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This is the Story

For those who mourn the passing of the romantic and adventurous West, this book will be a welcome revelation that it still exists. To Jack Lennon, prospector, wandering peacefully over a well-marked trail, this revelation came when a bullet knocked down his burro. With almost incredible speed he found himself dragged out of the comfortable routine of his life into a forced career of lawlessness. Besides the struggle between the two bands of desert dwellers there is the struggle between two women, and the story ends in a climax of tremendous tension and power.

An exhilarating thrill.—*Liverpool Post*.

Vivid portraiture ... great versatility in this thrilling tale.—*Yorkshire Post*.

By the Same Author

DEEP CANYON

KEN OF THE COW COUNTRY

*THE DIAMOND A GIRL

*THE QUARTERBREED

*THE ROUGH RIDER

THE COW COUNTRY KILLERS

VENGEANCE VALLEY

THE BRANDED WOLF

THE SHEEPMAN'S GOLD

* *Uniform with this Volume*

THE DESERT GIRL

by

ROBERT AMES BENNET

Author of "Branded," "The Quarterbreed," etc.

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CHAPTER I

AMBUSHED

As Lennon drove his heavily packed burro over the round of the ridge above the camp spring, all the desolate Arizona waste around him was transformed by the splendour of dawn. Up out of the mysterious velvety blue-black valleys loomed the massive purple-walled fortresses and cities of the mountain giants, guarded by titanic skyward towering pyramids and turrets of exquisite rose pink.

The burro was not interested in scenery or light effects. He topped the ridge and plodded slowly down the steep trail on the far side. Lennon lingered to enjoy the glorious illusion of the view.

All too soon, as the glaring sun cleared the high plateau on the eastern horizon, the ethereal colours of daybreak faded. The magic towers and pyramids lowered and shrank in bulk until they became only bald rugged peaks and buttes.

No less remorselessly the flood of hot white sun-rays burned away the shadow tapestry of the valleys. In place of the cool mysterious vales there were left only scorched gulleys and dry washes sparsely set with greasewood and sagebrush and cactus.

Yet the interest in Lennon's alert gray eyes increased rather than lessened as he swung away down slope after his burro. The trail he was following was very old. Above almost every arable valley bottom the heights were crested with the stone ruins of ancient pueblos. Not improbably, Coronado or others of the early Spanish explorers had ridden this trail, west and north around the great bend, into the territory of the Moquis and Navahoes.

Within the memory of settlers not yet white-haired, more than one war-party of renegade Apaches had sneaked along the ancient way in search of victims. Every few yards of the bad lands offered perfect lurking places for liers-in-wait along the trail.

Lennon glanced at the butt of his rifle in its sheath on the burro's pack. He recalled the tales of the old prospector whose copper mine he was seeking to re-discover. But his glance was only momentary. He knew that twenty-seven years had passed since the last murderous Indian outbreak in this land of desolation.

In those days a lone prospector would never have thought of tramping this trail without his rifle ready in hand, and the hammer at half cock. Lennon began to whistle a dance tune as he sauntered unconcernedly at the heels of his slow-moving burro up a rise and along a badly broken rocky slope.

They came down into a sandy wash that curved out of the mass of jagged ridges on the north. When midway across the bottom of the arroyo Lennon heard a sharp ping close above his ear—his sombrero whirled from his head. Before the hat struck the sand the rocky sides of the wash reverberated with the report of a rifle shot.

Lennon had never before been under fire, yet his reaction to the shot was almost instantaneous. One jump brought him alongside the burro. He crouched below the level of the pack and clutched the butt of his sheathed rifle. Again the gulley walls reverberated. The burro dropped dead, with a bullet through his head.

As the beast fell, Lennon hit the sand almost at the same moment, his rifle gripped in his right hand. Flattened out behind the inert body of the burro, he peered around the end of the pack. A bullet thwacked in the sand close at his right. He thought he could see a haze of semi-smokeless powder vapour above a jagged crag up-slope where the wash twisted in a sharp bend. He fired four shots in quick succession at promising notches in the crag.

Immediately after his fourth shot an arm and rifle were thrust up above the rock in a convulsive gesture, then suddenly disappeared. No more bullets came pinging down the arroyo.

Lennon gathered himself together and bounded on across the bottom of the wash to where the trail ran up a small side gulley. From the gulley he started to creep with cautious slowness up the left bank of the arroyo, under cover of the rocks and jutting points.

Now crawling, now springing from rock to rock, he worked his way half up to the crag, yet failed to catch a single glimpse of the lier-in-wait or to draw another shot. His conviction that he had killed the lurker became so firm that he stood erect to cover the remaining distance at a rush.

From down across the arroyo came a sharp clatter of hoofs. He whirled, with his rifle at his shoulder. Over the barrel he saw a scraggy pony loping down into the wash along the trail of the burro. The pony's rider was armed with a rifle. Lennon took quick aim—only to drop the muzzle of his weapon. The rider had flung up a gauntleted hand, palm outward. A musical feminine hail rang aslant the arroyo:—

"Wa-hoo! Friend! Don't shoot!"

Lennon had already perceived that the rider was a woman. He jumped clear of the bank and sprinted down the

rocky, sandy bed of the wash.

"Get off!" he shouted. "Hide behind your horse—quick! Danger."

The rider brought her pony to an abrupt halt below the dead burro and dropped out of her saddle on the far side. Only her old cowboy sombrero, the bottom of her khaki divided-skirt and her high laced boots were visible to Lennon.

With a startled snort, the ewe-necked pony plunged and backed around, clear of his motionless mistress. Lennon's first glance showed him that she was young and more than pretty. He was already leaping over the dead burro and brought up close before the girl to shield her with his body.

"Down!" he cried. "Down, before he fires!"

The dark eyes of the girl met his anxious look with a cool, level gaze. Her cheeks were ruddy with rich colour under their deep coat of tan. The corners of her rather large but shapely mouth quirked in an amused half smile.

"Don't tell me you're not a tenderfoot," she rallied, in a softly vibrant, contralto voice. "I heard shots, so came a-running. Your attacker must have vamosed, else you'd have collected lead on the jump."

"That's so," agreed Lennon. "Only I really think I nailed the beggar. Yet you must take no chances. Get under cover while I make sure."

"You've already done that—standing here ten seconds without drawing a shot. When a mountain lion misses his game first crack, he sometimes is so shamed he clears out. Same way with a broncho Apache."

"Apache? But I thought all Indians were now on reservations."

The girl dropped the reins of her skittish, snorting pony and picked up Lennon's new sombrero. Through the middle of the high peak was a neatly drilled bullet hole.

"Poor shot—for an Apache," she said. "Good, though, for ventilation."

The dry humour of this brought a twinkle into the Easterner's gray eyes. He took the hat from her out-stretched gloved hand, but paused with it half raised to his close-cropped head.

"If you'll permit me ... my name is Lennon—Jack Lennon—mining engineer."

"Engineer is all right, but can you shoot?" queried the girl.

"I have had pretty good luck with running deer. This is my first man."

"All right, Mr. Lennon. I'm going up to look for signs. Come along if you want to."

"No, you must stay here. I insist——"

But the girl was already swinging away up the bed of the arroyo, her spurs jingling on the stones. Lennon started to block the way but changed his mind when he perceived her amused smile. Instead of trying to stop her, he attempted to take the lead. The girl quickened her pace.

He had lowered more than one record in his college track meets; but the girl was accustomed to rough ground, and he was not. She was still side by side with him when he dashed up around the bend in the arroyo.

Both held their rifles ready to fire as they rushed the rear ledges of the jagged crag. From the upper side the slopes around were all open to view. Lennon came to a panting halt and stared about in frank surprise. He had fully expected to see the limp form of a dead Apache lying on the rocks.

The girl sprang past him into a niche of the crag and bent to pick up a cartridge shell.

"A thirty-two," she said. "Same calibre as my rifle.... And look at this track—Apache-made moccasin. Easy to tell the print from that of a Pima or Moqui."

To Lennon the track was only a small narrow blur.

"I was right," added the girl. "No trace of blood. You scored a clean miss and the bird has flown. All safe around here now, but may be dangerous on the trail ahead. Happens I know that a bunch of bronchos are loose over this way. They're looking for trouble."

"Bronchos? You mean wild horses—mustangs?"

"No—Apaches. Renegades are called bronchos. What do you figure on doing now, with your burro dead? Out prospecting, I noticed by your outfit. What were you heading up this way for, anyhow? The agents don't want prospectors on the Moqui or Navaho reservations."

"But I didn't intend to cross the boundary," explained Lennon. "About seventy miles on around this trail bend, I was to strike in eastward to a three-towered mountain. Old friend of mine discovered a big copper vein there in the early 'Nineties. A party of Indians ran him out of the country and so maimed him that he never could return."

"Why, that must be Cripple Sim and his——" The girl checked herself and tightened her lips. "Well, what you going to do about it? Hike back to the railroad?"

"Certainly—to get another burro. We might return together for mutual protection, unless you'd rather trust to your pony's heels."

