

Henty George Alfred

In the Hands of the Cave- Dwellers



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CHAPTER I A MIDNIGHT ATTACK

It was late in the evening at San Diego, in the autumn of the year 1832; there was no moon, but the stars shone so brightly in the clear, dry atmosphere that it was easy to distinguish objects at some little distance. A young fellow, in the dress of a sailor, was making his way through the narrow streets that bordered the port, when he heard a sudden shout, followed by fierce exclamations and Mexican oaths. Without pausing to consider whether it was prudent to interfere, he grasped tightly a cudgel he had that day cut, and ran to the spot where it was evident that a conflict was going on. It was but some forty yards away, and as he approached he made out four figures who were dodging round a doorway and were evidently attacking someone standing there. The inequality of the combat was sufficient to appeal to the sailor's sympathies. The sand that lay thick in the street had deadened his footsteps, and his presence was unmarked till his stick descended with a sharp crack on the up-lifted wrist of one of the assailants, eliciting a yell of pain, while the knife the man held flew across the street.

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

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

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

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

"That is so. I am an American."

"Is that so?" the other said, speaking this time in English. "As you see, I know about as much of your tongue as you do of mine. I thought you must be a stranger even before I observed your dress, for street frays are not uncommon in this town, whereas in other ports there are scores of men ready for any villany, and few of my people would care to interfere in a fray in which they have no interest. But do not let us stay here. It is best to get out of this quarter."

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

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

"Mine is William Harland," the sailor replied.

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

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

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

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

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

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

They were now in a wider street, and, passing a wine-shop from which the light streamed out, Harland saw that the Mexican was a young fellow but two or three years older than himself, and his dress showed him to belong to the upper class. The Mexican's glance had been as quick as his own, for he said, "Why, you are younger than I am!"

"I am just eighteen."

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

"No. My father is one of the leading citizens of Boston; he absolutely refused to allow me to follow the sea as a profession, although he is a large ship-owner himself; however, my mind was made up, and as I could not go as an officer, I came as a sailor. This is not my first voyage, for two years ago he let me sail in one of his ships as an apprentice, making sure that it would have the effect of disgusting me with the sea. However, the experiment failed, and to his anger I returned even fonder of it than when I started. He wanted me to go into his office, but I positively refused, and we had a serious quarrel, at the end of which I went down to the river and shipped before the mast. I know now that I have behaved like a fool. The captain was a brute of the worst sort, and the first mate was worse, and between them they made the ship unbearable. I stood it as long as I could, but three days before we got to this port one of the young apprentices, whom they had pretty nearly killed, jumped overboard, and then I made up my mind that as soon as we landed I would bolt and take my chance of getting a berth on board some other ship."

"But you speak Spanish very fairly, señor."

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

"I have been down for the past six months in Valparaiso, staying with a relation who has a house there, and my greatest friends there were some young Englishmen of my own age, sons of a merchant. My father had spoken of my paying a visit to your States some day, and therefore I was glad of the opportunity of learning the language. This, señor, is the house of my friends."

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

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

"It is nothing serious, and I had almost forgotten it till just now it began to smart. I have two, or, I think, three stabs on my left arm; they are not very deep, as I twisted my cloak round it when I was attacked. But it would have been a very serious business had it not been for this gentleman, whom I wish to introduce to you, Don Guzman, as the saviour of my life. He is an American gentleman, the son of a wealthy ship-owner of Boston, but, owing to some slight disagreement with his father, he has worked his way out here as a sailor. I ventured to promise that you would extend your hospitality to him."

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

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

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

"I must apologize for not having asked you before," Señor Guzman said to Harland, when the wounds were bandaged, "but have you supped?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I cannot say, but I own I have an idea it was my life that they wanted rather than my valuables. I had a fancy that a man was following me, and I went to see the man I had spoken to about the mules. Coming back I heard a whistle behind me, and twenty yards farther three men sprang out, and one ran up from behind, so that I don't think it was a chance encounter."

"Do you suspect anyone?"

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

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

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

"It is a pity so great a distance divides us from them," he said. "It is more effectual than any ocean, and yet perhaps if we were nearer neighbours your people would disturb our quiet life here. They are restless, and forever pushing forward, while we abhor changes, and live as our fathers did three hundred years ago. You see, the mountains act as a barrier to us, and we have never even tried to extend the territory we occupy beyond the strip of land between the coast and the mountains, and, indeed, that is ample for us. Our population has decreased rather than increased since Mexico

declared its independence in 1821, and took what I have always considered the ill-advised step of expelling all the Spanish residents about six years ago.

