



CHAPTER V. STRANGE DOINGS.

There could be no mistake about it. The young man, standing beside the boulder a few paces away, lighting his cigarette, was We-way-ma, the Apache youth whom Weston Rundell had provided with food when he was famishing and paid his passage on the railway to a point near the White Mountain reservation.

Having lighted the wisp of tobacco, We-way-ma took a number of vigorous puffs, the tip of the cigarette sending out a glow that revealed the point of his nose and reflected the keen glitter of his eyes, while the rest of his figure was so shrouded in gloom that only the faintest outlines could be traced by the watchful Rundell.

The shock of the latter held him motionless for the moment, undecided what to do. He believed that if the ranchman Huntley was in his place he would have brought his Winchester to his shoulder and whipped out his revolver and dropped the youth where he stood.

But, though our young friend was angered beyond description, he was not ready to do that. He decided upon a more radical course. He would cover him with his revolver, stop forward from the darkness and call him to account. If his explanation was unsatisfactory—as it was quite certain to be—it would then be time for more drastic measures.

Rundell did not hesitate, once his course was determined upon. Pistol in one hand and Winchester in the other, he took several quick strides and was on the point of addressing the dusky youth, when he made the astounding discovery that he was not present. He had vanished like a shadow.

Before whisking from sight, he flung the half consumed cigarette to the ground, where Rundell saw it glowing, while the odor of the burning tobacco lingered in the air. The baffled young man, with his finger upon the trigger of his half raised weapon, peered about him, distrusting the evidence of his own senses. He suspected the fellow had simply stooped down and was therefore likely to "get the drop" on him, but, unwilling to retreat, he took two more steps forward, until he paused on the very spot where the young Apache had been standing. Then all doubt disappeared; he was really gone.

The explanation was simple: We-way-ma had heard the noise, slight as it was, that disclosed the presence of some one near him, and with the wonderful cunning of his people darted like a flash beyond reach and sight. Rundell had not only failed to bring him to book, but had betrayed himself, thus adding infinitely to the advantage of the one who was already immensely his superior in woodcraft.

Filled with chagrin, the young man hurriedly withdrew to his former position, for it was intolerable to think that he stood in view of his invisible enemy. Still grasping his smaller weapon, he looked around, listening intently, but seeing and hearing nothing.

"The conductor was right," he bitterly reflected. "So was Mrs. Huntley, and the action of We-way-ma is another proof of it, where no proof was needed. I ought to have shot him while the chance was mine, for he would not have hesitated had our situations been reversed."

And yet the Apache had hesitated, for it is beyond denial that the moment he detected the proximity of a white man the power was the Apache's to bring him down with a shot from his gun or the pistol that, it is to be presumed, he had, but it was not to be supposed that he refrained through any consideration for his enemy. It was rather a part of his subtle scheme that he chose to wait until there came a change in the situation.

Weston Rundell found himself for the time at his wits' end. He did not know whether to advance or retreat. Just then he would have given much to be able to communicate with the ranchman; but, since the Apaches were prowling near, any attempt to reach an understanding with him was certain to expose himself to his enemies.

He looked in the direction of the house, whose shadowy outlines could be faintly traced against the starlit sky. To one side and at the rear was a smaller structure used as a stable. In that climate there is only occasional need of shelter for animals, but at rare intervals the northerners and driving storms render it necessary, and the stable was used at such times for the ponies, while the cattle of necessity were left to shift for themselves.

One striking peculiarity of the situation was the failure of the Apaches to use the advantage that was unquestionably theirs. Nothing was easier for them than to steal up to the stable and set it on fire, but it may have been that they saw it was not near enough to the dwelling to communicate with it, since there was hardly a breath of air stirring, and We-way-ma might have lighted his cigarette without the least protection to the blaze.

Be that as it may, the marauders had an equally good opportunity of firing the house itself, for, though it had windows on all sides and only the single front door, they could creep near in the darkness with brushwood and touch it off without detection. It may have been that such was their intention, and the

fact that they deferred action was evidence of itself that they had sufficient reason for their inaction. Recalling the arrangement of the house, Rundell knew that he was nearest the sleeping room of Mr. and Mrs. Huntley. He was at the rear and would not have more than a few paces to walk to reach the window, which, like all the rest, was on the ground floor.

His inclination was to go directly forward, knock on the window, make himself known and gain admission, but there was more than one reason why he should hesitate. In the first place, it was to be supposed that the mother and daughter, rifle in hand, were on the alert, passing from window to window and ready to repel any insidious approach of their foes. As he emerged from the gloom he was likely to be mistaken for one of the Apaches and would be fired upon before he was recognized.