The girl looked him up and down with sharp appraisal.

There was no hint of timidity in his smile.

"Don't figure there's any joke about a bunch of bronchos," she said. "They like to kill just for pure devilment, and when they can make it without risk, their choice of game is a white man."

"Or woman," put in Lennon, no longer smiling.

"Choicer still. But a man will do. How about that hole in your hat? Hadn't you better catch the first train East, and keep going?"

Lennon flushed, rallied himself, and smiled.

"I didn't come to Arizona for my health. I might say it was on business, but I've no objection to a bit of sport on the side."

The dark eyes of the girl flashed with a look of almost fierce intensity.

"I'll call your bluff," she challenged. "We'll see if you're four-flushing. Dead Hole—Dad's ranch—is only a few miles southeast of Triple Butte, the mountain you're headed for. I know the short cut across the Basin. Want to come along?"

"The Indians," protested Lennon. "No, do not misunderstand me, please. It is all right for a man to take chances. But a girl like you——"

"Like me? Well, the kind of girl I am is this—I'm going home. I've no mind to back up. Good-bye, Mr. Jack Lennon."

He was beside her again before she had reached the bed of the arroyo.

"I have a compass," he said. "Perhaps I'll get to your ranch even if your pony outruns me. Only trouble, I can't lug

both tools and food."

The girl stopped short to draw off her glove and offer him her strong white hand.

"I'm Carmena Farley. I don't like rattlers, coyotes, or quitters."

"I may prove to be a quitter, Miss Farley, but I'd like at least to be entered for the game."

The dark-eyed daughter of Arizona looked at him searchingly.

"You will be risking the highest of all stakes—your life," she warned.

Lennon smiled. "Oh, no; not the highest. There are other things more precious."

"Maybe," she assented. "But not everybody would agree with you."

CHAPTER II

OFF TRAIL

By the time the two reached the dead burro again the sombre mood of the girl had lightened.

"First thing is to sort over your pack," she said. "We'll cull out what's not needed."

The girths of the pack-saddle were cut loose, and the animal was dragged clear of the pack. When Lennon's very creditable diamond-hitch had been thrown off, the girl overhauled the pack and made quick decisions.

"We'll leave most of the flour. You can stock up at the ranch with corn-meal. Same with your cooking outfit. Throw out all but one drill and all the giant powder—no, keep half a dozen sticks."

"But, Miss Farley, I can't begin to lug a quarter of——"

"Don't forget my pony," cut in Carmena.

"He can't carry you and all this truck of mine," remonstrated Lennon. "I'll not permit you to walk. You must have hurt your foot. I saw you limp."

"I'm not asking your permission, thanks."

As she unbuckled her spurs Lennon noticed that the girl's boots were not built with the usual cowboy high heels. They would be suitable for walking.

The pony had wandered some distance down the wash, cunningly twitching his trailing reins to one side, clear of his hoofs. While Lennon started to cache his pack-saddle and the other discarded articles of his outfit, Carmena went after her would-be stray, limping and gingerly picking her steps when she saw that the young man's back was turned. After catching her pony she crouched down behind a corner of rock to unlace her boots. They came off with difficulty.

Inside the boots, she had been wearing a pair of curious high-top boot-moccasins with thick back-doubled toes. In a twinkling she stripped off the moccasins and thrust them down into the bottom of one of the saddle-bags. With her feet uncramped and easy in her relaxed boots, she sprang into the saddle and loped back up the trail.

Lennon's cache was a cavity under an overhanging ledge. Before he had blocked the opening to his satisfaction with

fragments of rock the rest of his outfit had been securely packed upon the pony by Carmena. Nothing was left out except rifles, cartridge-belts and two half-gallon canteens of water.

"Keep your gun loaded and never put all your water on your horse." The girl gave her companion the two first maxims of desert travel. "Come along. No use trying to hide your cache or your trail from Apaches. Only another Apache can do that. It's high time we hit out, anyhow."

To the surprise of Lennon, she started up the arroyo. When he joined her, the pony, whose reins had been tied to the pack, snorted and shied. But at a call from Carmena, the skittish beast followed his mistress up the arroyo like a dog.

"How about the chance of running into that murderous savage if we go this way?" Lennon inquired.

"You might be safer if you hurried back to the railroad," replied Carmena, and she swung up the steepening side of the arroyo.

Lennon's lips tightened. He did not again question his guide's choice of route. But, like her, he held his rifle ready as they came up over the round of a stony ridge. Though neither could see the slightest sign of lurking Indians, Carmena hastened to lead her pony across the ridge crest, and down the other side.

When safe below the skyline the girl broke into a dog trot. She held to the pace, on a long slant along the ridge side, until they came up into the mouth of a small cañon. Between the bald ledges of the dry channel were bars of sand and gravel. Lennon pointed to the hoofprints of a horse that had come down the cañon at a gallop.

"This must be the trail of our renegade," he said.

Carmena paused to fix him with a sombre gaze.

"The whole bunch of bronchos may be up here, but it's the only way into the Basin; and, once in, they may get behind us. Now's your chance to quit—your last chance."

This time Lennon was ready for her.

"Lead on, Miss Macduff, and—perhaps you know the rest of the quotation."

"Yes," gloomily retorted the girl. "Don't blame me if we meet up with those broncs. The joke will be on you."

"How about your safety? Wouldn't you have a better chance if mounted?"

"Want to back out, do you?"

"By no means. My idea is to dump the pack from your pony. Then, if we are attacked, I may be able to hold the renegades while you gallop off."

The girl's rich colour deepened into a flush. The thick fringe of her lashes swept down to hide the glow in her eyes. Without a word she swung ahead, on up the cañon. Though not a little puzzled over her abruptness, Lennon felt certain that she had been far from displeased by his matter-of-fact-suggestion.

He had no chance to urge the desirability of his plan. At his first rather loud-spoken remonstrance Carmena flung back at him a curt gesture for silence and led on at a quickened pace. Her swift ascent slackened only at the twists of the narrowing cañon; at these she would swing in close to the inner side of the bends and creep around, with her rifle half raised.

By mid-morning the bed of the cañon had become much rougher and steeper. The pony, for all his goat-like agility and sure-footedness, found difficulty in scrambling up some of the ledges.

Neither the rapid pace nor the climbing bothered Lennon. But between the burning heat and his very natural excitement over Carmena's stealthy bearing at the turns, he became keyed to rather a high pitch.

After a last sharp turn, the cañon broadened and flared out in a trough-like valley at the top of a high, cedar-clad, ridge-rimmed mesa.

"Wait!" Lennon exclaimed. "Look ahead, Miss Farley—all bare and open! Not a bit of shelter until we cross to the trees!"

The girl faced about, her red lips twisted in a smile of contempt, but her eyes clouded with disappointment.

"I told you, down at the lower end, it was your last chance to quit."

"Quite true. I've burnt my bridges. The question now is one of advance, not retreat. What if there are Indian watchers on those ridges? Would it not be best for me to hold their attention by going straight up the open valley, while you take the horse around through the cedars?"

Carmena met his proposal with a chuckle that brought a flush into Lennon's lean face. But her troubled eyes had cleared and there was a note of relief underlying her mirth.

"What's the matter with you, too, keeping under cover?" she rallied. "Besides, we don't go to the head of the valley. We slant up to the left through that notch in the ridge."

This banter, coupled with the assurance that the girl knew exactly what she was about, cooled Lennon's excitement. His high-strung nerves relaxed.

"No need to remind you I'm a tenderfoot," he jibed at himself. "Coming up the cañon I've been shooting Apaches at every bend."

The mirth left Carmena's face. Her lips straightened in hard lines and her eyes flashed.

"It's no joke," she said. "I'm right glad you're steadying down. If we meet that bunch of bronchos there's just one thing to do—shoot first. It'll be time enough to ask questions afterward. Is that clear?"

"Perfectly, Miss Farley. I have you to consider, and I presume no peaceful Indians come into these bad lands."

"Pimas and Moquis cut their hair square across the forehead. If you see any others, shoot—to kill!"

"I will," said Lennon, certain that he understood the cause of the girl's almost fierce insistence. He knew that the treatment of captured women by renegade Indians is a far worse fate than death.

Carmena took note of his set jaw, drew in a deep breath, and swung around to angle up the slope at the side of the cañon head. Half an hour of winding advance through the midst of the scraggly low-growing trees brought them to the notch in the rim-ridge. Before this break the mesa side pitched steeply into a great basin that was blotched with white alkali flats, wave-marked with sand dunes, and broken with jagged hills and skeleton-like ridges.

The air was so dry and clear that even far out in the Basin, many miles away, Lennon could distinguish patches of green. Nearer at hand appeared blurs of a grayish vegetation. But at his pleased exclamation Carmena told him that he was looking at no oasis. What he saw was only the green of mesquite and palo verde, the fluted columns of the giant sahuaro, and the gray of sagebrush. In all that wide waste of desolation no trickling rill or even the smallest of pools glinted under the fierce rays of the midday sun.