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

"Don Juan's father, a man of vigour and courage, has shown more enterprise than any of us, for before the beginning of the troubles he moved far up a valley running into the heart of the mountains, and established himself there. He had large flocks and herds, but his land was insufficient to support them, and, in spite of the warnings of all his friends, he determined to move. So far he has proved himself a wise man. He began by making a sort of treaty with the Indians of that part, by which he agreed to give them a considerable amount of blankets and other goods if they would bind themselves not to interfere with him in any way. These people have generally proved themselves faithless in such matters, but this has been an exception to the rule, and I believe that he has not lost a single head of cattle since he went out there, and he is now undoubtedly one of the richest men on this coast. The fact that he should send his son on to Chile to enlarge his mind and prepare him for a trip to the United States, and even to Europe, shows the energy of the man, and how far removed his ideas are from those of the hacenderos in general. I can assure you that Juan's departure caused quite a sensation in this part of the province."

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

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

"How far is this place from here?"

"About two hundred miles."

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

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

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

CHAPTER II

A HEARTY WELCOME

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

"I have been to your room, and when I found it empty, guessed the errand on which you were away. Why did you not tell me last night? You could have had a negro slave to go with you and carry that sack of yours back."

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

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

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

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

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

"How is your arm, Don Juan?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"He was good enough to say that when a request from my father reached him to that effect, he should most willingly accede to it. Colonel Melos did, in fact, call the day before yesterday, and formally proposed the alliance, to which Don Guzman replied that his daughter's affections were already engaged with his perfect consent and approval. The colonel, of course, had nothing to do but to bow himself out with as good a grace as he could muster. I fancy from what I have heard that he is a good officer and an honest man. He has played a part in all the civil wars that we have had here, but, unlike most others, he always stuck to the same side, which, fortunately for him, turned out in the end to be the successful one. His son bears an altogether different character. Here, indeed, there has been nothing much against him; the fact of his father being commandant has no doubt acted as a check upon him, and possibly the hope that he may have entertained of winning Christina's hand may have helped to render him discreet, but I have heard that in other places where his regiment has been in garrison, he bore the worst of characters.

"Thus, you see, as a bitterly-disappointed man and as an unscrupulous one, he might well have been the author of this attack upon me; and, as you noticed, the idea occurred to Christina as well as myself, remembering as we did the expression of his face when he saw us together. That the affair was his work, however, we have no shadow of proof, and I should not think of whispering my suspicions to anyone. Still, I shall take every precaution for the three or four days that I remain here, and shall not be out in the unfrequented streets after nightfall. And now about yourself; tell me, frankly, what are you thinking of doing? Do you intend to continue at sea, or are you thinking of returning to your home, where, no doubt, you would be gladly received by your father?"

"I have not thought it fully over yet, but I certainly shall not go back to my father with the tale that I found my life unbearable and deserted my ship. When I go it must be with a better record than that. He may have objected most strongly to my taking to the sea, but I think it would be an even greater annoyance to him to find that having, in defiance of his wishes, done so, I had so soon backed out of it. He himself is a man who carries through anything that he undertakes, no matter if he incurs loss in so doing. I do not say that if I saw some other opening and made a success of it, he would mind; but when I do go back it must not be as a returned prodigal, but as a man who has done something, who has in one line or another achieved a certain amount of success. As far as I have thought it over, my ideas have been to take a passage down to Valparaiso, which seems to me the most go-ahead place on this coast, and there look round. I have money enough to last for some little time, for my father, on my return from my last voyage, gave me a cheque for five hundred dollars, and, beyond twenty or thirty dollars expended on my sea-kit, I still have it all in my belt."

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

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

"Well, you will not embark on any such wild-goose chase for some time, for I intend to take you off with me to my father's hacienda for a long visit. You will receive the heartiest of welcomes when I tell them what you have done for me. I can promise you, I think, a pleasant time there, and you will see what will be quite a new side of life to you, and learn something of the ranching business, which, let me tell you, is as good as another, though I admit that a considerable amount of capital is required for making a fair start."

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

"There are no buts in it, Will," the other broke in. "You don't suppose that after what has happened you are going your way and I am going mine in the course of a few days, as if we were but two passengers who had made a short voyage together. My father would never forgive me if I did not bring you up with me. I expect to-morrow or next day we shall have three or four of the men down with horses, blankets, and other necessities for travel. I sent a messenger off on the day I arrived. There is generally a wagon or two that comes down every month for groceries, wine, and other matters, and as I find that it is fully that time since the last trip, I expect that the carts and men will both arrive to-morrow. Travelling comfortably, we shall take the best part of a week to get there; of course, with relays of horses it could be done in less than half that time. The wagons take ten days, and that is good travelling, especially as there are three days' heavy work over the first range of hills. Here the mules will have a few days' rest and then start again."

