't care about going together."

All this he spoke as much to Donoghue as to me, with a bantering air; and one thing at least I learned from this—the reason why these two had not done as Laughlin thought the natural thing for them to do, namely, to go out together, heedless of Canlan. For I had no doubt whatever that the expedition was to the Lost Cabin Mine. That was as clear as the sun. Further observation of their natures, if further observation I was to have, might explain their long reluctance to "go partners" on the venture, a reluctance now evidently overcome.

"Get to your job," growled Donoghue, "and quit palaver."

It was evident that Apache Kid was determined not to permit himself to be irritated, for he only smiled on Donoghue's snarl and turned to me: "My friend Donoghue and I," said he, "it is necessary to explain, are such very old friends that we can cordially hate each other."

"At times," interjected Donoghue.

"Yes; upon occasion," said Apache Kid. "To you, new to this country, such

a state of things between friends may be scarcely comprehensible, but——” and Apache Kid stopped.

”It’s them mountains that does it,” said Donoghue, with a heavy frown.

”Them mountains, as Donoghue says; that’s it. It’s queer how the mountains, when you get among them, seem to creep in all round you and lock you up. It does n’t take long among them with a man to know whether you and he belong to the same order and breed. There are men who can never sleep under the same blanket; yes, never sleep on the same side of the fire; never, after two days in the hills, ride side by side, but must get space between them.”

His eyes were looking past me on things invisible to me, looking in imagination, I suppose, on his own past from which he spoke.

”And if you don’t like your partner, you know it then,” Donoghue said. ”You go riding along and if he speaks to you, you want him to shut it. And if he don’t speak, you ask him what in thunder he’s broodin’ about. And you look for him to fire up at you then, and if he don’t, you feel worse than ever and go along with just a little hell burning against him in here,” and he tapped his chest. ”You could turn on him and eat him; yes siree, kill him with your teeth in his neck.”

”This is called the return to Nature,” said Apache Kid, calmly.

”Return to hell!” cried Donoghue, and Apache Kid inclined his head in acquiescence. He seemed content to let Donoghue now do the talking.

”Apache and me has come to an agreement, as he says, to go out on the trail, and though we ’ve chummed together a heap——”

”In the manner of wolves,” said Apache, with a half sneer.

”Yes,” said Donoghue, ”a good bit like that, too. Well, but on this trail we can’t go alone. It’s too all-fired far and too all-fired lonely.”

His gaze wandered to the mountains behind the town and Apache took up the discourse.

”You see the idea? We want a companion to help us to keep the peace. Foolish—eh? Well, I don’t blame you if you don’t quite understand. You ’re new here. You ’ve never been in the mountains, day in day out, with a man whose soul an altogether different god or devil made; with a man that you fervently hope, if there’s any waking up after the last kick here, you won’t find in your happy hunting-ground beyond. You won’t have to come in between and hold us apart, you know. The mere presence of a third party is enough.”

He looked on me keenly a space and added:

”Somehow I think that you will do more than keep off the bickering spirit. I think you ’ll establish amicable relations.”

It was curious to observe how the illiterate Donoghue took his partner’s speech so much for granted.

”What’s amicable?” he said.

"Friendly," said Apache Kid.

"Amicable, friendly," said Donoghue, thoughtfully. "Good word, amicable."

"The trip would be worth a couple of hundred dollars to you," said Apache, with his eyes on mine. "And if we happened to be out over two months, at the rate of a hundred a month for the time beyond."

"Well, that's straight enough talk, I guess," said Donoghue. "Is the deal on?"

My financial condition itself was such as to preclude any doubt. Had I been told plainly that it was to the Lost Cabin Mine we were going and been offered a share in it I would, remembering Apache Kid and Donoghue of the verandah, as I may put it, in distinction from Apache Kid and Donoghue of to-night—well, I would have feared that some heated sudden turn of mind of one or the other or both of these men might prevent me coming into my own. Donoghue especially had a fearsome face to see. But there was no such suggestion. I was offered two hundred dollars and, now that the night fell and the silence deepened and the long range of hills gloomed on us, I thought I could understand that the presence of a third man might be well worth two hundred dollars to two men of very alien natures among the silence and the loneliness that would throw them together closely whether they would or not.

"The deal is on," I said.

We shook hands solemnly then and Donoghue looked toward Apache Kid as though all the programme was not yet completed. Apache Kid nodded and produced a roll of bills. The light was waning and he held them close to him as he withdrew one.

"That'll make us square again," he said, handing me the roll. "I've kept off a five; so now we're not obliged to each other for anything."

And then, as though to seal the compact and bear in upon me a thought of the expedition we were going upon, the sun disappeared behind the western hills and from somewhere out there, in the shadows and deeper shadows of the strange piled landscape, came a long, faint sound, half bay, half moan. It was the dusk cry of the mountain coyotes; and either the echo of it or another cry came down from the hills beyond the city, only the hum of which we heard there. And when that melancholy cry, or echo, had ended, a cold wind shuddered across the land; all that loneliness, that by day seemed to lure one ever with its sunlit peaks and its blue, meditative hollows, seemed now a place of terrors and strange occurrences; but the lure was still there, only a different lure,—a lure of terror and

darkness instead of romance and sunlight.

CHAPTER VI

Farewell to Baker City

[image]

e all came to our feet then, Apache Kid carefully flicking the sand from his clothing.

"Now," he said, "that settles us. We 're quits." And we all walked slowly and silently back in company toward the city. When we came to Blaine's "coffee-joint" Apache Kid stopped, and told me he would see me later in the evening at the Laughlin House to arrange about the starting out on our venture. Donoghue wanted him to go on with him, but Apache Kid said he must see Blaine again before leaving the city.

"I desire to leave a good impression of myself behind me," he said with a laugh. "I should like Blaine to feel sorry to hear of my demise when that occurs, and as things stand I don't think he 'd care, to use the language of the country, a continental cuss."

So saying, with a wave of his hand, he entered Blaine's.

At Baker Street corner Donoghue stopped.

"I 'll be seeing you two days from now," he said.

"Do we not start for two days then?" I asked.

"O, Apache Kid will see you to-night and make all the arrangements about pulling out. So-long, just now."

So I went on to my hotel and, thus rescued from poverty on the very day that I had the first taste of it, I felt very much contented and cheered, and it was with a light and hopeful heart that I wandered out, after my unusually late supper, along the waggon road as far as the foothill woods and back, breathing deep of the thin air of night and rejoicing in the starlight.

When I returned to the hotel there was a considerable company upon the rear verandah, as I could see from quite a distance—dim, shadowy forms sprawled in the lounge chairs with the yellow-lit and open door behind shining out on the blue night, and over them was the lamp that always hung there in the evenings,

where the parrot's cage hung by day.

When I came on to the verandah I picked out Apache Kid at once.

A man who evidently did not know him was saying:

"What do you wear that kerchief for, sir, hanging away down your neck that way?"

There were one or two laughs of other men, who thought they were about to see a man quietly baited. But Apache Kid was not the man to stand much baiting, even of a mild stamp.

I think few of the men there, however, understood the nature that prompted him when he turned slowly in his chair and said:

"Well, sir, I wear it for several reasons."

"Oh! What's them?"

"Well, the first reason is personal—I like to wear it."

There was a grin still on the face of the questioner. He found nothing particularly crushing in this reply, but Apache went on softly: "Then again, I wear it so as to aid me in the study of the character of the men I meet."

"O! How do you work that miracle?"

"Well, when I meet a man who does n't seem to see anything strange in my wearing of the kerchief I know he has travelled a bit and seen the like elsewhere in our democratic America. Other men look at it and I can see they think it odd, but they say nothing. Well, that is a sign to me that they have not travelled where the handkerchief is used in this way, but I know that they are gentlemen all the same."

There was a slight, a very slight, exulting note in his voice and I saw the faces of the men on the outside of the crowd turn to observe the speaker. I thought the man who had set this ball a-rolling looked a trifle perturbed, but Apache was not looking at him. He lay back in his chair, gazing before him with a calm face. "Then again," he said leisurely, as though he had the whole night to himself, "if I meet a man who sees it and asks why I wear it, I know that he is the sort of man about whom people say here,—in the language of the country,—'Don't worry about him; he 's a hog from Ontario and never been out of the bush before!'"

There was a strained silence after these words. Some of the more self-reliant men broke it with a laugh. The most were silent.

"I'm a hog—eh? You call me a hog?" cried the man, after looking on the faces of those who sat around. I think he would have swallowed Apache Kid's speech without a word of reply had it not been spoken before so large an audience.

"I did not say so," said Apache Kid, "but if I were you, I would n't make things worse by getting nasty. I tried to josh a man myself this afternoon, and do you know what I did? I called in on him to-night to see whether he had savveyed

that I had been trying to josh him. I found out that he had savveyed, and do you know what I did? I apologised to him——”

”D’ ye think I ’m going to apologise for askin’ you that question?”

”You interrupt me,” said Apache Kid. ”I apologised to him, I was going to say, like a man. As to whether I think you are going to apologise or not—no.”

He turned and scrutinised the speaker from head to toe and back again.

”No,” he repeated decidedly. ”I should be very much surprised if you did.”

”By Moses!” cried the man. ”You take the thing very seriously. I only asked you——” and his voice grumbled off into incoherence.

”Yes,” said Apache Kid. ”I have a name for being very serious. Perhaps I did answer your question at too great length, however.”

He turned for another scrutiny of his man, and broke out with such a peal of laughter, as he looked at him, that every one else followed suit; and the ”josher,” with a crestfallen look, rose and went indoors.

I was still smiling when Apache Kid came over to me.

”Could you be ready to go out to-morrow at noon on the Kettle River Gap stage?” he asked quietly.

”Certainly,” said I. ”We don’t start from here, then?”

”No. That’s to say, we don’t leave the haunts of men here. It is better not, for our purpose. Have you seen Canlan to-night?”

I told him no, but that I had been out for my evening constitutional and not near the city.

”He does n’t seem to be at this hotel to-night. I must go out and try to rub shoulders with him if he’s in town. If I see him anywhere around town, I may not come back here to-night. If I don’t see him, I ’ll look in here later in the hope of rubbing against him. So if you don’t see me again to-night, you ’ll understand. To-morrow at noon, the Kettle River Gap stage.”

But neither Apache Kid nor Canlan put in an appearance all evening, and so I judged that elsewhere my friend had ”rubbed against” Canlan.

I was astonished to find on the morrow that I had, somewhere within me, a touch of fondness for Baker City, after all, despitefully though it had used me.

”You should stay on a bit yet,” said Mrs. Laughlin, when I told her I was going. ”You can’t expect just to fall into a good job right away on striking a new town.”

”I should never have come here,” I explained, ”had it not been that I had a letter to a gentleman who was once in the city. The fact is, my people at home did not like the thought of me going out on speck, and the only man in the country I knew was in Baker City. But he had moved on before I arrived.”

”And where do you think of going now?” she asked.

I evaded a direct answer, and yet answered truthfully:

"Where I wanted to go was into a ranching country. Mining never took my fancy. I believe there are some ranches on the Kettle River."

"Oh, a terrible life!" she cried out. "They 're a tough lot, them Kettle River boys. They 're mostly all fellows that have been cattle-punching and horse-wrangling all their lives. They come from other parts where the country is getting filled up with grangers and sheepmen. I reckon it's because they feel kind o' angry at their job in life being kind o' took from them by the granger and the sheepmen that they 're so tough. Oh! they 're a tough lot; and they 've got to be, to hold their own. Why, only the other day there a flock o' sheep came along on the range across the Kettle. There was three shepherds with them, and a couple of Colonel Ney's boys out and held them up. The sheep-herders shot one, and the other went home for the other boys, all running blood from another shot, and back they went, and laid out them three shepherds—just laid them out, my boy (d'ye hear?)—and ran the whole flock o' sheep over into a cañon one atop the other. Ney and the rest only wants men that can look after their rights that way—"

How long she might have continued, kindly enough, to seek to dissuade me, I do not know. But I was forced to interrupt her and remind her I should lose the stage.

"Yes," she said, "I might just have kept my mouth shut and saved my breath. You lads is all the same. But mind what I say," she cried after me, "you should stay on here and rustle yourself a good job. You 're just going away to 'get it in the neck.' Maybe you 'll come back here again, sick and sorry. But seein' you 're going, God bless you, my lad!" and I was astonished to see her green eyes moist, and a soft, tender light on her lean, freckled face.

"So-long, then, lad, and good luck to you," said her better half. "If you strike into Baker City again—don't forget the Laughlin House."

I was already in the street, half turning to hear their parting words, and with a final wave I departed, and (between you and me) there was a lump in my throat, and I thought that the Laughlin House was not such a bad sort of place at all to tarry in.

In Baker Street, at the very corner, I saw Apache Kid advancing toward me, but he frowned to me and, when he raised his hand to his mouth to remove his cigar, for a brief moment he laid a finger on his lip, and as he passed me, looking on the ground and walking slowly, he said: "You go aboard the stage yourself and go on."

There was no time to say more in passing, and I wondered what might be the meaning of this. But when I came to where the stage-coach stood, there was Canlan among the little knot of idlers who were watching it preparing for the road. He saw me when I climbed aboard, and, stepping forward, held out his

hand. "Hullo, kid," he said, "pulling out?"

"Yes," said I.

"Goin' to pastures green?"

I nodded.

"Well, I want to thank you. I bin keepin' my eyes open for you since that night. I want to thank you for that service you done me. Any time you want a—" but I did not catch his last words. The driver had mounted the box, gathered up the "ribbons," sprung back the brake, and with a sudden leap forward we were off in a whirl of dust. I nodded my head vigorously to Canlan, glad enough to see that he was only anxious to be friendly and to thank me for the service I had rendered him instead of embarrassing me with questions as to my destination.

Away we went along Baker Street and shot out of the town, and there, just at the turning of the road, was Apache Kid by the roadside, and he stood aside to let the horses pass. The driver looked over his shoulder to make sure that he got on safely, but there was no need to stop the horses, for with a quick snatch Apache Kid leapt aboard and sat down, hot, and breathing a little short, beside me.

CHAPTER VII

The Man with the Red Head

[image]

f two incidents that befell on the journey to Camp Kettle, I must tell you; of the first because it showed me Apache Kid's bravery and calm; and that the first of these two noteworthy incidents befell at the "Rest Hotel" where we had "twenty minutes for supper" while the monster head-lamps were lit for the night journey; for between Baker City and Camp Kettle there was one "all-night division," as it was called.

Apache Kid, after getting into the stage, sat silent for a much longer time than it took him to regain his wind. The high speed of travel with which we started was not kept up all the way, needless to say, such bursts being spectacular affairs for departures and arrivals. But with our six horses we nevertheless made good travel.

Occasional trivialities of talk were exchanged between the travellers—there were three others besides ourselves—and Apache Kid gave no indication by his manner that he and I were in any way specially connected. It was amusing indeed how he acted the part of one making friendly advances to me as though to a mere fellow-voyager, including me in his comments on the road, the weather, the coyotes that stood watching us passing with bared teeth and ugly grin. Later, when one of the others fell asleep and the remaining two struck up a conversation, he remarked:

“Well, that was a hot run I had. Whenever I turned the far corner of Baker Street I took to my heels, doubled back behind the block, and sprinted the whole length of the town. I had to tell another lie, however, for I saw Canlan in Baker Street, just when I was thinking of getting aboard the stage. The driver was in having a drink before starting and, so as to prevent him raising questions about my blanket-roll lying in the stage and me not being there, I told him I had forgotten something at this end of the town and that I would run along and get the business done, and he could pick me up in passing. Lucky he did n’t come out then or he would have wondered at the direction I took. You had n’t turned up, you see, and I knew I must let you know that it was all right.”

He paused and added: “But from to-day, no more lying. I don’t want when I come into this kingdom of mine to feel that I’ve got it at the expense of a hundred cowardly prevarications.”

He sat considering a little while.

“If Canlan should by any chance get wind of our departure and follow up—” he began, and then closed his teeth sharply.

“What then?” I asked.

“He ’d be a dead man,” said he, “and a good riddance to the world.”

“I ’d think murder worse than lying,” said I.

“Tut, tut!” said he. “You look at this from a prejudiced standpoint. Donoghue and I are going out to a certain goal. We ’ve arranged to win something for ourselves. Well, we ’re not going to win it with humbugging and lying. Where speech would spoil—we ’ll be silent; otherwise we ’re going to walk up like men and claim what’s coming to us, to use the phrase of the country. Heavens! When I think of what I ’ve seen, and been, and done, and then think of all this crawling way of going about anything—it makes me tired, to use the—” and he muttered the rest as though by force of habit but knowing it quite unnecessary to say.

There was nothing startling on our journey till the incident befell which I promised to tell you. It was when we came to the Rest House, a two-storey frame house, with a planking built up in front of it two storeys higher, with windows painted thereon in black on a white background, making it look, from the road,

like a four-storey building.

When we dismounted there one of the men on the coach said to the proprietor, who had come out to the door: "What's the colour of your hash slinger? Still got that Chink?"

"I've still got the Chinaman waiter, sir," replied the proprietor, in a loud, determined voice, "and if you don't like to have him serve you—well you can——"

"I intend to," said the man, a big, red-faced, perspiring fellow with bloodshot eyes. "I intend to. I'll do the other thing, as you were about to say;" and he remained seated in the coach, turning his broad back on the owner of the Rest Hotel.

"I won't eat here, either," said Apache Kid to me, "not so much from desiring in Rome to do as the Romans do, as because I likewise object to the Chink, as he is called. You see, he works for what not even a white woman of the most saving kind could live upon. But there is such a peculiarly fine cocktail to be had in this place that I cannot deny myself it. Come," and we passed wide around the heels of four restive cow ponies that were hitched at the door, with lariats on their saddle-pommels and Winchester rifles in the side-buckets.

"Some cowboys in here," said Apache Kid, "up from Ney's place likely, after strayed stock," and he led the way to the bar, and seemed rather aggrieved for a moment that I drew the line at cocktails.

When we entered the bar-room I noticed a man who turned to look at us remain gazing, not looking away as did the others. Instead, he bored Apache Kid with a pair of very keen grey eyes.

Apache evidently was known to the barman, who chatted to him easily while concocting the drink of which I had heard such a good account, and both seemed oblivious to the other occupants of the room. A flutter of air made me look round to the door again. Apache Kid had said no word of Donoghue, but I remembered Donoghue's remark as to seeing me later, in a day or two, and half expected him to appear here. But the door was not opening to a newcomer. Instead, the man who had cast so keen a look on my friend was going out, and as he went he glanced backwards toward Apache Kid again.

I stepped up to Apache Kid and said: "I don't like the manner of that man who went out just now. I'm sure he means mischief of some kind. He gave you a mighty queer look."

"What was he like?" Apache asked, and I described him, but apparently without waking any memory or recognition in Apache's mind.

"Who was that who went out?" he asked, turning to the barman.

"Did n't observe, sir," was the reply.

"O! Thought I knew his——" Apache Kid began, and then said suddenly, as though annoyed at himself: "No, I'm damned if I did—did n't think anything of

the kind. Did n't even see him."

The barman smiled, and as Apache Kid moved along the counter away from us to scrutinise an announcement posted on the wall, said quietly: "He don't look as if he hed bin drinkin' too much. Strange how it affects different men; some in the face, some in the legs. Some keep quite fresh looking, but when they talk they just talk no manner of sense at all."

I could have explained what was "wrong" with Apache Kid, but it was not necessary. Instead, I stepped back and took my seat with what the barman called, with a slight sneer, my "soft drink."

Apache Kid turned about and leant upon the counter. He sipped his cocktail with evident relish, and suddenly the door flew open. Those in the room were astonished, for the newcomer had in his grasp one of those heavy revolvers,—a Colt,—and he was three paces into the room and had his weapon levelled on Apache Kid before we had recovered from our surprise.

"Well!" he cried, "I have you now!" and behind him in the doorway, the door being slightly ajar, I caught a glimpse of the man who had gone out so surreptitiously a few moments before.

Apache Kid's eyes were bright, but there seemed no fear on his face; I could see none.

"You have me now," he said quietly.

The man behind the gun, a tall fellow with close-cropped red hair, lowered his revolver hand.

"I've waited a while for this," he said.

"Yes," said Apache Kid. "To me it is incomprehensible that a man's memory should serve so long; but you have the drop on me." Here came a smile on his lips, and I had a suspicion that it was a forced smile; but to smile at all in such a pass I thought wonderful. "You have the drop on me, Jake,—in the language of the country."

The man Jake lowered his hand wholly then.

"You can come away with that old gag of yourn about the language o' the country, and you right up against it like this? No, Apache Kid, I can't—say!" he broke off, "are you heeled?"

And I thought to myself: "In the language of the country that means, 'are you armed?'"

"I am not," said Apache, lightly.

The red-headed man—he looked like a cattleman, for he wore skin leggings over his trousers and spurs to his high-heeled boots—sent his revolver down with a jerk into the holster at his hip.

"I can't do it," he said. "You're too gritty a man for me to put out that way."

There was a quick jingle of his spurs, and he was gone.

A long sigh filled the room.

"A gritty man, right enough," said one man near by. "A pair of gritty men, I 'm thinking."

Apache Kid drained his glass, and I heard him say to the barman:

"Well, he 's no coward. A coward would have shot whenever he stepped in at the door, and given me no chance. And even if he had n't done that," he continued, arguing the thing aloud, in a way I had already recognised as natural to him, as though he must scrutinise and diagnose everything, "even if he had made up his mind to let me off, he would have backed out behind his gun for fear of me. No, he 's not a coward."

"But you told him you were n't heeled," said the barman.

"Oh! But I might have been lying," said Apache Kid, and frowned.

"He was n't lying, I bet," said the man near me. "A cool man like that there don't lie. It's beneath him to lie."

But Apache Kid did not seem to relish the gaze of the room, and turned his back on it and on me, leaning his elbows on the bar again and engaging in talk with the barman, who stood more erect now, I thought, and held his head higher, with the air of a man receiving some high honour.

And just then, "All aboard!" we heard the stage-driver intone at the door.

When we came forth again there were only two horses before the hotel.

"The red-headed man and his friend are gone," thought I, as I climbed to my place, and away we lumbered through the night, the great headlights throwing their radiance forward on the road in overlapping cones that sped before us, the darkness chasing us up behind.

CHAPTER VIII

What Befell at the Half-Way House

[image]

f the second incident that befell on the journey to Camp Kettle I must tell you because it had a far-reaching effect and a good deal more to do with our expedition than could possibly have been foretold at the time.

Of the incident at the Rest House, which I have just narrated, Apache Kid said

nothing, and as curiosity is not one of my failings (many others though I have), to question I never dreamt; and besides, in the West, even the inquisitive learn to listen without inquiring, and he evidently had no intention of explaining. But when, at last, after a very long silence during which our three fellow-travellers looked at him in the dusk of the coach (whose only light was that reflected from the lamp-lit road) with interest, and admiration, I believe, he said in a low voice which I alone could hear, owing to the creaking and screaming of the battered vehicle: "I think you and I had better be strangers; only fellow-travellers thrown together by chance, not fellow-plotters journeying together with design."

"I understand," said I, and this resolution we accordingly carried out.

After a night and a day's journey, with only short stops for watering and "snatch meals," we were hungry and sleepily happy and tired when we came to the "Half-Way-to-Kettle Hotel" standing up white-painted and sun-blistered in the midst of the sand and sage-brush; and I, for my part, paid little heed to the hangers-on who watched our arrival, several of whom stretched hands simultaneously for the honour of catching the reins which the driver flung aside in his long-practised, aggressive manner—a manner without which he had seemed something less than a real stage-driver.

I noticed that Apache Kid had taken his belt and revolver from his blanket-roll and now, indeed, was "heeled" for all men to see, for it was a heavy Colt he used.

Indoors were tables set, in a room at one side of the entrance, with clean, white table-cloths and a young woman waiting to attend our wants after we had washed the dust of the way from our faces and hands and brushed the grit from our clothes with a horse brush which hung in the cool though narrow hall-way.

Apache Kid sat at one table, I at another, two of our fellow-voyagers at a third. The remaining traveller announced to the bearded proprietor who stood at the door, in tones of something very like pride, that he wanted no supper except half a pound of cheese, a bottle of pickles, and a medium bottle of whisky.

This request, to my surprise, was received without the slightest show of astonishment; indeed, it seemed to mark the speaker out for something of a great man in the eyes of the proprietor who, with a "Very good, sir—step into the bar-room, sir," ushered the red-eyed man into the chamber to right, a dim-lit place in which I caught the sheen of glasses with their pale reflection in the dark-stained tables on which they stood.

In the dining-room I found my eyes following the movements of the young woman who attended there. A broad-shouldered lass she was, and the first thing about her that caught me, that made me look upon her with something of contentment after our dusty travel, was, I think, her clean freshness. She wore a white blouse, or, I believe, to name that article of apparel rightly, with the name

she would have used, a "shirt-waist." It fitted close at her wrists which I noticed had a strong and gladsome curve. The dress she wore was of dark blue serge. She was what we men call "spick and span" and open-eyed and honest, with her exuberant hair tidily brushed back and lying in the nape of her neck softly, with a golden glint among the dark lustre of it as she passed the side window through which the golden evening sunlight streamed. I had been long enough in the country to be not at all astonished with the bearing, as of almost reverence, with which the men treated her, tagging a "miss" to the end of their every sentence. The stage-driver, too, for all he was so terrible and important a man, "missed" her and "if you pleased" her to the verge of comicality.

I think she herself had a sense of humour, for I caught a twinkle in her eye as she journeyed to and fro. That she did so without affectation spoke a deal for her power over her pride. A woman in such a place, I should imagine, must constantly find it advisable to remind herself that there are very few of the gentler sex in the land and a vast number of men, and tell herself that it is not her captivating ways alone that are responsible for the extreme of respect that is lavished upon her. She chatted to all easily and pleasantly, with a sparkle in her wide-set eyes.

"I think I remember of you on the way up to Baker City," she said: "about two months ago, wasn't it?"

And when I had informed her that it was even so she asked me how I had fared there. I told her I thought I might have fared better had I been in a ranching country.

"Can you ride?" she asked.

I told her no—at least, not in the sense of the word here. I could keep a seat on some horses, but the horses I had seen here were such as made me consider myself hardly a "rider" at all.

She thought it "great," she said, to get on horseback and gallop "to the horizon and back," as she put it.

"It makes you feel so free and glad all over."

I would soon learn, she said, but "the boys" would have their fun with me to start.

All this was a broken talk, between her attending on the tables; and as she kept up a conversation at each table as she visited it I could not help considering that her mind must be particularly alert. Perhaps it was these rides "to the horizon and back" that kept her mind so agile and her form and face so pure. It was when she was bringing me my last course, a dish of apricots, that a man with a rolling gait, heavy brows, and red, pluffy hands, a big, unwieldy man in a dark, dusty suit, came in and sat down at my table casting his arm over the back of the chair.

This fellow "my deared" her instead of following the fashion of the rest, and surveyed me, with his great head flung back and his bulgy eyes travelling over me in an insolent fashion. When she returned with his first order he put up his hand and chucked her under the chin, as it is called.

"Sir," said she, with a pucker in her brows, "I have told you before that I did n't like that:" and she turned away.

My vis-à-vis at that turned to his soup, first glancing at me and winking, and then bending over his plate he supped with great noise,—something more than "audible" this,—and perennial suckings of his moustache.

When the maid came again at his rather peremptory rattle on the plate, "Angry?" he asks, and then "Tuts! should n't be angry," and he made as though to embrace her waist, but she stepped back.

He turned to me, and, wagging his head toward her, remarked:

"She does n't cotton to me."

I make no reply, looking blankly in his face as though I would say: "I don't want anything to do with you"—just like that.

"Ho!" he said, and blew through his nose at me, thrusting out his wet moustache. "Are you deaf or saucy?"

I looked at him then alert, and rapped out sharply: "I had rather not speak to you at all, sir. But as to your remark, I am not astonished that the young lady does not cotton to you."

With the tail of my eye, as the phrase is, I knew that there was a turning of faces toward me then, and my lady drew herself more erect.

"Ho!" cried the bully. "Here's a fane how-de-do about nothing! You want to learn manners, young man. I reckon you have n't travelled much, else you would know that gentlemen setting down together at table are not supposed to be so mighty high-toned as to want nothin' to do with each other."

I heard him to an end, and, laying down my spoon, "With gentlemen—yes," I said, "there can be no objection to talk, even though your remark is an evasion of the matter at present. But seeing you have gone out of your way to blame my manners, I will make bold to say I don't like yours."

The girl stepped forward a pace and, "Sir, sir," she began to me and the bully was glaring on me and crying out, "Gentlemen! 'between gentlemen' you say, and what you insinuate with that?"

But I waved aside the girl and to him I began:

"I have been in this country some time, sir, and I may tell you that I find you at the top of one list in my mental notes. Up to to-night I have never seen a woman insulted in the West—" and then, as is a way I have and I suppose shall have a tendency to till the end of my days, though I ever strive to master it (and indeed find the periods between the loss of that mastery constantly lengthening),

I suddenly "flared up."

To say more in a calm voice was beyond me and I cried out: "But I want no more talk from you, sir; understand that."

"Ho!" he began. "You—"

But I interrupted him with: "No more, sir; understand!"

And then in a tone which I dare say savoured very much as though I thought myself quite a little ruler of men, I said: "I have told you twice now not to say more to me. I only tell you once more."

"Good Lord!" he cried. "Do you think you can scare me?"

"That's the third time," said I, mastering the quaver of excitement in my voice, lest he should take it for a quaver of fear. "Next time I don't speak at all."

"Maybe neither do I," said he, and he lifted the water carafe as though to throw the contents on me, but he never did so; for I leant quickly across the table and with the flat of my hand slapped him soundly on the cheek, as I might have slapped a side of bacon, and, "That," said I, "is for insulting the lady."

It was "clear decks for action" then, for he flung back his chair and, spinning around the end of the table, aimed a blow at me; but I had scarce time to guard, so quick was he for all his size. I took the simplest guard of all—held my left arm out rigidly, the fist clenched, and when he lunged forward to deliver the blow I ducked my shoulder but kept my fist still firm.

It was a fierce blow that he aimed, but it slipped over my shoulder and then there was an unpleasant sound—a soft, sloppy sound—for his nose and my rigid fist had met. Then the blood came, quite a fountain. But this only heated him and he dealt another blow which I received with the "cross-guard," one of the best guards in the "straight on" system of boxing, a system generally belittled, but very useful to know.

I think he had never seen the guard in his life, there was so astonished a look on his face; but before he recovered I had him down with a jar on the floor so that the floor and windows rattled,—and his brains, too, I should imagine.

He sat up glaring but something dazed and shaken. God forgive me that I have so feeble a control of my passions once they are roused and such a horrible spirit of exultation! These have their punishment, of course, for a man who exults over such a deed, instead of leaving it to the onlookers to congratulate, falls in their estimation.

However, to give over moralising, I cried out, as he sat up there on the floor with the blood on his face and chin and trickling on his thick neck: "Come on! Sit up! If you lie malingering, I'll kick you to your feet! I'm only beginning on you."

I think the onlookers must have smiled to hear me, for, though so far I had got the better, the match was an absurd one. But my foe was a man of a bad

spirit; without rising he flung his hand round to his hip.

I had a quick glimpse of the girl clasping her hands and heard the gasp of her breath and her voice: "Stop that now—none of that!"

But another voice, very complacent and with a mocking, boyish ring, broke in:

"Throw up your hands, you son of a dog!" And then I ceased to be the centre of interest and my brain cleared, for Apache Kid was sitting at his table, his chair pushed back a little way, his legs wide apart as he leant forward, his left hand on the left knee, his right forearm lying negligently on the right leg—and loosely in his hand was a revolver pointed at the gentleman on the floor.

The other two were looking on from under their brows, the stage-driver sitting beaming on the scene. The girl swung round on Apache with an infinite relief discernible in her face and gesture. The cook who had come from the rear of the room, having seen the business through the wicket window from his pantry, I suppose, cried out: "Make him take out his gun and hand it over, sir."

Apache did not turn at the voice, but, "You hear that piece of advice?" said he. "Well, I 'm not going to take it. You can keep your little toy in your hip-pocket. Do you know why? Because you can do no harm here with it. Before you could get your hand an inch to it my Colt's bullet would have let all the wind sighing out of your contemptible carcass."

Then he gave a laugh, a chuckling, quiet, hearty laugh in his throat, hardly opening his lips and added: "In the language of the country, sir, I would advise you to shake a leg—to get up and get—hike—before I plug you."

And up rose the man, a commercial traveller (as the girl told me afterwards when trying to thank me—for what I cannot say, as I told her at the time), or a "drummer," as the name is, who had been there since yesterday's Baker-bound stage arrived, drinking at the bar and making himself disagreeable in the dining-room.

He looked a sorry figure as he shuffled from the chamber.

I turned to Apache Kid and began: "You saved my life, A——" but his frown reminded me that we were strangers;—"sir," I ended, "and I have to thank you."

"That's all right, sir; that's all right, sir. Don't mention it," said Apache Kid, throwing his revolver back into its holster.

That was the end of the drummer; we saw him no more that night, and when we came down in the morning we were told he had gone on to Baker City with the stage which went west earlier by an hour than the one toward the railway, the one we were to continue in—part of its journey.

But when we came to settle our bill the proprietor drew his hand under his long beard and put his head on the side—reminding me of a portrait of Morris I had seen—and remarked, looking from Apache to me and back again: "Well,

gentlemen, I 'd consider it a kind of honour to be allowed to remember that I did n't ask nothing for putting you up. I should n't like to remember about you, any time, and to think to myself that I had charged you up. I 'd be kind of honoured if you 'd let me remember I did n't take nothing from you."

We did not speak, but Apache's bow was something to see, and with a hearty shake of the hand we mounted the stage.

"Look up tew the window, my lad," said the driver, gathering up his reins. "Look up tew the window and get what's comin' to you; a smile to warm the cockles of your heart for the rest o' the trip."

And sure enough we had a smile and a wave of a strong and graceful hand from the upper window and raised our hats and bowed and were granted another wave and another also from the proprietor—and a wave from the cook at the gable of the house. And looking round again, as we rolled off, there was the fresh white girl standing at the door now.