Over beyond the north side of the Basin, above the lesser peaks and buttes, appeared a higher mountain. The top, dwarfed by distance but as clear cut in outline as a cameo, was divided into three thick towerlike masses.

"There's your Triple Butte," said Carmena.

"What! So near as that? We can make it by mid-afternoon."

The girl smiled. "You might, if you hurried enough. It's only forty miles away on a beeline."

Lennon stared, openly incredulous: "Forty miles?"

"Near fifty-five by way of the water-holes—forty to the ranch. We'll strike for the nearest tank. I've noticed your canteen has been empty some time. Here's mine."

Though Lennon's throat was parched, he sought to refuse the offered canteen, which was still half full. Carmena dropped it at his feet and began to zigzag down the mesa side.

Noon had passed before they gained the foot of the steep slope. Carmena followed out along a ridge of bare rock, past scattered growths of thorn-scrub and cactus, to where windblown sand lay in sterile drifts alongside the ledges. Here she turned up a narrow cleft of the ridge and entered the mouth of a small cave.

She knelt to dip her hat down a hole in the bottom of the cave. The hat came up brimful of water. She drank deeply, refilled the hat, and backed out past Lennon to water the eager pony.

"I'll thank you to fill the canteens and give the bronc as much more as he can drink," she directed. "There's firewood on around that point of rocks. Keep your gun handy."

Lennon was already drinking from a refilled canteen. He found the cliff-shaded water of the spring pure and deliciously cool. The watering of the pony took no little time and patience. Though the beast was too thirsty to show any of his former skittishness, Lennon's sombrero was leaky from the bullet holes.

When at last he drove the pony on along Carmena's trail, he noticed tiny cloudlets of dark smoke, like the puffs of a giant's pipe, rising straight up in the still air from behind the point of rocks. By the time he rounded the corner the smoke had thinned and lightened to an almost invisible haze.

A bright little fire of dry sticks was blazing in a sandy hollow. Carmena knelt beside it, leaning on the muzzle of her rifle. Her dark eyes were gazing off across the desert basin in a look that betrayed both eagerness and dread.

"Hallo. Ready for the frying-pan?" sang out Lennon. Then he perceived the tenseness of the girl's attitude and hastened to swing up his rifle. "What is it? Sighted another Apache?"

"No. But I put greasewood on the fire. You saw the smoke?"

"A few puffs—yes."

The girl rose and eyed him sombrely.

"Few puffs, you say.... If that bunch of bronchos is anywhere within fifteen miles—with a clear view this way—we can expect a visit."

"Should we not cut and run?"

"Why! We couldn't hide our tracks. Even if the devils aren't mounted, they'd soon overtake us. An Indian can lope along all day, like a coyote."

Lennon looked deliberately around at the ridge and sat down to clean and reload his rifle. Carmena's eyes flashed.

"You've got the idea," she said. "We'll eat and back up to the spring. The cave is an easy place to hold. You said you can shoot?"

"Rather well. Very long range rifle, too. I've knocked over a caribou with it at nearly a mile, up on Hudson Bay."

Carmena glanced at the high-power weapon and then raised her flashing eyes to gaze over the bent head of its owner. Midway out across the desolate Basin from the top of a craggy hill to the right of the line of Triple Butte, puffs of smoke were rising into the cloudless steel-blue sky.

The girl hastened to loosen her pony's pack and take from her saddle-bags a frying-pan, several slices of bacon, and a big chunk of corn pone.

CHAPTER III

THE GILA MONSTER

The bacon was ready almost as soon as Lennon's rifle. Carmena rose from beside the embers of the fire with the pan and corn bread.

"Fetch the canteens," she directed. "We'll eat over here under that overhanging rock."

But at the edge of the shade, below the outjutting cliff ledge, she stopped short with her gaze fixed upon an object close to the sand-sculptured wall of rock.

"Ever see a Gila monster?" she queried.

"No. You don't mean to say—really——"

Lennon had sprung forward beside her. His curious eyes at once perceived the hideous, thickset lizard that lay flattened upon the shadowed sand as if in a torpor. The reptile's dirty orange-mottled black body was as loathsome as its venomous blunt-nosed head.

"Big specimen—almost two feet long," remarked Carmena. "Hold on. Don't shoot. That sure would tell the bronchos where we are."

"But if we are to eat here?" questioned Lennon.

"I don't fancy the company of this sweet wiggler—not that I believe the wild yarns about them. All lizards are non-poisonous. No poison glands have ever been found in the mouth of these so-called monsters."

"Just look and see," rejoined the girl. "But look in the lower jaw. Trouble is, you science sharps expected to find hollow fangs and the sacs above like a rattler's. Do you know why a Gila monster flops on his back when he bites? It's to let the loose poison in his lower jaw drain into the hollow teeth."

"Really?"

The girl faced him with a challenging look.

"If they turn over, it's as bad as being struck by a six-foot diamond-back. They lock their jaws, and the poison—— But I've seen a man snap the head off one of those big snakes. Let's see if you have the nerve to toss this little lizard outside."

Lennon's smile faded as he perceived that the girl was in sober earnest. Very naturally he hesitated. He was not given to bravado, and even without her assertion that the reptile was deadly poisonous, he would have loathed to touch so repulsive a creature.

But there is no spur so galling as the derisive smile of a comely young woman. Lennon dropped his rifle, walked in beside the Gila monster, and suddenly clutching the lizard in mid-body, flung it several yards out upon the sun-scorched sand. The girl's scorn gave place to a look of grave approval.

"You'll do," she said. "Fact is, they're so sluggish in the shade you didn't run the slightest risk. You couldn't know

that, though. Yes, you'll do. Only don't try playing with the fellow out there in the sun. The light livens them up."

The advice was needless. Lennon felt quite ready to sit down beside the girl and start eating though he first rubbed his hands thoroughly in the sand. Neither had much to say. They were alike intent upon satisfying their keen hunger and keeping a sharp lookout against the chance of an attack.

After a time Lennon noticed that the Gila monster had crawled up on a little sand ridge in the full glare of the midday sun. It was viciously snapping its jaws and twitching its thick head from side to side. Carmena gave no heed to the angered reptile. She was gazing off towards the jagged hill from which had risen the distant smoke puffs.

As the girl finished her share of the hearty food she leaned sideways, with her ungloved hand on the sand at the edge of the cliff shadow. Like the hand, her wrist was white and well rounded. She drew on her old sombrero.

Lennon's gaze lifted to the wealth of dark hair that lay coiled about her shapely head. The girl was neither pretty nor beautiful, yet there was a certain handsomeness about her strong features.

Out of the tail of his eye Lennon caught a glimpse of a black and orange blur streaking toward them over the hot sand. He had seen many darting lizards that day. But none had moved more swiftly than the clumsily built Gila monster now darted at the disturbers of his torpor. There was no time for thought. Lennon sensed that the reptile aimed to strike at Carmena's bared wrist.

"Jump!" he cried, and flung himself forward to block the attack with his out-thrust right hand.

An instant later the Gila monster snapped its gaping jaws together on the fleshy edge of Lennon's palm. It whirled over upon its back. Caught outstretched and almost prone upon the ground, Lennon sought to wrench his hand free and draw away. The heavy lizard was dragged along with its crooked legs futilely clawing the air. But its powerful jaws remained clenched on the hand with bulldog tenacity.

A voice shrilled in Lennon's ear: "Hold still! Hold still!"

Carmena stooped over the writhing monster to thrust the muzzle of a small revolver against the side of its lower jaw. The bullet shattered the jaw and blew it half off. A vigorous kick hurled the now harmless reptile aside.

Lennon had started to raise himself to a sitting position. Carmena flung herself upon her knees and caught up his torn hand to her red lips. She sucked hard at the wounds——

With the suddenness of a dropped veil, the hot, white glare of the desert noon went black before Lennon's eyes. He sank down upon the sand, unconscious.

When the light of returning life glimmered back into his brain, he first was dimly aware of a pale Madonna face that appeared to hover close above him. His clearing gaze gradually made out the girl's features. There was no colour even in her lips. Her eyes were wide with grief and dread.

She saw the dawning consciousness in his eyes.

"Jack!" she whispered—"Jack!—You haven't left me—you won't leave me!"

"Who—what's the matter?—— Oh, that——"

He sought to raise his right arm. It was strangely numb and heavy. The girl lifted it from her lap, where it had been lying. He saw that her silk handkerchief had been knotted around his bared forearm and twisted very tight with the barrel of the little revolver. From the tourniquet down, the arm and wrist and hand were black, and beginning to swell. The lacerations torn in the side of the palm by the Gila monster's fangs appeared to be clotted with purple blood.

"I rubbed in snake medicine—permanganate of potash crystals," quavered the girl. "That'll kill the poison and not hurt you a bit. You're all right now—only we'll have to ease off a little on your arm. Take some good deep breaths."

Though sick and giddy and still faint, Lennon forced himself to obey. He rallied sufficiently to sit up. Carmena loosened the tourniquet and briskly rubbed his swollen hand and arm. The tingling pain of returning circulation roused him like a stimulant. But the poison had not all been sucked from the wounds or counteracted in the veins by the permanganate. Before the girl could again twist tight the tourniquet he sank down for the second time, unconscious.