"You find mules better than horses for wagons?"

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

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

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

"You think –" Will began.

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

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

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

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

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

Three days later Juan and Will said good-bye to Señor Guzman and his daughter and set out, the four mounted men riding behind them with two led animals carrying provisions and water-skins.

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

"The country is cultivated as far as the Chocolate Hills, as there are several small rivers, whose water is used for irrigating the fields. Beyond these hills there are scattered villages and haciendas, their positions being determined by the existence of streams coming down from a great mountain range, for although rain seldom falls near the coast, there are heavy showers there occasionally. Except in the rainy season, the beds of these streams are dry, but wells sunk in them at all times yield a plentiful supply of water. It is drawn up by the labour of bullocks, and the ground irrigated; and they grow oranges, bananas, grapes, melons, and all kinds of fruit, in fact, in abundance. Some of these irrigated estates are of considerable size. For the last fifty miles we shall come across no settlements until we reach our own hacienda, for the country is too much open to Indian forays. Though we do not suffer as much as they do on the other side of the Colorado; still the risk is great – too great for men who embark their capital, to say nothing of risking their lives. We are fortunate in the fact that the tribe immediately in our neighbourhood is a small one, and far less warlike than many of their neighbours. The goods they receive from us, and the cattle, make them comparatively rich, and they have never shown any signs whatever of enmity against us. We have promised them that if they are attacked by any of their savage neighbours we will, if they come down to us, assist them, and as the hacienda is strongly built and we have a supply of arms sufficient for all our men, we could resist any attack. I think this understanding has quite as much to do with their friendly feeling towards us as the benefits they receive from us."

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

"Yes; the valley is not very wide at the lower end near the river, but the hills open out and form a basin some ten miles wide and twenty miles long. Beyond that it extends a considerable distance, but narrows fast; a stream runs down the centre, and during the rainy season and at the

time of the melting of the snows there are innumerable rivulets coming down from the hills, and in consequence the grass is sweet and long. Our herds amount to about forty thousand head, and we do not let them exceed that number. We do not use the upper part of the valley. By our agreement with the Indians that is to remain untouched as a hunting-ground for them."

That night they slept at the hacienda of some acquaintances of Señor Sarasta, where they were most hospitably entertained; the next day they halted for a few hours at San Felice, and rode on as soon as the sun had lost its full power. They were now beyond the region of general cultivation; the plain was, however, fairly green, as a short time before the unusual circumstance of a heavy rain had occurred, with the result that in the course of a few days the whole face of the country was changed. As soon as the horses were unsaddled the men scattered to collect dead brushwood, and in a short time a fire was blazing, and a slice from a hindquarter of venison that had been presented to them by their host of the night before was skewered on a ramrod and placed over it. They had made sixty-five miles in two days' journey. They had not been following any beaten track, but the men had all made the journey so often that no path was needed. In the morning they would begin the ascent of the lower slopes of the mountains, whose crest rose some thirty miles ahead of them, although, seen in the clear air, they did not seem to Will Harland to be more than a fifth of that distance. Rather to the surprise of the men, Juan ordered that a watch should be kept, a precaution they had never taken before.

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

CHAPTER III

AN AMBUSH

The night passed quietly. The soil was soft and sandy, and, rolled in his poncho, Will slept as comfortably as if in a hammock. They were in the saddle early, for the day's ride would be a very long one, and Juan intended to give the horses a day's rest at Martinez.

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

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

"No, it was not necessary; the horses will have a good drink at a stream we shall cross in a couple of hours, and we shall fill the skins there; beyond that we enter the mountains and travel through an extremely difficult pass, or, rather, I should say, passes, till we come down into the valley. The carts do not come this way; they strike the Colorado River many miles down and follow its bank. It is at least a third longer, but if it were three times as long they would have to go that way; the passes are difficult enough for horses, but they would be impossible for wheeled carriages."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

It would, however, have been no easy matter to distinguish a man's head among the masses of rock and boulders through which in many places brushwood and small trees had sprung up, and, although all kept scanning the hillsides minutely, nothing suspicious was heard, until suddenly a shot was fired from a spot some forty feet up the rocks on the left-hand side. Will instantly swung himself to the ground, gave a sharp slap on his horse's quarters, and ensconced himself behind a rock, while the animal, relieved from the weight of his rider, made his way rapidly along the path. The first shot had been followed by half a dozen others. These came from both sides of the ravine, and a ball striking the rock close to Will's head, showed him that his position was no more safe there than it would have been on horseback. He therefore made a rush upward, and took up a position between two rocks which covered him from either side. Then he took advantage of some bushes and crawled some yards farther along, until he came to a spot where he could lie in shelter, and yet obtain a view through the bushes both above and below him.

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