She raised her hand to her lips and I felt a little sorry in my heart. I did not like to think she was going to "blow a kiss:" it would be a cheapening of herself methought. Then I felt a little regretful, for she did not blow a kiss, but kept her hand to her mouth as long as she remained there.

We went on in silence and then I heard Apache Kid murmur: "Did she mean it or did she not?"

"Mean what?" I asked.

"What do you mean?" said he, alert suddenly. "Oh! I was talking to myself." and then he said in a louder tone: "Excuse me, sir, for asking, but do you not carry a gun?"

"No," said I, with a smile part at this revival of his old caution and part at something else.

"Can you shoot?"

I shook my head.

"Well," said he, "this period of the history of the West is a transition period. The old order changeth, giving place to new. Fists are settling trouble that was formerly settled with the gun. But the trouble of the transition period is that you can never be sure whether it's to be a gun or the fists. Men like that drummer, too, carry a gun—but they carry it out of sight and you don't know it's there for certain. I advocate the gun carried openly; and I think you should begin right away learning its use. I must look up that remark of Carlyle's, first time I can, about the backwoods being the place where manners flourish. I want to see from the context if he did n't really mean it. Most people think it was sarcasm, but if it was, it should n't have been. Manners do flourish in all backwoods, until the police come in and the gun goes out, and it's the presence of the gun that keeps everybody mannerly. The gun does it. Now see—you hold a revolver like this,"

and he exemplified as he spoke. "The usual method of grasping a revolver is with the forefinger pressing the trigger, and even many experts follow this method; but, with all due respect to the advocates of that method, it is not the best. The best way to hold a revolver is with the second finger pressing the trigger, the forefinger extending along the side of the barrel like this, you see. That is the great desideratum in endeavouring to make a shot with a revolver—keeping the thing steady. It kicks under the muscular action required to pull the trigger with the forefinger, and unless one is thoroughly practised the bullet will fly above the mark aimed at. Remember, too, to grip tight, or with these heavy guns you may get your thumb knocked out. Then you throw your hand up and bring it down and just point at what you want to kill—like that!"

"Biff!" went the revolver, and I saw the top leaves on a sage-brush fly in the air.

The horses snorted and leapt forward and the driver flung a look over his shoulder, a gleeful look, and, gathering the reins again, cried out, "My gosh, boys! Keep it up, and we 'll make speed into Camp Kettle. Say, this is like old days!" he cried again, when Apache Kid snapped a second time and we went rocking onward.

So we "kept it up," Apache indicating objects for me to aim at, watching my manner of aiming, and coaching me as we went. It seemed to be infectious, for the traveller who had before kept to himself whipped out a "gun" from some part of his clothing and potted away at the one side while we potted at the other. The other two, the one who had suppered on cheese, pickles, and whisky, and breakfasted on the same, like enough, and the man with whom he had struck up an acquaintanceship, wheeled about and potted backwards; and at that the driver grew absolutely hilarious, got out his whip and cracked it loud as the revolver shots, crying out now and again: "Say, this is the old times back again!" and so we volleyed along the uneven road till dusk fell on the mountains to north and the bronze yellow plain to south and sunset crimsoned the western sky. And lights were just beginning to be lit when, in a flutter of dust and banging of the leathern side-blinds and screaming of the gritty wheels, we came rocking down the hillside into Camp Kettle.

But at sight of that Apache Kid turned to me, and with the look of a man suddenly recollecting, he said, in a tone of one ashamed: "Well, well! Here we are advertising ourselves for all we 're worth, when our plan should have been one of silence and self-effacement."

"Well," said I, "we can creep quietly up to bed when we reach the hotel here, and let no one see us, if that is what you are anxious about."

"You 'll have no more bed now, Francis," he said quietly. "No more bed under a roof, no more hotel now until—" and here for the first time he ac-

knowledge in actual, direct speech the goal of our journey, "until we lie down to sleep with our guns in our hands and our boots on—" he put his mouth to my ear and whispered, "in the Lost Cabin."

CHAPTER IX

First Blood

[image]

It would hardly astonish me, and certainly not offend me, to know that you found a difficulty in believing possible such a sight as Camp Kettle presented on our arrival. It made me shudder to see it, and the picture is one that I never remember without melancholy.

"They seem to be celebrating here," said he of the red eyes as a hideous din of shrieking and curses came up to us.

And "celebrating" they were, that day being, as Apache Kid now recollected, the anniversary of the first discovery of mineral in that place. Of such a kind was this celebration that the stage-driver had to dismount and drag no fewer than three drunken men from the road, which irritated him considerably, spoiling as it did his final dash up to the hotel door. But it served our turn better; for here, before entering Camp Kettle, we alighted.

Camp Kettle is built in the very midst of the woods, the old veterans of the forest standing between the houses which stretch on either side of the waggon road, looking across the road on each other from between the firs, so that a traveller coming to the place by road is fairly upon it before he is well aware. But on that day—or night—there were strips of bunting hanging across the waggon road, not from the houses, for they were all mere log huts, but from the trees on either side; and the forest rang with shouting and drunken laughter. Just where we alighted were several great, hewn stones by the roadside, with marks of much trampling around them.

"There 's been a rock-drilling contest here," said Apache Kid, pointing to the holes in the centre of these rocks, as we struck into the bush and came into Kettle from behind.

Here and there, backward from the front huts, were others dotted about in

cleared spaces, and all were lit up, and doors standing open and men coming and going, lurching among the wandering tree-roots and falling over stumps still left there. And the whole bush round about you might have thought the scene of a recent battle, what with the drunken men lying here and there in all manner of attitudes, with twisted bodies and sprawled legs.

Some few fellows in their coming and going spoke to us, crying on us to "come and have a drink," but it was only necessary for us to move on heedlessly so as to evade them—so dazed and puzzled were they all and seemed to lose sight of us at once, wheeling about and crying out to the twilight woods. At some of the cabins horses stood hitched, snorting and quivering ever and again, their ears falling back and pricking forward in terror.

"For once," said Apache Kid to me, "I have to be grateful for the presence of the despised Dago and the Chinee. The Dago may be a little fuddled, but not too much to attend to our wants in the way of horses, and he is not likely to talk afterwards. The Chinee will be perfectly calm among all this, and he, for a certainty, will not speak. Here's the Chinee joint. Come along."

He thrust open the door of a long, low house and we entered into a babel of talk, that ceased on the instant, and closed the door behind us.

We had a glimpse of a back room with a group of Chinamen who looked up on us with eyes a trifle agitated, but, I suppose on seeing that we were not the worse of liquor, they bent again over their tables, and we heard the rattle of dominoes again and their quick, voluble, pattering talk.

A very staid, calm-faced Chinaman, his high forehead lit up by a lamp which hung over a desk by which he stood, turned to us, and, looking on us through large horn spectacles, bowed with great dignity.

"Good evening," said Apache Kid.

"Good evening," said he.

"We want three mats of rice," said Apache Kid, and this placid gentleman called out a word or two to one of his assistants, and the rice was hauled down from the shelf. Then we bought three small bags of flour and two sides of bacon, and all this was tied up for us and set by the door to await our return; and off we went out of that place with the smell of strange Eastern spices in our nostrils.

"Not so long ago," said Apache Kid, "these fellows would not have been tolerated here at all. Then they were allowed an entrance and tolerated; but they only sold rice to begin with, and nothing more, except, perhaps, cranberries, to the hotel, which they gathered on the foothills. Now, as you see, they run a regular store. But on such nights as this it behooves them to keep indoors lest the white populace regret having allowed them within their gates. But John Chinaman is very wise. He keeps out of sight when it is advisable. Here's the livery stable."

The stout Italian who stood at the door of the stable, toying with a cigarette, frowned on us through the darkness, and seemed a trifle astonished, I thought, at our request for horses. But he bade us follow him, and by the aid of two swinging lamps Apache Kid selected three horses, two for riding and one pack-horse.

"But you ain't pull out to-night, heh?" said the Italian in his broken English.

"Yes," said Apache.

"You going down to Placer Camp or up to mountains?"

Apache Kid was drawing the cinch tight on the pony I was to ride (the Italian was saddling the other), and he merely turned and shot the questioner such a look as made me feel—well, that I should not like to be the Italian.

I thought then that, for all his slim build, this partner of mine, so quiet, so deliberate, must have seen and done strange things in his day, and been in peculiar corners to learn a glance like that. If ever a look on a man's face could cow another, it was such a look as Apache Kid flung to the Italian then.

Back to the Chinese store we went, leading our steeds, and there roped on our pack.

"Do you sell rifles?" asked Apache Kid.

"Yes, sir, vely good line," and so Apache added a Winchester, which was thrust atop of the load, and two of the small boxes of cartridges.

This was just finished when a voice broke in: "Goin' prospectin'?"

We wheeled about to see a foolish-faced man, with shifty eyes and slaving mouth, standing by, with firm enough legs, to be sure, but his body swaying left and right from the hips as though it were set there on a swivel.

"Yes," said Apache.

"Going prospectin' without a pick or a hammer or a shu-huvel," said the man, and hiccoughed and dribbled again at the mouth, and then he sat down on a tree-stump and broke out in a horrible drunken weeping, the most distressful kind of intoxicated fool I ever saw, and moaned to himself: "Goin' prospectin' without a—with on'y a gun at the belt and a Winchester," and he put his hand to his forehead and, bending forward, wept copiously. I looked on the Chinaman who stood by, placid and expressionless, and I was ashamed of my race.

"For the love of God," said Apache, "let us get out of this pitiful hell— Good-bye, John," to the Chinaman, who raised his lean hand and waved in farewell in a gesture of the utmost suavity and respect, and then we struck south (the Chinaman entering his store), and left that pitiable creature slobbering upon the tree-stump, left the din and outcrying and hideousness behind us, my very stomach turning at the sounds, and Apache, too, I think, affected unpleasantly. We went directly to the south upon the track that led to the Placer Camp on Kettle River.

On either side of us the forest thinned out there, but the place was full of a wavering light, for the tree-stumps to left and right of the track were all

smouldering with little, flickering blue flames, and sending up a white smoke, for this is the manner of clearing the forest after the trees are felled.

Through this place of flickering lights and waving shadows we still progressed, leading our horses. Here Apache Kid looked round sharply, and at the moment I heard a sound as of a twig snapping, but from what quarter the sound came I could not tell. We were both then looking back, half expecting to see some one issue forth behind us into the light of that space where the tree-stumps spluttered and flared and smoked.

"Perhaps it was just one of these stumps crackling," said I.

"It did n't sound just like that; however, I suppose that was all," Apache Kid replied. "Well this is our route now." And we struck west through the timber, back in the direction that Baker City lay, keeping in a line parallel to the waggon road. And ever and again as we went Apache emitted a low, long whistle and hearkened and whistled again, and hearkened and seemed annoyed at the silence alone replying.

Then, coming to the end of the place of smouldering stumps, we struck back as though to come out on the waggon road before its entering into Camp Kettle. "Where in thunder is Donoghue?" snapped Apache Kid, and suddenly the horse I was leading swung back with a flinging up of its head. Apache Kid was leading the other two and they also began a great dancing and snorting.

"We have you covered!" cried a harsh voice. "No tricks now! Just you keep holt of them reins. If you let 'em drop, your name is Dennis! That 'll be something to occupy your hands."

I think the voice quieted the horses, if it perturbed us, for they became tractable on the instant and ceased their trembling and waltzing. And there, risen out of a bush before us, stood two men, one with a Winchester at the ready and the other with his left hand raised, the open palm facing us, and a revolver looking at me over that, his "gun hand" being steadied on the left wrist.

I had seen Apache Kid in a somewhat similar predicament before, but his coolness again amazed me. And, if I may be permitted to say so, I astonished myself likewise, for after the first leap of the heart I stood quite easy, holding my horse—more like an onlooker than a participant in this unchancy occurrence.

"I think you have made a mistake, gentlemen," said Apache Kid.

"Oh, no mistake at all," said he with the Winchester. "I've just come out to make you an offer, Apache Kid."

"You have my name," said Apache Kid, "but I have n't the pleasure of yours."

"Why," said I, "I've seen that man at the Laughlin House;" and at the same moment Apache Kid recognised the other in a sudden flickering up of one of the highest stumps.

"Why, it's my old inquisitive friend—the hog," said he, looking on him.

"Where did you learn that theatrical style of holding up a gun to a man? Won't you introduce your friend?"

"That's all right," said the other. "I want you to listen to me. Here's what we are offering you. You can either come right along with us to Camp Kettle and draw out a sketch plan of where the Lost Cabin Mine lies, or else—" he raised his Winchester.

Apache Kid whistled softly.

"How would it suit you," said he, after what seemed a pause for considering the situation into which we had fallen, "if I drew up the sketch after you plugged me with the Winchester?"

"O!" cried the man. "The loss of a fortune's on the one hand. The loss o' your life's on the other. We give you the choice."

"It seems to me," said Apache Kid, "that your hand is the weaker in this game; for on your side is the loss of a fortune or the taking of a life."

"I 'd call that the stronger hand, I guess," said the man.

"Well, all a matter of the point of view," murmured Apache Kid, with an appearance of great ease. "But presuming that I am aware of the location of that place, what assurance could I have that once you had the sketch in your hands you would n't slip my wind—in the language of the country?"

He with the revolver, I noticed, glanced a moment at his partner at that, but quickly turned his attention to us again. "Besides, I might draw up a fake map and send you off on a wild goose chase," said Apache Kid, as though with a sudden inspiration.

"We've thought of that," said he with the Winchester, "and you 'd just wait with a friend of ours while we went to make sure o' the genuineness o' your plan."

"Oh! That's what I'd do?" said Apache Kid, and stood cheeping with his lips a little space and staring before him. Then turning to me, "I 'm up against it now," he said, "in the language of the country. The terms are all being made for me and at this rate—" he swung round again to these two—"you really mean that you are so bent on this that if I did n't speak up, did n't give you the information you wanted, you'd—eh—kill me—kill the goose with the golden eggs?"

I marked a change in the tone of Apache's voice, and looking at him noticed that there was a glitter in his eye and his breath was coming through his nostrils in fierce gusts, and under his breath he muttered: "The damned fools! I could keep them blithering here till morning!"

"We might find other means to get the right of it out of you," said the man with the Winchester. "I 've seen a bit of the Indians from whom you take your name, and I reckon some of their tricks would bring you to reason."

"What!" cried Apache Kid. "You'd threaten that, would you? You'd insult

me—coming out with a hog like that to hold me up, too,” and he pointed at the man with the revolver.

”Come! Come!” cried he of the Winchester, ”easy wi’ that hand. If you don’t come to a decision before I count three, you ’re a dead man. I ’ll run chances on finding the Lost Cabin Mine myself. Come now, what are you going to do? One—”

”Excuse me interrupting,” said Apache Kid, ”but are you aware that the gentleman you have brought with you there is an incompetent?”

”Haow?” said the Winchester man. ”What you mean?”

”That!” said Apache Kid, and, leaping back and wheeling his horse between the Winchester and himself, he had plucked forth his revolver and— But another crack—the crack of a rifle—rang out in the forest. I am not certain which was first, but there, before my eyes, the two men, who had a moment earlier stood exulting over us, sank to the earth, he with the revolver falling second, so that as he sagged down I heard the breath of life, one might have thought, belch out of him. It was really the gasp, I suppose, when the bullet struck him, but it was the most helpless sound I ever heard in my life—something like the quack of a duck. Sorry am I that ever I heard that sound, for it, I believe, more than the occurrence of that night itself, seemed to sadden me, give me a drearier outlook on life. I wonder if I express myself clearly? I wonder if you understand what I felt in my heart at that sound? Had he died with a scream, I think I should have been less haunted by his end.

If our horses shied at the smell of men whom they could not see, they were evidently well enough accustomed to the snap of firearms, for beyond a quick snort they paid no heed. As for me, I found then that I had been a deal more upset by this meeting than I had permitted myself to believe; and my nerves must have been terribly strung, for no sooner had they fallen than I shuddered throughout my body, so that I must have looked like one suffering from St. Vitus dance.

Apache Kid looked at me with a queer, pained expression on his face, scrutinising me keenly and quickly and then looking away. And into the wavering light of the burning stumps came Donoghue, with his rifle lying in the crook of his arm, right up to us and began speaking. No, I cannot call it speaking. There was no word intelligible. His eyes were the eyes of a sober man, but when he spoke to us not a word could we distinguish, and he seemed aware of that himself, spluttering painfully and putting his hand to his mouth now and again, as with a sort of anger at himself and his condition. Then suddenly, as though remembering something, away he went through the timber the way he had come.

”Fancy being killed by that!” said Apache Kid, wetting his lips with his tongue, and a sick look on his face.

"What's wrong with him?" said I.

"Drunk," said he, and never a word more. But he followed Donoghue, to where stood a horse, the reins hitched to a tree.

"That's a tough looking mount he's got," said Apache Kid, and then, like an afterthought: "Try to forget about those two fellows lying there," he added to me.

I looked at him in something of an emotion very nigh horror.

"Have they to lie there till—till they are found?"

"Yes," said he, "by the wolves to-night—if the light of the stumps doesn't keep them off. Failing that, to-morrow—by the buzzards."

I looked round then, scarcely aware of the movement, and there, between the trees, I saw the clearing with the smouldering, twinkling stumps.

The leader of these two lay with his back and his heels and the broad soles of his feet toward me; but the other, "the hog from Ontario," lay looking after us, with his dead eyes and his face lighting and shadowing, lighting up and shadowing pitifully in that ghastly glow.

I turned round no more. I breathed in relief when we came clear of the forest into the open, sandy ground; but when I saw the stars thick in the sky, Orion, Cassiopeia, and Ursa Major, the tears welled in my eyes; they seemed so far from the terrors of that place.

"I'll wait till you mount," said Apache Kid, holding my horse's head while I gathered the reins.

When I raised my foot to the stirrup the beast swerved; but at the third try I got in my foot, and with a spring gained the high saddle.

Donoghue's mount was walking sedately enough, but all the lean body of it had an evil look. Apache stood to watch his partner mount to the saddle. Donoghue flung the reins over the horse's neck and came to its left. He seemed to remember its nature, despite his condition then, for he ran his hand over the saddle and gave a tug to the cloth to see that it was firm. Then with a quick jerk, before the horse was well aware, he had yanked the cinch up another hole or two. At this, taken by surprise, the beast put its ears back and hung its head and its tail between its legs. Donoghue pulled his hat down on his head, caught the check-rein with his left and clapped his right hand to the high, round pommel. There was a moment's pause; he cast a quick glance to the horse's head; thrust his foot into the huge stirrup, and with a grunt and a mighty swing was into the saddle. And then the beast gathered itself together and with an angry squeal leapt from the ground. Half a dozen times it went up and down, as you have perhaps seen a cat or a ferret do—with stiff legs and humped back. But Donoghue seemed part of the heavy, creaking saddle, and after these lurchings and another half-dozen wheelings the brute calmed. Apache Kid swung himself up to his horse and we

struck on to the stage road in the light of the stars.

And just then there came a clinking of horse's hoofs to our ears and there, on the road coming up from Camp Kettle, and bound toward Baker City, was an old, grey-bearded man leading a pack-horse and spluttering and coughing as he trudged ahead in the dust.

"It's a good night, gentlemen," he said, stopping and eyeing us—Donoghue across the road, in the lead, and already a few paces up the hillside, Apache Kid with the led horse, I blocking his passage way.

"Yes; it's a fair night," said Apache Kid, civilly enough, but I thought him vexed at this encounter.

"It's a cough I take at times," said the old man, wheezing again. "I'm getting up in years. Yes, you're better to camp out in the hills instead of going into Camp Kettle to-night. I've seen some camps in my day—I'm gettin' an old man. No; I could n't stop in that place to-night."

His pack-horse stood meekly behind him, laden up with blankets, pans, picks, and the inevitable Winchester.

"Yes, siree, you're better in the hills, a fine starry night o' summer, instead of down there. It's a cough I have," he wheezed. "I'm gettin' an old man. Any startling news to relate?"

"Nothing startling," said Apache Kid.

"What you think o' the rush to Spokane way? Anything in it, think you?" said the old man in his slow, weary voice.

"O, I think——" began Apache Kid, but the old man seemed to forget he had put a question.

"What you think o' this part o' the country?" he asked, and then abruptly, without evidently desiring an answer: "Well, well, I'll give you good night. I'll keep goin' on, till I get a good camp place—maybe all night I don't like Camp Kettle to-night," and grumbling something about being an old man now, he plodded on, his pack-horse waking up at the jerk on the rein and following behind.

"Aye," sighed Apache Kid to me, "no wonder they say 'as crazy as a prospector.' It's the hills that do it. The hills and the loneliness and all that," he said with a wave of his hand in the starshine. Then suddenly he spurred forward his horse upon Donoghue and in a low, vehement voice: "Stop that, Donoghue!" he said. "What on earth are you wanting to do?"

For Donoghue was glaring after the weary old prospector and dragging his Winchester from the sling at his saddle. He managed to splutter out the word "blab" as he pointed after the man and then pulled again at the Winchester which he found difficult to get free. But Apache Kid smote Donoghue's horse upon the flank and pressed him forward and so we left the road and began breasting the hill with the stars, brilliant and seeming larger to me than ever they seemed seen

through the atmosphere of the old country, shining down on us out of a cloudless sky.

Perhaps it had been better had Donoghue got his rifle free, callous though it may seem to say so. For other lives might have been spared and these mountains, into the foothills of which we now plunged, have not been assoiled with the blood of many had that one solitary old prospector ceased his weary seekings and his journeyings there, as Donoghue intended.

CHAPTER X

In the Enemy's Camp

[image]

n a little fold of the hills we made our camp, somewhere about two in the morning, I should think.

Donoghue rolled off his horse at a word from Apache Kid, and stood yawning and grunting, but Apache Kid had his partner's blankets undone in a twinkling and bade him lie down and go to sleep. Then he hobbled the horses and, sitting down on his own blanket-roll, which he had not undone:

"Could you eat anything?" said he.

"Eat!" I ejaculated.

"Well, sleep, then?" he said.

"Aye, I could sleep," said I. "I should like to sleep never to awaken."

"As bad as that?" said he.

"Look here," said I. "I've just been thinking that I——" and I stopped.

Something was creeping stealthily along the ridge of the cup in which we sat, and the horses were all snorting, drowning the sound of Donoghue's deep breathing.

"It's only a coyote," said Apache Kid, looking up in the direction of my gaze. "You look tired, my boy," he added in a kindlier voice. "Well, if these fellows are going to sit round us, I suppose I'd better make a fire; but I did n't want to. We'll make a small one. You know what the Indians say: 'Indian make small fire and lie close; white man make big fire and lie heap way off. White man dam fool!' And there is some sense in it. We don't want to light a beacon to-night, anyway."

So saying, he rose and cried "Shoo!" to the skulking brutes that went round and round our hollow, showing lean and long against the sky.

I watched him going dim and shadowy along the hill-front, where contorted bushes waved their arms now and then in the night wind. He took a small axe with him, from the pouch of his saddle, and I heard the clear "ping" of it now and then after he himself was one with the bushes. And there I sat with my weary thoughts beside the snoring man and the horses huddling close behind me, as though for my company, and the prowl, prowl of the coyotes round and round me. Then suddenly these latter scattered again and Apache Kid returned, like a walking tree beside the pale sky, and made up a fire and besought me to lie down, which I had no sooner done than I fell asleep, for I was very weary.

Now and then I woke and heard far-off cries,—of wildcats, I suppose,—and saw the stars twinkling in the heavens and the little parcel of fire flickering at my feet; but the glow of Apache Kid's cigarette reassured me each time, and though once I thought of asking him if he himself did not want to sleep, so heavy with sleep was I that I sank again into oblivion ere the thought was fairly formed.

So it was morning at last, when I came again broad awake, and Apache Kid was sitting over the fire with the frying-pan in hand. Indeed, the first thing I saw on waking was the flip he gave to the pan that sent the pancake—or flapjack, as it is called—twirling in the air. And as he caught it neatly on the undone side and put the pan again on the blaze (that the morning sunlight made a feeble yellow) I gathered that he was catechising Donoghue, who sat opposite him staring at him very hard across the fire.

"No," Larry was saying, "I got a horse all right, and gave out at the stable that I was going to the Placer Camp, and struck south right enough and went into the bit where we were to meet and sat there waiting you, and not a soul came nigh hand all the derned time."

"How do you know, when you acknowledge you were as drunk as drunk?"

"How do I know?" said Donoghue. "Why, drunk or sober, I never lose anything more than my speech."

"True," said Apache. "But you 're a disgusting sight when you are trying to talk and—"

"Well, well; let that drop," said Donoghue. "I was sober enough to let the wind out of that fellow that held up you two."

"Thanks to you," said Apache Kid. "Which reminds me that there may be others on the track of us; though how these fellows followed so quick I—"

"O, pshaw!" said Donoghue. "You must have come away careless from Baker City. I saw the stage comin' in from where I was layin', and I saw them two fellows comin' up half an hour after."

"O!" said Apache Kid, paying no heed to the charge of a careless departure.

"And anybody else suspicious-looking?"

Donoghue shook his head. But the meal was now ready, and I do not know when I enjoyed a meal as I did that flapjack and the bacon and the big canful of tea made with water from a creek half a mile along the hill, as Apache Kid told me, so that I knew he had been busy before I awoke. I felt a little easier at the heart now than on the night before, and less inclined to renounce my agreement and return. But suddenly, as we were saddling up again, the thought of those dead men came into my head; and though of a certainty they had been evil men, yet the thought that these two with me had taken human lives gave me a "grew," as the Scots say.

I turned about and looked at my companions.

"Would you be annoyed if I suggested turning back?" I asked, coming right to the point.

It was Donoghue who answered.

"Guess we would n't be annoyed; but you would n't get leave, you dirty turncoat."

But Apache turned wrathfully on him.

"Turncoat?" he cried. "Do you think he wants to go down and give us away? If you do, you 're off the scent entirely. It 's the thought of those dead men that has sickened him of coming."

"O, pshaw!" cried Donoghue, grinning. "Sorry I spoke, Francis. There 's my fist; shake. Never mind the dead men."

We "shook," but I have to say that I did not relish the feel of that hand, somehow. He was a man, this, who lived in a different world from mine.

"Why, sure you can go back, if you like," said he. And then suddenly he caught himself up and said: "No, no, for the love of God don't do that! Apache Kid and me don't do with being alone in the mountains."

On one point at least this man felt deeply, it would appear.

"Well," said Apache Kid to me. "That's a better tone of Donoghue's. To beseech a favour is always better than to threaten or to attempt coercion and I must add my voice to his and ask you to come on with us. Though personally," he added, "had I once made a compact with anyone, I would carry it through to the bitter end."

"I should never have suggested this," said I, feeling reproved. "I will not mention it again."

This was the end of my uncertainty, and we rode on through the June day till we came to the north part of the Kettle River, gurgling and bubbling and moving in itself with sucking, oily whirlpools, and travelled beside it a little way and then left it at the bend where it seethed black and turbid with a sound like a herd bellowing.

The creek we came to at noon was kindlier, with a song in place of a cry; swift flowing it was, so that it nearly took our horses from their feet as we crossed it, or the nigher half of it, rather (for we camped on an islet in the midst of it and the second crossing was shallower and easy), but, though swift as the Kettle, it made one lightsome instead of despondent to see. The sun shone down into its tessellated bed, all the pebbles gleaming. The rippling surface sparkled and near the islet was dappled over with the thin shadows of the birches that stood there balancing and swaying. And scarcely had we begun our meal when we heard a clatter midst the pebbles and a splashing in the water, and there came an old Indian woman on a tall horse, with a white star on its forehead, and pots and kettles hanging on either side of it. It came up with dripping belly out of the creek and went slapping past us in the sand and the old dame's slit of a mouth widened and her eyes brightened on us under the glorious kerchief she wore about her head.

"How do," said my companion, and she nodded to us, passed on, and the babe slung on her back stared at us with wide eyes.

For an hour after that they came in twos and threes, men and women, the young folk laughing and chatting among themselves, giving the lie again to all tales of an Indian never smiling. It was a great sight to me and I can never forget that islet in the Kettle River. Not one of the people stopped to talk. The men and the old women gave us "How do" and drew themselves up erect in their saddles. The younger women smiled, showing white teeth to us in a quick flash and then looking away.

Apache Kid was radiant. "They're a fine people, these," said he.

"Yes," said Donoghue, "when you've got a gun and keep them at a distance."

"Nonsense," cried Apache Kid. "I've lived among them and I know."

"Yes, lived among 'em to buy 'em whisky, I guess, so as they could get round about the law."

"No," said Apache Kid, "never bought them a single bottle all the time I was with them."

I could see that Donoghue believed his partner, but I could see too that he could not comprehend this story of living with the Indians for no obvious reason. He looked at Apache Kid as men look on one they cannot understand, but spoke no further word.

After we left that camp, as we struck away across the valley toward the far-off range, we saw these folk still on the other mountainside and caught the occasional flash of the sunlight on a disk, maybe, or on a mirror, or the polished heel of a rifle swinging by the saddle; and then we lost sight of them among the farther woods.

That picturesque sight did a deal to lighten my heart. Apache Kid, too,

was mightily refreshed the rest of the afternoon, and spun many an Indian yarn which Donoghue heard without any suggestion of disbelief. But it was no picnic excursion we were out upon. We had come into the hollow of the hills. We were indeed at the end of the foothills, and across the valley before us the mountains rose sheer, as though shutting us into this vale. To right, the east, was a wooded hill, parallel with which we now rode; and to left cliffs climbed upwards with shelving places here and there on their front, very rugged and savage.

Donoghue nodded in the direction of a knoll ahead of us, and said: "Shall we camp at the old spot? It's gettin' nigh sundown; anyway, I guess we've done our forty to fifty mile already."

"Yes," said Apache Kid. "It's a good spot."

"You've been here before?" I inquired.

My two companions looked in each other's eyes with a meaning glance.

"Yes, we've been here before," said Donoghue, and I had the idea that there was something behind this. So there was; but I was not to hear it—then.

Suddenly we all three turned about at the one instant for a far-off "Yah-ah-ah-ah!" came to us.

There, behind us, we saw two riders, and they were posting along in our track at great speed.

We reined up and watched them, Apache Kid drawing his Winchester across his saddle pommel, and Donoghue following suit, I, for my part, slackening my revolver in the holster.

Nearer they came, bending forward their heads to the wind of their passage and the dust drifting behind them in two spiral clouds. Then I saw that one was a white man with a great, fluttering beard; the other an Indian, or half-breed. And just at the moment that I recognised the bearded man Apache Kid cried out: "Why! It's the proprietor of the Half-Way-to-Kettle House."

"What in hell do he want up here?" said Donoghue. "Lead?"

They came down on us in the approved western fashion, with a swirl and a rush, stopping short with a jerk and the horses' sides going like bellows.

"Good day, gentlemen," said the man of the beard. "Are you gentlemen aware that there's no less than seven gentlemen followin' you up, thirstin' for your money or your life-blood or something?"

"Well, sir," said Apache Kid, "it does not surprise me to hear of it."

"So," said the shaggy-bearded, whose name, by the way, was J. D. Pinkerton, for all who passed by to read above his hostel—"Half-Way-Rest Hotel—Prop.: J. D. Pinkerton," so ran the legend there.

"So," he repeated again, and again and took the tangle from his beard. "Well, I reckon from what I saw of two of you gentlemen already that you don't jest need to be spoon-fed and put in your little cot at by-by time, but—well, you see

my daughter—she has a way o' scarin' me when she puts it on. And she says: 'Dad,' she says, 'if you don't go and warn them, their blood will be on your head should anything happen to them.' Now, I don't want no blood on my head, gentlemen. And then she says: 'Well, if you don't go, I'll jest have to go myself with Charlie—this is Charlie—Charlie, gentlemen—a smart boy, a good boy, great hand at tracking stolen stock and the like employ. An old prospector had seen you, and by good luck he stopped us, and by better luck I was polite for once and listened to his chin-chin, and so we heard where you had got off the waggon road. After that it was all child's play to Charlie here."

"We owe you our thanks, sir," said Apache, and then the moodiness went from his face, and he said in a cheerful tone: "But they may never find out what way we've gone. You see it was a mere chance, your meeting that prospector and being told of the point at which we left the road."

"That's so," said Mr. Pinkerton: "but still there's chances, you know."

"Oh, yes," said Apache Kid, and again: "We owe you our thanks," said he.

"Not you, not you!" said Mr. Pinkerton.

"But what sort of outfit is this that you have come to post us up about?"

"Why, just as dirty a set of greazers as ever stole stock, and they must sit there talkin' away about you in the dining-room after they had told my daughter they was through with their dinner; and my cook heard 'em from his pantry—told my lass—she told me—I'm tellin' you—there you have the whole thing,—how they're to dog you up and wait till you get to your Lost Cabin. And now we're here. But I want to let you know—for I'm a proud man and would n't like any suspicions, though they might be nat'ral enough for you to harbour—want just to let you know that as for what you're after—this yere Lost Cabin,—I don't give that for it," and he snapped his fingers. "I've got all a rational man wants. But we'll chip in with you, if you think of waiting on a bit to see if you're followed."

"Sir," said Apache Kid, "I have to thank you again. I have to thank you, and your daughter through you, and your cook; but I must beg of you to get back."

"Pshaw!" cried Pinkerton. "What's that for?"

"Well—this may be a bloody business, sir, if we are followed, and it would be the saddest thing imaginable——" he broke off and asked abruptly:

"Pardon the question, sir, but is Mrs. Pinkerton alive?"

"My good wife is in her resting grave in Old Kentucky," said Pinkerton in a new voice.

"That settles it, sir," said Apache Kid. "It would be a sad thing to think of that fine girl down at the Half-Way House as an orphan."

Pinkerton frowned.

"When you put it that way," said he, "you take all the fight out of J.D."

"Then I must even beg you to be gone, sir, before there is any chance of

pursuit by these men," said Apache Kid. "If we come back alive, we may all call and thank you again, and Miss Pinkerton too. I beg of you to go and take care of meeting them on the way."