Out of the utter blankness of oblivion he first dreamed that he was alternately swimming through a rough sea and rocking in a wave-tossed boat— A gush of water dashed into his face—then the sea appeared to solidify into dry sand. He became conscious that Carmena was violently rolling him from side to side and slapping his face. She paused in this punishment to pump his arms above his head, forcing the air in and out of his lungs.

He struggled feebly to free himself. The girl jerked him to a sitting position and, with a desperate output of lithe strength, grasped his body from behind to heave him upright. He gained his feet, but was far too giddy to stand alone. The girl clasped his left arm about her neck and rushed him out beside the pony.

"Brace up!" she breathlessly implored him. "Grip hold of his mane with your good hand. We'll have to hit out. The broncs are coming."

She ran back to snatch up Lennon's sombrero, the rifles and one of the canteens. The other had been emptied into Lennon's face. Out again she darted to clap the sombrero on his drenched head and steady him with a hand on the tourniquet. A guttural command started the pony off at a walk. The direction chosen by his mistress was northwest, aslant the Basin, almost at right angles to the jagged hill where she had seen the smoke puffs.

For a while Lennon tottered and reeled like drunken man. Time and again he stumbled and would have sunk down upon the hot sand but for the convulsive clutch of his left hand on the pony's mane and the strong support of Carmena at his other side. He was giddy and nauseated and leaden-footed. Every step required an agonised effort of will power.

Yet the exertion of walking proved the best of treatment for him. Before half a mile had been covered, his head had cleared and his strength was fast returning. To offset this benefit, his arm was now blacker than ever and rapidly swelling. Carmena gave him a copious drink from the canteen, hesitated, glanced toward the smoke hill, and came to a desperate decision.

"We can't let that arm go," she said. "The tie must come off. Get ready for a rush."

At her command, the pony quickened his pace to a jog trot. As they ran along beside him Carmena untwisted her revolver from the tourniquet. This time Lennon did not lose consciousness. Either the remaining poison had been almost destroyed by the permanganate or else his previous reactions to the venom had rendered him partly immune.

Though the nausea and giddiness again threatened to overcome him, the support of Carmena and her pony kept him steadied. Very soon the run under the hot sun had him panting for breath. His highly oxygenised blood gushed through his arteries in a veritable stream of life. His face glistened with a profuse sweat.

Carmena held to the pace until he fell down, gasping for water and completely exhausted. The wonder was that he had been able to do so much after the terrible shock of the Gila monster poison. They had come into the midst of scattered mesquite trees, which offered a degree of cover. Carmena first tied up the pony, then opened the half-gallon canteen for Lennon.

While he sought to quench his fierce thirst, she hastily threw off the pony's loosened pack. Silk tent, blankets, prospector's tools, packsacks, bacon, flour—all were discarded. From her saddle-bags she dumped half of her own bacon and all but a pint of cornmeal. Into its place she slipped the half-dozen sticks of dynamite, with their fuses and caps.

One of Lennon's full gallon canteens was slung to the saddlehorn, opposite the horsehair rope. From its mate the girl refilled the smaller canteen, which Lennon had already more than half emptied. She took a deep drink and then carefully closed both canteens.

"Sorry, but we must cut it close on water," she said. "The bronchos have us headed off from the other tanks. With

your hand useless, we can't fight. We'll have to swing around through the dry side of the Basin. No time to lose! They'll be on our trail before long."

Lennon sprang to his feet.

"Mount your horse and ride as fast as you can," he ordered. "I'll trot along after you. Don't bother about me. I can shoot well enough left-handed to hold off the beggars until dark."

Carmena suddenly came close to him, her eyes aglow with soft radiance. She caught up his injured hand. It was still swollen and bleeding, but the purple-black discolouration had lightened to red; her deft fingers tore a strip from her handkerchief and bound up the ragged wounds.

"There. Now you'll get on and ride," she said. "You don't suppose I'll leave you to those devils, after you saved my life?"

"But it is you who have saved mine, Miss Farley."

"To say that—when you jammed your hand into the monster's mouth! If he had bit me I'd have had no show at all. You didn't know how to treat the poison. No. Either the bronchos will get us both, or we're going to win through to the ranch together."

"But, Miss Farley——"

The heat-flush in the girl's tanned cheeks deepened to rose.

"I never before knew a man like you, Jack. Won't you call me Carmena?"

The candid directness of this rather took Lennon's breath. But the girl was of the desert—efficient, resolute, crude in dress, yet rich coloured as the bloom of the red-flowered cactus. She had saved him from the horrible death of the Gila monster's poison and was now intent upon saving him from even worse fate at the hand of the murderous Apaches.

He caught up her willing hand in an eager clasp.

"Carmena!—To have a girl like you for pal—it's simply ripping!"

"Pal?" she repeated the word after him, as if not quite certain of its meaning. "Oh, you mean pard. Yes, we're partners now—for this deal at least—whether it means life or death."

CHAPTER IV

PARDS IN PERIL

As Lennon's clasp relaxed, the girl's tightened. She drew him toward the pony.

"You've got to ride," she said. "You can't stand the pace. That poison is no joke. Don't want to hold me back, do you?"

The question overcame Lennon's reluctance. The girl had refused to leave him, and she was right about the poison. He could endure the severe pain of his wounded hand, but he was still weak and badly shaken from the effects of the venom. Unless he rode he would be a drag upon her.

"Very well," he agreed, and he permitted her to help him clamber up into the saddle.

No time was lost over lengthening the stirrup leathers. Carmena handed him his rifle and the half-emptied gallon canteen, caught up the small one and her own rifle, and started off in lead of the pony. Her easy swinging stride, though seemingly unhurried, covered the ground faster than the pony could walk. Every little while the animal had to break into a jog to catch up with her.

At the far end of the scattered mesquite growth Carmena edged off to the left down a shallow wash that brought them around to the west side of a ridge. Under cover of the gaunt earth-rib of worn rock she headed north, straight for the distant towers of Triple Butte.

The deceptive green of occasional palo-verde bushes now gave place to the columns of the giant sahuaro. The fluted, leafless stems of these high-towering cactus candelabras bristled with fierce thorns, yet each was crowned with the glory of a gorgeous foot-wide blossom.

Over the loose hot sand, amidst this shadeless mockery of a forest, Carmena swung steadily along at her graceful stride. Her movements seemed as lacking in effort as the lope of a coyote or the bound of a cat. Lennon would not have realised how greatly she was exerting herself had he not seen how frequently she drank from her canteen.

No one of white blood, however thoroughly inured to thirst, can walk fast under the blistering sun, in the bone-dry air of the desert, without need of much water. Lennon, though riding, was no less parched than the girl. He was fresh from a moist climate, and the Gila monster poison had put him into a feverish condition. Hard as he tried, he could not resist drinking. His canteen was emptied even sooner than Carmena's.

This was little past mid-afternoon. They had left the sahuaros behind and were coming down among widely scattered salt bushes to the border of an utterly barren alkali flat. For the first time since the stop in the mesquite, Carmena halted her quick advance. But it was not to rest. The feverish crimson of Lennon's face sobered her reassuring smile. She peered searchingly back along the trail, glanced at the sun, and hastily transferred to their empty canteens all but a quarter from the full canteen on the saddle-horn.

"We've got to make it last till sundown, Jack," she warned. "Then, if only we can hold our lead, we'll be able to keep going all night."

Lennon drew out two half dollars. "How about trying these in our mouths?"

"They'll help," she replied, and she took one. "Be ready to tie your neckerchief over your nose, soon as we strike the alkali."

The wisdom of this advice was evident when they started out across the snow-white flat. Every step stirred up clouds of alkali dust that hung about the fugitives like thick smoke. The impalpable powder penetrated their clothes, smarted in their eyes, and all but choked them, even behind the veiling neckerchiefs.

Before they had half crossed the fearful dust flat Carmena was walking as slowly as the pony. At the far side she sank down beside a thick-stemmed cactus. Lennon, half delirious from fever, sought to spring off, with the vague idea of forcing her to ride. He succeeded only in tumbling upon the sand. The startled pony shied clear. With a smothered cry, Carmena leaped up to grasp his bridle.

"Close call!" she gasped at Lennon. "If he'd made off—no show for us at all."

Lennon was too far gone for speech. His canteen was already half empty. Carmena gave him a sip from her own and dragged him around until his head lay in the small blot of shade made by a cactus stem. Half an hour passed before he was able to get back into the saddle. But the rest appeared to have fully restored the girl's strength. She set off at a pace that again forced the pony into an occasional jog.

After a time the sheltering ridge ran down into the sandy level of the desert. Yet Carmena continued to find a route protected by inequalities of the ground or by growths of cactus and thorn scrub from any eyes that might be peering across the Basin. As the sun sank nearer to the western rim of buttes and mesas she kept an ever closer watch to the rear. Her own and Lennon's canteens were again empty and her seemingly tireless stride was at last beginning to flag.