We-way-ma wore a sombrero like himself, and it was probable that some of his companions did the same, while the gloom would conceal the other differences in their attire until too late to remedy the mistake.

Moreover, the same if not a greater peril must threaten from the Apaches themselves. It would seem that they must detect the approach of a white man sooner than the women, with consequences that need not be dwelt upon.

Several times while scrutinizing the dark, gloomy structure in front of him Rundell fancied he could see a faint, almost imperceptible illumination, as if a candle were burning somewhere within the building. The windows, being provided with curtains, would of necessity subdue such a light, which was also screened by other means. However, the glow was so faint that at times he doubted whether there was any light at all inside the house.

But the minutes were passing, and the young man was getting impatient. The impulse to do something was strong upon him and finally led him to an attempt that was the height of rashness. He had approached as near the house as he dared, for to advance farther would be to pass into the open, as may be said, where he was almost certain of discovery. Drawing a match from his pocket he drew it smartly along his trousers at the thigh. It was of the silent kind and broke into sulphurous smoke without noise. He, too, sheltered it, though he used but one hand, and even that was not necessary. When the flame was at its height, he deliberately raised and held the blaze within a few inches of his forehead, slowly circling it around and up and down, until the light dwindled, when he threw it to the ground.

"If either Edith or her mother is at the window, she has recognized me," was his thought when he exposed his features in the manner described, in the hope of revealing his presence to them.

The peril of the whole business, as he himself realized, was that there was the same chance of making himself known to the Apaches prowling all about him. But, as is sometimes the case in the affairs of this world, that which he dreaded did not occur and the daring proceeding was rewarded with more success than he was warranted in expecting or hoping for.

Sh! There was a slight noise at the window, so slight that he could not identify it, but instantly he was all attention.

He heard it once, and then all was still. Remembering the danger to which he had exposed himself from the hostiles, he quietly stepped a couple of paces to the right, so that if any of them sent a shot at the spot where the tiny flame had flickered for a few seconds, the bullet would not touch him. At the same time he availed himself, so far as he could, of the shelter of a dwarfed pine, which was one of a number growing near.

Sh! He heard the soft rustling again, like the swish of a woman's dress, but it lasted longer than before, and then his heart was thrilled by the certainty that some one was stealthily raising the window.

"She has seen me! She knows that it is I who am waiting for admittance!" was his thought. While eager to hurry forward, he yet held back from a doubt that was hardly clear to himself.

Singular that with so many deadly enemies moving hither on the watch to gain an advantage such profound silence should reign, but it was as if Weston Rundell was stealing across a graveyard at midnight.

Through this broiling stillness a whisper reached him, so faint and low that it was hardly an intrusion upon the silence, but his tense hearing could not doubt the fact that his own name was pronounced.

"Weston, is it you?" He impulsively stepped forward and called back in the same guarded undertone: "Yes. Shall I come to you?" "Be quick!" He ran lightly across the intervening space, forgetful of other perils in his eagerness. Reaching the window, he found the sash raised, while Edith, standing a little to one side, was invisible in the gloom. He had shoved his revolver back in his hip pocket, but his Winchester of necessity was in his grasp.

"Let me have it!" whispered the young woman. "Be quick!"

A white hand flashed in the darkness, and the weapon was taken from him. Then, grasping the sides of the window, he thrust one booted leg through and instantly followed it with his body.

Without pausing to greet her, he turned and pushed down the sash. Its catch was of the primitive kind, being a big nail.

"Quick! It must be secured!" he whispered. "Where is the nail?" "I have it," she replied, deftly showing it in place.

"There!" he exclaimed lightly. "The burglars can't get in without breaking the panes, and they don't seem to wish to do that."

Instinctively the two stepped aside, to be out of range of any shot sent that way. As they did so, the listening ear might have detected a soft, almost inaudible sound, like that of a falling leaf or the whisper of the summer wind among the flowers, or such as is caused by the gentle contact of two pairs of human lips. We dare not deny that in the present instance such may have been the cause.

"Where is your mother?" asked Rundell. "In the front room."

"And no harm has come to either?" "None. I cannot understand it. Where is father?" "Somewhere among the hills. He thought it better for us to part company, since we were less likely to be seen."

"And where are the three men?" "Miles away, looking after the cattle."

"Strange that they are not here. I do not understand that either."

"Edith, who do you suppose is with the Apaches that have attacked your ranch?" "How should I know?" "We-way-ma, that young Apache whom we befriended on the train. We

thought the conductor was harsh when he spoke of his people as he did, but he was right."

"I do not think so."

"Do you not believe him after what I have just told you?" "We-way-ma, the young Apache, is now in this house," was the astounding reply of Miss Huntley.

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