"Well, boys, luck to you all, then," and round he wheeled and away with a swirl of leather while the half-breed laid the quirt, that swung at his wrist, to his lean pony's flanks and, with a nod to us, shot after Mr. Pinkerton.

We watched them till they had almost crested the rise and there suddenly they stopped, wheeled, and next moment had dismounted.

"What's wrong?" said Donoghue. "Something wrong there."

"It looks as if the chance Pinkerton spoke of was against us after all," said Apache Kid, quietly.

We were not left long in doubt, for a puff of smoke rose near the backbone of the rise and a flash of a rifle and then seven mounted men swept down on these two.

We saw the half-breed tug at his horse's head; saw the brute sink down to its knees, saw the half-breed fling himself on his belly behind it, and then his rifle flashed.

The seven riders spread out as they charged down on the two and at the flash of the rifle we saw one of them fall from the saddle and his horse rear and wheel, then spin round and dash madly across the valley, dragging the fallen rider by a stirrup for quite a way, with a hideous bumping and rebounding.

But it was on the two dismounted men on the hill-front that my attention was concentrated, and round them the remaining six of their assailants were now circling.

"Come on!" cried Apache Kid.

He dropped the reins of our pack-horse to the ground and remarked: "She 'll not go far with the rein like that and the pack on her."

Next moment we three were tituping along the valley in the direction of the two held-up men.

Apache Kid was a little ahead of me, Donoghue a length behind, but Donoghue's mount would not suffer us to go in that order long. With a snort it bore Donoghue abreast of me and I clapped my heels to the flanks of my beast. Next moment we were all in line, with the wind whistling in our ears. The six men who seemed to be parleying with Pinkerton and the half-breed, suddenly catching sight of us in our charge, I suppose, wheeled about and went at a wild gallop, with dirt flying from their horses' hoofs, slanting across the hill.

And then I had an exhibition of Donoghue's madness.

He cried out an oath, the most terrible I ever heard, and, "Come on, boys," he shouted to us.

"Yes, let's settle it to-day," came Apache's voice.

"Right now!" cried Donoghue, and away we went after the fugitives.

I saw the reason for this action at once; for to put an end to these men now would be the only sure way to make certain of an undisputed tenancy of the Lost Cabin. Indeed, their very flight in itself was enough to suggest not so much that they were afraid of us (for Pinkerton had given them the name of fearless scoundrels) as that they did not want an encounter yet—that their time had not yet come. But for Pinkerton, they might have followed up quietly the whole way to our goal. Thanks to him, we knew of them following. This, though not their time to fight, was our time.

Suddenly I saw Donoghue, who was ahead, rear his horse clean back on to its haunches and next moment he was down on a knee beside it, and, just as I came level with him, his rifle spoke and in a voice scarcely human he cried, "Got 'im! Got 'im! The son of a dog!"

And sure enough, there was a riderless horse among the six and a man all asprawl in the sunshine before us.

But at that the flying men wheeled together and all five of them were on their feet before Apache Kid and I could draw rein. I heard a rifle snap again behind me, whether Apache Kid's or Donoghue's I did not know, and then, thought I, "If I stop here, I'm done for; I've got to keep going."

The same thought must have been in Apache Kid's mind for I heard the quick patter of his pony as it came level with me. He passed me and he and I—I now a length behind him—came level with the five men clustered there behind their horses and the horse of the fallen man, Apache crying to me:

"Try a flying shot at them."

He fired at that, and a yell rose in the group and I saw one man fall and then I up with my revolver and let fly at one of the fellows who was looking at me along his gun-barrel.

And just at that moment it struck me, in the midst of all the fluttering excitement, that they let Apache Kid go by without a shot. But right on my shot my horse went down—his foot in a badger hole—and though afterwards I found that I had slain the horse that the fellow who was aiming at me was using as a bastion, I knew nothing of that then—for I smashed forward on my head.

The last thing I heard was the snort of pain that my horse gave, and the first thing, when I awakened, that I was aware of was that I was lying on my back looking up at the glaring sky, a great throbbing going on in my head.

My hands were tied together behind my back and my ankles also trussed up in a similar manner.

I was in the wrong camp. I had fallen somehow into the hands of our

enemies.

CHAPTER XI

How It Was Dark in the Sunlight

[image]

ou will hear persons speak of one who has been in a trance or swoon as "returning to consciousness." I remember once of hearing someone objecting to the phrase, saying that a person was either conscious or unconscious, and to speak of one returning to consciousness as though there was a middle state, he argued, was erroneous; but I discovered for myself, that day, the full meaning of the phrase; for first it was a sound that I heard, a sound as of rustling wings, and this presently changed and became the sound of whispering as of a whole chamber full of furtive, stealthy persons talking under the breath. Then I was aware of the sunlight in my face and at the same moment the number of voices dwindled and the power of them increased. I opened my eyes and found myself lying in a mighty uncomfortable and strained position upon a slab of rock, so hot with the sun that my hands, which were behind my back and under me as I lay, were absolutely scorched. I made to withdraw them and then found they were fast tied together.

As for the voices I heard, they were only two in number, I think.

"He's all right; I see his eyes flickerin'," said one, and there, bending over me, was a face as full of evil as ever I desired to see.

I have seen a cast of an eye that almost seemed to give a certain quaint charm to a face; but the cast in these eyes that scrutinised me now was of the most diabolic.

My head was beating and thumping like a shipyard with all its riveters, and the pain between my eyes was well-nigh unbearable.

With puckering eyebrows I scrutinised my captor, and as I did so he cried out: "Here you are now, Farrell."

"Right!" came a voice from behind, and the man called Farrell shuffled down on us, a big-boned, heavy-browed man with a three days' stubble on his face which was of a blue colour around the upper lip and on the jaws—and over his

right cheek-bone there was an ugly scar of a dirty white showing there amidst the sun-tan.

I thought at first it was a whip he carried in his hand, but suddenly what I took for the thong of the whip wriggled as of its own accord, and addressing himself to it, he said: "None o' your wrigglin', Mr. Rattler, or I 'll give you one flick that 'll crack your backbone."

Then I saw that what he carried was a stick, with a short string at the end of it and in the end of that string was a noose, taut around a rattlesnake's tail, just above the knob of the rattle.

"See what I've bin fishin' for you?" he said, and laughed in an ugly way.

He of the terrible eyes caught me roughly by the shoulders and drew me to a sitting posture, so that I saw where we were—on a rock-strewn ledge of some cliffs, which I supposed to be those we had seen on our left from the valley. But owing to the rise of the ledge toward the front I could not see the lower land, only the far, opposing cliffs, blue and white and yellow, with the fringe of trees a-top. And lying on their bellies at the verge of the shelf on which we were, I then saw two other men, with their rifles beside them, lying like scouts, gazing down intently on the valley.

I had no thought then as to how we came there, where my friends were, nor for any other matter save my own present peril. For before I was well aware, and while yet too feeble to offer any resistance, too dazed to make any protest, I was flung down upon my face in the sand, and then, "Give me a hand here, you two," said Farrell, and the scouts turned and rose, and, one of them clutching me by the back of the neck and thrusting my face down into the sand, I felt a weight gradually crushing upon my back and legs.

"That's him!" said one, and then my neck was freed.

The weight upon my buttocks and legs was nothing else than a great, flat slab of rock. I thought, though it had been lowered gently enough on me, that the heaviness of it would alone be sufficient to crush my bones. Certainly to move below the waist was quite out of the question.

All this I suffered in a dumb, half-here, half-away fashion, my head hammering and my tongue parched in my mouth like a piece of dry wood. But when these four laughed brutally among themselves and began a series of remarks such as: "See and don't give it an inch too short," or, "See that the string's taut or we 'll not get what we want," I came more to my senses and wondered what was to befall me. Then, for the first time, I was addressed directly by Farrell.

"Well, kid," he said, "you 're in a tight corner—you hear me?"

"I hear you," said I, speaking with difficulty, so dry was my throat.

"Well," said he, "you can get out of this fix right off by telling us where the Lost Cabin Mine lies. And that's business right off, with no delay."

"I can never do that," said I, "for I don't know myself."

There was a chorus of unbelieving grunts and then: "All right," snapped the voice. "Fact is, we have n't much inclination to loiter here. You 've taken a mighty while to come round, too, as it is—shove it in," he broke off.

But the last words were not for me.

One of the others stepped before me, his foot grazing my head, and I heard him say, "There?"

"No," said another. "That's over close—yes, there. That's the spot."

And then they all stepped back from me, and I, lying with my chin in the dust, saw what the man had been about; for directly before me was the point of the stick, thrust into the ground, with the snake noosed by the tail to it.

No sooner had the man who fixed it in leaped back (and he did so very smartly, while the others laughed at him and caused him to rip out a hideous oath) than the reptile coiled fiercely up the stick; but the hand was gone from the end of it, and down it slithered again.

Then it saw me with its beady eyes, rattled fiercely, again coiled, and—I closed my eyes and drew in my head to the shoulders and wriggled as far to the side as I could.

But something smote me on the chin. I felt my heart in my throat, and thought I to myself, "I am a dead man now"; but before I opened my eyes again I heard another rattle, opened my eyes in quick horror, saw the second leap of the snake toward me, and shrivelled backward again.

"Close shave!" cried one of my tormentors; but this time, after the tap on my chin I felt something moist trickle down upon the point of it, and I thought me that I was close enough to get the poison that it spat, but not close enough to allow of its fangs reaching me.

"But if this stuff should reach my eye it might be fatal," thought I, heedless now of headache or weariness, or anything but the terrible present. My mouth, too, I kept tight closed, as you may guess.

"Will you tell us now, kid?" cried Farrell. "Will you spit it out now?"

Thought I to myself: "I must die now for certain. I trust that even if I knew, I would not reveal this that they ask. But assuredly, to reveal it or to keep it secret is not mine to choose. I must even die."

It came into my head that soon the thin string would, at one of these leaps, cut clean through the snake's tail, and then— Then it leapt again.

"I do not know!" cried I. "I cannot tell you!"

"Then you can just lie there!" snapped one of the four, and went back to his place of outlook on the ledge. And the other, who had been watching the valley, came and stood by my shoulder, irritating the snake, by his presence, to fresh efforts.

"You 're a fool," he said. "Your partners have deserted you. They 're off. There ain't hide nor hair to be seen of them. If they 'd leave you in a lurch like this, you 're a fool not to let us know the location. We 'll follow 'em up again and take vengeance on 'em for you—see?"

And just then, as though to refute his remarks as to the heedlessness of my partners, I heard a faint snap of a rifle, and the man with the squint, who had taken his turn on guard at the place this fellow had vacated, turned round and said he: "Boys, O boys, I 'm hit!"

Something in the tone of his voice made me glance at him sharply, but with half an eye for the snake, as you may be sure, and my ears alert for its warning rattle. I was never more alert in my life than then, and, strange though it may seem, the predominating thought in my mind was, "How sad, how very sad to leave this world, never to see the rich, rich blue of that sky again!"

But, as I say, the tone of the man's voice breaking in on my thoughts and terrors was peculiar, and, with my head still as low in my shoulders as I could manage to hold it, I laid my cheek to the hot sand and looked at him. He had turned to the man who had been standing by me, but at sound of the shot had dropped to his knees.

"Does it look bad?" said he, drawing his finger across his forehead, where was a tiny mark, and then holding out his hand and looking on it for traces of blood, raising up his face for inspection by the man beside me at the same time, and a question in his eyes, very much as you have seen a child, "Is my face clean, mother?" Yes, and with a very childish voice, too.

"It don't look bad," was the reply—and neither it did.

But when he turned away again to the other sentry who lay further off, repeating his question to him in that simple voice, I saw the back of his head. And his brains were dribbling out behind upon his neck. A terrible weakness filled my heart. I heard him say, with no oath, as one might have expected, but in a soft voice: "Dear me!" and again, "Dear me! How very dark it is getting!"

Which was an awful word to hear with the sun blazing right in his eyes out of the burnished, palpitating sky. And then he put it as a question and still with the note of astonishment: "Dear me, isn't that strange? Is n't it getting very——" and he sank forward on his face; but what followed I do not know. In the terror of my own position I kept all my faculties alert; but at the sight of that man's back and the bloody wound, and at the childish voice of him, the world seemed

to wheel. A sickness came on me and I fainted away.

CHAPTER XII

I Am Held as a Hostage

[image]

t must have been more of a momentary squeamishness, that, rather than a fainting fit, I think; for I heard myself moan twice, was conscious of the moaning. There seemed something pressing on my heart and forcing me to gasp for breath and relieve the tension on it. A sweat broke on me then, and after that I felt myself, as it were, swinging through space, and with another gasp and a great gulp of air the world spun back again and there I lay, the cold sweat standing on my brow, and the rattlesnake coiling afresh.

"Why! What's this move now?" I heard one of my captors cry. "What's he doin' with his rifle carried and wagglin' his hand in the air that ways?"

"Don't you know what that is? That's the peace sign—flat of the hand held up, palm open and pushed forward wi' that there kind o' to-and-fro movement."

"Peace sign be durned! If I was sure we could get the information out of this here kid layin' behind us, I'd put a bullet through his skull and let out his brains—front of his face or back of his neck like Cockeye there—all the same to me."

"Reckon you 'd be safer not to do that."

"Think the kid here won't speak, then?"

"No; I don't think he'll speak. I've just been figurin' that neither Apache Kid nor Larry might tell him. He's liable to be givin' you straight goods and no lie when he says he don't know the location."

"Pity we did n't drop Apache Kid's hoss that time they charged down. We could ha' got him, instead, that way. Reckon we need n't have been so scared o' killin' Apache Kid himself without gettin' the news. But say! This won't do. I don't like the looks of this thing. They all are getting a move on 'em and edgin' up this way, the whole three of 'em."

"Three of them," thought I, with my eye on the rattler. "That's one short. I wonder who has been killed or disabled."

"Say! Shout to him to stop. Tell him if he wants to pow-wow with us to come up alone."

"Yes, and leave his rifle down. You do the talkin' now, Farrell."

"Right," said Farrell, and then he shouted, "Well, what do you want?"

"I want to come up and talk this out with you," hailed a voice that I recognised for Apache Kid's.

"He can't come up here," said Farrell. "We don't want 'em to know that we 're only a threesome now, same as 'em."

"I 'll tell you what to do," said one of them, with the voice of a man who has been visited by a sudden inspiration.

"Stop there a minute!" cried Farrell, and then turning to the speaker he said sharply: "Spit it out then, Pete; what's your notion?"

"Loosen the kid there," said Pete, "and set him on the front here and hold your gat to his head while we hear what they 've got to palaver."

"Hum!" mused Farrell. "Kind o' hostage notion? Heh? Well, there's something in that," and he stood upright fearlessly and held his hand aloft, the palm facing away to those in the valley.

"You can come up the length o' that there white rock," he cried, and then to his companions: "See! Lend a hand here."

The snake had coiled again. I cannot guess how often it had sprung at me; I do not know. All that I know is that at every fresh rattle I crouched my head into my shoulders and gasped to myself the one word "God"; for we all, I believe, no matter what manner of lives we have led, at the last moment give a cry to the Unknown, in our hearts, if not with our lips. And every leap of the snake I was prepared to find the one that was to make an end of my acquaintance with the sunlight and with the sweet airs that blow about the world.

But that torment was over now, for with one swift drop of his rifle-butt Farrell cut the head clean from the hideous long body, and then lent the other two men a hand to roll the great stone from off my aching limbs.

"Stand up, you son of a whelp," he said, and spurned me with his boot.

After the terror of the snake there seemed little now that I need heed.

"It's easier said than done!" I cried, angry at his words. "I 'm like a block of stone from my waist down."

"I guess that's right. He must be feeling that way," said one of the others, with a touch of commiseration in his voice.

That was the first sign of any heart that I had discovered in the ruffians.

"Oh, you guess it's right, do you, Dan?" sneered Farrell. "Well, lend a hand and haul him here to the front of this ledge."

Next moment it was as if a thousand red-hot needles were being run into my stiff, trailing legs, for they caught me up by my arms and drew me like a sack

to the front of the cliff.

And then I saw the whole plateau below us. Apache Kid was half-way up the rise, among the long wire-grass at the verge of the cliffs; further down, leaning upon a rock, his shoulders and head visible, was Larry Donoghue. The third man that had been spoken of I could not see and searched the hillside in vain for; but when Farrell stood upright beside me and waved his hand I saw the half-breed, Charlie, who had come after us with Mr. Pinkerton, rise behind a flat rock and lounge across it, looking up on us with his broad sombrero pushed back on his head.

Mr. Pinkerton, I supposed, had been prevailed upon to return out of our dispute, lest his life might be the forfeit for his interest in our behalf. But just as that explanation for his non-appearance had satisfied me I saw, half across the plain, something moving slowly—a pack of horses it seemed, and so clear was the air of that late afternoon that I recognised the form of the mounted man who guarded them, could almost, with a lengthy and concentrated survey, descry his great beard like a bib upon his breast.

"Well," said Farrell, "what do you want to pow-wow about? You see who we got here?"

"I see," said Apache Kid, putting a foot upon the white stone. "How are you, Francis?"

"He 's all right," said Farrell. "But he 's a kind o' prisoner o' war just now."

"Oh!" said Apache Kid. "Well, I suppose if we want to get him back we 'll have to buy him back?"

"That's what!" said Farrell, emphatically.

"Well," said Apache Kid, "we are going on,—my friends and I,—and, as we have your horses now as well as our own, we thought we might perhaps be able to trade you them back for the lad."

And here, as you will be wondering how the horses had changed hands, I must tell you what I had afterwards explained to me.

It seems that no sooner did I fall from my horse, at the time it put its foot in the badger hole (Apache Kid having gone past wildly, bringing down one man and one horse with his two running shots), than the four men, seeing my predicament, swung to their horses' backs, opened out, and two of them passing, one on either side of me, swung from their saddles and yanked me up by my arms.

Then full tilt they charged down the centre of the plain, intending evidently to make the rising knoll, of which I spoke, in the valley's centre. And with me lying across Farrell's saddle, they doubtless thought they had the key to the Lost Cabin. But Apache Kid wheeled his horse below, and Donoghue mounted again above, and from the hill-crest the half-breed spurred down, and so these three set after us, converging on each other as they came.

But Farrell's mount was falling behind with the burden of my extra weight, and they wheeled sharp to left and put their horses directly to the cliff-front. These ponies can do marvels in climbing, but they were over-jaded, having been very hard ridden, and right on the slope it was evident that not only the half-breed, but Larry next, and Apache Kid following, were coming within effect range. It was Farrell who proposed their move then, considering that with me in their hands half the battle was won if only they had something in the way of a fort from which to stave off attack. So they flung off there, and, letting their horses go, up they came, dragging me along. But at the foot of the hill the others stopped, seeing how they had all the odds against them then and were so fully exposed. For it had not yet occurred to them, as indeed was very natural it should not, that the last thing these men wanted to do was to fire upon them.

The intention of this little company of cut-throats had been to follow up softly in the rear, as near as possible without being seen by us, until we came to our journey's end. What they had planned for us then it is, perhaps, needless to so much as hint. Little did they think that between them and us was Mr. Pinkerton, carrying the news of their possible pursuit. But when they saw him riding out of that plain, with the half-breed, the whole reason for his presence there was guessed by them, especially when they saw us halted within sight, the whole three of us turned round as though already watching for their approach. It was, undoubtedly, this upsetting of their plans that made them so short-tempered and snappish with one another.

But by now I think even Farrell was convinced that I was useless to them in so far as the giving of information went. And so I was now to be used as a hostage,—a sort of living breastwork before them,—as though they were to say: "See! if you fire, you kill your partner!"

Farrell laughed loud at Apache Kid's suggestion.

"Why," said he, "you talk as if you held the trumps; but you don't. And for why? Why, because we do." And he spat in the sand and put a hand on either hip. "We don't need our horses, my mates and me. We ain't in any hurry, and can set here as long as you like,—aye, or go away when we like, for that matter. What we want is that Lost Cabin Mine, and if you don't tell us where it is, why, then we'll let the wind out of your partner here."

"And where do we come in?" yelled Donoghue, rearing up beside his bush.

"Oh!" said Farrell, insolently, "are you talking, too? Well, you don't come in at all. There you are! That's something for you to consider!"

Donoghue broke out in a roar of laughter.

"Oh," he said, "the lad is nothing to us. You can do what you like with him."

Apache Kid turned upon him with a glance as of astonishment, and then again to Farrell he said:

"I 'll give you the offer we came up with, and you and your two mates can consider it."

"Three mates, you mean," snapped Farrell.

"Na! Na!" cried Donoghue. "When I look along a rifle I never err."

"Oh, it was you did it?" cried Farrell. "Well, what's your offer?"

"This is our offer," said Apache Kid. "You can come along with us. We are three, and so are you, and we can split the Lost Cabin between us."

Farrell turned to his two companions and looked a question at them.

"I guess you 'd better take that," said the man Dan, "for I reckon even if we did suggest killing this kid, it would n't bring the facts out of 'em."

"And anyhow," said the other, him they called Pete, speaking low, but yet I caught the drift of his words, "we can easy enough fix them all when we get there."

"Come on!" said Apache Kid. "How does our offer strike you? Are you aware that every hour we delay there may be others getting closer to the Lost Cabin Mine?"

"Take the offer, man. Take the offer," said Pete and Dan.

"All right," cried Farrell. "But mind, we're bad men, and this will have to be run on the square."

Donoghue laughed, and for a moment, as I looked at him, I saw an evil glitter in his eye. "Oh, yes!" he ejaculated, "we're all bad men here."

My three captors made no delay; but as for their fallen friend, they paid no heed to him. Only Farrell took the cartridges from his belt and ran his hands through the pockets, which contained a knife, a specimen of ore, two five-dollar bills, and a fifty-cent piece.

For my part, I had the utmost difficulty in getting to my legs, and still more in descending the face of the precipice. I noticed, too, that Farrell kept close by my side, as though he thought still that it was as well to have me between Apache Kid and himself.

Just as we came down the rise, there was Mr. Pinkerton leading the horses along toward us.

"Say!" cried Farrell. "What about him?" And he pointed to Pinkerton.

"O!" said Apache Kid. "He wants nothing to do with this expedition whatever."

Then suddenly Farrell's face lighted with a new thought. "And he goes down to the camps and blabs the whole thing, eh?"

"I believe he won't say a word about it,—neither he nor the half-breed here."

Farrell seemed scarcely convinced, and we went down in silence a little way. Then suddenly he said: "I think you 've got some game on. Say! do you swear you are on the square with us?"

Apache Kid frowned on him and, "I give you my word of honour," said he; and so we came ploughing through the loose soil and sand into the sun-dried grass, and thence on to the level below, where Mr. Pinkerton, now aided by his half-breed follower who had gone on down-hill and mounted his horse, was bunching the horses together. And over all was the sky with the daylight fading in it.

CHAPTER XIII

In Which Apache Kid Behaves in His Wonted Way

[image]

hat with the pains upon my forehead, caused by the blow I had come by when my unfortunate horse put his foot in that unchancy burrow and sent me flying; what with that pain and the ache of my legs, and something else that was not a pain, but worse than a pain, I had scarcely the heart, I fear, to give Mr. Pinkerton as kindly a smile of welcome as he had in store for me on seeing me again alive.

That other thing I speak of as worse than a pain was a horrible nervousness with which my hour of torture with the snake had endowed me. Yes, it can only have lasted about an hour, I think, that hideous experience, though then it seemed an eternity. But so had it affected me that when we gathered together on the plateau I paid little heed to the council of my companions,—had lost interest in their affairs. Instead, I kept jerking my head into my shoulders, and caught myself even gasping suddenly and dodging a snake that leaped at me in the air,—a snake that, even as I sought to evade, I knew was not there at all,—a mere creature of my harassed and frayed nerves. Mere fancy I knew it to be, but still I must needs dodge it and blurt out a gasp of terror again and again.

It was while I was still busied on this absurd performance,—still standing in the talking group and heedless of the talking,—that I saw Apache Kid knitting his brows at me, and supposed it was in contempt; and that caused me to pull myself together and square myself, as a soldier may do under the eye of an officer. When I did so, I remember that I seemed to go to the other extreme; in my attempt to master this nervousness, I caught myself grinning.

It was then that Mr. Pinkerton, who was holding back a little way, looking on, but not party to our doings, remarked to me, as he caught my eye again:

"I took a long shot at that horse of yours, sir, and put it out of its agony when it got its leg broke; but things have been levelling up since then, and I think men and horses are just on a par again—one horse, one man."

I laughed hilariously at this saying, as though it were something hugely amusing. But between you and me, I do not think that Mr. Pinkerton spoke it from his own kind heart but spoke thus more as some sensitive men wear a cloak of pride or shyness or a false bombast to protect them from other men less finely tuned. It was, I believe, only to show a hard front before these new partners of ours, as villainous a trio as you ever clapped eyes on, that he spoke in this light way of the doings of death; because at my laugh I saw him frown as though he regretted that I could enjoy his bitter jest so fully.

In a dazed way I saw the party mounting; but so great difficulty had I in gaining the saddle of a horse—whose horse I do not know; I think it was the mount of the man called Cockeye—that Donoghue came to my side and held the stirrup and gave me a "leg up" and, "Are you scared, or what?" he said in my ear, low and angry and with something of contempt. "You 've made a hash of to-day for us as it is, with goin' and gettin' that accident. Are you scared o' them fellers?"

"Scared!" said I. "Man! I 've been tortured."

"Been what?" said he, and he got on to that vicious mount of his with such a viciousness himself, in his pull of the rein and lunge of his spurs, that I saw Mr. Pinkerton give him a look as who should say: "He's a devil of a man, that."

But Donoghue crowded his beast to my side and asked me what I meant by my remark of being tortured, and I told him the whole matter of it as we rode across the plateau, all lit now with the thin last glow of day.

He listened with his head to one side and his loose jaw tightening and thrusting out.

"I take back what I said to you," said he. "I take it back right now; and as for hindering our journey—why that could n't be helped. Better that we met these fellows right here, face to face, instead of goin' on unknowing and getting shot by 'em round the fire to-morrow night or plugged through the windows of the Lost Cabin three nights hence."

This might have given me an idea of how far we had still to go—or rather should I say, in a country such as this, of vast distance, of how nigh we already were to our journey's end, had I been much heeding that evening.

He held out his hand to me across his saddle (I was riding on his left), and as we shook hands I saw the man Pete look at us with a doubtful eye.

And for a surety there was every reason why these fellows should be sus-

picious of us and be wary and watchful of our movements.

That they were three unscrupulous scoundrels—"The toughest grazers that ever stole stock," as Mr. Pinkerton had phrased it when speaking of them and their cronies (using the word "grazer" in its loose, slang sense, not necessarily implying thereby that they were actually Mexicans, which is the meaning of the name)—that they were capable of any treachery and cruelty themselves, there was no doubt. And as they were, so they would be very prone to judge others and were, doubtless, already thinking to themselves that we three had after all—for the present at least—the best of the bargain; for had they set upon us and done away with us, where would have been their chance of coming to the Lost Cabin? As far away as ever; the Lost Cabin would still have been a needle in a haystack.

On the other hand, I guessed them already arguing, we would be glad and even eager to kill them, though they desired to keep us alive—for a time.

I suppose they took our handshake—Larry's and mine—for a sign of some understanding between us and scented in it a treacherous design upon them, for they kept upon our flanks hereafter, at sight of which Donoghue laughed his ugly laugh and shook his horse forward a step, sneering at them over his shoulder.

O! We were a fine company to go into camp together, as we did within half an hour, before the last grasshoppers had ceased their chirring, on the side of the knoll where was a spring of water, a little pool overhung by a rock with strange amphibious insects darting away from its centre to the sheltering banks as we dipped our cans for water to make the flapjacks.

To any chance observers, happening into our camp at twilight, we would have seemed nothing more dire than a round-up camp of cow-boys, I fancy, for after the meal, when pipes and cigarettes were lit and belts let out a hole or two and boots slackened, there was an air of out-door peace around the fire.

Yet I need not tell you that the peace was on the surface—fanciful, unreal. As for me, the snake was leaping in my eyes out of the fire, when Apache Kid, as calm as you please, struck up a song.

Heads jerked up and eyes glanced on him at the first stave. It seemed as though everything that any man there could do or say was to be studied for an underlying and furtive motive.

It was "The Spanish Cavalier" he sang, with a very fine feeling, too, softly and richly. There is a deal of the sentimentalist about me, and the air, apart from the words, was ringing in my heart like a regret.

"The bright, sunny day," he sang, "it soon fades away," and after he ceased the plain had fallen silent. The chirring of insects had gone and left the valley empty of sound. During all the journey I never heard so much as the twitter of any bird (except one of which you shall hear later), so I think that the gripping

silence at the end of day must have been due only to the stopping of the insect life. By day one was not aware of any sound; but at the close of day, when the air chilled, the silence was suddenly manifest.

Sure enough, the bright, sunny day was fading and in the silence, when the voice of the singer ceased, I must needs be away back in the homeland, counting the hours in my mind, reckoning them up and judging of what might probably be afoot in the homeland then—and there is something laughable in the thought now, but I counted the difference in time the wrong way about and sat sentimentalising to myself that my mother perhaps was just gone out to walk in the Botanic Gardens, and picturing my little sister prattling by her side with her short white stockings slipping down on her brown legs, and looking back, dragging from my mother's hand, to watch the blue-coated policeman at the corner twirling his whistle around his finger. Had I not been so wearied and worn, I would not have made this error in the reckoning. As likely as not my mother was then waking out of her first sleep, and thinking, as women do, of my material and spiritual welfare, all at the one time; perhaps wondering if my socks were properly darned and putting up a loving prayer for my welfare.

Then the singing ceased, and the cry that I now knew well, the dusk cry of the coyotes, rose in a howl, with three or four yelps in the middle of it and the doleful melancholy baying at the close.

I looked round the group at the fire again.

"Well," said Apache Kid, the first to speak, "who's to night-herd the horses?"

The man Dan rose up at that. It was he who alone of all my tormentors on the cliff had spoken a word with anything of kindness in it.

"I'll take the first guard, if you like," said he.

Farrell looked across at Apache Kid.

"One of your side, then," said he, "can take the next guard—share and share—time about, I guess; eh?"

Apache Kid threw the end of his cigarette into the fire and, drawing out his pouch, rolled another and moistened it before he replied.

"Why do you talk about sides at all?" he asked. "I thought we were a joint stock company now?"

"Well, well," snapped Farrell, "I mean one of you three—you or one of your partners."

"Quite so; I know what you mean. I understand your meaning perfectly."

There was a pause and then said he, taking a brand from the fire and lighting his cigarette, so that I saw his full, healthy eye shine bright: "If you are going to talk about sides in this expedition—then so be it. But I don't think our side, as you call it, will bother with any night-herding; indeed, I think we need hardly trouble about saddling up or unpacking or cooking or anything—if you make it

a matter of sides." And he blew a feather of smoke. "I think my side will live like gentlemen between now and the arrival at the Lost Cabin Mine."

Every eye was fixed anxiously on him.

"You see," he explained, "the fact is, you need us and we don't need you. It's a case of supply and demand and—seeing you talk of sides," he said, with what must have been, to Farrell, an aggravating insistence, "our side at present is wanted. It's almost a sort of example of the workings of capital and labour. No!" he ended, with a satisfied grunt, "I don't think there's any need for me to tend horses at all, thanks. I'm quite comfy by the fire."

There was a shrewd, calculating look on Farrell's face as he looked Apache Kid cunningly in the eye a space. I could wager that he was making himself certain from this speech that Apache Kid was the principal in our expedition. I think he really believed that I could say nothing of the Lost Cabin, even had I desired to, and from the way he looked then to Donoghue and looked back again to Apache Kid it struck me forcibly that he was wondering if it were possible that Larry Donoghue was not "in the know" to the full, but merely of the company in a similar way with myself.

Then he rolled an eye back again to Apache Kid, and I remembered the sheriff of Baker City then, for Farrell's words were the very words I had heard the sheriff use: "You're a deep man," he said.

"And I'm quite comfy, too," broke in Donoghue. "Thanks," he added. "And as for this young man beside me, I think he wants a rest to-night. A man that's had a snake wriggling at his nose for half of an afternoon is liable to want a little sleep and forgetting."

Everybody cocked an ear, so to speak, on this speech; but no one of those who did not understand asked an explanation.

Farrell looked with meaning at Mr. Pinkerton, who sat out of the affair, but neither he nor the half-breed spoke a syllable, Pinkerton pulling on his corn-cob pipe, and the half-breed rubbing the silver buckle of his belt with the palm of his hand, and studying the reflection of fire-light in it.

"No, no," suddenly remarked Apache Kid, "you could n't ask Mr. Pinkerton to do that, nor Charlie either. We can't be so inhospitable as to ask our guests of this evening to night-tend our horses."

"What the hell are you getting on about?" said Farrell, and then, as though thinking better, and considering that a milder tone was more fitting, he said: "I never asked them to."

"No, no; you did not ask them to," said Apache, in a mock-conciliatory tone, and then, with a smile on his lips, he said gently: "But you were thinking that, and I—know—every—thought—that passes through your mind, Mr. Farrell."

You should have seen the man Pete at these soft-spoken words.

I must give you an idea of what this fellow looked like. To begin with, I think I may safely say he looked like a villain, but more of the wolf order of the villain than the panther; he had what you would call an ignorant face,—a heavy brow, high cheek-bones, very glassy and constantly wandering eyes, far too many teeth for his mouth, and they very large and animal like. And if ever I saw superstitious fear on a man's face, it was on the face of that cut-throat.

He looked at Apache Kid, who sat with his hat tilted back and his open, cheery, and devil-may-care face radiant to the leaping firelight,—looked at him so that the firelight made on his face shadows, instead of lighting it; for he held his chin low and the mouth open. His hat was off and only his forehead was lit up. The rest was what I say—loose shadows. Then he looked at Farrell, as though to see if Farrell were not at all fearful, and, "Say!" he said, "I'll take 'herd' to-night."

Farrell turned on him with a leer and laughed.

"I guess you 'd better go first then," said he, "before midnight comes, and let Dan go second, after a three hours' tend. You 're the sort of man that is all very good robbing a train, but when you get in among the mountains with the boodle you get scared. And what for? For nothing! That's the worst of you Cat'licks."