By the time the lower edge of the sun touched the rim of the Basin the fugitives had come opposite a long range of broken hills. Carmena dragged herself wearily up over an out-thrust spur ridge. Lennon was swaying in the saddle, and his tongue, like hers, had begun to swell. But the girl did not offer to open the canteen on the saddle-horn.

At the top of the ridge she hurried the pony down below the skyline and crept back to peer over a ledge. Far to the rear, across the shadow-streaked waste, her anxious eyes sighted a group of moving dots. She ran to seize the pony's bridle and urge him into a jog.

"Must hurry!" she rasped in a thirst-harshened voice. "They're trailing us—on the lope!"

The alarm shocked Lennon out of his semi-delirium. His relaxing grip on the rifle tightened. He straightened in the saddle. Carmena did not look back at him. She was turning into the mouth of a wash that appeared to head over toward the far side of the hills. Half a mile up the wash the gravelly bottom changed to loose stones. Carmena smashed the smaller canteen and tossed it off to one side.

Some distance farther along the footing became all rock. Carmena stopped on a flat ledge and flung the big canteen she was carrying as far as she could up the arroyo. She then changed from her boots to the long-legged moccasins that she had hidden in one of the saddle-bags. No less hastily she cut strips from the Navaho saddle-blanket to tie over the pony's lightly shod hoofs.

The sun had now been down for several minutes, and the clear desert twilight was beginning to fade. Carmena turned the pony and carefully led him at an easy angle up a flight of solid step ledges on the side of the arroyo. Half circling a hill, she descended another arroyo that ran northwest, back down into the level desert.

By the time the edge of the broken ground had been reached dusk was deepening into night. Carmena halted and eased Lennon down out of the saddle. Water, trickled a few drops at a time between his cracked lips, gradually soothed his swollen tongue and parched throat. His fever was already subsiding in the coolness of nightfall.

Carmena gave him almost half of the remaining quart of water. A half pint more she used to rinse her own mouth and moisten the nostrils of the pony. The few sips left were held in reserve.

Scant as was the water ration, it enabled both the girl and Lennon to suck at lumps of raw bacon. They lay silently mouthing and chewing the greasy fat, their rifles ready and their ears alert for the slightest thud of approaching hoofs. But no sound broke the death-like stillness of the desert night.

"Looks like we fooled 'em," whispered Carmena. "They must have found the canteens—figured we'd gone desperate with thirst and headed on across for the nearest waterhole. Can you mount again?"

Lennon dragged himself to his feet.

"You're wonderful!" he murmured. "If you'd leave me here—I'm only a drag. You could ride at a gallop——"

She grasped his arm and pushed him around beside the horse.

"Don't be looney. We can go all night without a drop. Count on me to out-travel the pony till sun-up. Get on. You don't suppose I'm going back on my pard, do you?"

There was no room for argument. Lennon's condition was still so serious that she had to help him into the saddle. With the pony in lead, she set out straight toward the North Star.

Before many miles Lennon caught himself lapsing into a doze. He had almost dropped his rifle. To make certain against its loss, he thrust it into his cartridge belt like a pistol. After this he drowsed off again into a half torpor of sleep and exhaustion. Some automatic functioning of his subconscious mind kept him balanced in the saddle.

When at last he roused from the stupor it was to a miserable realisation of pain and weariness and cold. A bleak gray light was filtering over the eastern rim of mesas down into the blackness of the Basin. Dry as was this land of

desolation, it was not so utterly arid as the sea-level deserts of the lower Colorado.

Lennon shivered and forced open his heavy eyelids. He first made out the bowed figure of Carmena plodding along, with one backward-dragged hand noosed in the reins of the weary pony. The gray light gradually brightened. He saw that the girl was swaying, almost staggering. He forced out a hoarse cry:—

"Stop!"

The call broke the hypnotic spell of motion that alone had enabled the girl to keep placing one leaden foot before the other. She tottered and sank down and lay still. Lennon dropped out of the saddle to bend over her. Like the knees of the pony, the girl's moccasins were torn with the thorns of cacti and desert bushes, against which they had struck in the dark.

She had not fainted. Her dark eyes gazed up at Lennon, wide with an anguish of self-reproach.

"Used up—can't make it," she whispered. "No chance for both—after sun-up. Ride hard toward Triple Butte."

Lennon's reply was to open the canteen and hold it to her lips. Only a few drops were left when she managed to thrust it away. He put his uninjured arm about her slender waist and lifted her to her feet.

"Ride—your turn," he commanded. "I walk. Never say die!"

Her sunken eyes lighted with a faint glow. A last flicker of strength enabled her, with his help, to pull herself into the saddle. Lennon caught up her rifle and started off toward Triple Butte in desperate haste.

An hour after sunrise found him still staggering forward almost at a dog trot. The northern border mesas of the Basin were now only a short distance ahead. But already his swollen tongue was beginning to blacken in his mouth. When at last he came to the foot of the lower mesa he could barely totter.

Carmena rode up alongside. She huskily whispered for him to hand over her rifle and grasp the stirrup leather. He had not dragged along beside the pony more than a hundred paces when a jerk on the reins headed the weary beast around into the mouth of a broad cañon. Carmena uttered a sharp cry and pointed ahead. Near the base of the cañon wall a dark patch on the ledges was shimmering in the sunrays.

Hope flared high in the hearts of the perishing fugitives—only to flicker and die out again in utter despair. The black patch was water—a tiny spring that seeped from a horizontal crevice between the stratas of rock—but its trickle was spread out in a paper-thin sheet down the sloping lower ledges. At their foot it vanished in the dry sand of the cañon bed.

They could cool their swollen tongues and so obtain temporary relief from their suffering. But they could not suck up enough water to quench their terrible thirst. Nor could they collect in the canteen even a gill of water to take with them.

Lennon, however, was an engineer. Even while hope fled from him, his eyes were peering around with the scrutiny of a trained observer and thinker.

His roving gaze fixed upon a bank a little way out from the cañon mouth. He staggered down to it and came back with a handful of dry clay. This he spread out upon the least tilted of the wet ledges. By patting and scraping he soon had a little ball that kneaded like putty in his eager fingers.

Carmena already had perceived his purpose and was hurrying to fetch a heaping hatful of the dry clay. Before many minutes they had built a little concave dam, in which the down-seeping water slowly but steadily collected.

When at last they had quenched their thirst Lennon took his rifle and went to sit under a shady ledge where he could look out into the Basin. Carmena lingered at the spring to water the pony and fill the canteen. She then gave all the cornmeal to the beast, and brought slices of raw bacon to share with Lennon.

He clasped the hand in which she held out his first slice.

"So we made it, after all. Good work?"

"Yes, we made it, Jack!" she exulted. "Close shave—but worth the risk. I know now for sure you're a man, a real man!"

Her glowing eyes brought a deeper red into Lennon's sunburnt face.

"I'm still pretty much of a tenderfoot," he protested. "And there's this game arm. I'd rather run than fight."

The girl smiled.

"That's all right till you get back the use of your hand. But it won't hurt to show those bronchos the range of your rifle. They're coming a bit too fast to suit us."

Lennon stared out across the open plain. Rather more than a mile away a dozen or more riders were loping along the trail of the fugitives.

The sights slid upon Lennon's rifle. He put the butt to his left shoulder and rested the barrel across a rock. The first bullet raised a puff of dust a little to the left of the Indians. The second must have shrieked close over their heads. They wheeled their ponies and scattered out in fanlike formation.

Lennon's fourth shot caught one of the ponies broadside. The beast tumbled over and lay motionless. Its rider dashed behind a cactus. The rest of the Apaches wrenched their ponies about and raced to get back beyond range. They had not bargained on a rifle that could shoot so far. A renegade prefers to kill without risk to himself.

"That's enough," chuckled Carmena. "There's no cover for 'em unless they crawl up afoot. Some will ride around and climb the mesa. Time we were moving. Come on. We'll beat 'em into the Hole."

Lennon elevated his rifle and sent a parting shot over the heads of the fleeing riders. When he came running back into the cañon mouth Carmena had the canteen swung to the saddle-horn and was lacing on her boots, in place of the torn moccasins.

After a last deep drink from the pool and another sombrero for the pony, the little dam was carefully scraped off the ledge and the clay covered with a loose boulder. The Apaches would be able to lap the wet stone but not to drink. They were not engineers or dam builders.

CHAPTER V

DEAD HOLE

The race up the cañon was far different from the terrible flight of the previous day and the misery of the night. The cool spring water had been very refreshing, lofty cliffs shadowed the cañon bed from the hot morning sunrays, and the pain of Lennon's lacerated hand had eased to a dull ache. He took turn about with Carmena, riding and running.

The cañon bottom was fairly smooth. For more than an hour the fugitives raced up the great cleft between the towering precipices and past narrow side cañons. At last they came to a break in the sheer walls. The cliff on the right leaned back in a series of terraces that formed a broken giant stairway to the top of the mesa.

