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CHAPTER VII.

A MOMENTOUS QUESTION.

Edith Huntley showed resentment when, after the completion of her hurried recital, her companion insisted that she and her mother had been deceived by We-way-ma, the young Apache.

"Why do you doubt him after the proof he gave of his good will?" she demanded.

"Because it was no proof at all," was the curt reply.

"Why, then, did he warn us not to go out of the house and surrender to the party?"

"Nothing is plainer. He knew from the first that you would not do so. Your mother has had too much experience with his people to be misled by so shallow a pretense. He gained your confidence by giving counsel that was not needed. He has a deeper scheme in mind, and he has succeeded in blinding both of you to his real purpose."

"We shall soon find out," she said, strong in her faith.

"There is no doubt of that. Come," he repeated, "take me to him and your mother."

The Apache and Mrs. Huntley had heard the murmur of voices in the adjoining room from the first. The youth slipped away from the woman and silently approached the couple, without their knowledge, and quickly identified them. Then he returned with a statement of the truth.

The young woman talked fast, and her story took less time in its telling than would be supposed. Before they were expected, Rundell came into the front room, with Edith close behind him.

Weston had not been mistaken regarding the light that he fancied was burning in some part of the dwelling. The outer door opened into the middle apartment, on the right and left of which were two communicating rooms, used for sleeping purposes. In one of these, on the floor, was a lighted candle, shedding a dim yellow illumination through the one that was used as a dining and sitting room. We-way-ma was standing close to the outer door, rifle in hand, looking expectantly toward the couple as they came forward into the faint light. Mrs. Huntley, holding also a larger weapon, stood some paces away, her position such that she was not in range from either window, at the side of the door and before which a curtain was tightly drawn.

Although Rundell thoroughly distrusted the Apache, he had decided to act as if he held unbounded faith in him. The moment he recognized the shadowy figure he strode across the room and extended his hand.

"How do you do, We-way-ma? I did not expect to see you here."

The Indian took the proffered hand, but his clasp was weak. He must have known the young man did not share the feelings of the women.

"I be well—how be you?"

"I don't know what to make of the situation. Why have you come into the house, We-way-ma?"

"To be friend to my friends."

"I am glad to hear you say that, for they never needed friends more than now. Tell me your plans."

"Apaches ask me to get 'em come out and give up. I tell 'em not do so. They stay in the house."

"Yes," interposed Mrs. Huntley. "We-way-ma proved himself loyal and true when he might have persuaded us to surrender to his party."

Rundell could not help turning toward the speaker and asking:

"Could he have persuaded you to give yourselves up?"

"I hardly know."

"I do; but go on, We-way-ma."

"I tell Apaches wait till night, then I come in and bring out women through door, but," he added with a queer chuckle, "we don't do so. We go out window, same as you come through little white ago."

Further questioning made clear the scheme of We-way-ma. His story was that his comrades when they started on their raid were so impatient that they insisted upon attacking the ranch without any delay. The encounter between Rundell and the rancher on one hand and the three bucks on the other made it manifest that there were only the two women in the house, and though there was a certain degree of risk in the assault a dozen well armed hostiles must speedily prevail over the defenders.

Erave, however, as these red men are they invariably prefer the course that is attended with the least danger to themselves. We-way-ma insisted that an attack upon the dwelling must result in the death of several of the party, for the women had repeating Winchester rifles at command and knew how to use them. He maintained that by promising good treatment he could induce the defenders to come out and give themselves up, thus securing their prisoners without any harm to the hostiles.

The Apaches showed their common sense by declaring such a ruse to be impossible of success, and the argument, as has been shown, became acute in its violence, but it terminated in the victory for We-way-ma, who went forward under his flag of truce with a result that has already been made known to the reader.

The next proposal of the youth was to wait until night was fully come when he would secure entrance into the building, and once there he was sure to

find it easy to bring about the undoing of the defenders. He would persuade them to accompany him through the front door in the belief that he meant to conduct them to the wooded hills,



He strode across the room and extended his hand.

where they would be safe; but once fairly outside of the shelter nothing in the world was easier than to make them prisoners, while, if they refused to accompany him, he could manage in some way to overcome them.

We-way-ma met less difficulty than he expected in gaining consent to his second plan, it being accepted with a readiness that surprised him. Two of the Apaches asked that as soon as it became dark enough they should be allowed to steal up to the building and set fire to it, but they were overruled and compelled to agree to the line of action already named.

It must not be supposed that such cunning miscreants as a raiding party of Apaches could forget an important factor in the situation. Two white men, the friends of the women, were in the neighborhood and had already given a proof of their mettle by tumbling one of the bucks from his broncho. Although the ranchmen had seemingly fled, it was simply a strategic movement on their part. They were still in the neighborhood and were sure to take a hand in the final round up. To fire the building would set them to work on the instant. If they could not save the endangered females, who would be compelled to flee from the burning dwelling, they would shoot down more than one of their assailants. It was this self evident fact that caused an emphatic veto of the scheme of the two exuberant bucks.