So Farrell pronounced the word, and the man flung up his head at that with an angry and defiant air, so that one only saw there the bravo now, and not the ignorant and superstitious savage. He was on the point of speech, but Apache Kid said:

"Sir, sir! it is very rude, to say the least of it, to malign any gentleman's religion. I presume from your remark that you are of the Protestant persuasion, but my own personal opinion is that you are both equally certain of winning into hell. If our Roman Catholic friend is kind enough to offer to relieve us of the monotony of night-herding duty, we can only thank him."

So Pete rose and tightened his belt, and went his ways; and that in no less than time, for the horses were already restive, as though the loneliness of the place had taken possession of them. Of all beasts I know, I think horses the most influenced by their environment.

"Well, if this don't beat cock-fightin'!" I heard Mr. Pinkerton's voice behind me, where he lay now, leaning on an elbow; and then he said a word or two to the half-breed, who rose and departed out of the circle of the fire-shine.

In a little space he returned, leading his own mount and Pinkerton's by the lariats which were around their necks, and as he made fast these lariats to a stone Farrell looked at Mr. Pinkerton across the glow, and asked him, suspicious as ever, "What's that for?"

"Oh! Just so as not to be indebted to you," replied Pinkerton, and coming closer to the fire he rolled his one grey blanket round him and, knocking out the

ashes of his pipe, lay down to rest, the half-breed following suit. But after they had lain down, and when I, a little later, at a word from Donoghue, suggesting I should "turn in," unpacked my blankets, which I had found among the pile of our mixed belongings, I saw the half-breed's eyes still open and with no sign of sleep in them. "So," said I to myself, "Pinkerton and the half-breed, I expect, have arranged to share watch and watch, without having the appearance of doing so."

And indeed one could scarcely wonder at any such protective arrangement in such a camp as this. Donoghue and Apache Kid, indeed, were the only two there who could close their eyes in sleep that night with anything like a reasonable belief that the chances of their awakening to life again were greater than their chances of never breathing again the sage-scented air of morning.

CHAPTER XIV

Apache Kid Prophecies

[image]

ou may wonder how it was possible for me to lie down, to roll myself round in my blankets, to fall asleep in such a camp, in such company as that. I, indeed, wondered at myself as I did so, wondered how I came by the heedlessness, for I cannot call it courage, that allowed me to compose myself to slumber. Anything might have happened in the dark hours, murder and sudden death; but I was excessively fatigued; my body ached; my nerves too were unstrung by the torture of the cliff. Sleep I must and sleep I did, on the instant that I stretched myself and laid down my head. Perhaps the sigh with which I dismissed from my mind the anxieties that might have kept me wakeful was more of a prayer than a sigh.

Across the fire of smaller branches that had cooked our supper, in the preparing of which each took part, a great log was laid, so that no replenishing would be necessary.

It was the sound of Donoghue's voice that woke me to blue night, starshine, and the red glow of the log. His position was unaltered. I could have believed that he had not moved a muscle since my lying down, and the stars told me I had slept some time. He reclined with his legs crossed, his feet stretched to the glow, his hands in his coat pockets, and his unloosened blanket-roll serving for

a cushion to the small of his back.

"There ain't no call for me to turn in," he was saying. "I don't have to turn in to please you."

I snuggled the blankets under my chin and looked to see who he was addressing.

All the others of the company were lying down, but it was evidently Farrell who had made the prior remark, for he now worried with his shoulders in his blankets to cast them from him, and rising on an elbow, said: "O, no! You don't have to. But it looks to me mighty like as if you was scared of us—that you don't lay down and sleep. We 're square enough with you."

Donoghue looked at him in that insolent fashion of opening the eyes wide, and then almost shutting them, and sneered:

"Well, well, what are you always opening your eyes up a little ways and peepin' at one for? One would think you was scared o' me; and that feller there, that Dan, or what you call him, he keeps waking up and giving a squint around, too. You 're square with us? We 're square with you, ain't we?"

Farrell flung the blankets back from him and cried out: "Do you know what I'm goin' to tell you? I would n't trust you, not an inch. I got my gun here ready, if you try any nonsense."

The gleam of an unholy satisfaction was on Donoghue's face then, and he cried out: "Well, sir, if I find a man trust me, I 'm square with him; but if he don't trust me, I don't play fair with him. That's right, I guess, ain't it?"

This, to my mind, was a very faulty morality, but it seemed not so to Farrell.

"Yes," he agreed. "I reckon that's generally understood," and then he showed quite a turn for argument on his own plane of thought.

"But you don't trust me, neither," said he, "and if I was payin' you back the way you talk about, I 'd up and plug you through the head."

Argument was not in Donoghue's line but he cried out:

"And where would I be while you were tryin' it on?"

Farrell did not answer, and in the pause Donoghue did indeed continue the argument, unwittingly, to its logical conclusion:

"No, no, my boy," he said, "you would n't plug me here. You would n't plug me till we got you what you wanted. O! I know your kind well. You thought you held the trumps when you corralled the lad there," and he jerked his head in my direction, "But you did n't."

"It seems to me like as we did," said Farrell, with a vindictive leer, "else why are we here now?"

"Here now?" snapped Donoghue. "Why, you're here because my partner is so durned soft, times. He would n't—go—on—and leave the lad," he drawled contemptuously. "What good was the boy to you, anyhow?" he asked. "Looks as

if you knew you were trying it on with a soft, queer fellow. I 'd ha' let you eat the boy if you wanted and jest taken a note o' your ugly blue mug in my mind and said to myself: 'Larry, my boy, when you see that feller ag'in after you 've got through with this Lost Cabin Mine—you shoot him on sight!'"

"And what if the mug was to follow you up?" said Farrell.

All this while there was no movement round the fire, only that I saw Apache Kid's hand drawing down the blankets from his face. Pinkerton and the half-breed were a little beyond Donoghue and lying somewhat back so that I did not know whether or not they were awakened by this talk. And just then Dan sat up suddenly, glared out upon the plain to the four points of the compass, and screamed out:

"The hosses! Where's the hosses?"

We were all bolt upright then, like jumping-jacks, and leaning on our palms and twisting about staring out strained into the moon-pallid plain.

Dan leapt to his feet.

"The hosses is gone!" he cried, and he rushed across to the two horses that were tied with the lariats.

"Lend me a hoss," he cried. "We must go out and see where Pete has got to with them horses."

"I lend you dis—you sumracadog!" said the half-breed in his guttural voice and he flung up his polished revolver in Dan's face.

It was Apache Kid who restored some semblance of order to the camp.

"All right, Dan," he said. "Don't worry. It's too late now."

We all turned to him in wonder.

"Pete thought it advisable to take the whole bunch away. He agreed that it was advisable to make what little capital he could out of his expedition into this part of the country. On the whole, I think he was sensible. Yes—sensible is the word," he said, thoughtfully wagging his head to the fire and then looking up and beaming on us all.

"What you mean?" cried Farrell.

"Just what I say," said Apache Kid. "He simply walked the whole bunch quietly away five minutes after he bunched them together out there."

"You saw him doin' that! You saw his game and said nothing!" cried Farrell.

"Even so!" replied Apache Kid.

Farrell glared before him speechless.

"What in creation made him do that?" said Dan, going back like a man dazed to his former place.

"You mean *who* in creation made him do that?" Apache Kid said lightly: "and I have to acknowledge that it was I."

"You!" thundered Farrell. "I did n't see you say a word to him. You bought

him off some ways, did you? How did you do it?"

"O!" said Apache Kid. "I simply gave him a hint of the terrors in store for him if he remained here. You heard me; and he was a man who could understand a hint such as I gave. I took him first, as being easiest. But I have no doubt that you two also will think better of your intention and depart—before it is too late. He went first. You, Mr. Farrell, I think, will have the honour of going last."

"I don't know what you mean," said Farrell, like a man scenting something beyond him.

"No," said Apache Kid. "I understand that. You will require some other method used upon you. I don't know if it was, as you suggested, the gentleman's religion that was to blame for it, but he suffered from the fear of man. That was why he went away. Now you, Farrell, I don't think you fear man, God—"

"No! Nor devil!" cried Farrell.

"Nor no more do I!" said Dan, turning on Apache Kid. "Nor no more do I. And if the loss o' the hosses don't cut any figure to you, it don't no more to us, for we 're goin' through with you right to the end."

But I thought that a something about his underlip, as I saw it in the shadows of the fire, belied his strong statement. Apache Kid was of my opinion, for he looked keenly in Dan's face and remarked: "A very good bluff, Daniel."

"Don't you Daniel me!" cried the man. "You 're gettin' too derved fresh and frisky and gettin' to fancy yourself."

"That's right. A bluff should be sustained," said Apache Kid, insolently, and then dropping the conversation, as though it were of absolutely no moment, he rolled himself again in his blanket. And this he had no sooner done—unconcerned, untroubled, heedless of any possible villainy of these two men—than Pinkerton's voice spoke behind me:

"He 's a good man spoiled, is that Apache Kid. I could ha' been doin' with a son like that."

"I think you 're kind o' a soft mark, right enough," sneered Farrell to the now recumbent form of Apache Kid. "I think you 're too soft to scare me."

Apache Kid was up in a moment.

"Soft!" he cried, "soft!"

And on his face was the look that he gave the Italian livery-stable keeper at Camp Kettle, only, as the saying is, *more so*.

I heard Donoghue gasp, you would have thought more in fear than in exultation: "Say! When he gets this ways you want to be back out of his way."

"Look at me!" said Apache, standing up. "You see I 've got on no belt; my gun's lying there with the belt. I 've got no knife—nothing. Will you stand up, sir, and let me show you if I 'm soft, seeing that I have given you my word—not to kill you?" You should have heard the way these last words came from him. "Will

you stand up and let me just hammer you within an inch of your end?"

Farrell did not quail; I will do him that justice. But he sat considering, and then he jerked his head and jerked it again doggedly, and, "No," he said, "no, I reckon not."

The fire of anger had leapt quick enough to life in Apache Kid, and it seemed to ebb as suddenly.

"All right," he said. "All right. Perhaps it is better so. It would dirty my hands to touch you. And indeed," he was moving back to his place now, "lead is too clean for you as well."

He turned as he reached where his blankets lay.

"Farrell," he said, "it is at the end of a rope that you will die."

CHAPTER XV

In Which the Tables Are turned—at Some Cost

[image]

fter that peace came, and I dozed again.

It was a shot, followed by a scream, that awoke me; and those kind gods who guard us in our sleep and in our waking caused me even at that moment not to obey the sudden impulse to leap up. Instead, I flung my hand to my revolver and lay flat—and in doing so saved my life.

Beside me, with the first quick opening of my eyes, I saw Donoghue kick in his blankets, like a cat in a sack, and then lie still, and the second shot rang in my ears, fired by the man Dan from across the fire and aimed at me. But truly, it was fated that Dan should go first of these two who remained with us of his side, as Farrell had called it, and it was I who was fated to do the deed. Let me put it in that way, I beg of you. Let me say "fated" in this instance, if in no other, for it is a terrible thing to slay a man. And then I saw what had befallen, after my shot had gone home and Dan lay on his face where he had fallen—dead, with the light of morning, of a new day, just quivering up the eastern sky, and making the thing more ghastly.

Farrell and he must have quietly whispered over their plan where they lay—to make a sudden joint attack upon us. Dan's part had evidently been to put an

end to Larry and to me, while Farrell attended to Apache Kid; for there was Farrell now with a revolver in each hand, and both were held to Apache Kid's head.

At hearing my shot, for a moment Farrell glanced round, and, seeing that Dan had failed in his attempt, he cried out: "If you move, I kill Apache Kid here, right off. Mind now! I kill him—and let the Lost Cabin Mine slide. We 'll see who 's boss o' this round up!"

And then it suddenly struck me as strange that they had not reckoned on the other two who were with us,—Mr. Pinkerton and the half-breed. Even as I was then considering their daring, there came a moan from beside me. I flung round at the sound, and there lay Pinkerton with his hand to his breast. Yes; I understood now. That sound that woke me was not of one shot; it was two,—Dan's first shot at Larry, and Farrell's at Mr. Pinkerton. But what of the half-breed? I bent to Mr. Pinkerton and, with my hand under his neck, said: "O, Mr. Pinkerton! Mr. Pinkerton! O, Mr. Pinkerton! can I do anything for you?"

He looked upon me with his kind eyes, full of the last haze now, and gasped: "My girl! My girl! You will——" and he leant heavy in my arms.

"I will see to her," said I. "O, sir! this you have got for us. It is through us that this has happened. I will see that she never wants."

These or some words such as these I spoke,—for I never could rightly recall the exact speech in looking back on that sad affair.

"You—you are all right, my son," he said, "but if Apache Kid gets out o' this—he 's—he's more fit like for——"

I saw his hand fumble again on his breast, and thought it was in an attempt to open his shirt; but then I caught the agony in his eye, such as you may have seen on a dumb man trying to make himself understood and failing in the attempt. Something of that look, but more woeful, more piteous to see, was on his face. He was trying to hold his hand to me; when I took it, he smiled and said:

"You or Apache—Meg." And that was the last of this kindly and likeable man who had done so much for us.

But what of the half-breed? Was he, too, slain? Not so; but he was of a more cunning race than I am sprung of. When I laid back Mr. Pinkerton's head and again looked around, the half-breed was gone from the place where he had lain.

There, on his belly almost, he was creeping upon Farrell from the rear. To me it seemed the maddest and most forlorn undertaking.

There was Farrell with the two revolvers held to Apache Kid's head, talking softly, too quietly for me to hear, and Apache Kid replying in a low tone without any attempt at rising. And Farrell cried out: "Nobody try to fire on me! At a shot I fire too! My fingers is jest ready. I 'm a desperate man."

I crouched low, my breath held in dread, my heart pounding in my side,

at long intervals, so that I thought it must needs burst. I did not even dare look again at that crawling savage, lest Farrell might perhaps cast another such quick glance as he had already bestowed on me and, seeing the direction of my gaze, realise his danger.

The result of such a discovery I dared not imagine. There was enough horror already, without addition. It was just then that Donoghue gave a queer little wheezing moan and his eyes opened; but even as I turned to him, "crash!" went a shot and I spun round, a cry on my lips; and there lay Apache Kid, as I had seen him before Donoghue's voice called me away from observing him. But now he had clutched Farrell's right wrist in what must have been a mighty sudden movement, and was pushing it from him. He had leapt sidewise a little way, but without attempting to rise.

There, thrusting away, in a firm grasp, the hand that held the smoking weapon, he still looked up in Farrell's eye, the other revolver before him so that he must have looked fairly into it.

"You durn fool!" said Farrell. "You think I did n't mean what I said? Well, let me tell you that I run no more chances. Oh! you need n't grasp this arm so fierce. I don't have to use it. But, Apache Kid, I 'm goin' to kill you now. I reckon that that there Lost Cabin ain't for any of us,—not for you, for sure. Are you ready?"

"Quite ready," I heard Apache Kid say, his voice as loud as Farrell's now, but more exultant still. It horrified me to hear his voice so callous as he looked on death. I wondered if now I should not risk a shot as a last hope to save him.

"There, then!" cried Farrell.

But there followed only the metallic tap of the hammer,—no report, only that steely click; and before one could well know what had happened, Apache Kid was the man on top, shoving Farrell's head down in the sand, but still clutching Farrell's right wrist and turning aside that hand that held the weapon which, on his first sudden movement, had sent its bullet into the sand beside Apache.

"You goat!" cried Apache Kid. "When you intend to use two guns, see that they both are loaded, or else don't hold the one that you 've fired the last from right in front of—" He broke off and flung up his head, like a wolf baying, and laughed.

He was a weird sight then, his face blackened from the shot he had evaded. But by this time, I need hardly tell you, I was by his side, helping to hold down the writhing Farrell—and the half-breed brought us the lariat from his horse and we trussed Farrell up, hands and feet, and then stood up. And as we turned from him there was Donoghue sitting up with a foolish look on his face and the blood trickling on his brow; and, pointing a hand at us, he cried out, "Come here, some o' you sons o' guns, and tie up my head a bit so as I kin git up and see his hangin'

afore I die.”

Farrell writhed afresh in his bonds as he heard Donoghue’s cry, and in a voice in which there seemed nothing human, he roared, “What! is that feller Donoghue not killed?”

”No, sir!” Donoghue replied, his head falling and his chin on his breast, but eyes looking up, with the blood running into them from under his ragged eyebrows: ”No, sir,—after you!” he cried, and he let out that hideous oath that I had heard him use once before, but cannot permit myself to write or any man to read.

CHAPTER XVI

Sounds in the Forest

[image]

e hanged Farrell in the morning, for he had broken the compact and he was a murderer. And we laid Pinkerton to his rest in the midst of the plain, with a cairn of stones to mark the spot.

Let that suffice. As for these two things you may readily understand I have no heart to write. And indeed, it would be a depraved taste that would desire to read of them in detail. I know you are not of those who will blame me for this reticence.

When I told Apache Kid of Mr. Pinkerton’s last words he was greatly moved, as I could see, though he kept a calm front, and he told the half-breed, who left us then, to convey to Miss Pinkerton our united sympathy with a promise that we would visit her immediately on our return from our expedition.

Then we set out again, a melancholy company, as you will understand, Apache Kid and I carrying all the provisions that he thought fit to take along with us; for Donoghue was too light-headed to be burdened with any load, and lurched along beside us as we made toward the hills that closed in the plain to north, lurched along with the red handkerchief around his head and singing snatches of song now and again. The bullet had ploughed a furrow along the side of his head, and though the bleeding had stopped he was evidently mentally affected by the wound.

It was drawing near nightfall again when we came to the end of this seeming cul-de-sac of a valley, and the hills on either side drew closer to us.

Before us now as we mounted, breathing heavily, up the incline we saw the woods, all the trees standing motionless, and already we could look well into the hazy blue deep of that place.

"I have been here before," said Apache, "but not much farther. We thought we might have to push clear through this place and try what luck there was in getting a shelter beyond. They pushed us very close that time," he said meditatively. But so absently did he speak this that, though I could not make any guess as to who it was that was "pushing" him "close" and who was with him on that perilous occasion, I forbore to question.

You have seen men in that mood yourself, I am sure, speaking more to the air than to you.

He turned about at the entering into the wood and we looked down on the plain stretching below us. A long while he gazed with eyelids puckered, scanning the shelving and stretching expanse.

"Two parties have followed us," he said in a whisper almost. "God grant there be no more, else when we get the wealth that lies in store for us we shall hardly be able to enjoy it for thinking of all it has cost us. It has been the death of one good man already," he added. "Ah, well! There is no sign of any mortal there. We must push on through this wilderness before us."

He stopped again and considered, Donoghue rocking impotent and dazed beside us.

"I wonder where Canlan is to-night," he said, and then we plunged into the woods.

If the silence of the plain had been intense, we were now to know a silence more august. I think it was our environment then that made Apache Kid speak in that whisper. There was something in this deep wood before us that hushed our voices. I think it was the utter lack of even the faintest twitter of any bird, where it seemed fitting that birds should be, that influenced us then almost unconsciously. Our very tread fell echoless in the dust of ages there, the fallen needles and cones of many and many an undisturbed year. It was with a thrill that I found that we had suddenly come upon what looked like a path of some kind. Apache Kid was walking first, Donoghue following, the knotted ends of the handkerchief sticking out comically at the back of his head under his hat.

"You see, we're on to a trail now," said Apache Kid, as he trudged along. "You never strike a trail just at the entrance into a place like this. Travellers who have passed here at various times, you see, come into the wood at all sorts of angles, where the trees are thin. But after one gets into the wood a bit and the trees get thicker, in feeling about for a passage you find where someone has

been before you and you take the same way. A week, or a month, or a year later someone else comes along and he follows you. This trail here, for all that you can see the print of a horse's hoof here and there on it, may not have been passed over this year by any living soul. There may not have been anyone here since I was here last myself, three years ago—yes, that print there may be the print of my own horse's hoof, for I remember how the rain drenched that day, charging through the pass here and dripping from the pines and trickling through all the woods."

"It is a pass, then?" said I.

"Oh, yes," he explained. "It is what is called, in the language of the country, a buck's trail. That does not mean, as I used to think, an Indian trail. It is the slang word for a priest. You find these bucks' trails all over the country. They were made by the priests who came up from old Mexico to evangelise and convert the red heathen of the land. I think these old priests must have been regular wander-fever men to do it. Think of it, man, cutting a way through these woods. Aha! See, there's a blaze on a tree there. You can scarcely make it out, though; it's been rained upon and snowed upon and blown upon so long, year in, year out. Turn about, now that we are past it, and you see the blaze on this side. Perhaps the old buck made that himself, standing back from the tree and swinging his axe and saying to himself: 'If this leads me nowhere, I shall at least be able to find my way back plain enough.' Well! It's near here somewhere that I stopped that time, three years ago. Do you make out the sound of any water trickling?"

We stood listening; but there was no sound save that of our breathing, and then suddenly a "tap, tap, tap" broke out loud in the forest, so that it startled me at the moment, though next moment I knew it was the sound of a busy woodpecker.

We moved on a little farther, and then Apache Kid cried out in joy:

"Aha! Here we are! See the clear bit down there where the trees thin out?"

We pushed our way forward to where, through the growing dusk of the woods, there glowed between the boles a soft green, seeming very bright after the dark, rusty green of these motionless trees.

"There is n't much elbow room round about us here to keep off the wild-cats," said Apache Kid, looking round into the forest as we stepped forth into this oasis and found there a tiny spring with a teacupful of water in its hollow. The little trickle that went from it seemed just to spread out and lose itself almost immediately in the earth; but it served our purpose, and here we camped.

Donoghue had been like a dazed man since morning, but now, after the strong tea, he was greatly refreshed and had his wits collected sufficiently to suggest that we should keep watch that night, lest another party were following us up. He also washed the wound in his forehead, and, finding it bleeding afresh after that, pricked what he called the "pimples" from a fir-tree, and with the sap

exuding therefrom staunched the bleeding again, and I suppose used one of the best possible healers in so doing.

That there were wildcats in the woods there was no doubt. They screamed half the night, with a sound like weeping infants, very dolorous to hear. Apache Kid took the first watch, Donoghue the second, and I the third. I was to waken them at sunrise, and after Donoghue shook me up and I sat by the glowing fire, I remember the start with which I saw, after a space, as I sat musing of many things, as one will muse in such surroundings, two gleaming eyes looking into mine out of the woods—just the eyes, upright ovals with a green light, turning suddenly into horizontal ovals and changing colour to red as I became aware of them.

We were generally careful to make our fire of such wood as would flame, or glow, without shedding out sparks that might burn our blankets; but some such fuel had been put on the fire that night, and it suddenly crackled up then and sent forth a shower of sparks. And at that the eyes disappeared. I flicked the sparks off my sleeping comrades and then sat musing again, looking up on the stars and alternately into the darkness of the woods and into the glow of the fire, and suddenly I saw all along the forest a red line of light spring to life, and my attention was riveted thereon.

I saw it climb the stems of trees far through the wood and run up to the branches. A forest fire, thought I to myself, and wondered if our danger was great in that place. I snuffed the air. There was certainly the odour of burning wood, but that might have been from our camp-fire alone, and there was also the rich, unforgettable odour of the balsam.

But so greatly did the line of fire increase and glow that I stretched forth my hand and touched Donoghue upon the shoulder. He started up, and, following the pointing of my finger, glared a moment through the spaces of the forest. Then he dropped back again.

"It is the dawn," he said, and drew the blankets over his head. "Wake me in another hour."

But I sat broad awake, my heart glowing with a kind of voiceless worship, watching that marvellous dawn. It spread more slowly than I would have imagined possible, taking tree by tree, running left and right, and creeping forward like an advancing army; and then suddenly the sky overhead was full of a quivering, pale light, and in the dim blue pool of the heavens the stars went out. But no birds sang to the new day, only I heard again the tap-tap of a woodpecker echoing about through the woods.

So I filled the can with water, which was a slow process at that very tiny spring, and mixed the flour ready for the flapjacks and then woke my comrades.

I must not weary you, however, recounting hour by hour as it came. I have

other things to tell you of than these,—matters regarding hasty, hot-blooded man in place of a chronicle of slow, benignant nature.

On the journey of this day we came very soon to what seemed to be the "height of land" in that part, and descending on the other side came into a place of swamp where the mosquitos assaulted us in clouds. So terribly did they pester us that on the mid-day camp, while Apache Kid made ready our tea (for eatables we did with a cold flapjack apiece, having made an extra supply at breakfast, so as to save time at noon), I employed myself in switching him about the head with a leafy branch in one hand, while with the other I drove off another cloud of these pests that made war upon me.

No sooner had we the tea ready than we put clods and wet leaves upon the fire, raising a thick smoke, a "smudge," as it is called, and sitting in the midst of that protecting haze we partook of our meal, coughing and spluttering, it is true; but the smoke in the eyes and throat was a mere nothing to the mosquito nuisance.

I think that for the time being the mosquitos spurred us forward as much as did our fear of being forestalled in our quest. Mounting higher on our left where a cold wind blew, instead of dipping down into the next wooded valley, we found peace at last. As we tramped along on this crest, where our view was no longer cramped, where at last we could see more than the next knoll before us or the next abyss of woods, I noticed Apache constantly scanning the country as though he were trying to take his bearings.

Donoghue, who was now more like his rational, or irrational self, soon seemed to waken up to his surroundings, and fell to the same employ.

It was to the valley westward, now that we were upon the ridge, that they directed their attention. Donoghue, his loose jaw hanging, his teeth biting on his lips, posted on ahead of us and suddenly he stopped, stood revealed against the blue peak of the mountain on whose ridge we now travelled, in an attitude that bespoke some discovery. He was on a little eminence of the mountain's shoulder, a treeless mound where boulders of granite stood about in gigantic ruin, with other granite outposts dotted down the hill into the midst of the trees, which stood there small and regular, just as you see them in a new plantation at home. He shaded his eyes from the light, looked finally satisfied, and then sat down to await our coming.

Apache stepped forward more briskly; quick and eager we trotted up the rise where Donoghue merely pointed into the valley that had now for over an hour been so eagerly scanned. There, far off, in the green forest bottom, the leaden grey glint of a lake showed among the wearisome woods.

"Ah! We'll have a smoke up," said Apache, with an air of relief. So we sat down on our blanket-rolls in the sunlight. There was a gleam in my companions'

eyes, a look of expectation on their faces, and after that "smoke up" Apache spoke with a determined voice, dropping his cigarette end and tramping it with his heel.

"We camp at that lake to-night," said he.

"To-night?" said I, in astonishment, for it seemed to me a monstrous length to go before nightfall; but he merely nodded his head vehemently, and said again: "To-night," and then after a pause: "We lose time," said he, "there may be others." and we rose to our feet.

"We could n't camp up here, anyhow," said Donoghue, looking round.

It was truly a weird sight there, for we could see so many valleys now, hollows, gulches, clefts in the chaos of the mountains; here, white masts of trees all lightening-struck on a blasted knoll; there, a rocky cut in the face of the landscape like a monstrous scar; at another place a long, toothed ridge that must have broken many a storm in its day. Besides, already, though it was but afternoon, a keen, icy-cold wind ran like a draught there and the voice of the wind arose and died in our ears from somewhere in that long, rocky backbone, with a sound like a railway train going by; and so it would arise and cease again, and then cry out elsewhere in a voice of lamentation, low and mournful.

Apache Kid was looking round and round, his eyes wide and bright.

"I should like to see this in Winter," said he, "when leaves fall and cold winds come."

"There 's no mortal man ever saw this in Winter," said Donoghue, "and no man ever will."

I saw Apache Kid linger, and look on that terrible and awesome landscape, with a half-frightened fondness; and then he cast one more glance at the leaden grey of the lake below and another at a peak on our right and, his bearings thus in mind, led the way downward into that dark and forbidding valley.

I shall never forget the journey down to that lake.

Winding here, winding there, using the axe frequently as the thin trees I mentioned were passed, and we entered the virgin forest below, close and tangled, we worked slowly down-hill; and it was with something of pleasure that we came at last again onto what looked like a trail through the forest. It was just like one of the field paths at home for breadth; but a perfect wall of tangled bush and trees netted together with a kind of tangled vine (the pea-vine, I believe it is called), closed it in on either side.

We were on the track of the indomitable "buck" again, I thought. But it was not so. His trail had kept directly on upon the hill, Apache Kid told me.

"I thought you saw it from the knoll there," he said, and then with a queer look on his face, "but you can't go back now to look on it. Man, do you know that a hunger takes me often to go back and see just such places as that on the summit there? I take an absolute dread that I must die without ever seeing them

again. There are places I cannot allow myself to think of lest that comes over me that forces—aye, forces—me to go back again for one look more. I love a view like that more than ever any man loved a woman.”

Donoghue looked round to me and touched his forehead and shook his head gently.

”Rathouse,” he said: ”crazy as ever they make ’em.”

”But this is a trail we have come onto, sure enough,” I said.

My companions looked at it quietly and I noticed how they both at once unslung their Winchesters from their shoulders, for Donoghue had again taken his share of our burdens.

”Not exactly a trail,” said Apache Kid, ”at least, neither an Indian’s trail nor a buck’s trail this time. What was that, Donoghue?”

A sharp crack, as of a branch broken near us, came distinctly to our ears.

Donoghue did not answer directly but said instead:

”You walk first; let Francis here in the middle. I’ll come last,” and Donoghue dropped behind me.

Apache nodded and we started on our way.

Neither to left nor right could we see beyond a few feet, so close did the underbrush still whelm the way.

The sound of our steps in the stillness was more eerie than ever to my ears. I felt that I should go barefoot here by right, soundless, stealthy, watching every foot of the way for a lurking death in the bushes.

”Crack,” sounded again a broken branch on our left.

”Well,” said Apache, softly—I was treading almost on his heels and Donoghue was close behind me—”twigs don’t snap of their own accord like that in mid-summer.”

We kept on, however, not hastening our steps at all, but at the same even, steady pace, and suddenly again in the stillness—”Crack!”

Again a branch or twig had snapped near by in the thick woods through which we could not see.

CHAPTER XVII

The Coming of Mike Canlan

[image]

here was a cold shiver ran in my spine at that second crack, for it was eerie to know that some live thing, man or beast, was following us up through the bushes.

"It's a lion, sure thing," Donoghue said behind me, "and it's goin' at this stalking of us darned careless, too. I wisht we could get to a clear place and give him a chance to show himself."

"Lion?" asked I, astonished.

"Yes—panther, that is," said Apache Kid.

"In the phraseology of the country, that is," I suggested.

Apache looked over his shoulder at me.

"You are pretty cool for a tenderfoot," he remarked. "This is a bad spot for us to be stalked by a beast like that. Let me come behind now, Larry," he continued. "We are getting to a clear place, I think, and he may spring before we get out."

"Not you," said Larry. "Just you go on ahead and let the lad keep in between."

Here the bushes thinned out considerably and when we reached this opener part Donoghue bade us walk straight on.

"Don't look back," said he. "Let him think we don't know he's followin'. Give him a chance to cross this here glade. We'll stop just inside them further trees and if he shows himself there, we'll get him then, sure thing. What between men and beasts we suttingly have been followed up some this trip, and I'm gettin' tired of it. This here followin' up has got to end."

But though we carried out Donoghue's suggestion, crossing the open space, entering again on the path where it continued down-hill in the forest again, and halting there, the "lion" did not show himself.

It was here, while standing a little space, waiting for the panther's appearance, if panther it was that shadowed us, that Apache Kid pointed a finger at the ground before us, where a tiny trickle of water, in crossing the path, made it muddy and moist.

"See the deer marks?" he whispered. "Neat, aren't they? This, you see, is a game trail from the hills down to the lake——"

"No good," broke in Donoghue. "He ain't going to show himself."

So we passed on, and soon the way became more precipitous; the underbrush cleared; the trees thinned; and in a jog trot we at last went rattling down the final incline and came right out with the impetus of that run upon the open ground around the lake, though of the lake itself, now that we were at its level, we could discern little—only tiny grey glimpses, so closely was it thronged about by rushes, and they so tall.

A thousand frogs were singing, making quite a din in our ears, so pent in was the sound in that cup-like hollow. But weary as we were, we rejoiced to have

come to our desired camp and soon were sitting fed and contented round the fire.

Of all our camps so far this seemed to me the most secure. Consequently, it horrified me a little when Apache Kid remarked, taking his cigarette from his lips:

"Where do you think Canlan will be to-night?"

Donoghue considered the burning log:

"Oh! Allowing for him getting on to us pulling out, even the day after we left, and allowing for him starting out right then, he can't be nigher here than a day's journey, coming in to the country the way he would do it—over the shoulder of Mount Baker and in that ways."

"He 'll be over behind there, then," said Apache, pointing; "right over that ridge, sitting by his lonesome camp and perhaps half a dozen fellows dogging him up too, eh?"

"Like enough," said Donoghue; "but he's accustomed to bein' dogged up."

"Those who live in glass houses..." remarked Apache Kid, with a laugh that had no real merriment in the ring of it.

Donoghue raised his eyes to Apache's across the fire and laughed back. And they both seemed to fall into a reverie after these words. From their remarks I gathered that they believed that Canlan really knew the location of the mine. He had been simply waiting in Baker City, then, for fear of my two partners. So I sat silent and pondering. Presently Apache Kid snorted and seemed to fling the thoughts aside that had been occupying him. But anon he fell brooding again, biting on his lip and closing an eye to the glow.

It was after one such long, meditative gazing into the glowing and leaping embers that he spoke to me, and with such a ring in his voice as caused me to look upon him with a new interest. The tone of the voice, it seemed to me, hinted at some deep thought.

"Where do you come from, Francis?" he asked. "What is your nationality?"

"Why, I'm a Cosmopolitan," said I, half smiling, as one is prone to do when a man asks him some trivial matter with a voice as serious as though he spoke of strange things.

"Yes; we all are," said Apache Kid, putting aside my lightness. "But is n't it Edinburgh you come from?"

"Yes," said I.

He mused again at my reply, plucking his finger-knuckles, and then turned an eye to Donoghue, who was already surveying him under his watchful brows.