Carmena led the pony up a sloping shelf ledge. The line of ascent picked out by her practised eye proved unexpectedly easy. As they climbed in steep zigzags from terrace to terrace Lennon trailed behind. Carmena noticed his

frequent glances down into the cañon bottom.

"Don't worry," she said. "They didn't rush the cañon mouth—they crawled. If any circled and climbed the mesa, the side cañons cut 'em off from us. We'll beat 'em to the Hole."

"The Hole—we'll find help there?" queried Lennon.

"Slade is away. But I figure we'll be safe enough, once we get in. There's dad and—my sister."

"If they are at all like you, Carmena!"

The girl paused on a ledge to gaze down at him with a sombre, clouded look that brightened into a tender smile.

"Elsie is as much like me as a lily is like a cactus. No thorns about *her*. She's cuddlier than a kitten. Eyes bluer than forget-me-nots, Jack; hair, yellow as corn silk. She's only eighteen and sweet as honey."

"I'm picturing an angel," bantered Lennon. "Your father must be a fine man to have two such daughters."

The flush in the girl's tanned cheeks deepened. But the soft glow of her eyes faded and left them dull and haggard.

"Dad's been unlucky all 'round," she murmured. "Not his fault, either. He came west for his health—almost died—one lung gone."

"Hard lines," sympathised Lennon. "Ranch work can't be easy for a sick man."

The girl climbed to another terrace before she replied:—

"That's not the worst of it. Slade came six years ago—when we were starving. Dad got in with him. He can't break loose. If only we could get away, dad would be all right."

"Yes?" said Lennon.

Carmena remained silent until he came panting up after her to the top of the steepest ascent. While he paused to catch his breath she opened the canteen. They were by now badly in need of a drink. Before starting on up the ledges she met Lennon's smiling gaze with a look of tremulous appeal.

"Dad used to be a lawyer," she faltered. "If only you'll try to like him and—and help."

"Of course!" exclaimed Lennon. "Aren't we pals? You're pulling me through this scrape. Perhaps I can pull him out of his hole. You called it Dead Hole, didn't you?"

"Yes," murmured the girl. "That's the name and—it fits."

"You've stood by me. I'll stand by you," Lennon pledged himself. "We'll look for that copper mine together. I'm working for a big copper syndicate. If I relocate the mine I am to receive twenty thousand in cash and ten per cent. of the stock. Your half of the cash should pull your dad out of his hole."

The girl's eyes dilated.

"Don't—don't tell dad!" she gasped. "It's not the money I want. You don't *sabe*. Promise you won't say a word to dad about the money—or the mine?"

"Why, if you do not wish me——"

"Not a word—not the barest hint! Promise!"

"Very well. Only——"

"You'll learn all too soon!" she murmured, and she started quickly up the last ascent.

When they rounded the brink, twelve hundred feet above the cañon bed, the girl did not linger to talk. She dropped the pony's reins and started off it a jog across the hot, level, cedar-dotted top of the mesa.

Lennon galloped ahead of her, tied the pony, and ran on afoot. Carmena copied the manoeuvre. In this manner, taking turn about, they covered the ground almost as fast as if both had been mounted. As each drank from the canteen at every stop, and Carmena twice wet the nostrils of the pony, none was yet exhausted when, at the end of five or six miles, the girl headed down into a quickly narrowing valley.

The funnel-shaped trough pinched to a steep chute between precipices that leaned closer together overhead the deeper the fugitives descended. The bed of the narrow mountain crack became even more steep. In places the pony had to jump like a goat down five and six-foot ledges. Time and again he slid on his haunches. At the worst place of all the beast was saved from certain destruction only by snubbing his horsehair picket rope around a corner of rock and so easing his descent to better footing.

But, as Carmena remarked, the steeper the grade the sooner it was ended. They came down into the bottom of the lower cañon, bruised and exhausted but with no bones broken.

"Almost there," panted Carmena, and she reeled ahead along the boulder-strewn bed of the chasm.

At the second turn the cliff ended in a vertical slit-glare of sunlight. The pony whinnied. Carmena led the way out into an oval cliff-walled valley, two or three miles long and half as broad.

First to strike Lennon's desert-starved eyes was the vivid grateful verdure of irrigated cornfields. Beyond, in browning hay meadows, grazed a herd of cattle and twenty or thirty head of horses. Three-quarters of a mile to the left, in a cavity forty feet up the rock wall and well under an overhang of the towering precipices, nestled a group of stone ruins.

Lennon pointed toward the ancient buildings.

"Cliff dwellings, I take it."

"Yes—I told Elsie to be ready with the ladder. We'll make it in time for the call of Cochise."

Before Lennon could inquire the meaning of this, she sprang upon the pony and loped along the cliff foot toward the cliff ruins. As Lennon jogged after her he saw a rope ladder slide down the under cliff, followed by a rope reeved through a crane that thrust out from another opening in the façade of the cliff building.

Carmena's saddle and bags, saddle blanket and rifle, and the canteen—all were fast to the hoisting rope when Lennon came staggering and panting up beside the girl. She pointed toward the head of the valley and caught the rifle from him to tie it on the load.

"A miss is as good as a mile," she said. "We'll just have time to get up. Cochise and Pete must have ridden over around and come down Hell Cañon. Ours was Devil's Chute."

Lennon frowned at the pair of riders who were racing swiftly down aslant from the head of the valley.

"We'll be ready to pick them off," he said. "There's no cover under here."

"Too late for that," sighed Carmena. "Dad won't let us. Besides—Pete——"

"But when the murderers have tried to kill you!—— And they'll steal all his cattle."

The girl winced and looked down.

"No. You see dad—he is friends with all the—Indians hereabouts. I'll be safe enough now, soon as Cochise cools

off. It's only a question of you."

"I see!" exclaimed Lennon. "You know the renegades. You would have been safe at the first. You have risked your own life just to save mine. I'll never forget that, Carmena."

"If only—if only you'll remember—when you know!" she whispered, and she turned to start up the rope ladder.

As Lennon stepped forward after her he noticed that the saddle load had already been hoisted above his reach and was rapidly going higher.

A rope ladder draped upon the face of a smooth rock wall and unfastened below is at best not easy to climb. Lennon had to crook his right elbow through the rungs to get any use of his injured arm. But the riders racing swiftly across the head of the valley would soon be within short rifle range. Lennon's left hand was only a few rungs below Carmena's boot heels all the way up the ladder.

At the top the girl pulled herself in over the worn stone sill of a massive-walled doorway. As Lennon scrambled up and through the deep entrance after her he glimpsed a thin gray face, with bleary red eyes and loose lips, leering at him out of the darkness of an inner room.

To the right, a little way back from the next opening, a small fair-haired girl was rapidly winding in on a miner's windlass. She stopped to tug at a rope. The crane swung around into the entrance with the saddle and rifles.

Carmena had already faced about to haul the ladder up the cliff. Lennon caught hold with his left hand to help her. They had gathered in less than ten yards when a bullet whizzed between their heads and splattered on the stone wall at the rear of the room. Carmena hooked the ladder over a peg at the side of the doorway and forcibly dragged Lennon out of the opening.

Two more bullets whizzed in, one of them angling up close over the sill. Had it come a moment sooner Lennon must have been struck. Carmena's hand shook and her voice quavered, though she sought to speak in an unconcerned tone:—

"That's warmer than I expected at this stage of the game. Guess Cochise is feeling pretty bad in his heart. We'll have to let him cool down awhile."

"Why not return his compliments?" suggested Lennon. "We can easily pick off both of the devils without exposing ourselves."

"And get the rest of the bunch down on us! No, Jack, they've got us holed up. We might slip away before the others came but they'd make a clean sweep of the stock and everything else. Come and meet Elsie. Cochise will soon tire of wasting cartridges."

CHAPTER VI

HER FOLKS

The fair-haired girl was cowering behind the massive front wall of the cliff house. At every shot from the rifles of the infuriated Apaches she crouched lower. Carmena held out reassuring arms to her.

"There, there, Blossom," she soothed. "You've no need to be scared."

The trembler sprang to clasp the neck of the older girl.

"Oh, Mena, Mena!" she sobbed. "I'm so glad you're back! It's been awful! Dad had one of his spells; and now, with

Cochise angry——"

"We'll manage him—never fear. He's stopped shooting already. Quit your shaking. I don't want Jack to think you're a silly little rabbit."

For the first time the panic-stricken girl appeared to realise that Lennon was a stranger. She lifted her head from Carmena's bosom to stare at him with innocent childish wonderment. Her piquant little face was flowerlike in its delicate contours and apricot tinting; her big blue eyes were the pure intense blue of alpine forget-me-nots. No line of her pretty face bore the slightest resemblance to Carmena's comely but strong features.

"O-o-oh!" she voiced her amazement. "He's new—and he's white!"

"Yes, but he and I are pards," Carmena reassured her. "Shake hands. He has come to help us."

"To help us?" The young girl held out a timid hand. "You—you won't side with Cochise? You won't let him take me?"

"Course he won't," put in Carmena. "Didn't I tell you we're pards? His name is Jack Lennon, and he's a real man."