As for the cattlemen absent in the hills, they were so far off that it was safe to leave them out of the calculation, provided there was not too much delay in pushing through the plan of campaign proposed by We-way-ma and accepted by all the others.

Thus a situation was evolved the like of which it may be believed was never seen in the southwest. A dozen Apaches swooped down upon a ranch defended by two women, all being fully armed, and yet, omitting the encounter between the horsemen as described, not a single shot had been fired.

We-way-ma, after finishing the cigarette that Rundell saw him light, walked round to the door of the ranch, and, making himself known, was admitted by the women, both of whom were unfeignedly glad to see him. According to his declaration, he had promised his comrades, who were stationed near in the darkness, that he would induce them to accompany him through the door, under the assurance that, favored by the gloom, he could quickly conduct them to a place of safety. He was emphatic in declaring to the other Apaches that he could do this because of the favoring conditions, though in order to lull the suspicions of the couple it was necessary to be deliberate in what he proposed and did.

Such was the story told in his broken way by We-way-ma, who, it may be said, held the fate of the women in his hands. Mrs. Huntley and her daughter believed every syllable. Weston Rundell did not credit a single word. The Apache's proposal was that the little party should follow him through the window that had served to admit Rundell. The waiting Apaches would not look for anything of that nature, and the rear of the house was so close to the pines and bowlders that a few hurried steps must take the fugitives to shelter, where they would be beyond danger.

Rundell listened intently to every point of this remarkable statement and before it was finished he had formed his conclusion, which was in keeping with his thorough distrust of the young barbarian.

Aware that he possessed the confidence of the women, he strengthened it by his proposal to deceive the waiting Apaches by stealing out from the rear of the house instead of the front, where they would walk into the arms of their implacable enemies.

Several questions instantly presented themselves to the young man. Was it reasonable to suppose that the hostiles would hold only the front of the building under surveillance? When there were so many, would they not wholly surround the house and guard against

the very scheme We-way-ma had in mind?

More important still, why should the women leave the house at all?

With Rundell (and supposedly the rancher) at hand to create a diversion, the Apaches would, in a certain sense, be placed between two fires. The defenders could be counted on to make a brave fight, while their allies on the outside were certain to add to the complication of the situation.

Still further, the cattlemen who were at no great distance must have been summoned to the spot by some means and would arrive ere long. All that was necessary, therefore, was for mother and daughter to wait where they were, especially in view of the fact that they had received a reinforcement in the person of Rundell himself.

Ah, why, had not the latter thought of it before? The peculiar manner in which the rancher had fired his Winchester and in which Rundell by request initiated him was a signal to the three cattlemen. There could be no doubt that it was a summons for them to hasten to the house where their services were sorely needed.

If there had been any question in Rundell's mind of the intended treachery of We-way-ma there was none now. So angered was he that but for the presence of the women he would have denounced him to his face and fought it out to the death in that very room, but he mastered his feelings. He decided that he, too, would dissemble and catch the traitor in his own trap.

"We-way-ma's plan is well laid," said Rundell significantly, after it had been fully considered, "and I presume there need be no haste in carrying it out."

"We must not wait," said We-way-ma. "Apaches get tired."

"No doubt he is right," added Mrs. Huntley. "Before long the Indians will become suspicious over the delay and it will be all the harder for us to give them the slip."

"If We-way-ma is to take charge of the business he ought to be obeyed implicitly. I am awaiting his pleasure."

The Apache was nearer the front door than any one. He seemed to hear something at that moment, though no one else noticed it. Raising one hand as a warning for the others to remain silent he leaned toward the heavy structure and bent his head in an attitude of intense listening. Evidently some of his people were there, but they must have feared to open communication with him, for nothing further occurred.

The Apache now moved on tiptoe through the door of the room, whose window opening at the rear was the one that had admitted Weston Rundell. As he was passing from view he turned and beckoned to his friends to follow him. Rundell anticipated the women by instantly stopping after the youth, followed by Edith and her mother.

The obscurity was so deep that all were mutually invisible, but a slight sound showed that We-way-ma was removing the catch over the sash, which was softly raised to its full height. Then he whispered:

"Wait till I come back. I see if all be right."

The faintest possible star gleam revealed his figure as he thrust his leg through the opening and noiselessly placed himself on the outside. There he paused for a minute while he used his keen sense of sight and hearing to their utmost, and then, as if he found things as he desired, he vanished like the shadow of a moving cloud.

Somehow or other Weston Rundell found the hand of Edith Huntley in the



He turned and beckoned to his friends to follow him.

gloom, and when he gently closed his fingers she returned the pressure still more gently and did not seek to draw her hand away.

"Do you believe now in We-way-ma?" asked Mrs. Huntley in guarded undertones.

"No," replied the young man, with less attempt to lower his voice. "He is carrying out his plan of betraying you. But I shall permit neither you nor Edith to help. You shall not follow him through that window even if I must use force to restrain you!"

(To be concluded next Thursday.)

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