"Shall I tell him?" he asked.

"Tell him what?" said Donoghue, looking uncomfortable, I thought, as though this mood of his partner's was one he did not relish.

"Tell him what we are—how we live—all that?"

From Apache to me and back again Donoghue glanced, and then: "Oh! tell, if you like," said he. "There won't no harm come from telling him. He's safe. He's all right, is Francis."

Again there was a pause.

"Well," said Apache Kid, finally, ending his reverie. "The fact is that we—Donoghue and I—except upon occasion, when we want to make some sort of a character for ourselves, to show a visible means of support,—the fact is, we are——"

"Spit it out," said Donoghue. "Spit it out. It ain't everybody has the courage to be."

I considered what was coming.

"The fact is," said Apache Kid, "we are what they call in this country road-agents—make our living by holding up stage-coaches and——"

"By gum! we've held up more nor stage-coaches," cried Donoghue, and began fumbling in an inner pocket with eager fingers.

"And banks," said Apache Kid, gazing on me to see the effect of this disclosure.

Donoghue stretched across to me, his loose face gleaming with a kind of joy.

"Read that," he said. "Read what that says;" and he handed me a long newspaper cutting.

What I read on the cutting was:

"Daring Hold-Up of the Transcontinental.
The Two-some Gang again at Work."

"That's us," said Donoghue, gloating. "It reads pretty good, but Apache here says there ain't no sense in the headin' about the two-some gang—says them journalist boys is no good. Seems to me a right slick notice—that's us, anyway."

Apache Kid seemed disturbed, annoyed.

"Well! what do you think?" he said, fixing me with his eye.

"I'm sorry," said I.

Donoghue threw back his head and laughed.

"It's not the right sort of way to live?" said Apache Kid, questioningly. "You know I can make out a fine case in its defence."

"Yes," I replied. "I have no doubt you could, and that's just what makes me all the more sorry to think of your doing this. Still, I feel that you having told me prevents me stating an opinion."

"If someone else had told——" he began.

"Then I might speak," said I.

"Should it not be the other way about?" he asked, half smiling.

"Perhaps it should," said I. "But if you honour me by telling me, it is enough for me just to say I am sorry. Would you have me preach?"

He looked on me with great friendliness.

"I understand the sentiment," said he. "But I should like you to preach, if you wish."

"Well," said I, "I have no doubt you could, with the brains you have and your turn for sophistry, make out a very entertaining defence for such a life. 'Murder as a fine art,' you know——"

"Murder?" asked Donoghue; but Apache Kid silenced him with a gesture, and I continued:

"But neither you nor those who heard your defence could treat it otherwise than as a piece of airy and misplaced, misdirected wit, on a par with your misplaced love of adventure."

He nodded at that part, and his face cleared a little.

"That but makes me all the more sorry," said I, "to know you are——" I paused. "A parasite!"

I blurted out.

"Parasite!" he cried; and his hand flew down to his holster, wavered, and fell soundless on his crossed legs.

It was the first time he had looked on me in anger.

"What's parasite?" asked Donoghue.

"A louse," said Apache Kid.

"Hell!" drawled Donoghue, and glanced at me. "You need lookin' after."

"There are parasites and parasites," said I. "In this case it is more like these deer-lice we came by in the forest."

We had suffered from these, but I have not said anything of them, for the subject is not pleasant.

"Well," drawled Donoghue. "They are fighters, anyway, they are. You kind o' respect them."

Apache Kid smiled.

"Yes," he said, in a low voice, "it's the right word, nevertheless."

Donoghue jeered.

"Waal! Here's where I come in! Here's the beauty of not being ediccated to big words nor what they mean, nor bein' able to follow a high-toned talk except the way a man follows a poor-blazed trail."

Apache surveyed him with interest for a moment and then again turning to me he heaved a little sigh and said:

"I wonder if you would do something for me after we get through with this expedition? If I were to give you a little wad of bills, enough for a year's holiday

at home, I wonder if you 'd go and take a squint at the house where my folks lived when I left home; find out if they are still there, and if not, trace them up? You 'd need to promise me not to let that sentimental side of you run away with you. You 'd need to promise not to go and tell them I'm alive; for I 'm sure they have given me up for dead years ago and mourned the allotted space of time that men and women mourn—and forgotten. It would only be opening fresh wounds to hear of me. They have grieved for my death; I would not have them mourn for my life. But I—well, I sometimes wonder. You understand what I mean—”

”Watch your eye!” roared Donoghue. ”Watch your—” but a shot out of the forest sent him flying along the ground, he having risen suddenly and stretched for his rifle.

Instead of clutching it he went far beyond, ploughing the earth with his outstretched hands; and right on the first report came a second and Apache cried: ”O!”

He sagged down all in a heap, but I flung round for my revolver—the one with which I had had no practice. I heard the quick, dull plod of running feet and before I could get my finger on my weapon a voice was bellowing out:

”Don't shoot, man; don't shoot! It's Canlan; Mike Canlan. You ain't hostile to Mike Canlan.”

I wheeled about, and there he was trailing his smoking rifle in his left hand and extending his right to me; Mike Canlan, little Mike Canlan with the beady eyes, the parchment-like, pock-marked face, and the boy's body.

Had my revolver been to hand, he had been a dead man, I verily believe—he or I. As it was, I leapt on him crying:

”Murderer! Murderer!”

Down came my fist on his head and at the jar his rifle fell from his grasp. The next stroke took him on the lips, sending him backwards. I pounded him till my arms were weary, he lying there with his faded, pock-marked face and his colourless eyes dancing in pain and crying out: ”Let up! Let up, you fool! We ain't hostile. It's Canlan!” he cried, between blows. ”Mike Canlan.”

At last I did ”let up” and stood back from him.

He sat up and wiped the blood from his mouth and spat out a tooth.

”Ah, lad,” he said. ”Here's a fine way to repay me for savin' your life. Think I could n't have laid you out stark and stiff there aside them two?”

My gorge rose to hear him talk thus.

”Easy I could have done it,” he went on, ”but I didn't. And why?”

He sidled to me on his hams without attempting to rise, and held up a finger to me.

”Why, lad, you saved my life once, so I spared yours this blessed night. That's me, that's Mike Canlan. And see here, lad, you and me now—”

"Silence!" I cried, drawing back from his touch, as he crept nearer.

I had seen murder done, of the most horrible kind. I had seen a big-hearted, sparkling-eyed man, not yet in his prime, struck out of life in a moment. What he was telling me of himself was nothing to me now. I only knew that I had come to like him and that he was gone—slain by this little, insignificant creature that you could not call a man. And I had seen another man, whom I did not altogether hate, sent to as summary an end. I held this man who talked in the sing-song voice at my feet in horror, in loathing. I bent to feel the heart of Apache Kid, for I thought I saw a movement in his sun-browned neck, as of a vein throbbing and—

"O! They're dead, dead and done with," cried Canlan. "If they was n't, I 'd shove another shot into each of 'em just to make sure. But they 're dead men, for Canlan killed 'em. If they was n't, I 'd shove another shot into each of them!"

The words rang in my ears with warning. I had just been on the point of trying to raise Apache Kid; a cry of joy was almost on my lips to think that life was not extinct; but the words warned me and I turned about.

"He's dead, ain't he?" said Canlan, and I lied to him.

"Yes," I replied. "He is dead, and as for you——"

"As for me—nothing!" said Canlan, and he looked along his gleaming barrel at where my heart fluttered in my breast.

"You and me," said he, "has to come to terms right now. Oh! I don't disre-spec' you none for not takin' kindly to this. I like you all the better for it. But think of what you 've fallen into all through me. Here 's half shares in the Lost Cabin Mine for you now instead of a paltry third—half shares, my lad. How does that catch you?"

I was not going to tell him the terms I was here on, but I said:

"Put down your rifle then, and let us talk it over."

"Come, now, that's better," said Canlan, cheerily; but I noticed that a nerve in his left cheek kept twitching oddly as he spoke, and his head gave constant nervous jerks left and right, like a man shaking flies away from him, and he sniffed constantly, and I think was quite unaware that he did so. But I did not wonder at his nervousness after such a heinous deed as he had performed that evening.

CHAPTER XVIII

The Lost Cabin is Found

[image]

ome, come," said Canlan, suddenly, with an access of the facial twitching and another sudden jerking of his head. "If them 's your blankets, pack 'em up and let's git out o' this, back to my camp the other side of the lake."

I thought it as well to obey him, for if either of these men yet lived and should by any ill fortune emit as much as a moan, I knew that Canlan would make a speedy end then. If they lived, the best I could do for them was to leave them.

And yet there was another thing that I might do—snatch up one of the revolvers and straightway mete out justice—no less—upon this murderer.

But he was on the alert and shoved his Winchester against my neck as I stooped, tying my blanket-roll, with my eyes surreptitiously measuring the distance to the nearest weapon.

"See here," he said, "I can't be runnin' chances with you. I 've let you off already, but I can't be givin' you chances to kill me now. Funny thing it would be for me to let you off for having saved my life once, and then you turn round and plug me now. Eh? That would be a skin kind of a game to play on a man. If that's your gun layin' there with the belt, you can buckle on the belt but keep your hands off the gun, or I gets tired o' my kindness. See?"

He snarled the last word at me, and over my shoulder I saw the leer on his grey face as he spoke. So I packed my blankets without more ado and buckled on my belt, with the revolver in its holster hanging from it, and at Canlan's suggestion took also a bag of flour with me.

"I guess there ain't no call to see what them two has in their pockets by way of dough," [#] said he. "We don't have no need for feelin' in dead men's pockets now—you and me," and he winked and laughed a dry, crackling, nervous laugh, and stooped to lift a torch from our fire.

[#] Money.

With this raised in his hand he whirled about on me and said: "Now remember, I trusts you," and led off at a brisk pace from the trodden circle of the camp-fire. He had the tail of his eye on me, and I followed at once.

We skirted the lake, keeping under the trees, the torch sending the twisted shadows flying before us and bringing them up behind; and just at the bend of the lake I looked back at that camp, and it brought to my mind the similar, or almost similar, scene I had witnessed in the place of smouldering stumps behind

Camp Kettle.

We plodded round the north end of this little lake, and then a horse whinied in the gloom, and, "Here we are," cried Canlan, and stooping, he thrust the torch into the embers of the fire he had evidently had there and trodden out suddenly. He kicked it together again, and soon the flames were leaping up vigorously. Then he turned and looked on me.

"Well," said he, "you and your friends must ha' travelled pretty quick. Clever lads! Clever lads! Did you know that you was goin' to try and spoil Mike Canlan's game that day I gave you good-bye at Baker City?"

"Not I," I replied. "I did not know then that you knew the secret."

"Ah well, I did! Clever lad Apache thought himself, I guess, slinkin' away down to Camp Kettle and cuttin' in that ways. Well, I ain't surprised he took that way. He knows it well. If all stories is true, he 's played hide and seek in that same valley more nor once with gentlemen that had some desire for to settle accounts with him."

He blinked on me, and then sniffed twice, and suddenly pursed his lips and said:

"But that ain't here nor there. Are you on to take my offer o' half shares in this?"

The whole man was still loathsome to me, and I cried out:

"No, no! And would to Heaven I had never heard of this horrible and accursed quest."

"Well," drawled Canlan, "I 'm gettin' some tired o' havin' no sleep nights for sittin' listenin' for fellers follerin' me up. Not that they 'd kill me in my sleep. I guess I 'm too precious like for that. I 've been keepin' myself up on tanglefoot all the way in, but I did n't bring nigh enough for them mountains, and it's give out. It's give out this last day and a night, and by jiminy, I 'm gettin' them again. I feel 'em comin' on. It ain't good for a man like me wantin' my tonic. Say," and his face twitched again, "I 'm jest holdin' myself together now by fair devil's desperation; when I get to the end o' this journey I 'm gettin' some scared my brain-pan will jest—" he stopped abruptly and began on a fresh track: "Well, it's natural, I guess, for you to feel bad to-night, you bein' partners o' them fellers so recent. But you'll be better come morning. Say, if I lay down and sleep you won't shoot me sleepin', eh?"

"I won't do that," said I.

"That's a bargain, then," he cried, and before I could say another word he threw himself down beside the fire.

He drew his hand over his brow and showed me it wet.

"That's for wantin' the liquor," he said. "A man what don't know the crave can't understand it. I know what I need though. Sleep,—that's what I need; and

I 'm jest goin' to force myself to sleep."

I made no reply, but looked on him as he lay, and perceived that his ghastly face was all clammy in the fire-sheen as he reclined in this attempt to steady his unstrung nerves. For me, I sat on, scarcely heeding the noises of the midnight forest. I heard a mud-turtle ever and again, with that peculiar sound as of a pump being worked. That was a sound new to me then, but the other cries—of the wildcats and wolves—I heeded little.

Once or twice I thought of taking a brand from the fire to light me round to the camp across the lake, that I might discover whether, indeed, both my friends were dead. But, as I turned over this thought of return in my mind, Canlan brought down his arms again from above his head where they had lain relaxed, and, opening his eyes, rolled on his side and looked up at me.

"Don't you do it," he said.

"Do what?" I inquired.

"What you was thinkin' of," he replied.

"And what was that?"

"You know," he said, thickly and grimly, "and I know. Two men alone in the mountains can't ever hide their thoughts from each other. Mind you that!"

"What was I thinking of doing, then?" I asked.

"That's all right," he said. "You can't bluff me."

"Well, what then?" I cried, irritated.

He sat up.

"You was thinkin' of goin' right off, right now. No, it wasn't to get in ahead of me at the Cabin Mine. I 'm beginnin' to guess that Apache Kid did n't let you know so much as that. But you was just feelin' so sick and sorry like that you thought o' gettin' up quiet and takin' my hoss there and——"

He was watching my face as he spoke, peering up at me and sniffing. With a kick he got the fire into a blaze, but without taking his eyes from me. Then, "No, you was n't thinkin' that, either," he said, in a voice as of disappointment that his power of mind-reading seemed at fault.

"Derned if I dew know what you was thinkin'," he acknowledged. "Oh, you 're deeper than most," he went on, "but I 'll get to know you yet. Yes, siree; I 'll see right through you yet."

He lay down after this vehement talk, as though exhausted, wiping the sweat from his brow where it gleamed in the little furrows of leathery skin. He was not a pretty man, I assure you.

A feeling as of pride came over me to think that this evil man was willing to take my word that I would not meddle him in his sleep, as I saw him close his eyes once more,—this time really asleep, I think.

But to attempt to return to Apache Kid's camp I now was assured in my

mind would be a folly. At a merest movement of mine Canlan might awaken, and if he suspected that I entertained a hope of at least one of my late companions being alive, he might himself be shaken in his belief in the deadly accuracy of his aim.

I pictured him waking to find me stealing away to Apache's camp and stealthily following me up. I even pictured our arrival at the further shore—the still glowing fire, both my companions sitting up bleeding and dazed and trying to tend each other, Canlan marching up to them while they were still in that helpless predicament and blowing their brains from his Winchester's mouth. So I sat still where I was and eventually dozed a little myself, till morning came to the tree-tops and slipped down into the valley and glowed down from the sky, and then Canlan awoke fairly and stretched himself and yawned a deal and moaned, "God, God, God!"—three times.

And I thought to myself that this reptile of a man might well cry on God on waking that morning.

Neither he nor I, each for our own reasons, ate any breakfast. My belongings I allowed him to pack on his horse with his own, so that I might not be burdened with them, the chance of a tussle with Canlan being still in my mind. Then, after we had extinguished the fire, a thought came to me. It was when I saw that he was going to strike directly uphill through the forest that I scented an excuse to get back to my comrades. True, my hope that they lived was now pretty nigh at ebb, for I argued to myself that if life was in them, they would already have managed to follow us. Aye! I believed that either of them, supposing even that he could not stand, would have *crawled* along our trail at the first light of day, bent upon vengeance; for I had learnt to know them both as desperate men—though to one of them, despite what I knew of his life, I had grown exceedingly attached.

"I 'll go back to our old camp," said I, "and bring along an axe if you are going right up that way. We may need it to clear a way for the horse."

He wheeled about.

"Say!" he said. "What are you so struck on goin' back to your camp for. Guess I 'll come with you and see jest what you want."

He looked me so keenly in the eye that I said at once, knowing that to object to his presence would be the worst attitude possible: "Come, then," and stepped out; but when he saw that I was not averse to his company he cried out:

"No, no. I have an axe here that will serve the turn if we need to do any cutting. But I reckon we won't need to use an axe none. It's up this here dry watercourse we go, and there won't be much clearin' wanted here."

It was now broad day, and as I turned to follow Canlan again I gave up my old friends for dead.

The man's short, broad back and childish legs, and the whole shape of him, seemed to combine to raise my gorge.

"I would be liker a man," I thought, "if I struck this reptile dead." And the thought was scarce come into my mind and must, I think, have been glittering in my eyes, when he flashed around on me his colourless face, and said he:

"Remember, I trust my life to you. I take it that you 've agreed to my offer of last night to go half shares on this. God knows you 'll have to look after me by nightfall, this blessed day—unless there 's maybe a tot o' drink in that cabin."

At the thought he absolutely screamed:

"A tot o' drink! A tot o' drink!" and away he went with a sign to me to follow, scrambling up the watercourse before his horse, which followed with plodding hoofs, head rising and falling doggedly, and long tail swishing left and right. I brought up the rear. And thus we climbed the greater part of the forenoon, with occasional rests to regain our wind, till at last we came out on the bald, shorn, last crest of the mountain.

Canlan marched the pony side on to the hill to breathe; and he himself, blowing the breath from him in gusts and sniffing a deal, pointed to the long, black hill-top stretching above us.

"A mountain o' mud," he said. "That's it right enough. Some folks thinks that everything that prospectors says they come across in the mountains is jest their demented imaginatings like; but I seen mountains o' mud before. There 's a terror of a one in the Crow's Nest Pass, away up the east Kootenai; and there's one in Colorado down to the Warm Springs country. You can feel it quiver under you when you walk on it—all same jelly. See—you see that black crest there? That's all mud. This here, where we are, is good enough earth though, all right, with rock into it. It's here that we turn now. Let me see—"

He took some fresh bearings, looking to the line of hills to the south-east. I thought I could pick out the notch at the summit, over there, through which Apache Kid, Donoghue, and I had come; and then he led off again—along the hill this time, his head jerking terribly, and his whole body indeed, so that now and again he leapt up in little hopping steps like one afflicted with St. Vitus' dance.

Up a rib of the mountain, as it might be called, he marched, I now walking level with him; for I must confess I was excited.

And then I saw at last what I had journeyed so painfully and paid so cruelly to see,—a little "shack," or cabin, of untrimmed logs of the colour of the earth in which it stood, there, just a stone's cast from us, between the rib on which we stood and the next rib that gave a sweeping contour to the hill and then broke off short, so that the mountain at that place went down in a sharp slope, climbed upon lower down by insignificant, scrubby trees. But there—there was the cabin, sure enough. There was our journey's end.

Canlan turned his ashen face to me, and his yellow eyeballs glittered.

"It looks as we were first," he said, his voice going up at the end into a wavering cry and his lips twitching convulsively.

CHAPTER XIX

Canlan Hears Voices

[image]

ou should have seen the way in which Canlan approached that solitary, deserted cabin. One might have thought, to see him, that he fully expected to find it occupied.

"Hullo, the shack," he cried, leading his horse down from the rocky rib on which we had paused to view the goal of our journey. I noticed how the horse disapproved of this descent; standing with firm legs it clearly objected to Canlan's leading. The reins were over its head, and Canlan was a little way down the rib hauling on them, half-turned and cursing it vehemently. It could not have been the slope that troubled the animal, for that was trifling; but there it stood, dumbly rebellious, its neck stretched, but budge a foot it would not.

At last it consented to descend, but very gingerly feeling every step with doubtful forefeet, and craned neck still straining against Canlan. Even when he succeeded in coaxing and commanding it to the descent it seemed very doubtful about going out on the hollow toward the shack, and reminded me, in the way it walked there, of a hen as you may see one coming out of a barn when the rain takes off.

"What in thunder's wrong with you?" cried Canlan. "Come along, will you? Looks as if there was somebody, sure thing, in the shack. Hullo, the shack! Hullo, the cabin!" he hailed again.

"—the shack! Hullo, the cabin!" cried out the rib beyond, in an echo.

So Canlan advanced on the cabin, his rifle loose on his arm, right up to the door on which he knocked, and from the sound of the knocking I declare I had an idea that the place was tenanted.

He knocked again.

"Sounds as if there was somebody in here," he said, in a low, thick whisper,

so that I thought he was afraid.

He knocked again, rat-tat-tat, and sniffed twice, and piped up in his wheezy voice: "Good day, sir; here's two pilgrims come for shelter."

It was at his third rap, louder, more forcible on the door, which was a very rough affair, being three tree-stems cleft down the centre and bound together with cross-pieces, as I surmised, on the inside,—just at the last dull knock of his knuckles that the door fell bodily inward, and a great flutter of dust arose inside the dark cabin.

"Anyone there?" he asked, and then stepped boldly in.

"Nobody here," he said, bringing down his rifle with a clatter. "One has to be careful approaching lonesome cabins far away from a settlement at all times."

Then suddenly he turned a puzzled face on me.

"Queer that, eh?"

"What?"

"Why, that there door. Propped up from the inside. If there was any kind of a smell here apart from jest the or'nary smell of a log shanty, I 'd be opining that that there number three o' this here *push* that worked the mine— Say!—" he broke off, "where in thunder is the prospect itself?"

And out he went of the mirk of the cabin, in a perfect twitter of nerves, and away across to the spur of which I told you.

There I saw him from the door (by which the pack-horse stood quiet now, the reins trailing) kick his foot several times in the earth. Then he turned to see if I observed him, and flicking off his hat waved it round his head and came posting back.

"There 's half a dozen logs flung across the shaft they sunk," said he, "and they're covered over with dirt, to hide it like. Let's get in first and see what's what inside."

There was no flooring to the cabin and at one end was a charred place on the ground. Canlan looked up at the low roof there and, stretching up his hands, groped a little and then removed a sort of hatch in the roof.

"This here," said he, "hes bin made fast from the inside too—jest like the door. Look in them bunks. Three bunks and nothin' but blankets. And over the floor the blankets is layin' too, hauled about."

The light from the hatch above was now streaming in.

"Them blankets is all chawed up," he said.

"Heavens!" I gasped. "Were they driven to that?"

"What devils me," he said, not replying to my remark but looking round the place with a kind of anxiety visible on his forehead, "is this here fixin' up from the inside. There's blankets, picks, shovels, all the outfit, and there's the windlass and tackle for the shaft-head. No," he said, recollecting my remark, "them blankets

was n't chewed up by them. Rats has been in here—and thick. See all the sign o' them there?"

He pointed to the floor, but it was then that I observed, in a corner, after the fashion of a three-cornered cupboard, a rough shelving that had been made there. Every shelf, I saw, was heaped up with something,—but what? I stepped nearer and scrutinised.

"Look at all the bones here," I said.

Canlan was at my side on the very words.

"That's him!" he said, in a gasp of relief. "That's him. That's number three. That's him that stuck up the door and the smoke hole."

I turned on him, the unspoken question in my face, I have no doubt.

All the fear had departed from his face now as he snatched up a bone out of one of the shelves.

These bones, I should say, were all placed as neatly and systematically as you could wish, built up in stacks, and all clear and clean as though they had been bleached.

"This here was his forearm," said Canlan, his yellow eyeballs suddenly afire with a fearsome light; and he rapped me over the knuckles with a human elbow.

"Ain't it terrible?" he said.

"It is terrible," said I.

"Ah!" he cried. "But I don't mean what you mean; I mean ain't it terrible to think o' that?" and he pointed to the cupboard, "to think o' comin' to that—bein' picked clean like that—little bits o' you runnin' about all over them almighty hills inside the rats' bellies and your bones piled away to turn yellow in a spidery cupboard."

I stepped back from his grinning face.

"But how do these bones come there?" I said.

"It's the rats," he replied, "them mountain rats always pile away the bones o' everything they eat—make a reg'lar cache o' them; what for I dunno; but they do; that's all."

I stood then looking about the place, thinking of the end of that "number three," all the horror of his last hours in my mind; and as I was thus employed, with absent mien, suddenly Canlan laid his hand on my arm.

"What you lookin' that queer, strained ways for?" he whispered, putting his face within an inch of mine, so that I stepped back from the near presence of him. "That was a mighty queer look in your eyes right now. Say; do you know what you would make? You'd make an easy mark for me to mesmerise. You 'd make a fine medium, you would."

I looked at him more shrewdly now, thinking he was assuredly losing his last hold on reason; but he flung back a step from me.

"O! You think me mad?" he cried, and verily he looked mad then. "Eh? Not me. You don't think I can mesmerise you? I've mesmerised heaps—men too, let alone women," and he grinned in a very disgusting fashion. "Say! If we could only see a jack-rabbit from the door o' this shack, I'd let you see what I could do. I'd give you an example o' my powers. I can bring a jack-rabbit to me, supposin' he's lopin' along a hillside and sees me. I jest looks at him and *wills* him to stop—and he stops. And then I wills him to come to me—and he comes. Mind once I was tellin' the boys at the Molly Magee about bein' able to do it and they put up the bets I could n't—thought I was jest bluffin' 'em, and I went right out o' the bunkhouse a little ways and fetched a chipmunk clean off a rock where he was settin' lookin' at us,—there were n't no jack-rabbits there,—fetched him right into my hand. And then a queer, mad feelin' come over me—I can't just tell you about it—I don't just exactly understand it myself. I closes my hand on that chipmunk and jest crushed him dead atween my fingers. And suthin' seemed kind o' relieved here then, in the front o' my head, right here. The boys never forgot that. They kind o' lay away off from me after that—did n't like it. Yes, I could mesmerise you."

He waved his hands suddenly before my eyes.

"Feel any peculiar sensation at that?" he said.

"Yes," said I.

"What like?" he asked.

"I feel that I'll not let you do it again," said I.

"Scared like? Feel kind o' slippin' away?"

"No," I said quietly: "not scared one little bit. But I object to your waving your hands within an inch of my face. Any man of grit would n't allow it."

"Well, well, say no more. We'd better be investigating this yere shack. God! If there was only a drink on the premises. I tell you *they're* comin' on again, and when they come on I'm fearsome—I am."

He looked round the place again and then cried out in a voice of agony:

"Look here! I don't want to lose holt o' myself yet; perhaps a little bit of grub now might help me. I reckon I might be able to shove some down my neck as a dooty. You go and make up the fire outside, do."

He spoke this in a beseeching whine. To see the way the creature changed and veered about in his manner was interesting.

"We ain't goin' to sleep in here to-night, anyways, not for Jo, wi' them mountain rats comin' in on us. It'll take quite a while o' huntin' to get all their holes filled up. You go and make dinner. I could do a flapjack and a slice o' bacon, I think, with a bit o' a struggle and some resolution like."

Anything that might prevent me having a madman on my hands in that wilderness was not to be ignored, so I went out and ran down the slope to where

the bushes climbed, and gathered fuel, a great armful, and so came back again and made up a fire.

Water was not so easy to find, but a muddy and boggy part of the hill led me to a spring, and I set to work on preparing food.

With all this coming and going I must have been busied quite half an hour before even getting the length of mixing the dough. Canlan, by that time, had got the windlass out and had lugged it across to the covered shaft beside the spur of outcropping rock that ran down parallel with the ridge in the lee of which I had lit the fire. He went back to the cabin and carried out the coil of rope, and had just got that length in his employ when I called him over for our meal; our evening meal it was, for, intent on our labours, we had not noticed how the sun was departing. All the vasty world of hollows below us was brimmed with darkness. All the peaks and the mountain ridges marching one upon the other into the shadowing east were lit, toward us, with the last light when Canlan sat down to force himself to eat. But I saw he had difficulty in swallowing. The jerking of face and hands, I also perceived, was increasing past ignoring. So too, presently became the fixed stare of his eye upon us as he sat with his hand frozen on a sudden half-way to his mouth.

"Listen! Don't you hear nuthin'?" he asked, hoarse and low.

"Nothing," said I.

"Ah! It's jest them fancies," said he, and fell silent.

Then again, with a strange, nervous twitch and truly awful eyes, he said in a whisper, "Say, tell me true? Did n't you hear suthin' right now?"

"I heard a coyote howl," I said.

"No, no; but somebody whispering?" he said. "Two or three people all huddling close somewhere and tellin' things about me. By gum! I won't have it! I dursent have it!" he said in a low scream—which is the best description of his voice then that I can give you.

I shuddered. He was a terrible companion to have here on this bleak, windy hillside, with the thin trees below us marching down in serried ranks to the thicker forest below, and the scarped peaks showing against the pale moon that hung in the sky awaiting the sun's going.

I shook my head.

"Sure?" he asked.

"Positive," said I.

He bent toward me and said in a small voice, "Keep your eye on me now. I ain't goin' to ask you another time, for I think when I speak they stop a-whispering; but I'll jest twitch up my thumb like this—see?—fer a signal to you when I hear 'em."

He sat hushed again; and then suddenly his eyes started and he raised his

thumb, turning a face to me that glittered pale like lead.

"Now?" he gasped.

"Nothing," I said: "not a sound."

"Ah, but I spoke there," he said. "I ought n't to have spoken; that scared 'em; and they quit the whispering when they hear me."

He sat again quiet, his head on the side, listening, and I watching his hand, thinking it best to humour him and to try to convince him out of this lunacy.

But my blood ran chill as I sat, and his jaw fell suddenly in horror for a voice quavering and ghastly cried out from somewhere near by, "Mike Canlan! Mike Canlan! I see you, Mike Canlan!"

And a horrible burst of laughter that seemed to come from no earthly throat broke the silence, died away, and a long gust of wind whispered past us on the hill-crest.

It had been evident to me that though Canlan bade me hearken for the whispering voices that he himself did not actually believe in their existence. He had still sufficient sense left to know that the whispering was in his own fancy, the outcome of drink and of—I need not say his conscience, but—the knowledge that he had perpetrated some fearsome deeds in his day, deeds that it were better not to hear spoken in the sunlight or whispered in the dusk.

But this cry, out of the growing night, real and weird, so far from restoring equanimity to his mind appeared to unhinge his mental faculties wholly. His eyeballs started in their sockets; and there came the cry again:

"Mike Canlan! Mike Canlan! I 'm on your trail, Mike Canlan!"

As for myself, I had no superstitious fears after the first cry, though I must confess that at the first demented cry my heart stood still in a brief, savage terror. But I speedily told myself that none but a mortal voice cried then; though truly the voice was like no mortal voice I had ever heard.

It was otherwise with Canlan. Fear, abject fear, held him now and he turned his head all rigid like an automaton and, in a voice that sounded as though his tongue filled his mouth so that he could hardly speak, he mumbled: "It's him. It's Death!"

Aye, it was death; but not as Canlan imagined.

There was silence now, on the bleak, black hill, and though I had mastered the terror that gripped me on hearing the voice, the silence that followed was a thing more terrible, not to be borne without action.

Then suddenly the voice broke out afresh quite close and Canlan turned his head stiffly again and I also looked up whence the voice came—and there was the face of Larry Donoghue looking down on us from the rib of rocky hill under whose shelter we sat. There was a trickle of blood, or a scar—it was doubtful which—from his temple down his long, spare jaw to the corner of the loose

mouth; the eyes stared down on us like the eyes of a dead man, blank and wide.

He stretched out his arms and gripped in the declivity of the hill with his fingers, crooked like talons, and pulled himself forward; but at that tug he lost his balance, lying on his belly as he was, and came down the slope, sliding on his face, the kerchief still about his head as I had seen him when I thought he had breathed his last.

In Canlan's mind there was no question but that this was Larry Donoghue's wraith. He tried to cry out and could not, gave one gulping gasp in his throat, and when Donoghue slid down the bank, as I have described, Canlan leapt to his feet and ran for it—ran without any intelligence, straight before him.

I have told you that the next rib of rock broke off sheer and went down in a declivity. Thither Canlan's terror took him; and the last I saw of him was his legs straddled in the run, out in mid-air, as though to take another stride; and then down he went. But it was to Donoghue I turned and strove to raise him. For one fleeting moment he seemed to know me; our eyes met and then the light of recognition passed out of his and he sank back. It was a dead man I held in my arms, and though I had never greatly cared for him, that last glance of his eye was so full of yearning, so pathetic, so helpless that I felt a lump in my throat and a thickness at my heart and as I laid him back again I burst into a flood of tears that shook my whole frame.

A strange, gusty sound in my ear and the feeling of a hot vapour on my neck brought me suddenly round in, if not fear, something akin to it. But I think absolute fear was pretty well a thing I should never know again after these occurrences.

It was Canlan's horse standing over me snuffing me; and when I raised my head he gave a quiet whinny and muzzled his white nose to me. Perhaps in his mute heart the horse knew that these sounds of mine bespoke suffering, and truly these pack-horses draw very close to men, in the hills.

But though the horse brought me back in a way to manliness and calm it was a miserable night that I spent there. I sat up and with my chin in my hands remained gazing vacantly eastwards until the morning broke in my eyes. And behind me stood the horse thus till morning, ever and again touching my shoulder with his wet nose, his warm breath puffing on my cheek.

I was thankful, indeed, more than I can tell you, for that companionship. And now and then I put up my hand and when I did so the beast's head would come gently down for me to clap his nose, and doing so I felt myself not altogether

alone and friendless on that hill of terror and of death.

CHAPTER XX

Compensation

[image]

rom where I sat on the frontage of that hill, the black, treeless mountain behind me, the hurly-burly of the scattered, out-cropping hills and tree-filled basins below me, as the sun came up in my face, my gaze was attracted to a bush upon the incline.

This bush stood apart from the others on the hill, like an advance scout; and as the sunlight streamed over the mountains I saw the branches of it agitated and a bird flew out, a bird about the size of a blackbird. I do not know its name, but it gave one of the strangest cries you ever heard—like this:

”Bob White! Bob White! Bobby White!”

And away it flew with a rising and falling motion and down into the cup below, from where its cry came up again.