Lennon was pressing the soft little hand of the younger girl.

"So you are sister Elsie," he said. "Carmena is right. I will not side with Cochise—if that's our hot friend down below."

The girl's rosebud lips parted in a smile of wondering delight.

"You called me sister! Then you'll be my brother—my brother Jack!"

Lennon was astonished that any girl more than fourteen could be so naïve. Yet the effect was more than charming.

"I'll be only too happy, if Carmena has no objection."

He glanced up into the face of the older girl and surprised a look not meant for him to see. As the down-drooping lashes veiled her dark eyes a deep blush glowed under the tan of her dust-grimed, haggard face. The realisation of the meaning of that blush and glance sobered Lennon.

The girl had known him a scant seven-and-twenty hours. But in that full day had been packed more intense peril and emotion than many couples share in a lifetime. He had saved her and she him. Together they had suffered agonies of thirst and exhaustion, and together they had cheated the murderous Apaches. Even now, down beneath them at the foot of this ancient cliff refuge, the leader of the renegades was futilely cursing.

Lennon was a white man, and he had proved himself not a quitter. The girl had been overwrought by their terrible flight. That she should fancy herself beginning to fall in love with him was quite understandable. The discovery of the fact set his jaded nerves to tingling with a pleasant thrill even as he realised the awkwardness of the situation.

By way of diversion, he stepped around to take his rifle from the saddle. As he straightened up with it the muzzle of a double-barrelled shotgun thrust out at him from a small slit window in the end wall of the room. Behind the gun, framed deep by the thick stone of the window casing, he saw the leering gray face that he had first caught a glimpse of in another opening at the opposite end of the room.

A thin dry voice that was shrill with fear snarled at him:—

"Hands up! Drop that gun!"

Carmena flung herself between Lennon and the threatening muzzle.

"Don't shoot, dad! He's a friend!" she cried.

Over her shoulder Lennon saw the reddened eyes blink and the muscles of the gray face twitch. The muzzle of the shotgun wavered.

"Put your gun down, dad," Carmena ordered. "Mr. Lennon and I are partners. Come out here and meet him."

Both face and gun disappeared. After several moments a smallish gray-haired man shuffled out through the doorway on the right of the window and scurried across the opening into which the crane had swung its load. As he unbent his emaciated body to face the visitor his breath was heavy with the fumes of whisky.

Lennon knew without looking that Carmena's eyes were fixed upon him in mute appeal. He had given her his promise to help her father. There was no betrayal of repugnance in the friendly offer of his hand.

"My name is Lennon, Mr. Farley. Your daughter tells me you were a lawyer. I'm a professional man myself—engineer."

Farley stiffened to a show of dignity.

"I am still a lawyer," he rasped. "I must stipulate that you are received here with reservations. Your presence is a trespass. This ranch is private property and——"

"All right, dad. That lets you out with Slade and Cochise," interrupted Carmena. "We'll all bear witness. Come in now. We're both half dead for want of food and sleep. Those devils ran us clear across the Basin."

Lennon glanced at his rifle.

"How about the two below?"

"We might send down a pie to them," suggested the timid Elsie. "That would make Cochise feel better."

To the vast surprise of Lennon, Carmena took this preposterous proposal seriously.

"All right, Blossom. But not a drop of tizwin, mind. This way, Jack."

The doorway opened into a large living-room, home-like with bright-hued Navaho rugs, a quantity of cliff-dweller pottery, and a sufficiency of heavy, comfortable furniture hewn out of cedar. The chairs were seated and backed with tightly stretched rawhide. Several artistic pictures from periodicals were pasted on the stone walls. In one corner a pot was boiling over a charcoal brazier.

As the fair-haired Elsie thrust a big pie into a loop-handled basket and hurried out, Carmena fetched two large bowls brimming with soup. While her back was turned Farley winked leeringly at the visitor and offered him a half-emptied whisky flask. Carmena was in time to see Lennon refuse the drink. Her fatigue-bent shoulders straightened to a deep-drawn breath, and her sunken eyes glowed softly.

Cool water from a sweating jar and rich meat broth thickened with beans and corn were, at last, equal to the task of satisfying even so ravenous a hunger and thirst as Lennon's. Elsie had come back with her basket empty. She set to waiting upon Carmena and "Brother Jack" with shy delight.

The other visitors, down below, evidently had not been displeased by the gift of the pie. There was no resumption of the firing. Lennon felt that he understood the reason, when the girl divided another pie between him and Carmena. It was made of dewberries, sweetened with honey.

Lennon found his eyelids beginning to droop. At a word from Carmena, Farley led him to a cool dark inner room. He curtly pointed out a rude bed-frame across which had been stretched a rawhide. Lennon fell asleep the moment he lay down upon the elastic bed.

CHAPTER VII

CRAFT AND CRUELTY

When Lennon wakened he was at first so stiff and sore that he could hardly turn over. Yet his strength had in good part returned to him, and he was aware of a grateful feeling of refreshment and well-being.

Some one had covered him over with a finely woven old Navaho rug. In pushing it off he noticed a fresh bandage on his wounded hand and the arm above. Under the cloth was an aromatic resinous salve. He next discovered that his boots and socks had been taken off and his badly blistered feet washed and treated with a healing powder.

He sat up on the side of the bedstead. Before him stood a chair draped with a towel and a change of coarse but clean clothes. On the clean-swept floor were a pair of soft moccasins, a dishpan, a bar of soap, and a large jar of water.

When he limped out of his bedroom he had "tubbed" himself as thoroughly as an Englishman and felt as ravenous as a wolf. Elsie was alone in the living room, deftly handling pots and pans on the charcoal brazier.

"Good-morning," he hailed. "Glad I'm just in time for breakfast."

The girl upturned her wide blue eyes to him in a look of shy delight.

"I heard you splashing about and I hustled," she replied. "But it's not breakfast—it's dinner."

"So early as this?"

"So late! You've slept all the rest of yesterday and all night and all morning. I thought you'd never wake. Sit down."

"How about the others?"

"Oh, dad just nibbles when he has his tizwin spells, and Mena ate hers midmorning."

The table top had been scrubbed. Lennon sat down at the nearest corner and fell to on the omelette and fried chicken, cream cheese, salad, cornbread and honey that she set before him. The food was all served in bowls and jugs of quaintly beautiful ancient cliff-dweller pottery.

"There's no cream for your coffee," the girl apologized. "The milk soured. Mena was asleep, and I dassn't go down to the goats alone. Cochise has come back with all the bunch. Dad was cross not to get cream. He's cranky over his food."

"You say those red devils are all down there?"

The girl cringed.

"Don't—don't speak so loud. Cochise might hear you. He's stopped swearing. I lowered a whole basketful of pies to them. Carmena is getting ready to give him a big talking to. She—she won't let them get us."

"That's good news," rallied Lennon.

For the first time he was able to look away from his food long enough to notice that Elsie was wearing a fresh pretty frock of blue-dotted calico. He smiled at her amusedly.

"Didn't you promise to be a sister to me—or something like that? Why not sit down with me and celebrate our escape?"

The girl clasped her hands together in childlike delight.

"Oh, do you want me to be, really and truly? Only I don't know how to act to a brother. Sisters are different. They kiss each other—sometimes. If you don't mind, I'll just sit and watch. I had mine with Mena."

With unconscious grace she perched on the edge of the table.

"You eat ever so much nicer than Cochise."

"I should hope so—a wild Indian!"

"But he isn't. He's educated—he went to the Reservation school. He knows a whole lot. That's why he's never been sent up. They caught him only once. But dad got him off. Dad's a lawyer, you know. He didn't want to go out and leave us, but he's so scarey he does everything Slade tells him."

Lennon recalled Carmena's plea for him to help her father and sister. He thought he understood the situation.

"So this Slade and the Indians are keeping all of you prisoners, here in the Hole, are they? Yet Carmena got out. Why hasn't she taken you and your dad?"

Elsie's big blue eyes rounded.

"But they won't let us out—only one at a time, and I'm 'fraid to go alone, 'cause of Cochise. Besides, the Hole is dad's ranch. He won't give it up and Slade keeps promising him his share of the profits, and it's a mighty flourishing business."

"What, farming in a place like this?"

"Course not. That's just for fodder. We're stockholders, dad says. We con—conduct a stock exchange. Slade sells what the bunch maverick and brand-blot."

The terms brought no enlightenment to Lennon. He was from the Atlantic coast.

"You mean they deal in cattle?" he inquired.

"Cattle and horses—and tizwin," added Elsie, screwing up her luscious little mouth over the last word as if it had a bad taste.

Lennon caught a half glimmer of the truth. But the girl's thoughts had flitted butterfly fashion——

"I hope your feet don't hurt. Mena's were even rawer—awful bad. She just couldn't help crying when I sopped them with the tizwin. She says that's all it's good for. I never knew her to cry before. But you were too dead asleep to feel the smart. I'll have your boots oiled and your clothes cleaned before you need 'em."