It is difficult for me to tell you exactly what that bird meant to me then. My heart that was like a stone seemed cloven asunder on hearing that bird’s liquid cry. That there was something eerie in the sound of it, so like human speech, did in nowise affect me. To terror, to the weird, to the unknown I now was heedless. But at that bird’s cry my heart seemed just to break in sunder and I wept again, a weeping that relieved me much, so that when it was over I felt less miserable and heartsore. And I prayed a brief prayer as I had never prayed before, and was wondrously lightened after that; and turning to the horse, as men will do when alone, I spoke to it, caressing its nose and pulling its pricked ears. And then it occurred to me that if Donoghue had survived his wound, Apache Kid might still be alive. It had been for Apache, indeed, that I had entertained greater hope.

”Shall we go down to the valley and see if my friend still lives?” I said, speaking to the horse; and just then the beast flung his head up from me and his eyeballs started.

I looked in the direction of his fear—and there was Apache Kid and no other, climbing up from the direction of the bush whence the bird had flown away.

I rushed down the rise upon him with outspread arms, and at our meeting embraced him in my relief and joy, and dragged him up to my fire, and had all my story of my doings of the night, the day, and the night told him, and of Donoghue and of Canlan—a rattling volley of talk, he listening quietly all the while, and smiling a little every time I broke in upon my tale with: "You do not blame me, Apache?"

And then I asked him, all my own selfish heart being outpoured, how it was that I found him here alive.

"As for your accusations," he said, "dismiss them from your mind. In all you have told me I think you acted with great presence of mind and forethought. As for my escape from death, and Larry's, it must have been due entirely to the condition of that reptile's nerves, as you describe him to me."

He had been standing with his back to where Donoghue lay, and now in the light that took all that black hillside at a bound, I saw a sight that I shall never forget. For there, where should have been the dead man's face, was nought but a skull, and perched upon the breast of the man and licking its chops, showing its front teeth, was one of the great mountain rats.

Apache Kid followed the gaze of my eyes, looked at me again with that knitting of the brows, as in anger almost, or contempt.

"Brace up!" he said sharply.

"Brace up!" I cried. "Is it you who tell me to brace up, you who brought me into this hideous place, you who are to blame for all this! I was a lad when you asked me to accompany you that day at Baker City—it feels like years ago. Now, now," and I heard my voice breaking, "now I am like a man whose life is blighted."

When I began my tirade he looked astonished at first, and then I thought it was a sneer that came upon his lips, but finally there was nothing but kindness visible.

"I was only trying the rough method of pulling you together," he said, "and it seems it has succeeded. Man, man, you have to thank me. Come," and taking me by the arm and I unresisting, he led me to the cabin.

It was curious how then I felt my legs weak under me, and all the hill was spinning round me in a growing darkness. I felt my head sinking and heard my voice moan: "Oh! Apache, I am dying. This night has killed me!" and I repeated the words in a kind of moan, thinking myself foolish in a vague way, too, I remember, and wondering what Apache Kid would think of me. And then the darkness suddenly closed on me, a darkness in which I felt Apache Kid's hands groping at my armpits, lifting me up, and then I seemed to fall away through utter blackness.

When I came again from that darkness, I stretched out my hands and looked

around.

I had been dreaming, I suppose, or delirious and fevered, for I thought myself at home in the old country, imagined myself waking in the dark Hours; but only for a moment did that fancy obtain with me. All too soon I knew that I was lying in the Lost Cabin, but by the smell of the "fir-feathers" on which I lay, I knew that they were freshly gathered, and from the bottom of my heart I thanked Apache Kid for his forethought. For to have wakened in one of these bunks would, I believe, have made me more fevered than I was already. It was night, or coming morning again. The hatch was off the roof, and through that hole a grey smoke mounted from a fire upon the earthen floor. The door was fastened up again.

At my turning, Apache Kid came to me out of the shadows and bent over me; but his face frightened me, for with the fever I had then on me it seemed a monstrous size, filling the whole room. I had sense enough to know from this that I was ill, and looking into that face which I knew my fever formed so hideously, I said:

"Oh, Apache Kid! It would be better to die and have done with it."

"Nonsense, man," he said. "Nonsense, man. There are so many things that you have to live for:" and he held up his left hand, the fingers seeming swollen to the size of puddings, and began counting upon them. "You have a lot of duties to perform to mankind before you can shuffle off. Shall I count some of them for you?" And he put his right forefinger to the thumb of his left hand and turned to me as though to begin; but he thought better of it, and then said he:

"I know you have a lot to do before you can shuffle off. But if you would perform these duties, you must calm yourself as best you can."

"How long have I lain here?" I asked suddenly.

"Just since morning," said he. "A mere nothing, man. After another sleep you will be better, and then we—" he paused then.

"We will do what?" I said.

"We will get out of here and away home," he said, and took my hand just as a woman might have done, and wiped my brow and kept smoothing my hair till I slept again.

From this I woke to a sound of drumming, as of thousands of pattering feet.

It was the rain on the roof. Rain trickled from it in many places, running down in pools upon the floor. The smoke hole was again covered, the fire out, but the door was open, and through it I had a glimpse of the hills, streaming with rain and mist.

Apache Kid sat on one of the rough stools by the door, looking outward, and I called him.

He came quick and eager at my cry.

"Better?" he said. "Aha! That's what the rain does. And here 's the man that was going to die!" he rallied me. "Here, have a sip of this. It is n't sweet, but it will help you. I've been rummaging."

"What is it?" I asked.

"Just a little nip of cognac. They had that left, poor devils. It's a wonder Canlan—" he continued, and then stopped; doubtless I squirmed at the name.

I took over the draught, and he sat down on the fir-boughs and talked as gaily as ever man talked. All the substance of his talk I have forgotten, only I remember how he heartened me. It was my determination to fight the fever and sickness, that we had nothing in the way of medicines to cure, that he was trying to awaken. And I must say he managed it well.

With surprise I found myself sitting up and smoking a cigarette while he sat back nursing a knee, laughing on me and saying:

"Smoking a cigarette! A sick man! Sitting up—and inhaling, too—and blowing through the nose—a sick man—why, the thing's absurd!"

I looked and listened and smiled in return on him, and some thought came to me of what manner of man this was who ministered so kindly to me, and also of how near death's door he himself had been.

"How are you?" I asked. "Where was it you said you had been wounded? I fear I was so sick and queer that I have forgotten everything but seeing you again."

"I?" he said. "Oh, I have just pulled myself together by sheer will-power. I have a hole in my side, filled up with resin. But that's a mere nothing. It 'll hold till we get back to civilisation again, or else be healed by then. Thank goodness for our late friend's shaky hand." And at these words it struck me, thinking, I suppose, how narrowly Apache had missed death, that Canlan might be alive despite his fall.

Apache read the thought before I spoke. He nodded his head reassuringly, and said:

"We are safe from him. He will trouble us no more. I have seen, to make sure."

"I think I should be ashamed of myself," said I, "for giving in like this."

"Nonsense," said he. "You were sick enough last night, but you are all right now. Could you eat a thin, crisp pancake?—I won't say flapjack. A thin, crisp pancake?"

I thought I could, and found that he had a few ready against such a return to my normal. As I ate, he meditated. I could see that, though he spoke gaily enough, there was something on his mind. He looked at me several times, and then at last: "Do you think you could stand bad news?" he asked.

I looked up with inquiry.

"It's a fizzle, this!" he snapped; and then he told me that sure enough the three original owners of the mine had "struck something." But the ore, according to Apache Kid's opinion of the samples lying in the cabin, was of such a quality that it would not repay anyone to work the place.

"O," he said, "if there was a smelter at the foot of the mountains, I don't say it would n't repay to rig up a bucket-tramway and plant; it's not so very poor looking stuff; but to make a waggon road, or even a pack-road, from here, say, to Kettle River Gap or even to Baker City and use the ordinary road there for the further transportation—no, it would n't pay. We might hold this claim all our lives and the country might never open up this way while we lived; and what would we be the better for it all?"

It mattered little to me. My soul was sick of it all.

"Of course, that's the black side," he broke off. "Again, this valley might be opened up—other prospects put on the market—and down there in that valley you 'd live to see the smoke of a smelter smelting the ore of this little place of yours." He paused again. "But I doubt it," he said.

"So it's a fizzle?" I said half-heartedly.

"Yes," said he. "That is, practically a fizzle. As the country is at present it does n't seem to me very hopeful. But of course I am one of those who believe in big profits and quick returns. It is perhaps scarcely necessary for me to tell you of that characteristic of mine, however, unless the excitement of your recent experience has caused you to forget the half-told story I was spinning to you when friend Canlan interrupted us. Man, how it does rain! And this," said he, looking up, "is only a preamble. If I 'm not in error, we 're going to have a fierce night to-night. The storm-king is marshalling his forces. He does n't often do it here, but when he does he does it with a vengeance. I think our best plan is to get the holes in this roof tinkered. I see the gaps round about have been blocked up recently. Was it you did that?"

I told him that the tinkering was Canlan's doing, to prevent an inroad of the rats, should we have slept in the place.

"Thanks be unto Canlan," said he. "We 'll start on the roof."

At this task I assisted, standing on the wobbly stool and filling up the crevices.

It was when thus employed that in a cranny near the eaves I saw a piece of what looked like gunnysacking protruding and catching hold of it it came away in my hand and there was a great scattering to the floor—of yellow raindrops, you might have thought; but they fell with a dull sound. I looked upon them lying there.

"What's that?" I cried. But indeed I guessed what these dirty yellow things were.

Apache Kid scooped up a handful and gave them but one glance. He was excited, I could see; but it was when he most felt excitement that this man schooled himself the most.

"Francis," said he, "there is, as many great men have written, compensation in all things. I think our journey will not be such a folly after all."

"These are gold nuggets?" said I. "Our fortunes are——" and then I remembered that I had already received my wages and that none of this was mine. "Your fortune is made," said I, correcting myself.

He smiled a queer little smile at my words.

"Well," he said, "if this indicates anything, my fortune is made in the only way I could ever make a fortune."

"Indicates?" I said. "How do you mean?"

"Pooh!" said he, turning the little, brass-looking peas in his hand. "These would hardly be called a fortune. Even a bagful of these such as you have unearthed don't run to very much. There is more of this sort of stuff in our cabin," said he.

I was a little mystified.

"Search!" he said. "Search! That is enough for the present. If our labours are rewarded, then I will give you an outline of the manner and customs of the Genus Prospector—a queer, interesting race."

We thought little now of filling up the holes in that cabin. It was more a work of dismantling that we began upon, I probing all around the eaves, Apache Kid picking away with one of the miners' picks, beginning systematically at one end of the cabin and working along.

"Here," I cried, "here is another," for I had come upon just such another sack and quickly undid the string.

"Why, what is this?" said I. "What are these?"

He took the bag and examined a handful of the contents—the green and the blue stones.

"This," said he, "is another sign of the customs of these men. This was Jackson's little lot, I expect; the man the Poorman boys picked up. Jackson was a long time in the Gila country."

"But what are they?" I said.

"Why, turquoises," replied Apache Kid.

"Turquoises in America?" I said.

"Yes," said he, "and a good American turquoise can easily match your Persian variety."

He went over and sat down upon his stool.

"I don't like this," said he, disgustedly, and I waited his meaning. "Fancy!" he cried, and then paused and said: "Fancy? You don't need to fancy! You see it

here before you. When I say fancy, what I mean is this: Can you put yourself, by any effort of imagination, into the ego of a man who has a fortune in either of his boot-soles, a fortune in his belt, a fortune in the lining of his old overcoat, and yet goes on hunting about in the mountain seeking more wealth, grovelling about like a mole? Can you get in touch with such a man? Can you discover in your soul the possibility of going and doing likewise? If you can, then you're not the man I took you for."

"They did n't get these turquoises here, then?" I said.

"Oh, no! I don't suppose that there is such a thing as a turquoise in this whole territory. Don't you see, we've struck these fellows' banking accounts? Did you ever hear of a prospector putting his whole funds in a bank? Never! He 'll trust the bank with enough for a rainy day. The only thing that he 'll do with his whole funds is to go in for some big gamble, such as the Frisco Lottery that put thousands of such old moles on their beam ends. In a gamble he 'll stake his all, down to his pack-horse. But he does n't like the idea of putting out his wealth for quiet, circumspect, two-a-half per cent interest. He 'd rather carry it in his boot-soles than do that any day."

Up he got then, and really I must leave it to you to decide how much was pose, how much was actual in Apache Kid, when he said:

"I think we had better continue our search, however, not so much for the further wealth we may find as to satisfy curiosity. It would be interesting to know just how much wealth these fellows would n't trust the banks with. Let us continue this interesting and instructive search."

For my part, I, who heard the ring in his voice as he spoke, think he was really greatly excited, and to talk thus calmly was just his way.

CHAPTER XXI

Re-enter—The Sheriff of Baker City

[image]

ardon the question," said Apache Kid, looking on me across the hoard, he sitting cross-legged upon one side, I sprawled upon the other, "but do you feel no slightest desire stealing in upon you to possess this all for yourself?"

I stared at him in astonishment, so serious he was.

"It does not even enter your head to regret my return from the dead?"

"Apache!" I exclaimed.

He chuckled to himself.

"I fear," said he, "that you are of too refined a nature for this hard world. I predict that before you come to the age of thirty you will be aware of its cruelty—always understanding when I say world that I mean the men in the world. I have to thank you for not suggesting that that was the way in which I used the word. It wearies me to have the obvious always iterated in my ears. So you feel no hankering to see me dead?"

I made no reply, and he chuckled again and then looked upon our trove.

We made certain we had found it all—the first bag of small nuggets of which I told you, the bag of turquoises, two more bags of larger nuggets, and three separate rolls of dollar and five-dollar bills. The bills amounted to a hundred and fifty dollars—a mere drop in the bucket, as Apache said. It was the two bags of larger nuggets and the bag of turquoises that were the real "trove," but Apache Kid would not hazard a guess of their value. All that he would say then, as he weighed them in his palm, was: "You are safe, Francis—you need no more run with the pack." I did not at the moment understand his use of the word "pack," but his next words explained it.

"The only way," said he slowly, rolling a cigarette with the last thin dust of tobacco that remained in his pouch, so that he had to shake it over his hand carefully, "the only way that I can see to prevent that world-weariness coming over you is for you to acquire a sufficiency to live upon, a sufficiency that shall make it unnecessary for you to accept the laws of the pack and rend and tear and practise cunning. I think, considering such a temperament as yours, I should call off with our old bargain and strike a new one with you—half shares."

I heaved a deep sigh. I saw myself returning home—and that right speedily—I saw already the blue sea break in white foam on the ultimate rocks of Ireland, the landing at Liverpool, the train journey north, the clean streets of my own town through which I hastened—home.

"Ah, these castles," said Apache Kid, after a pause which I suppose was very brief, for such thoughts move quickly in the mind. "They can all be built now."

Then he leant forward; and he was truly serious as he looked on me.

"But one thing you will do in return," he said, and it was as the sign of an agony that I saw on his face. "You will do that little bit of business for me that I asked you once before?"

He paused, hearkening; and I too was on the alert. The squelching of a horse's hoofs was audible without.

"Our pack-pony," said I; "it has come down for shelter, I expect."

He rose and walked to the door.

"Chuck that stuff under your bed!" said he, suddenly.

I made haste, with agitated hands, to carry out the order, and as I bent to my task I heard a voice that seemed familiar say:

"Apache Kid, I arrest you in the name of—"

The remainder I lost, for Apache Kid's cheery voice broke in:

"Well, well, Sheriff—this is an unexpected pleasure! Come in, sir; come in; though I fear we can offer but slender—"

"All right," I heard the sheriff say. "Glad to see you take it so well." And with a heavy tramp entered the sheriff of Baker City, booted and spurred and the rain running in a cascade from his hat, the brim of which was turned down all around.

"Donoghue," he said, "Larry Donoghue, I arrest you in— Say! Where's Donoghue, and what are you doin' here, you, sir?"

This latter was of course to me.

"Donoghue you can never get now," said Apache Kid. "He will be saved the trouble of putting up a defence. But won't you bring in your men?"

"Is that your hoss along there on the hill under that big tree?" said the sheriff.

"That," said Apache Kid, "was Canlan's horse, I believe."

The sheriff hummed to himself.

"So," he said quietly, "just so. There ain't any chance o' Canlan dropping in here, is there?"

"None whatever," said Apache Kid, calmly.

"So," said the sheriff. "Well, I guess them pinto broncs of ours can do very well under that tree. That bronc of Canlan's seemed some lonesome. Seemed kind o' chirped up to see others o' his species. They 'll do very well there till we get dried a bit."

He looked again at me and shook his head mournfully.

"You look kind of sick," he said, "but it's all right. Don't worry. You 'll only be in as a witness."

"Witness for what?" I asked.

"Murder of Mr. Pinkerton, proprietor of the Half-Way House to Camp Kettle."

Apache interrupted:

"Do you happen to have such a thing as quinine about you, Sheriff?"

"Sure," said the sheriff: "always carry it in the hills."

"Give my friend a capsule," he said, "and defer all this talk."

"Murder of Mr. Pinkerton!" I cried; but just then the sheriff stooped and lifted a slip of paper from the floor.

"Literature!" he said. "Keepsake *pome* or what?"

Then I noticed his firm, kindly eyebrows lift. He turned to Apache Kid.

"This," he said, "seems to have fallen out your press-cuttin' book. I see in a paper the other day where they supply press-cuttin's to piano wallopers and barn-stormers and what not. You should try one o' them. I disremember the fee; but it was n't nothing very deadly."

Then I knew what the cutting was that had come into his possession. It was the cutting Larry Donoghue had shown me in his childish, ignorant pride, the account of the "hold-up" by "the two-some gang." I must have thrust it absently into my pocket, hardly knowing what I was doing, when Canlan's shot interrupted the unusual conversation of that terrible camp.

The sheriff hummed over it.

"Kind o' lurid, this," he said; and at that comment Apache Kid's face became radiant in a flash.

"Sir," he said, "I am charmed to know you. You are a man of taste. I always object to the way these things are recounted."

The sheriff rolled his bright eye on Apache, misunderstanding his pleasure which, though it sounded something exaggerated, was assuredly genuine enough.

"I guess the way it's told don't alter the fact that in the main it's true. It would mean a term of years, you know."

For the first time in my knowledge of him Apache Kid's face showed that he had been hit. He gave a frown, and said:

"Yes, that's the ugly side of it; that's the reality. It must be an adventurous sort of life, the life portrayed in that cutting. I fancy that it is the adventuring, and not the money-getting, that lures anyone into it, and a man who loves adventure would naturally resent a prison cell."

The sheriff, with lowered head and blank eyes, gazed from under his brows on Apache Kid.

"I guess it's sheer laziness, sir," said he, "and the man who likes that ways of living, and follows it up, is liable to stretch hemp!"

"That would be better, I should fancy, than the prison cell," said Apache Kid. "The fellows told about there would prefer that, I should think."

The sheriff made no answer, but turned to the door and bade his men unharness the pintos and come in.

"You there, Slim," said he to one of the two; "you take possession o' them firearms laying there. But you can let the gentlemen have their belts."

Apache Kid was already kindling the fire. The rain had taken off a little, and before sunset there was light, a watery light on the wet wilderness. So the hatch was flung off and supper was cooked for all. The sheriff and these two

men of his—one an Indian tracker, the other ("Slim") a long-nosed fellow with steely glints in his eyes and jaws working on a quid of tobacco when they were not chewing the flapjack—made themselves at home at once. And it astounded me, after the first few words were over, to find how the talk arose on all manner of subjects,—horses, brands, trails, the relative uses and value of rifles, bears and their moody, uncertain habits, wildcats and their ways. Even the Paris Exposition, somehow or other, was mentioned, I remember, and the long-nosed, sheriff's man looked at Apache Kid.

"I think I seen you there," said he.

"Likely enough," said Apache Kid, unconcernedly.

"What was you *blowing in* that trip?" asked the long-nosed fellow, with what to me seemed distinctly admiration in his manner.

Apache looked from him to the sheriff. They seemed all to understand one another very well, and a cynical and half-kindly smile went round. The Indian, too, I noticed,—though he very probably had only a hazy idea of the talk,—looked long and frequently at Apache Kid, with something of the gaze that a very intelligent dog bestows on a venerated master, his intuition serving him where his knowledge of English and of white men's affairs were lacking.

They talked, also, about the ore that had gathered us all together there, and Apache Kid showed the sheriff a sample of it, and listened to his opinion, which ratified his own.

On the sheriff handing back the sample to Apache Kid the latter held it out to the assistant with the bow and inclination that you see in drawing-rooms at home when a photograph or some curio is being examined.

There was a quiet courtesy among these men that reminded me of what Apache Kid had said regarding Carlyle's remark on the manners of the backwoods. And it was very droll to note it: Apache in his shirt and belt, and the long-nose—I never heard him called but by his sobriquet of "Slim"—opposite him, cross-legged, with his hat on the back of his head and his chin in the palm of his hand, the elbow in his lap, at the side of which stuck out the butt of his Colt, the holster-flap hanging open.

"I know nothing about mineral," said Slim, in his drawl. "I 'm from the plains."

Apache Kid handed the ore over to the Indian, who took it dumbly, and turned it over, but with heedless eyes; and he presently laid it down beside him, and then sat quiet again, looking on and listening. Never a word he said except when, each time he finished a cigarette and threw the end into the fire, the sheriff with a glance would throw him his pouch and cigarette papers. The dusky fingers would roll the cigarette, the thin lips would gingerly wet it, and then the pouch was handed back with the papers sticking in it, the sheriff holding out a hand,

without looking, to receive it And on each of these occasions—about a dozen in the course of an hour—the Indian opened his lips and grunted, "Thank."

Then the conversation dwindled, and the sheriff voiced a desire "to see down that there hole myself"

The Indian had risen and gone out a little before this, and just as the sheriff rose he appeared at the door again, and looking in he remarked:

"Bad night come along down," and he pointed to the sky.

"Oh!" said the sheriff, "bad night?"

"Es, a bad mountain dis," said the Indian. "No good come here."

"You would n't come here yourself, eh?" said the sheriff, smiling, but you could see he was not the man to ignore any word he heard. He was wont to listen to everything and weigh all that he heard in his mind, and take what he thought fit from what he heard, like one winnowing a harvest.

"No, no!" said the Indian, emphatically. "I think—a no good stop over here. Only a darn fool white man. White man no care. A heap a bad mountain," he ended solemnly.

"Devils?" inquired the sheriff. "Bad spirits, may be?" and he looked as serious as though he believed in all manner of evil spirits himself.

The Indian seemed almost bashful now.

"O! I dono devil," he said, and then after thinking he decided to acknowledge his belief. "Ees," he said, and he looked more shy than ever, "maybe bad spirit you laugh. Bad mountain, all same, devil o' no devil."

"And what's like wrong with the mountain?"

"He go away some day."

"Mud-slide, eh?" asked Apache Kid.

The Indian nodded,

"O! Heap big mud-slide," he said. "You come a look."

We all trooped on his heels, and then he led us to the gable of the shanty and pointed up to the summit.

"Good preserve us," said Slim.

"Alle same crack," said the Indian. "Too much dry. Gumbo[#] all right; vely bad for stick when rain come; he hold together in dry; keep wet long time—all same chewing gum," he added with brilliancy.

[#] A sticky soil common in these parts.

"But this ain't like chewin' gum, heh?" said the sheriff, following the drift of the Indian's pidgin English.

"Nosiree," said the Indian, "no hold together, come away plop, thick."

"It's a durned fine picture he's drawin'," said Slim. "I can kind o' see it, though. 'Plop,' he says. I can kind o' hear that plop."

Along the hill above us, sure enough, we could see a long gash running a great part of the hill near the summit, in the black frontage of it.

"Well," said the sheriff, "I should n't like to be under a mud-slide. But you 'd think that them two ribs here would hold the face o' this hill together, would n't you?"

He looked up at the sky; sunset seemed a thought quicker than usual, and there were great, heavy clouds crawling up again, as last night, from behind the mountains.

Apache Kid had said not a word so far, but now he spoke.

"I 've seen a few mud-slides in my time, Sheriff," he said: "but this one would be a colossal affair. Might I ask you a question before I offer advice?"

"Sure," said the sheriff, wonderingly.

"Is it only the charge of murdering Mr. Pinkerton that you want me for, or would you try to make a further name for your smartness by using that clew you got about the two-some gang—not to put too fine a point upon it?"

You would have thought the sheriff had a real liking for Apache Kid the way he looked at him then.

He took the cutting from his sleeve, and tore it up and trampled it into the wet earth.

"I guess the hangin' will do you, without anything else," said he; from which, of course, one could not exactly gauge his inmost thoughts. But sheriffs study that art. They learn to be ever genial, without ever permitting the familiarity that breeds contempt—genial and stern.

"In that case," said Apache Kid, "I would suggest leaving this cabin right away. I want to clear myself of that charge; and if that crack widened during the night, I might never be able to do that."

CHAPTER XXII

The Mud-Slide

[image]

rom our scrutiny of the mountain above us the sheriff turned aside.

"If we have to leave here, I reckon I just have a look at that hole o' theirs and see what like it is to my mind," said he, "with all due respect to your judgment, sir," (this to Apache Kid) "and out of a kind o' curiosity."

He bade the Indian go with him to tend the windlass and Apache Kid and I returned to the cabin, Slim following ostentatiously at our heels, and remaining at the door watching the sheriff.

I plucked my friend by the sleeve. This was the first opportunity we had had for private speech since the sheriff's arrival.

"Apache," I said, "what is the meaning of this arrest? Is it the half-breed that came with Mr. Pinkerton who has garbled the tale of his death for some reason?"

He shook his head.

"No," said he, "not the half-breed. I'll wager it is some of Farrell's gang that are at the bottom of it."

"But they," I began, "they were all—" and I stopped on the word.

"Wiped out?" he said. "True; but you forget Pete, the timid villain."

"But he," I said, "he was away long before that affair of poor Mr. Pinkerton."

"Yes, but doubtless the Indian made up on him, and whether they talked or not Pete could draw his conclusions. And a man like Pete, one of your coyote order of bad men, would just sit down and plot and plan—"

"But even then," I said, "they can't prove a thing that never occurred; they can't prove that you did what you never did."

He looked at me with lenient, sidewise eyes, not turning his head, and then pursed his lips and gazed before him again at the door, where Slim's long back loomed against the storm-darkened sky.

"All this," said he, "is guesswork, of course; for the sheriff is reticent and so am I. But as for *proving*, I dare say Pete could get a crony or two together to swear they saw me. O! But let this drop," he broke out. "If there's anything that makes me sick now, it's building up fabrications. Let us look on the bright side. Gather together your belongings and thank Providence for sending us the convoy of the sheriff to see us safely back to civilisation with our loot."

"You 're a brave man," I said. But he did not seem to hear.

"What vexes me," said he, "is to think that Miss Pinkerton may have heard this yarn and placed credence in it."

The entrance of the sheriff, with a serious face, put an end to the conversation then.

"Well," said Apache Kid, "what do you think?"

"I think this is a derved peculiar mountain," said the sheriff, "and I reckon

you boys had better pack your truck. That hole 's full."

"Water?" said Apache Kid.

"No," said the sheriff: "full of mountain. You can see the upward side of it jest sliding down bodily in the hole, props and all. They must ha' had some difeiculty in it, the way they had it wedged. You noticed?"

"Yes."

"Well, it's just closed up now, plumb. Went together with a suck, like this yere," and he imitated it with his mouth. "Reckon we better get ready to pull out, if needs be. What in thunder—" he broke off.

Apache Kid, Slim, and the sheriff looked at each other. You should have heard the sound. It was like the sound of one tearing through a web of cloth—a giant tearing a giants web and it of silk.

"The horses!" the sheriff cried; but the Indian had already gone. "How about yours, young feller?"

I made for the door to follow the Indian and catch the horses, out onto the hillside—and saw only half the valley. The other half was hid behind the wall of rain that bore down on us.

The Indian was ahead of me, scudding along to where the lone pine stood; but the terrified horses saw us coming and ran to meet us, quivering and sweating.

Then the rain smote us and knocked the breath clean out of me. I had heard of such onslaughts but had hardly credited those who told of them. I might have asked pardon then for my unbelief. I was sent flying on the hillside and was like a cloth drawn through water before I could get to my feet again. The Indian was scarcely visible, nor his three horses. I saw him prone one moment, and again I saw him trying to hold them together as he—how shall I describe it?—*lay* aslant upon the gale. I succeeded in quieting my beast, and then turned and signed to him that I would lead one of his beasts also, for when I opened my mouth to speak, he being windward of me, the gust of the gale blew clean into my lungs so that I had to whirl about and with lowered head gasp out the breath and steady myself. But he signed to me to go, and nodded his head in reassurance; though what he cried to me went past my ear in an incomprehensible yell.

Thus, staggering and swaying, we won back to the rib beside the cabin, but this we could scarcely mount. So the Indian, coming level with me, stretched his hand and signed that he would hold my pack-horse with his own. I saw the sheriff battling with the gale and the dim forms of Apache Kid and Slim a little ahead of him, Slim and Apache Kid weighted greatly down. How we ever succeeded in getting the saddles on the horses seemed a mystery. But the beasts themselves were in a state of collapse with terror. I dare say they would have stampeded had there been any place to stampede to; but there was no place. For a good

five minutes you might have thought we were hauling on saddles and drawing up straps and cinches on the bed of a lake that had a terrible undercurrent in it. Then the first onslaught passed and we saw the hill clear for a moment, but still lashed with hail, so that our hands were stiff and numb. The sheriff and Apache Kid were floundering back to the cabin, and it was then that the catastrophe that the Indian had feared took place. Mercifully, it was not so sudden as an avalanche of snow; for, at the united yell of the three of us who cowered there with the beasts, the sheriff and Apache Kid looked up at the toppling mountain. Aye, toppling is the word for it. The lower rim of the chasm I told you of was falling over and spreading down the surface of the hill. It was a slow enough progress to begin with, and the two men seemed to waver and consider the possibility of again reaching the cabin. Then they saw what we beheld also—the whole face of the mountain below the chasm sagged forward. It looked as though there was a steadfast rib along the top; but barely had they gained the rocky part where we stood, than that apparent backbone collapsed upon the lower part, and, I suppose with the shock of the impact on the rest, completed the mischief. The sound of it was scarce louder than the hiss of the rain, a multitude of soft bubblings and squelchings. But if there was with this fall no sound as when a rock falls, it was none the less awful to behold.

We saw the mountain slide bodily forward, and the one thought must have flashed into all our minds at once, "If this rock on which we stand is not a rib of the hill, but is simply imbedded in that mud mountain, we are lost."

That of course could scarcely be, but nevertheless we all turned and fled along the ridge, horses and men, and, as we looked over our shoulders, there was the farther spur of rock, which had attracted the three prospectors, slipping forward and down, whelmed in the slide. The rest was too sudden to describe rightly. A great crashing of trees and a rumbling, now of rocks, came up from the lower valley, and the mountain absolutely subsided in the centre and went slithering down. We posted along the face of the hill here to the south, I think each of us expecting any moment to feel the ground fail under him. But at last we gained the hard, rocky summit of a ridge that ran edgewise into that black mountain. There we paused and looked back.

There was now a dip in the ridge, where before had been an eminence; and farther along, where a new precipice had been made by this fall, we saw (where the rain drove) huge pieces of earth loosen and fall, one after the other, upon the blackness below. But these droppings were just as the last shots after a battle, and might keep on a long while, sometimes greater, sometimes less, but never anything to compare with the first fall.

But we could not remain there. A fresh bending over of the tree-tops, like fishing-rods when the trout runs, a fresh flurry of wind, and a sudden assault of

hail sent us from that storm-fronting height to seek shelter below.

One would have thought that there could be no dry inch of ground in all the world; the hills were spouting foaming torrents, and in our flight, as we passed the place up which Canlan and I had come, I saw the watercourse no longer dry, but a turbulent rush of waters.

It was farther along the hill, so anxious were we to pass beyond the possibility of any further crumbling, that we made a descent. Our faces were bruised with the hail and we were stiff with cold, when at last we came to what you might call an islet in the storm.

The hill itself, quite apart from its watercourses, was all a-trickle and a-whisper with water, but here was a little rise where the water went draining around on either side, and in the centre of the rise a monster fir-tree, the lowest branches about a dozen feet from the ground which all around the tree was dust-dry, so thick were the branches overhead.

Under this natural roof we sheltered; here we built our fire, dried ourselves, and cooked and ate the meal of which we stood so greatly in need; and after that we sat and hearkened, with a subdued gladness and a kind of peaceful excitement in our breasts, to the voices of the storm—the trailing of the rain, the cry of the wind, and the falling of trees.

So we spent the night, only an occasional raindrop hissing in our little fire or blistering in the dust. But by morning the itching of the ants had us all early awake. It was in a pause in the breakfast preparations that Slim remarked:

"Well, I guess anybody that wants that there ore now will find it in bits strewed about the valley. It won't need no crushing before it gets smelted."

"Yes," said the sheriff, "there's abundance o' 'floats' lying in among that mud, but, now that I think on it, that was the tail end they were on, them three fellers. In the course o' time yonder chunk was broken off and sagged away into yonder wedge-like place of mud. I bet you the lead is right in this hill to back of us. Suppose you was prospectin' along through the woods up there now and found any of them floats, why, you 'd go up to look for the lead right there. It would n't astonish me one little bit to find that with the mud sliding away there it would jest be a case o' tunnelling straight in."

Apache Kid became so interested in this suggestion that he wanted to go back there and then to see what the storm and the mud-slide had laid bare, but the sheriff broke in on him:

"Sorry, sir; I understand your curiosity, and I 'm right curious myself; but I 'm sheriff first, and interested in mineral after:" and then the hard, callous side of the man peeped through, and yet with that whimsical look on his chubby face: "But after I 've seen you safely kickin' I don't know but what I might come along and have a study of the lay of the land now."

"Well," said Apache Kid, lightly, "to a man in your position it would n't matter so much, though the assay was nothing very great."

"No, sir; that's so," said the sheriff. "So you see that it's advisable for a man to get a position in life. Sheriff Carson of Baker City has expressed in glowin' terms his faith in the near future of the valley," he said, like a man reading.

Apache Kid laughed.

"I suppose Sheriff Carson's expression of faith would soon enough get up a syndicate to work it!"

"I would n't just say no," said the sheriff.

There was more of such banter passed, and suggestions as to where the city—Carson City—would be built; but when Apache Kid suggested the stage-coach route the sheriff scoffed.

"Stage-route nothing!" he said. "Railroad you mean, spur-line clear to Carson City."

"The country is sure opening up and developing to lick creation," said Slim; but at that the sheriff frowned. He might banter with his prisoner, but not with his subordinate.

So we saddled up again, the sheriff looking with interest on the heavy gunny-bags that we stowed carefully away again among the blankets on our pack-horse, but making no comment on them. He must have known pretty well what they contained.

Apache Kid's eyes and his met, and something of the look I have already told you of, that came at times, grew on Apache Kid's face, and a sort of reply to it woke in the sheriff's. But, as I say, no word passed on the matter then. Apache Kid had taken care to bring our treasures from the cabin before thinking of aught else.

That return journey with the sheriff, which had been so suddenly proved impossible, was to bring our firearms which the sheriff had appropriated on his arrival and made Slim set in a corner. The sheriff himself was not in a very happy mood, quite snappy because of that foiled attempt. He had thrown off his cartridge-belt in the cabin, and in the flurry at the end had only been able to secure his rifle in addition to his blankets. How many charges were in its magazine I did not know. He had worn his cartridge-belt apart from the belt to which his revolver hung, and in the latter were no cartridge-holders.

Part of the sheriff's "shortness" when speaking to Slim was due to the fact, I think, that Slim, intent upon getting out the provisions, had come away without a thought for any arms at all. But the Indian had made up for Slim, for he had not unbuckled his arsenal, and in addition to his revolver had, on either side of his tanned and fringed coat, cartridge pockets with four shells on either side. The loss of our weapons (Apache's and mine) mattered little.

But this is all by the way, and was not so carefully considered at the time as these remarks would lead you to think. I mention it here at all simply because of what happened later. We were not seers or prophets to be able at the time to know all that this shortage of ammunition was to mean.

Enough of that matter, then, and as for the journey through the wilderness, which was by Canlan's route now, at an acute angle from our former route, I need not tire you with a description. It was just the old story of plod, plod, plod over again; of trees and open glades and silence, and at nightfall the forest voices that you know of already.

After three days of this plodding we sighted a soaring blue mountain ridge with snow in its high corries and this as I guessed was Baker Ridge; but it took us a good day's journey to come to its base, even though the valley between was but scantily wooded. It was on the afternoon of the fourth day that we came to the eastern shoulder of Baker Ridge and lost sight for a space of the valley behind ere we sighted the one ahead, travelling as on a roof of the world where were only scattered blackberry bushes and rocks strewn like tombstones or tipped on end like Druidical stones.

Then the falling sides of the southern steep came to view, bobbing up before us, and on the first plateau of the descent the sheriff had some private talk with Slim who presently, with a final nod to a final word of instruction, set off with a sweep of his pony's tail and loped away out of sight, going down sheer against the sky over the plateau's verge.

When we, following more slowly, arrived at that point he was nowhere visible, having evidently pushed on speedily. Nor at the third level did we have any sight of him, though now we caught a glimpse of the first sign of civilisation—a feather of steam puffing up away to left among the scrubby trees, indicating the Bonanza mine; and a little beyond it another plume of steam from the McNair mine. A little below us there was a running stream and this being a sheltered fold of the hill, I suppose, defended from the east and north, there grew honey-suckle there and the scent of it came to us most refreshingly. There we sat down, apparently, from the sheriff's manner, to await some turn of events.

CHAPTER XXIII

The Sheriff Changes His Opinion

[image]

t was a good two hours after the departure of Slim.

We sat in silence (while the ponies browsed the tufts of grass) watching the clouds of mosquitos hanging in their phalanxes along the trickle of the stream and the bright, gauzy, blue wings of two mosquito-hawks flashing through their midst.

"By the way," said Apache Kid, "do you know if Miss Pinkerton herself has heard of this accusation against me?"

"By now, she is liable to have heard some rumour of it, I reckon," said the sheriff; "but as to whether she heard the news or not at the time of my starting out after you, I dunno."

The implication was amusing.

"Ah, yes, of course," said Apache Kid. "You act so promptly, always, Sheriff."

The Indian, who was sitting a little above us, spoke: "Tree men," he said, "an' tree men and one man come along up-hill beside the honeysuckle."

"That's seven," said Apache Kid.

"Seven?" said the Sheriff, sharply, rising to his feet; "and no waggon?"

"No."

"I reckon this is a deppitation," said the sheriff, as he glared down-hill.

"I don't like deputations of seven," said Apache Kid, looking down to the honeysuckle. "We were visited by one deputation of seven on this trip already; eh, Francis?"

"Ho?" said the sheriff. "You did n't tell me;" but he was not looking at Apache. He was gazing across the rolling land towards those who were coming in our direction, now quite plain to see—seven mounted men, armed, and suspicion-rousing.

"Pity about them guns and shells being lost," said the sheriff, and then he sung out:

"Halt right there and talk. What you want?"

One man moved his horse a step or two ahead of the others, who had reined in.

"We want that man you have there," said he.

"Halt right there," said the sheriff again; and then he remarked to Apache:

"Reckon you 'd rather travel down to Baker City with a reputable sheriff and have an orderly trial before hangin' instead o' hangin' up here-aways without no trial."

"I 'd rather go down—"

"Halt right there!" roared the sheriff.

"—and prove myself innocent of the charge," Apache ended.

"Well, then," said the sheriff, "I reckon here's where we become allies and you gets on the side o' law and order for once. Take that," and he clapped the butt of his Colt into Apache Kid's hand. "Draw close, boys, till I palaver" and he rose from his rock seat, with his Winchester lying on his arm.

"Well, gentlemen," he said. "I reckon you's all aware that you are buttin' up ag'in law and order," he began.

"Law is gettin' kind of tender-hearted," replied one of the newcomers. "We want to see justice done."

"I don't seem to know your face," said the sheriff.

"Oh! We're mostly from outside your jurisdiction," was the reply. "We jest came along up from the Half-Way House to see that justice is done in this yere matter."

"I don't know 'em," said the sheriff to Apache Kid.

"That's not their fault," said Apache Kid. "I know two of them by head-mark. A fat lot they care for seeing justice done. It's revenge they want on the loss of Farrell."

"What about Farrell?" said the sheriff. "You did n't tell me."

"He was one of the seven I mentioned," said Apache Kid. "But where, might I ask, Sheriff, do you intend to make your fire zone?" And he nodded his head toward the seven who were walking their horses a trifle nearer yet.

"Yes," said the sheriff, "they do creep up some. Dern, if we could only pow-wow with 'em till Slim gets back with the posse and the waggon."

This was the first hint of what business Slim had been despatched upon, but that is by the way. The sheriff apparently was not to be permitted a "pow-wow" to kill the time.

"See here," cried the spokesman of the party, "jest you throw up your hands, the lot of you or—"

"Or what?" said the sheriff.

"Or we come and take him."

"Now, gentlemen," said the sheriff, "I'm a patient man. If it was n't for the responsible position I holds, I would n't argue one little bit with you, but you know I'm elected kind o' more to save life than to destroy it."

Apache hummed in the air.

"That's just their objection," said he, softly.

"Pshaw!" said the sheriff. "That was a right poor cyard I played; but it's tabled now and can't be lifted. Get back there! By Jimminy! if you press any closer, we fire on you."

There was a quick word among the seven men and then they swooped on us. I tell you it was a sudden business that. Down went the sheriff on his knee.

And next moment the now familiar smell of powder was in my nostrils. Two of the seven fell and their charge broke and they swept round us to left and right.

"Anybody hit here?" said the sheriff. "Nobody! Guess they don't want to hit you, Apache Kid."

"I'm getting used to that treatment," said Apache Kid. "It's not the first time I've pressed a trigger on seven men who wanted my life—rather than my death," he ended grimly.

"You got to tell me about that, later," said the sheriff. "I gets interested in this seven business more and more every time you refers to it."

"I hope to have the opportunity, at least," said Apache, grimly, "to satisfy your curiosity."

"Look up! Here they come again," the sheriff interjected.

There was another crackle to and fro, a quick pattering of hoofs and flying of tails. One bullet zipped on a granite block in front of me and splattered the splinters in my face. The five wheeled and gathered; one of the fallen men crawled away and lay down in the shadow of a rock to look on at the fight, with a sick face.

"They do look like as they were gatherin' again systematic. Pity about that there mud-slide comin' so sudden," remarked the sheriff again, as though talking to himself more than to us; and then again he cried: "Lookup!"

Down came the five then, bent in their saddles, their right hands in air, apparently determined to make a supreme effort. They were going to try the effect of a dash past, with dropping shots as they came. But at a word from one they wheeled, rode back a distance, and then, spinning round, rode back as you have seen fellows preparing for a running start in a race, wheeled, and then came down in a scatter of dust, and a cry of "Yah! Yah!" to their horses.

Next moment they were past—four of them.

"If them four fellows come again," said the Indian, "my name Dennis."

I wondered how Apache Kid could titter at this remark.

I thought perhaps that it was half excitement that caused the laugh. It was not that exactly, however. It was something else.

"As you remarked," said he to the sheriff, "it's a pity about that mud-slide," and he swung his revolver to and fro in a limp hand.

"Don't drop that gun o' yours," said the sheriff in anxiety. "Don't you give the show plumb away. By Jimminy! they are meditatin' another. Say! Guess I'll palaver again some."

He leaped to his feet and waved the palm of his hand toward the four and then set it to the side of his mouth like a speaking-trumpet.

"I tell you," he cried, "I'm not a bloody man. I'm ag'in blood. That's why I give you this last reminder that you're kickin' ag'in the law and I advise you to

take warnin' from what you got already. If I was n't ag'in blood, I would n't talk at all."

Apache Kid tittered again.

"You need n't just tell them it's your own blood you are thinking of, Sheriff."

"No!" said the sheriff, with a queer, flat look about his face—I don't know how else to describe it—"I've said enough, I reckon. If I seem anxious to spare 'em and warn 'em off some more, they might be liable to tumble to it that we've put up our last fight, eh?" And he gave a grim, mirthless laugh.

The four seemed uncertain. Then one of them looked down-hill, the other three followed his gaze, and away they flew above us and round in a circle, not firing now, to where their wounded comrade lay by the rock, and after capturing his horse, one of them, alighting, helped him to the saddle. It is a wonder to me that they did not surmise that our ammunition was done, for they came close enough to carry away the others who had fallen. But they themselves did not fire again. They seemed in haste to be gone, and with another glance round and shaking their fists backwards as they rode, they departed athwart the slope and broke into a jogging lope down Baker shoulder.

Apache Kid had moved away a trifle from the rest of us as we watched this departure, and now he sat grinning at the sheriff who was mopping his brow and head.

"Well, Sheriff," he said. "I hope this convinces you of my innocence."

"What?" asked the sheriff, a little pucker at the eyes.

Apache handed him back the revolver that he had received at the beginning of the fight.

"That!" said he.

The sheriff looked at the chambers which Apache Kid's finger indicated with dignified triumph.

"Two shells that you did n't fire!" said the sheriff. "What does that show?"

"That I had you held up if I had liked—you and your Indian—and I passed the hand, so to speak. My friend and I might leave you now if we so desired. There are other ways through the mountains besides following these gentlemen. We could do pretty well, he and I, I think."

The sheriff smiled grimly.

"This here Winchester that's pointin' at your belly has one shell in yet," said he. "It come into my haid that maybe—" and he stopped and then in a voice that seemed to belie a good deal of what I had already taken to be his nature, a voice full of beseeching, he said: "Say, Apache, I got to apologise to you for keepin' up this yere shell. You're a deep man, sir, but I guess you are innocent, right enough, o' wipin' out Pinkerton. Here comes Slim and the waggon."

Apache looked with admiration on the sheriff.

"Diamond cut diamond," he said, and laughed; and then said he: "And have I to apologise for keeping my two shells?"

"No, sir!" cried the sheriff. "You kept them to show me you was square. I kept my last one because I did n't trust you. I guess I do now."

"We begin to understand each other," said Apache.

"I don't know about understand," said the sheriff. "But I sure am getting a higher opinion of you than I had before."

CHAPTER XXIV

For Fear of Judge Lynch

[image]

he long, dragging scream of wheels came to our ears, putting an end to this mutual admiration; and then there came out of the cool of the woods below, where the honeysuckle showed, into the blaze of the hillside, with its grey-blue granite blocks and their blue shadows, a large Bain-waggon drawn by two horses.

On either side of it two men rode on dark horses. The sheriff signed to the cortège to stop, and by the time that we had descended to this party the waggon was turned about.

"Well," said the sheriff to Slim who was driving the team, his horse hitched behind, "you got it from him. Was he kind o' slow about lendin' it?"

"Nosiree," said Slim. "He was settin' on a dump near the cable-house when I got to the mine, settin' shying crusts o' punk at the chipmunks—they 've a pow'ful lot of them around the Molly Magee—and he seemed kind o' astonished to see me. 'Up to business?' he says, 'up to business? You ain't goin' to take him away from me?' he says, meanin', of course, the violinist—"

Apache said to me at that: "Remind me to tell you what he means—about the violinist."

"So I jest tells him no," continued Slim, "and asked him the loan o' one of his waggons, and he says, 'What for?' And I takes him by the lapel o' his coat an' says, 'Can you keep a secret?' and he says then, 'Aha,' he says, 'I know what it is. You got Apache Kid on the hill there and you want the waggon to get him through the city for fear o' any of the boys tryin' to get a shot at him.' Says I:

'Who told you? Guess again.' And he says he reckoned he would lend me the waggon, and right pleased" (Slim shot a meaning look at Apache Kid), "but as for keepin' quiet, that was beyond him, he said."

"Dern!" said the sheriff. "So he 'll be telling the Magee boys and havin' 'em comin' huntin' after us, like enough, for our prisoner, if feelin' is high about this."

Slim laid a finger to his nose. "Nosiree," said he. "I jest told him if he could n't keep holt o' our secret for three hours, and give us a start, that first thing he knew we'd come along and be liftin' his violinist, some fine day, along with a nice French policeman or sheriff, or what they call 'em there—*grand army* or something—all the way from Paris."

The sheriff gloated on this.

"That would tighten him up some," said he.

"It did," replied Slim, and would have continued to pat himself on the back for his diplomacy, I believe, but the sheriff turned abruptly to Apache Kid and me and ordered us with a new sharpness, because of the newcomers, I suppose, to get into the waggon; and soon we were going briskly down-hill, the four mounted men riding two by two on either side, the sheriff loping along by the team's side and my pack-horse trotting behind, with Slim's mount in charge of the Indian.

We gathered from the remarks of the sheriff that these four men had been camped down-hill a little way for three days, out of sight of the waggon track, awaiting our coming. Slim had evidently, after securing the waggon, picked them up.

"That violinist," said Apache Kid to me, "that Slim mentioned to the Molly Magee boss by way of a threat, is rather a notable figure here. He was leader of an orchestra in Paris, embezzled money, bolted out here and up at the Molly Magee gets his three and a half dollars a day of miner's wages and keeps his hands as soft as a child's. He could n't tap a drill on the head two consecutive times to save his life."

"What do they keep him for, then?" I asked. "And why do they pay him?" though really I was not much interested in violinists at the time and wondered how Apache Kid could talk at all or do else than long for getting well out of this grievous pass that he was in. And, from his own lips, I knew he thought his condition serious.

"Well," said he, "the reason why gives you an idea of how very stiff a miner's lot is in some places. The Molly Magee mine is a wet mine, very wet, and it lies in a sort of notch on the hill where the wind is always cold. Crossing from the mine to the bunkhouse men have been known to take a pain in the back between the shoulder-blades, bend forward, and remark on the acuteness of it and be dead in three hours—of pneumonia. It's a wet mine and a cold hill. This violinist is just a Godsend to the owners. Instead of having to be content with whoever they can

get to work the mine for them they have the pick of the miners of the territory; even most of the *muckers* in the mine are really full-fledged miners, but are yet content to take muckers' wages—and all because of this violinist. He plays to them, you see, and his fame has gone far and wide over the territory. The Molly Magee, bad mine though she is, with a store of coffins always kept there, never lacks for miners. That's what they keep our violinist for."

But we were jolting well down-hill now and soon caught glimpses of Baker City between the trees.

"I reckon you better lie down in the bottom of that there waggon," said the sheriff, looking round, his left hand resting on his horse's quarters. "When they see you it might rouse them."

"Sir!" said Apache (it was the first word he had spoken, apart from his talk with me, since the guard joined us), "I 'm innocent of this charge, and I want to live to disprove it, not for my own honour alone. For many reasons, for many reasons I want to disprove it. But I 'm damned if I grovel in the bottom of a waggon for any hobo in Baker City!"

The sheriff said not a word in reply, just nodded his head as though to say, "So be it, then," stayed his horse till the waggon came abreast, leant from his saddle and spoke a word to Slim, who suddenly emitted a yell that caused the horses to leap forward.

The guard on either side had their Winchesters with the butts on their right thighs—and so we went flying into Baker City, the sheriff again spurring ahead; so we whirled along, with a glimpse of the Laughlin House, dashed down that street, suddenly attracting the attention of those who stayed there, and they, grasping the situation after a moment's hesitation, came pounding down on the wooden sidewalks after us.

So we swept into Baker Street, where a great cry got up, and men rose on the one-storey-up verandahs of the hotels and craned out to look on us; and the throng ran on the sidewalks on either side.

Apache Kid had a sneer beginning on his lips, but that changed and his brows knitted as a man who, on toting up a sum, finds the result other than he expected. For those, who saw our arrival waved their hats in air and cheered our passage; and it was with a deal of wonder and astonishment that I saw the look of admiration on the brown faces that showed through the dust we raised. To me it looked as though, had these men cared to combine to stop our progress, it would not have been to hale Apache Kid before Judge Lynch, but rather to have taken the horses from the waggon, as you see students do with the carriage of some man who is their momentary hero, and drag us in triumph through the city.

The sheriff had expected to find the city enraged at us, anxious to do "justice" in a summary fashion.

This cheering must have puzzled him. It certainly puzzled us.

CHAPTER XXV

The Making of a Public Hero

[image]

n old, bowed greybeard, with an expressionless, weather-beaten mask of a face, closed the gate into the "lock-up" after us as we swept into the square. I remember the jar with which that massive gate closed, but somehow it did not affect me as I thought it should have done. Perhaps the reason for this absence of awe was due to the fact that the murmur of voices without, as of a concourse gathering there, was not a belligerent murmur.

"If Judge Lynch goes to work like this," said I to myself, "he has a mighty cheerful way of carrying out his justice on those who offend him."

But I saw that the sheriff and Slim and the guard also were somewhat "at sea," at a loss to account for the manner of our reception. The sheriff flung off his horse and marched into the gaol building, I suppose to see that the entrance into the office was closed. We remained still in the waggon.

Slim chewed meditatively and spat in the sand of the patio, or square—familiarity I suppose breeding contempt—and to the old greybeard, who had closed the gate on our entrance, and now stood by the waggon clapping the quick-breathing horses, he said: "Well, Colonel, you know how them turbulent populace acts. You hev seen some turbulent populaces in your time, Colonel. What does this yere sound of levity pertend?"

"You mought think from the sound they was electin' a new mayor, eh?" said the old man addressed as colonel. "B'ain't a hangin', for sure," and at these words I impulsively laid my hand on Apache Kid's forearm and pressed it; but the colonel at the same moment tapped Apache Kid on the small of the back, and he turned round to find that worthy holding up a leathery hand and saying, "Shake."

"With pleasure," said Apache Kid. "It is an honour to me to shake hands with you, Colonel."

The old man seemed to enjoy being addressed in this flattering fashion, which doubtless Apache Kid knew; for after the hand-shaking, when the colonel

waddled away to the horses' heads to begin unhitching, a task in which Slim promptly assisted (I think more to ask questions, however, rather than to share the work), Apache Kid remarked to me:

"He 's a great character, that; he goes out about town now with the chain-gang; you must have seen him trotting behind them, with his head bowed, squinting up at his flock from the corners of his eyes, his rifle in hand. That's the job he gets in the evening of his days; but if any man could make your hair curl, as the expression is, that old man could do it with his yarns about the days when everything west of the Mississippi was the Great American Desert. He seems to be congratulating me on something. Whether he thinks I 'm one of the baddest bad men he 's ever seen, or whether—"

It was then that the sheriff came slowly down the three steps into the square.

"You two gentlemen," said he, "might be good enough to step this way. And say, Slim! That there pack-horse is jest to be left standing, meanwhile. I reckon the property on its back ain't come under the inspection of the law yet—quite."

I could have cried out with joy; not for myself, for the sheriff had led me to believe all the way that I had got mixed up with this "trouble" on the less objectionable side,—the right side. It was for Apache Kid that my heart gladdened. Yet he, to all appearance, was as little affected by this ray of hope as he had been by the expectation of "stretching hemp."

He swung his leg leisurely over on to the tire of the wheel, stepped daintily on to the hub, and leaped to the ground.

"At your service, Sheriff," said he, and I followed him.

I noticed that the sheriff had again assumed his ponderous frown, a frown that I was beginning to consider a meaningless thing,—a sort of mere badge of office. He led us into a white-painted room, where a young lady habited plainly in black sat, with bent and sidewise head. And we were no sooner into the room, hats in hand, than the door closed behind us and we heard the sheriff's ponderous tread depart with great emphasis down an echoing corridor.

The young lady, as you have surmised, was Mr. Pinkerton's daughter; and there was a wan smile of welcome on her saddened face as she looked up to us.

We stood like shamed, heart-broken culprits before her; and I know that my heart bled for her.

She was so changed from the last time I had seen her. The innocent expression of her face, the openness and lack of all pose, were still evident; but these things served to make her lonely position the more sad to think of. She was like a stricken deer; and her great eyes looked upon us, craving, even before she spoke her yearning, some word of her father.

"Tell me," she said. "Charlie has told me—in his way. Oh! It is a hard, bitter

story, as it comes from him.”

”To my mind,” said Apache Kid, in a soft voice, ”it is at once one of the saddest stories and one of which the daughter cannot think without a greater honouring of her father.”

Her hungering eyes looked squarely on him, but she spoke not a word.

”To me,” he said, ”his passing must be ever remembered with very poignant grief; and to my friend”—and he inclined his head to me—”it must be the same.”

I thought she was on the brink of tears and breaking down, and so, I think, did he; for as I looked away sad (and ashamed, in a way), he said: ”God knows how I feel this!”

I think the interjection of this personal cry helped her to be strong to hear. She tossed the tears from her eyes bravely, and he went on:

”When I think that he died through simple disinterested kindness, and that that kindness, that was his undoing, was done for me—and my friends,” he said in a lower tone, ”then, though it makes me but the more sorrowful, I feel that”—he spoke the rest more quickly—”he died a death such as any man might wish to die. It was a noble death, and he was the finest man——”

”Oh!” she cried, ”but I—I—it was I who bade him follow you.”

Apache Kid’s eyes were staring on the floor; and in the agony of my heart, whether well or ill advised I do not know, I said:

”Your name was the last on his lips.”

Her face craved all that could be told; and I told her all now, she growing calmer, with bitten lips, as I, feeling for her grief, found the more pain.

Then Apache Kid spoke, and I found a tone in his voice,—I, who had come to know him, being cast beside him in the mountain solitudes,—that made me think he spoke what he did, not because he really did believe it, but because he thought it fit to say.

”It may seem strange,” said he, ”to hear it from my lips, as though I desired to lighten my own regret, but I think our days are all ordained for us; and when those we love have been ordained to unselfishness, and to gain the crown of unselfishness, which is ever a crown of thorns, we can be but thankful—though at the moment we dare not say this to ourselves.”

He looked dumbly at me, pleadingly, I thought. I had an idea that his eyes besought something of me—but I knew not what; and then he turned to her and took her hand ever so fearfully, and said:

”You will remember that we have a charge from him, as my friend has told you; and indeed, it was not necessary that the charge should have been laid on us.” He dropped her hand, and looking at me, said: ”I believe we both would have considered it a privilege to in some slight way——” he seemed to feel that he was upon the wrong track, and she said:

"Oh! That is nothing. Now that I have heard it all from you it is' not—not so cruel as Charlie's account. I think I must go now, and I have to thank you for being so truthful with me and telling me it all so plainly."

She turned her face aside again and we perceived that she would be alone. So we passed from the room very quietly and saw the sheriff at the end of the corridor beckoning us, and went toward him.

"She hes told you, I guess," said he, "that the case is off."

Apache shook his head.

"Pshaw!" said the sheriff. "What she want with you?"

"To hear how Mr. Pinkerton died."

"But she knew."

"Yes," said Apache Kid, "as a savage saw it."

The sheriff puckered his heavy mouth and raised his eyes.

"Sure!" said he. "That's what. Pretty coarse, I guess. You would kind o' put the limelight on the scene."

"Sir, sir!" said Apache Kid. "We have just come from her."

"I beg your pardon, gen'lemen," he said. "I understand what you mean; I know—women and music, and especially them songs about Mother, and the old farm, and such, jest makes me *feel* too, at times. I understand, boys, and I don't mock you none. And that jest makes me think it might be sort of kind in you if you was goin' out and gettin' them cheerin' boys out there some ways off, lest she hears them cheerin' an' it kind o' jars on her."

"Then I am free?"

"Yap; that's what," said the sheriff. "She rode up here with that Indian trailer feller when the news spread. The colonel tells me that it was a fellow, Pious Pete, hetched the story out. It was two strangers to me came to inform me about the killing of Pinkerton—said they saw you do it from out a bush where they was camped, and would have gone for you but they had gone busted on cartridges and you was heeled heavy. They put up a good enough story about them bein' comin' back from a prospectin' trip, and had it all down fine. So I jest started right off."

"But how did you know what way to come for us?" asked Apache Kid.

"Oh, well, you see, I had been keepin' track of Canlan. I hed lost sight o' you, and when I heard you was in the hills away over there, and also knew how Canlan had gone out over Baker shoulder, I began to guess where The Lost Cabin lay. It was handier like for me to start trackin' Canlan than to go away down to Kettle with them fellows and into the mountains there, and try to get on to your trail where they said you had buried Mr. P."

Apache Kid nodded.

"So I left them two here to eat at the expense o' the territory till my return.

It was the colonel got onto them fust—recognised 'em for old friends of a right celebrated danger to civilisation which his name was Farrell.”

”Ah!” said Apache Kid.

”So I hear now, when I comes back, anyway,” said the sheriff. ”Then along comes Miss Pinkerton, and when they see her on the scene, well, why they reckon on feedin’ off this yere territory no more. The colonel is some annoyed that they did n’t wait on and try to hold up their story. I reckon they either had not figured on Miss P., or else had surmised she ’d not raise her voice ag’in’ your decoratin’ a rope. But I keep you from distractin’ them boys out there and they starts cheerin’ ag’in. After you ’ve kind o’ distributed them come back and see me. I ’m kind o’ stuck on you, Apache. I guess you ’ll make a good enough citizen yet—maybe you might be in the running yet for sheriff o’ Carson City within the next few years.”

But a renewed outbreak of the cheering brought a frown to Apache Kid’s face and sent him to the door speedily, with me at his heels.

The sheriff opened the door and out stepped Apache Kid. The first breath of a shout from the crowd there he stopped in the middle. What his face spoke I do not know, being behind him; but his right thumb pointed over his shoulder, his left hand was at his lips, I think,—and the cry stopped.

”Gentlemen,” he said, and broke the cry that threatened again to rise with a raised hand; ”the lady within”—he got to the core of his remark first—”has her own sorrow. We must think of her.”

You could hear the gruff ”That’s what,” and ”That’s no lie,” and ”That’s talking,” and see heads nodded to neighbour’s heads in the crowd.

But the question was how to get away? Apache Kid stepped down to the street level and then, before we knew what was come to us we were clutched by willing hands and, shoulder high, headed a silent procession tramping in the dust out of ear-shot of the jail—that the woman within might not feel her sorrow more bitter and lonely hearing the cheers that were given to the men who had ”wiped out the Farrell gang.”

So much the populace knew had happened. That much had leaked out, and the least that was expected of Apache Kid was that he would get out on some hotel verandah and allow himself to be gazed upon and cheered and make himself for a night an excuse for ”celebration” and perhaps, also, in the speech that he must needs make, give some slight outline of how Farrell *got it*—to use

(as Apache Kid would say) the phraseology of the country.

CHAPTER XXVI

Apache Kid Makes a Speech

[image]

here was a good deal of the spirit of Coriolanus in Apache Kid, and he knew the worth of all this laudation.

When we at last found ourselves jostled up onto the balcony of that saloon which I spoke of once as one of the "toughest" houses in Baker City, that very saloon at the door of which I had beheld the sheriff of Baker City give an example of his "smartness," the throng was jostling in the street and crying out:

"What's the matter with Apache Kid?—He's all right!"

Both question and answer in this cry were voiced always in one, not one man crying out the question and another replying, and it made the cry seem very droll to me.

Apache Kid was thrust to the front and the crowd huzzahed again and shouted: "Speech!" And others cried out: "Tell us about Farrell's gang."

So Apache Kid stepped to the rail and raised his head, and, "Gentlemen," he began, "this is a great honour to me," and they all cried out again.

"If it is not," said he, "it should be."

I think the majority took this for humour and they laughed and wagged their heads and looked up smiling, for more.

"When I think of how so shortly ago I merited your disapproval and now, instead of gaining that, am welcomed so heartily and effusively, I cannot but feel how deeply I am indebted to all the citizens—" he paused and I heard him laugh in his throat, "of our progressive and progressing city."

They gave vent to a bellow of pleasure and some cried out again: "Farrell! Farrell! Tell us about Farrell."

"I must appeal to the sense of propriety," he said, "for which our western country is famous. In the West we are all gentlemen."

There was a cry of: "That's what!"

"And a gentleman never forces anyone to take liquor when he does not

want to, never forces anyone to disclose his history when he does not want to. The gentleman says to himself, in the first instance, 'there is all the more for myself.' In the second case he knows that his own past might scarcely bear scrutiny. Ah well! As we are all gentlemen here I know that with perfect reliance in you I can say that I had rather not speak about Farrell and his gang."

There was a slight murmur at this.

"There are men of the gang still in the territory. As you are now aware, it was they who came to you with a cock-and-bull story about me. In your desire to further law and order in this progressive Baker City you rightly decided that I must pay the penalty for the deed you believed that I had done."

He paused a moment and then continued in another tone:

"Now there is nothing I regret more than the sad death of Mr. Pinkerton. He was a man we all honoured and respected. I am glad you do not now believe that I was his slayer. With those who raised that calumny against me—should I meet them—I will deal as seems fit to me."

A great cheer followed this.

Apache Kid cleared his throat.

"Men of Baker City!" he cried, "I wish, finally, to thank you for this so exuberant expression of your regret that you believed me guilty."

They took this better than I expected. A cheer in which you heard an undercurrent of rich laughter filled the street and drowned his last words:

"I bear you no ill will."

He bowed, backed from the balcony-rail into the saloon, touched me on the arm where I stood by the door, and before those who had followed us in well knew what we were about, we had run through the sitting-room that gave out on that balcony, gained the rear of the house, and were posting back to the jail by the rear street.

But there, relieved at last of the anxiety that had held me together all the way from the Lost Cabin Mine, knowing now that my friend was safe, all the vigour seemed to leave me.

My memory harked back to the nights in the forests on the hillsides, to the attack upon us on the shoulder of Baker Ridge, to the mud-slide, to the night of Canlan's madness, and the previous night of his onslaught on our camp. Larry Donoghue loomed in my mind's eye, large-framed, loose-limbed, heavy-mouthed. Again I saw the summit over which we passed, the Doréesque ravines and piled rocks, the forest trail, the valley where Mr. Pinkerton lay, on the cliff of which I had faced the terrors of the snake. I saw the Indians trooping at the ford, the dead men lying in the wood at Camp Kettle, the red-headed man in the Rest House, the loathsome "drummer" at the Half-Way House,—and all the while the sheriff's voice was in my ears and sometimes Apache's replying.

My brain was in a whirl, and I heard the sheriff say:

"That boy is sick looking."

He said it in a kind, reassuring voice, and I knew that I was in the home of friends, and need no longer keep alert and watchful and fearful. My chin went down upon my breast.

I had a faint recollection of fiery spirits being poured down my throat, and then of being caught by the arm-pits and lifted and held for awhile, and of voices whispering and consulting around me. Then I felt the air in my face, and came round sufficiently to know I was in the street, and the dim ovals of faces turned on me, following me as I was hurried forward at what seemed a terrible speed, and then I opened my eyes to find myself in a room with the blind down at the open window.

It was night time, for the room was in darkness, and I lay looking at a thin cut in the yellow blind, a cut of about three inches long, through which the moonlight filtered; and as I looked at it I saw it begin to move with a wriggling motion, and even as I looked on it it stretched upward and downward from either end. At the top ran out suddenly two horizontal cuts, the lower end split in two, and ran out left and right, and then it all turned into the form of a man like a jumping-jack, with twitching legs and waving arms. A head grew out of it next, and rolled from side to side; it was the figure of Mike Canlan. I turned my head on the pillow and groaned.

"Heavens!" I cried, "I am haunted yet by this."

And then a great number of voices began whispering in a corner of the chamber. I cried out in terror, and then the door opened and a woman entered, carrying a candle, shaded with one hand, the light of it striking upon her freckled face and yellow hair.

It was Mrs. Laughlin, and she sat down by me and took my hand, feeling my pulse, and ran her rough palm across my brow. She may have been a beligerent woman, and had many "tiffs" with her husband, but I cannot tell you how soothing was her rough touch to me then,—rough, but extremely kind.

The whisperings kept on, but very faint now,—fainter and fainter in my ears like far echoes, and, holding her bony hand, I fell asleep.

The fever of the mountains, the weariness of the way, the fear of pursuit, the smell of powder, and the sight of dead men's eyes,—all these I had braced myself against. But now I steeled myself no longer. Now I rested, I, who had feared much and yet been strong (which I have heard persons say is the greatest form of bravery,—the coward's bravery), I rested fearless, clinging to this worn

woman's hand.

CHAPTER XXVII

The Beginning of the End

[image]

feel somehow that I have to apologise for "giving in" that way. I should have liked to figure before you like a cast-iron hero. But when I set out to tell you this story I made up my mind to tell the truth about all those concerned in it—myself included.

I could not understand how Apache Kid kept so fresh through it all. But, of course, you remember what he told me of his life, and he was, as the saying is, "hard as nails." Yet he avoided commiserating me on my condition, being a man quick enough to understand that I resented this break-down. He even went the length of telling me, as he sat in my room, that he felt "mighty rocky after that trip," himself. And when the doctor pronounced that I might get up, he told me that I was getting off very easily.

On two points I had to question Apache Kid and his answers to my questions gave me a further insight into his character. The first of these matters was regarding the wealth we had brought with us from the Lost Cabin Mine.

"I have done nothing about it yet," said he. "I thought it advisable for us to go together to the bank."

I looked my surprise, I suppose.

"Then you have no idea what it amounts to yet?" I asked.

"No," said he. "You know it will neither increase nor diminish with waiting."

"But why did you wait?"

"O," he said lightly, "if a man cannot wait for his partner getting well, and do the thing ship-shape, he must be very impatient."

"You don't seem anxious, even, to know what you are really worth."

"I fear not," said he. "O, man, can't you see that once we know, to a five-cent piece, what all that loot is worth, we are through with the adventure and there's no more fun to be had? I'm never happy when I get a thing. It's in the hunting that I find relief."

But there fell a shadow on his face then.

I asked him if Miss Pinkerton was still in Baker City. I declare, he blushed at the very mention of her name. I could see the red tinge the brown of his cheeks.

I often wondered, when Apache Kid spoke, just what he was really thinking. He did not always say what he thought, or believe what he said. He had a way, too, of giving turns to his phrases that might have given him a name for a hardness that was not really his.

"O," he said, "she heard that you were ill and wanted to come and look after you, but you were babbling not just of green fields, exactly—you were babbling of Hell—and I can never get over a foolish idea that early in youth was pumped into me that women do not know about Hell and should not know. I thought it advisable to prevent her coming to see you—and hear you."

I felt my own cheeks tingle to think that I had been raving such ravings as he hinted at.

"And did Mrs. Laughlin——" I began.

But Mrs. Laughlin herself replied, coming quietly into the room.

"Yes, yes," she said, and laughed. "Mrs. Laughlin heard it all," and then she turned on Apache Kid. "And Mrs. Laughlin was none the worse o' hearing it, Apache Kid," she said, "not because she 's old, but because in gettin' up in years she 's learnt how to weigh things and know the good from the bad, even though the good does look bad. Oh! I know what you are thinking right now," she interrupted herself. "You 're thinkin' you might remark I don't have no call to talk 'cause I heard you talkin' just now without you knowin'——"

"Madam——" began Apache Kid, in a courteous voice, but she would not permit him to speak.

"I was coming along in my stocking soles, in case the lad was sleeping," and she plucked up her dress to disclose her stockinged feet, "and I heard by accident what you was talkin'. And I 'm going to tell you, Mr. Apache Kid, that you 're a deal better a man than you pretend."

It was, to me, an unlooked-for comment, for her manner was almost beligerent.

"You had it pumped into you, you says! O! An old woman like me understands men well. It's you sarcastic fellows, you would-be sarcastic fellows, that have the kind, good hearts. And you talk that way to kind of protect them."

I saw Apache Kid knitting his brows; but, as for me, I do not know enough of human nature to profess to understand all that this wise woman spoke.

"Take you care, Apache Kid," she said, and shook her finger at him, and even on her finger, as I noticed, there were freckles, and on the back of her hand. "Take you care that you don't get to delude yourself into hardness, same as you delude men into thinking you a dangerous sort o' fellow—a kind of enigma man."

"I am afraid I don't follow you," said Apache Kid.

"But you do follow me," she said. "All you want to do is to let yourself go—let that bit of yourself go and have its way—that bit that you always make the other half of you sit and jeer at!"

She paused, and then shaking her finger again remarked solemnly:

"Or you 'll maybe find that the good, likeable half o' you ain't a half no longer, only a quarter, dwindled down to a quarter, and the half of you that puts up this bluff in the face of men becomes three-quarter then. I 'm thinking I would n't like you so good then, Apache Kid! Not but what I 'd be——" she hesitated, "sorry for you like," she said.

"To win your sorrow, Mrs. Laughlin," said he, looking on her solemnly, "would be a desirable thing."

She gazed at him a long while, and to my utter astonishment, for I did not quite understand all this, there were tears in her eyes when she said, as to herself, "Yes, you mean that."

She sighed, and then said she: "What you need is to settle down with a good, square, honest girl. If I was younger like myself——" she broke off merrily. Apache Kid looked her in the face with interested eyes.

"I wish I knew just what you were like, just how you spoke and acted when you were—in the position you have suggested as desirable."

"Would you have had me?" she said.

"I would perhaps have failed to know you possessed all these qualities you do, for you would never have shown them to me."

"Would I not?" said she. "Well, I show myself now; and if you object to young girls not showing their real selves, you begin and set 'em the example. You go down to the Half-Way House and show that Miss Pinkerton your real self, and——"

"Mrs. Laughlin!" he said. "I would not have expected this——"

"Why!" she cried, "I'm old enough to be your grandmother. Well, well! I see the lad is all right; that's what I came up for, so I 'll get away down again."

"Laughlin has certainly a jewel of a wife," said Apache Kid, after she departed, and that was all on the matter.

Miss Pinkerton herself was not mentioned again by either of us, and the other subject of our talk we settled two days later, when I, having "got to my legs" again on the day following that chat, accompanied Apache Kid to the jail where the sheriff unlocked the safe for us and gave us our property, which he had in keeping.

The horse, I heard then, had been returned to the livery stable from which Canlan had hired it.

All that the sheriff had to say on the matter of our property was to the

effect that though two of the Lost Cabin owners had been often enough known to say that they had no living relative, the other—Jackson—was supposed to have a sister living.

"If you want to do the square thing," said he, "you ought to advertise for her."

Apache turned to me.

"I forgot that," said he; "I forgot to tell you," and he drew a newspaper from his pocket. "Don't you get the 'Tribune,' Sheriff!"

He opened the paper and pointed to his announcement for relatives of J. E. Jackson.

"I have put it in this local rag," said he, "and a similar one in a dozen leading papers over the States, and in three of the smaller papers in his own State. I heard he was an Ohio man."

The sheriff held out his hand.

"I once reckoned," said he, "that we 'd be ornamenting a telegraph pole in Baker City with you, but now I reckon we will see you sheriff of Carson City, sure."

Apache Kid took the proffered hand and shook it; but he showed me deeper into himself again when he said in a dry voice:

"I don't think, Sheriff, that there will be any real need for you to congratulate me any oftener than you have done already, on finding out further mistakes you have made in your attempts to discover my real character."

And so saying we went out; and as I shook the sheriff's hand I noticed that he took mine absently. I think he was pondering what my friend had said.

"One grows weary of patronage," said Apache Kid to me as we plodded along the deserted streets to the bank.

"Deserted streets?" you say. Yes, deserted. For an "excitement" had sprung up at Tremont during my ten days in bed. As we passed the hotels on our way to the bank, the hotels that had always been thronged and full of voices, the doors always on the swing, we saw now on the verandah of each of them one solitary man, with chair tilted back and feet in the rail. These were the worthy proprietors, each figuring on the chances of Baker City booming again, each wondering if he should follow the rush.

As we passed the corner of the street in which "Blaine's joint" had stood, I noticed above the door and window a strip of wood less sun-scorched than the rest. That was where the famous canvas sign had been, rolled up now and carted off with the coffee-urn to this other "city" that had depopulated Baker City. The stores, of course, were still open; for the city which is centre for five paying mines can never die. It may not always *boom*, with megaphones in every window and cigar smoke curling in the streets, but it will not *languish*.

Still, it was not the Baker City that I knew of yore, and as we entered the door of the bank, carrying our bullion, it struck me that the stage-setting was just in keeping with the part we played; for as Apache Kid had said—when we knew our wealth the adventure would be over. This was the last Act, Scene I. And I felt a quiver in my heart when the thought intruded itself, even then, that Scene II (and last) would be a farewell to Apache Kid.

Slowly the teller in the bank weighed out our nuggets, scanning us between each weighing over his gold-rimmed glasses and noting down the amounts on his writing pad.

"Grand total," said he, and paused to awaken the thrill of suspense, "forty thousand dollars."

"Forty thousand dollars," thought I, "and fifteen hundred in notes, that makes forty-one thousand five hundred."

"A mere flea-bite," Apache said.

"I beg your pardon?" said the teller, astonished.

"A mere flea-bite," repeated Apache Kid. "Look at that," and he held up a turquoise in his fingers. "Don't you think a man would give forty-one thousand five hundred for a bagful of these?"

"A bagful?" said the teller.

Apache nodded.

"Do you wish to dispose of some of these, too?" the teller asked.

"No, thanks," said Apache Kid. "They go to an eastern market."

"An eastern market!" Did that mean that Apache Kid was going east? Was I to have his company home? Home I myself was going. But he—as I looked at his brown face, the alert eyes puckered at the side with long life in the sunshine, the lips close with much daring (and I think just a little hard), the jaws firm with much endurance, and that self-possessed bearing that one never sees in the civilised East, I knew he was not going back East.

The tiny gold ear-rings might be removed, but the stamp of the man could not; and men of that stamp are not seen in cities.

CHAPTER XXVIII

Apache Kid Behaves Strangely at the Half-Way House to Kettle

[image]

ou hear people talk of the *Autumn feeling in the air*. Well, the Autumn feeling was in the air as we drove down through the rolling foothills to the Half-Way House.

My farewell to Mr. and Mrs. Laughlin had touched me deeply. It was only a word or two and a handshake, for when it comes to parting in the West, there is never any effusion—partings there are so frequent that people spare themselves the pain of them and make them brief. But nevertheless, they sting.

There was sunlight, to be sure, all the way; but that Autumn feeling was there. The sound of the wheels fell dead on the air, and we were all moody and quiet. I got it into my head that I was soon to say farewell to Apache Kid, and that forever. He was exceedingly thoughtful and silent, and I wondered if he was meditating on the suggestion of Mrs. Laughlin regarding the advisability of his settling down, asking Miss Pinkerton for her hand, and becoming a respectable person.

Before we came in sight of the Half-Way House we heard the dull rasp of a saw, and then, topping the second last roll of the sandy hills and swinging round the base of the last one, we went rocketing up to the hotel. A man at the wood trestle, which stood at the gable-end, straightened himself and looked up at our approach, and I saw that he was the red-headed man who had "held up" Apache Kid at the Rest House on our last journey.

Apache Kid's face went a trifle more thoughtful at sight of him, but just then Miss Pinkerton appeared at the door to welcome us. But when we alighted I detected something new in her manner toward us. What it was I cannot exactly tell. Certainly she was just as demure, as open-eyed, as natural as before. But she did not seem to require our presence now for all that she welcomed us in a friendly way. There was that in her manner that made me think she would bid us farewell just as innocently and pleasantly, and straightway forget about us. Her welcome seemed a duty.

"These are the two gentlemen I told you about, George," she said to the red-headed man. "Mr. Brooks," she introduced, "but I don't know your names, gentlemen, beyond just Apache Kid and Francis."

George nodded to us.

"I guess these names will serve," said he. "How do, gentlemen? Kind of close this eve."

"It is, indeed," said Apache Kid. "The Summer is ended, the harvest is past," he quoted.

"Yes," said George, "there is that feeling in the air, now."

"As if the end of all things was at hand," said Apache Kid.

He was looking George right in the eyes.

I thought something forbidding was in their exchange of glances, but then of course I had seen them meet before in the peculiar circumstances of which you know. Margaret, I think, saw nothing noteworthy (for all she was a woman), but then, she did not know that these men were acquainted; they gave no sign of that.

"You will want a wash before you eat," she said, ushering us in, and George nodded, and, "See you later," said he.

Margaret attended to our wants herself when we sat down to table in the fresh dining-room. But there was little said until the meal was over, and she sat down beside us. Apache Kid seemed to be thinking hard.

"Well, Miss Pinkerton," he said at last, making bread pills on the table and smoothing a few crumbs about in little mountain ridges and then levelling them again. "You remember what we told you about Mr. Pinkerton's last wishes for you?"

"Yes," she said, "I was telling George what pop had said."

Apache's eyebrows frowned a trifle, and then settled again.

"Yes?" he said, as though requesting an explanation of what she meant by this; but she remained silent.

"O, I thought perhaps the gentleman had made some suggestion, when you mentioned his name just now," said Apache Kid.

But she did not yet reply, and he went on again:

"Well, Miss Pinkerton, I may tell you that we failed to find any such bonanza at the Lost Cabin as we had hoped for."

Margaret Pinkerton stiffened, and I glanced up to see her looking on Apache's face with pin-points of eyes and a look on her face as though she said: "So—you are a contemptible fellow, after all."

I think she had really admired Apache Kid before, but I surmised—a third party, the one who looks on and does not talk, can surmise a great deal—that, as the saying is, she had been *tampered with*. She had heard tales against my friend, and now doubtless believed that she was provided with proof that he was a rogue. The look on her face was as though she were gaining confirmation.

"Excuse me interrupting," said George, in the doorway, "but I suppose you have specimens o' this ore."

I expected Apache Kid either to ignore the interruption or to recognise it with some sarcasm or flash of anger. Instead, he turned lightly to the speaker.

"Ah!" he said, "I had not noticed you. So you are interested in—" he paused, "in mines," he said.

Margaret stiffened, and George said easily:

"Well in this one I reckon I am."

"Ah yes," said Apache Kid. "There has been of course a lot of talk about it. Yes, I have specimens."

He produced two pieces and handed them to George, and then turning to Miss Pinkerton, he said:

"I was going to make a suggestion to you, Miss Pinkerton, remembering your father's desire that we—remembering the desire he expressed to us, I was going to make the suggestion, that, if it would not offend you, you would accept—May I speak before this gentleman?"

"Certainly," said she, coldly.

He bowed.

"I was going to suggest that you might allow me to transfer to your bank the sum of—let me see—" and he took a paper from his pocket. It was inconceivable that he had forgotten the amount, but he glanced at the paper, and then looked up as though making a computation, but in so doing looked both at the young woman and at George, who was leaning against a neighbouring table. "The sum of twenty thousand, seven hundred and forty dollars," said he.

There was no change on his face; he spoke as lightly of the sum as might a Rockefeller, and his was the only face that remained immobile. But then, of course, he was the only one who knew what was coming.

George stared with a look of doubt.

Margaret looked at Apache Kid keenly and then at George for a long space, thoughtfully.

For me—I was thunderstruck. I gasped. I think I must have cried out something (I know that what I thought was: "Why! This is your entire share, apart from the turquoises,") for the three were all looking at me then.

I knew besides that he had no money left, apart from our Lost Cabin wealth; for he had told me so. Twenty thousand, seven hundred and fifty had been his share of the gold and ten dollars of this he had paid already for his seat in the stage. He was giving this girl all he had.

"It will not go very far," said Apache Kid, smiling. "It is, after all, very little to offer, but I am in hopes that within a fortnight or so I may be able to perhaps double the amount. I know," and now, if you like, I could see the sneer creep on his face, "I know that women are not mercenary and I must apologise for speaking of money matters. It was not only money matters that were in Mr. Pinkerton's mind, I believe. I believe it was your happiness that he was anxious about. I cannot pretend to myself that I could ever, by offering you money, wipe out the debt we owe him. I know that we were the cause of his death, though we did not fire the fatal shot. Money, to my mind, could never recompense for a life lost for others."

He looked up and saw Margaret's eyes fixed on him—and his eyes did not remove. He gazed into hers unflinching, and as he looked hers filled with tears. He had his head raised and she seemed to be looking clear into his soul. Her face was very beautiful to see then.

How George took all this I do not know; for I was looking on the girl.

"O!" she said, her voice quavering. "O, I think you are just *all right*."

Then she bowed her head and wept quietly to herself and as I could not bear to see her thus and do nothing to console her, I very softly rose to steal out. I knew myself a spectator, not an actor in this affair. Out into the red-gold evening I went and looked across the brown, rolling plain and Apache followed me and then George came after us and said quietly to him:

"What game is this you are playing?"

Apache Kid turned to him. "Be guided," he said, "by a woman's intuition. You saw that she knew I was playing no game."

And then he said very quietly: "Are you aware, George, that if I wished I could steal her away from you?"

The breath sucked into George's nostrils in a series of little gasps and came forth similarly.

"I believe you are a devil," he said. "And if it was n't for her, I'd finish our other little matter right now."

"We will let that rest—for her sake," said Apache Kid. "Still, tell me, are you aware of that? Do you know that I am master here?"

George's face was pale under the sun-brown.

We were standing there in that fashion when there was a sound of slow hoofs in the sand and three ponies came ploughing along the road, an old, dry-faced Indian riding behind the string.

"You want to buy a horse?" he asked.

Apache Kid looked up.

"Well, we might trade," said he. "How much you want for them two, this and that?"

"Heap cheap," said the Indian. "Ten dollah."

"For two?"

"No, ten dollah for one, ten dollah for one."

"It's a trade then," said Apache Kid. "Will you lend me twenty dollars, Francis?"

I glanced at George and saw him looking dazed, uncomprehending.

I think the Indian was surprised there was no attempt to beat down the price and regretted he had not asked more.

When Apache Kid paid for the horses he gave me the halters to hold, stood absently a moment with puckered brows and biting lips, then drew a long breath

and stepped into the house again. George did not follow but stood looking over the plain.

"What is his game?" said George.

"I do not know," said I, "but whatever it is you may be sure it is nothing mean."

George meditated and then:

"No, I guess not," he said. "He's too deep for me, though. I don't understand him. Did he ever tell you our little trouble?"

"No," said I.

"Neither will I, then," said he, "and I guess he never will."

"I would n't think of asking him," said I.

"And he would n't think of telling," replied George.

And just then Apache Kid came out and Miss Pinkerton with him. I think it was as well that the verandah was in shadow.

"George," she said, and I at least caught a tremble in her voice. "Ain't this too bad? Apache Kid tells me that he has just reckoned on pulling out right away,—says he never meant to stay here over night. I wanted to lend him two of our mounts, but he says he 's got these two from an Indian, and they 'll serve. Do you think you could get a pair of saddles turned out?"

"Ce't'inly," said George; and away he went to rout out the saddles.

I could not understand Margaret's next remark.

"If they do come down after you," said she, "I 'll tell them——"

"Better tell them you did n't see us go away," interrupted Apache Kid. "Better just don't see us go away—and then you 'll be able to speak the truth. You won't know which way we went."

She seemed very sad at this, but George now returned with the saddles, and we were soon ready for the way, our blankets strapped behind.

Margaret held up her hand.

"Good-bye," she said.

"Good-bye, Miss Pinkerton," said Apache Kid.

She stretched up and said: "You 're too good a man to be——" I lost the rest, and, indeed, I was not meant to hear anything.

She shook hands with me.

"If ever you are in them parts again," she said, "don't forget us; but you 'll have to ask for Mrs. Brooks then."

Apache was holding out his hand to George, who took it quickly, with averted face.

"Good-bye, Mr. Brooks," said Apache Kid. "And, by the way, in case you might think it worth while to have a look at that ore in place, I 've left a map of your route to the mountain with Miss Pinkerton, and an account of how you

might strike it. You can tell the sheriff of Baker you have it. He and Slim, that lean assistant of his, are the only men who know about the lie of the land; the Indian tracker does n't count. You can do what you like between you."

George seemed nonplussed.

"This," said he, "is real good of you, sir; but I don't know what you do it for."

"O!" said Apache Kid. "I told you I had n't much faith in its value, you remember."

"Yes, so you did," said George; but he seemed doubtful, and then suddenly took Apache Kid's hand again and shook it. "We 're friends, we two," said he.

"Why, sure, you 're friends," said Margaret, hastily; but her eyes looked out on the road to Baker City, and she seemed listening for some approach.

Apache touched his horse, and it wheeled and sidled a little and threw up the dust, and then suddenly decided to accept this new master.

My mount was duplicating that performance, and when he got started Margaret gave just one wave of her hand and, taking George by the arm, led him indoors. When we looked back, the house stood solitary in the sand.

"What does this mean?" I said.

But Apache Kid did not answer, and we rode on and on in silence while the evening darkened on the road to Camp Kettle.

But the look on Apache Kid's face forbade question.

CHAPTER XXIX

So-Long

[image]

ou will hardly be astonished to hear that the saloons in Kettle are open night and day. Go there when you please, you need no "knocking-up" of sleepy attendants. The hotel door is never closed.

It was long after midnight when we came into the place, over the very road and at the same hour and at much the same speed as Mr. Pinkerton must have ridden in pursuit of us, not a month prior to this ride of ours. This road from Baker City to Camp Kettle was the base of a triangle over which we had travelled, as it were,

at the apex of which triangle was the Lost Cabin Mine; and when we passed the place on the hillside, where we had gone so short a while before, something of a pang leapt in my heart. I bade farewell there to that terrible chapter in my life forever,—bade farewell there to the Lost Cabin Mine.

"I will have to borrow from you again," said Apache Kid (the first speech he had spoken since leaving the Half-Way House), as we came loping into Kettle at three of the morning. "Give me fifty dollars, and we'll settle later."

I told him the money was as much his as mine, and gave him what he asked before we reined up at the hotel door, where a wild-faced lad took our horses. An effeminate-looking youth, with that peculiar stamp that comes to effeminate youths in the West,—as though they counterbalanced their effeminacy, in so rugged a place, by keeping quiet, and so held their own among the strenuous majority,—led us to a double-bedded room (for we were very sleepy and desired to rest), we carrying up our blankets and belongings with us. He set a lamp in the room, wished us good-night with a smile,—for it was nigh morning, really a new day,—and we sat in silence, while on the low ceiling the smoke of the lamp wavered.

The room was close, stuffy, and Apache Kid flung open the window and moths straightway came fluttering in, moths as large as a dollar piece, and other strange insects, one like a dragon-fly that rattled on the roof and shot from side to side of the apartment so fiercely that it seemed rebounding from wall to wall by the force of its own impact.

Apache threw off his coat and blew out a deep breath.

"Warm," he said. "It's beastly to sleep indoors. No! This just adds proof. I could n't ever do with civilised ways, now. That girl," and he nodded towards the west, "she is mine, or she was mine—when she found that she had been right after all in her opinion of me. And she swung back to me more than ever strong because she had been lured away. But I—" he threw up his head and cried the words out in a whisper, so to speak: "I must never be weighed in the balance before being accepted. I must just be accepted. That is why I like you. You just accept me. But I made it all right with her. She will never regret having believed George's stories of me for when I went back to her and put the roll down and said: 'For your father's sake, Miss Pinkerton—you will accept this,' you could see that she wanted to ask forgiveness for having put me in her black books. But I put that all right."

"How?" I asked, for he had paused.

"Oh, I told her I was a villain, told her I fully expected to be arrested there and had only stopped to settle my promise to her father. It was a different thing for me to tell her I was a villain from another telling her that. When a villain tells his villainy to the ear of a woman he becomes almost a hero to her. She

begged me to change my ways, and I promised that for her sake I would. Quite romantic, eh? A touch of Sydney Carton—eh?” and he laughed. “And now she will remember me, if she does not indeed forget me, as a good fellow gone wrong, and thank God she has so good a husband as George. And George is not so bad a fellow. He can appreciate his master when he meets him. That is one good point about George. George is like the lion in the cage, the lion that roars in rage after the tamer has gone and determines to slay him on his next visit. But on the next visit he goes through his tricks as usual. It’s a pleasure at least to know that George at last was forced to hold out his hand to me and call himself my friend. He does n’t know why he did. He ’ll remember and wonder and he’ll never understand. That day that he came in and held me up,—you remember?—I said to myself: ‘You come to kill me to-day, but the day will come, not when I will crush you, but when you will come to me just like my little poodle dog.’”

He broke off and smote the buzzing insect to the floor as it blundered past his face (he was sitting on a chair with his arms folded on the back) and drew his foot across it.

“And he came, didn’t he?” he added. “My poodle dog!

“But after all,” he said, after a pause, “a woman that could be moved by my little poodle dog could never be the woman for me. When I look for a woman it must be one who does not doubt me—and who does not fear me. She did not fear me and that was why I thought— Ah well, you see, she doubted me. But let’s to bed.”

So we put out the light and turned in.

But I lay some time considering that Apache Kid was not the domineering man his words might have caused one to think. He covered up a deal of what was in his heart with a froth of words.

Next day (or I should say, later in that day), we continued our journey, after a few hours’ sleep and a monstrous breakfast; but never another word was spoken on the matter of the previous night and in the bright afternoon we came into Kettle River Gap and found that the “east-bound” was due at three in the afternoon.

In the hotel to which we repaired for refreshment Apache Kid wrote a letter to a dealer in New York, a letter which I was to deliver in person, carrying with me the turquoises.

“One gets far better prices in New York than in any of the western towns,” explained Apache Kid. “You can rely on this fellow, too. We are old friends, and he will do the square thing. You can send on half the amount to me, deducting what you have lent me.”

“Oh, nonsense!” said I.

“Deducting what you have lent me,” he repeated. “Twenty dollars at the

Half-Way House and fifty at Camp Kettle. That makes seventy.”

”You will need some more,” said I.

”No,” said he. ”I have still almost all the fifty, of course, and I can sell the two pintos for what I paid for them. Don’t worry me. I have never been obliged to a soul in my life for anything.”

But looking up and catching my eye looking sadly on him he smiled and: ”Humour me,” he said, ”humour me in this.”

When the letter was written he handed it to me, open, and said:

”Well, that is all, I think, until we hear the east-bound whistle.”

My heart was in my mouth.

”That other matter?” I said.

”What other?” said he.

”You wanted me to do something for you in the old country.”

”True,” said he, and sat pondering; and then coming to a conclusion he wrote a name and address on another sheet, and putting it in an envelope, which he sealed, he said: ”When you reach home you can open that, and—it should be easy enough to find out who lives there. If they are gone, you can trace them without anyone knowing what you are doing. They must never know about me, however. You will promise?”

”I promise,” said I.

”You can write to—let me see—say, where shall I go now?—say Santa Fe—to be called for.”

”Had you not better come home?” I asked half-fearfully, and he looked at me as twice I had seen him look,—once, when he silenced the ”Dago” livery-stable keeper; once, when he silenced the sheriff. I knew Apache Kid liked me; but at that glance I knew he had never let me quite close to himself. There was a barrier between him and all men. But the look passed, and said he, slowly and definitely:

”I can never go home.”

We went out into the air and sat silent till the east-bound whistled and whistled and screamed nearer and nearer.

It was while we sat there that I remembered that he had advertised for Jackson’s relatives, and asked what he would do if they were heard of.

He had evidently forgotten about that, for he seemed put out, and then remarked that he would send them his share of the turquoises, still to be disposed of.

”But you——” I began, and he held up his hand.

”I don’t want the stuff, anyhow,” said he. ”Now—don’t worry me. Don’t ask me questions. What I like about you is that you take me for granted. Don’t spoil the impression of yourself you have given me by wanting to know how I will get on, and thinking me foolish for what I intend to do.” He looked round on me.

"Yes," said he, "I like you. Do you know that the fact that you had never asked me what George Brooks and I were enemies for made me your most humble servant? Would you like to hear that story?"

I nodded.

"Well, well," he said, and laughed. "That makes me like you all the more. You are really interested, and yet are polite enough not to ask questions. Yes—that's the sort of man I like."

But he had no intention of telling me that affair,—just chuckled to himself softly and remarking, "That must remain a mystery," he lapsed again into silence.

And then the train whistled at the last curve, shot into sight, and came thundering and screaming into the depot.

"Oh! Apache Kid," said I, "I cannot go to-day. I must wait till to-morrow."

"That is a pity," said he, "for then you would have to wait here alone all to-morrow. I go West with to-morrow morning's 'west-bound.'"

"Ah, then," said I, "I will go with this one; for I could not stand the loneliness here with you flying away from me."

"No?" he said, half inquiringly; and then he surveyed me, interested, and said again, "No, not so easily as I can stand your departure—I suppose." But he looked away as he spoke.

My belongings lay just in the doorway, ready to hand, and these he lifted, boarding the train with me and finding me a seat. This was no sooner done than the conductor outside intoned his "All aboard!"

Apache Kid snatched my hand.

"Well," said he, "in the language of the country—so-long!"

I had no word to say. I took his hand; but he gave me only the fingers of his, and, whirling about, lurched down the aisle of the car, for the train had already started, and the door swung behind him. I tried to raise the window beside me, but it was fast, and by the time I had the next one raised and looked out, all the depot buildings were in the haze of my tears, in the midst of which I saw half a dozen blurred, waving hands, and though I waved into that haze I do not know whether Apache Kid was one of those who stood there or not.

So the last I really saw of Apache Kid was his lurching shoulder as he passed out of the swinging car.

CHAPTER XXX

And Last

[image]

t was with a full heart that I sat down, oblivious of all other occupants of the car. I sat dazed, the rattle of the wheels in my ears, and the occasional swishing sound without, when we rattled across some trestle bridge above a foaming creek hastening down out of the hills. Sunset came, glowing red on the tops of the trees on either hand. The Pintsch lamps were lit, and glimmered dim in that glow of the sunset that filled the coaches. It was not yet quite dark when we left Republic Creek, the gate city of the mountains, behind. The sunset suddenly appeared to wheel in the sky, and piled itself up again to the right of the track. We were looping and twining down out of the hills. I went out onto the rear platform for a last look at them. Already the plains were rolling away from us on either side, billowy, wind-swept, sweet-scented in the dusk. Behind was the long darkness, north and south, of the mountains. I gazed upon it till the glow faded, and the sinister, serrated ridge was only a long, thin line of black on the verge of the prairie.

Then I turned inwards again to the car and lay down to sleep, while we rolled on and on through the night over the open, untroubled plains.

But sleep on a train is an unquiet sleep, and often I would waken, imagining myself still in the heart of the mountains, sometimes speaking to Apache Kid, even Donoghue.

Old voices spoke; the Laughlins, the sheriff, my two fellow-travellers spoke to me in that uneasy slumber, and then I would awaken to answer and find myself in the swinging car alone, and a great rush of emotion would fill my heart.

* * * * *

Two items still remain to be told.

At New York I found the address to which Apache Kid had directed me. A sphinx of a gentleman read the letter I gave him, looked me over, and then asked: "The turquoises? You have them with you?"

I produced the bag, and he scrutinised them all singly, with no change on his face, rang a bell, and bade the attendant, who came in response, to bring him scales. He weighed each separately, touched them with his tongue, held them up to the light, and noted their values on paper. He must have been, indeed, a man Apache Kid could trust.

"Will you have notes or gold?" he asked. "The sum is two hundred thousand dollars, and I am instructed in this note, which as it is open you will know entitles you to half, to pay you on the spot."

I asked for a bill of exchange on the Bank of Scotland. He bowed and obeyed my request without further speech, but when he rose to usher me to the door his natural curiosity caused him to say:

"Do you know how your friend came by these?"

"I do," said I; but I thought to give this quiet man a Roland for his Oliver, seeing he was so much of a sphinx, and I said no more save that.

He smiled.

"Quite right," said he. "And did you leave your friend well?" he asked, smiling on me in a fatherly fashion.

"In the best of health," I said.

"I see I have to remit to Santa Fe," said he. "He did not say where he was going after that, did he? I can hardly expect him to stay there long."

"No, he did not say," I replied.

"Ah! Doubtless I shall hear of him when he thinks necessary," and he bowed me out and shook hands with me at the door.

The second item that still remains to be told is of my opening of the second letter that Apache Kid gave me. There was no difficulty in finding the address of his "people" which this contained. But if the address astonished me, I was certainly less astonished than deeply moved, when, by watching the residence, I found that his mother still lived,—a stately, elderly lady, with silver hair.

By careful inquiries, and by some observation, I found that there were two sisters also in the house, and once I saw all three out shopping in Princes Street, very tastefully but plainly dressed, and it struck me to the heart, with a sadness I cannot tell, to think that here was I, who could step up to them and say: "Madam, your son yet lives; ladies, your brother is alive," and yet to know that my lips were sealed; that for some reason Apache Kid could never again come home.

They noticed me staring at them, and, remembering my manners, I looked away. This intelligence I wrote to Apache Kid (to be called for at Santa Fe), as he had desired. But I never heard any word in reply. The letter, however, was not returned, so I presume he received it.

I do not know whether the fact that I am bound by a promise causes me, in contradictory-wise, to desire all the more to speak to these three of Apache Kid,—how alien his name sounds here in Edinburgh of all places!—but I do know that I long to speak to them. In Apache Kid's younger sister, especially in her winsome face, there is something I cannot describe that moves my heart. Once I saw her with her sister eating strawberries on one of the roof-café's in Princes Street, whither I had gone with my mother. My mother noticed the drifting of my eyes and looked at the girl and looked back at me and smiled, and shook her head on me, and said:

"She is a sweet girl, but do not stare; you have lost your manners in Amer-

ica!”

She did not understand, and I could not explain. But her words, spoken jestingly, took me back to that conversation with Apache Kid on the stagecoach, after we had left the Half-Way-to-Kettle House, when he delivered his opinion on the transition period in the West; and I wondered if he had yet looked up Carlyle's remark about the manners of the backwoods.

My little fortune had to be explained in some way, but you may be sure I told nothing of the terrors of the journey that we undertook in the gathering of it. The common fallacy that fortunes are to be picked up in America, by any youth who cares to go a-plucking there, helped me greatly with most folk, and I never was required to tell the bloody story of the Lost Cabin Mine.

But now that they who might have wept for my share in that business have gone beyond all weeping and grieving I can publish the tale with no misgivings; for the only fear that haunts me, as I go my ways through the world, is lest I give pain to any of these quiet, cloistered hearts, who, in their blissful and desirable ignorance, live apart in peace, not knowing how barbaric, how sad, how full of unrest, and how blood-bespattered the world still is.

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