Quite naturally, Lennon inferred from this chatter that Elsie had first made Carmena comfortable and then, with innocent concern for him, had ventured into his room alone to treat his injured hand and feet.

He laid down his fork to clasp one of her plump, capable little hands with grateful warmth.

"It was most kind of you, Elsie, to care for my injuries."

The grown-up child beamed at him radiantly.

"I think you awful nice, Jack! I just knew I'd like you the minute I set eyes on you."

"My word!—when I looked like a dying tramp," teased Lennon.

Carmena had not exaggerated. Elsie was sweet as honey, and cuddlier than a kitten. He felt tempted to put a finger under her dainty uptilted chin.

"Now that I look more like a matinee idol, just how much more do you like me?" he bantered.

"Oh, heaps more than I liked the first pard Mena brought in. He was a cowman, and after they made him pay a whole lot to get loose, Mena set Cochise on him 'cause he wanted me to go away to live with him—like Slade. They filled him up with tizwin and left him out in the middle of the Basin, with only tizwin in his canteen. Mena said it served him right and dead men tell no tales."

Lennon stiffened.

"You can't mean to say your father and sister were parties to such an outrage—that they helped to rob a man and then abandon him to die of thirst?"

"Why not?" demanded Elsie, with unexpected spirit. "He wasn't what Mena thought him. He was a bad cowman. He wanted to bring his bunch and shoot up the Hole and kill us all and make me go with him. You see how it was, don't you?"

"Yes," agreed Lennon, certain that he understood.

His surmise was that Carmena had sought help from a neighbouring rancher, and the man had proved himself a scoundrel. Elsie had not mentioned any proposal of marriage. Whatever the lawlessness of Farley's Indian associates, they had apparently put the guilty man to ransom and then turned him loose to die in the desert, merely by way of vengeance for his attempted wrong against the girl.

Yet both of the girls had given out that the partnership with the Apaches and the unknown Slade was by no means satisfactory. Farley feared his associates, and they would permit him and Carmena to leave the Hole only one at a time.

On the other hand, when he first met Carmena, she had been alone on the trail, only a few miles from the railroad. Why had she not galloped to the nearest station and led a sheriff's posse to free her father and sister? She knew that Cochise and his fellows were "bronchos."

Across the train of Lennon's thoughts fell a black shadow of suspicion. Was it possible that the girl had acted as a decoy to lure him into this ill-omened Dead Hole? She had previously brought in another man, who had in effect been murdered, after paying ransom.

In his own case, the girl had herself suffered far too much during their flight from the Apaches for the pursuit to have been a sham. But she may very well have had an arrangement with the renegades to lure a victim into the Basin; and then, untrustful of their bloodthirsty instincts, had fled with her prize to the Hole, so that he might be put to ransom.

The more Lennon pondered the situation, the more everything related to it appeared in a worse and worse light—everything and everybody, except the open-eyed innocent little Elsie. The Apaches admittedly were renegades. The absent Slade had been mentioned by no means favourably. Farley was far from prepossessing either in appearance or words or actions. As for Carmena, even the tender glances that he had surprised might be explained by the coquetry of a Delilah.

Lennon rose from his chair with an appearance of calm deliberation.

"Would you be so kind as to bring me my rifle, Elsie?" he asked. "With smokeless powder a gun needs frequent cleaning and oiling."

"Yes. Carmena always keeps hers clean as a whistle. But dad put yours away. He said he apprehended that you might become per-perturbed and commit an assault with a deadly weapon. He and Mena are talking things over now— No, they're coming out. Want to hear Mena give it to Cochise?"

The girl darted through the largest doorway. Lennon, still affecting cool indifference, stepped out after her into the long, bare anteroom whose rear wall Cochise and his mate had so angrily splashed with bullets.

Farley was crouched at the far side of the rope ladder doorway. Carmena had bent her head to pass under the massive lintel. Lennon followed Elsie to the side of the doorway opposite Farley. The lawyer-ranchman appeared to cringe, yet he held to his position and even attempted an ingratiating smile as he rasped out a half-whispered, "G'day."

Lennon gave him a curt nod and bent down to peer into the deep entrance. Carmena did not glance around. If she heard him, she gave no heed. She had seated herself upon a Navaho rug and was leaning forward to look over the cliff, with her hands on the sillstone at the brink. Down below Lennon could see only a single swarthy face, bound about the forehead with a wide cloth band. The other Indians were in nearer the base of the cliff.

Instead of crouching in tense readiness to dodge back out of danger, Carmena gazed over at her late pursuers with serene fearlessness. Her rich contralto voice, no longer harsh from thirst, rang mockingly down the cliff:—

"Howdy, boys. Glad you've begun to cool off. Quite a warm run, wasn't it?"

From below came an explosion of thick gutturals and hissings. Carmena flung out a hand in a gesture of refusal.

"No, I won't, Cochise. I'll talk American, and so will you— And you'll speak decently, or we chop off. *Sabe?*"

There followed a silence of several moments. Carmena's patience soon reached its snapping point. She frowned and started to draw back. The voice below called up, still thick and guttural, but speaking clear-cut English:—

"You lied. You said you catch another sucker."

"I said I would fetch another man to the Hole, and I have done it. Any lie about that?" countered the girl.

"Dam' plenty," came back an angry shout. "You knew what we want him for."

"How about Slade? What'll he want him for? Haven't you any sense any more, Cochise? Have you forgotten how dad had to get you loose? Don't you see you've got to keep on playing the game our way? Yours is out of date. Even in the days of your Uncle Cochise and Geronimo it didn't work."

"They got a heap of fun."

"Well, let me tell you one thing—the new man is my game, not yours. You had your chance and missed it. He stood up full of Gila monster poison and got away from you—threw you off his trail—tricked a bunch of Apache trailers—out-ran and out-thirsted you. Want me to tell that to Slade?"

The taunt was followed by another prolonged silence. Carmena smiled and tossed down first a bare corncob and then a full ear.

"Which will you have?" she asked. "Your way, you'll get the cob. My way, we'll all have a share of corn. A man who could fool and out-game you wouldn't make a poor partner to take into our business. We'll wait for Slade to decide."

"You give me my woman, I wait," bargained the unseen Cochise.

Carmena fairly blazed with anger. She hurled down another bare corncob.

"She's not your woman. You shan't have her! We'll see what Slade says about that and about your running me across the Basin. You know you can't scare me. Now, is it fight, or do you back up?"

The reply was a jabber of hissings and gutturals.

Carmena jerked her hand about in swift signs and cried back in uncouth thick-tongued Apache words. The dispute at

last ended in a sullen mutter from below and a sudden thudding of hoofs. The Apaches dashed out from under the cliff, loping their horses toward a corral over across to the left of the cornfields.

Carmena drew back out of the deep doorway, with a look of profound relief. At sight of Lennon she smiled and caught up his wounded hand.

"I've made Cochise back up," she said. "We're safe from the bunch till Slade returns—only none of us can leave the Hole. How's your arm feeling?"

The dark eyes were very clear and straightforward in their gaze. Lennon flushed with shame over his black suspicions. These renegade Apaches, and Slade as well, probably were bad men. Farley, no doubt, was in with them. But he appeared to be an unwilling associate, barred from escape by sickness, drink, and fear. Carmena had begged for help to get him and Elsie out of the Hole.

Lennon permitted his hand to linger in her gentle clasp.

"It seems to be much better," he replied to her question.

"That's good. Let's hope it will be all right before Slade gets back. You heard me bluff off Cochise with the partnership talk?"

Farley was backing across the room, gray-faced and trembling like a very old man.

"Slade will be angered," he quavered. "I'll lose all—all!"

"Leave him to me. I'll handle him," promised Carmena. "Remember what you agreed. Jack is to be a full partner."

Lennon felt a sudden rekindling of suspicion.

"May I ask you to explain all this about a partnership?" he queried.

"Why, of course," replied the girl. She drew close to him and lowered her voice.

"Dad refuses to give up everything and leave the Hole. So I've allowed him to think you'll come in with the bunch. My idea is to bring about a split between Slade and Cochise. We'll then have a fighting chance. All we can do now is take things easy and get your hand in shape."

"My rifle was taken by your father. I would rather like to——"

"Dad, hand over Jack's rifle," called the girl.

Elsie glided across to the dark doorway through which Farley was disappearing. Within a few moments the missing rifle was thrust out to her. She brought it to Carmena, who handed it over to Lennon. A seemingly casual examination showed him that it had not been tampered with.

His last flicker of suspicion died away.

CHAPTER VIII

CACTUS CARMENA

Immediately after the armistice Carmena and Elsie went down to attend the goats and chickens that were penned in

small enclosures a short distance up-valley from the cliff house. The girls also gathered a supply of fresh vegetables from a nearby kitchen garden. At dusk the rope ladder was hauled up.

In the morning Carmena took Lennon to see the valley. She had roped a pair of ponies near the garden enclosure. Though the rifles were carried, no occasion arose that called for use of the weapons. The Apaches in charge of the stock merely grunted in response to Carmena's friendly greeting and stared stolidly as she and Lennon rode by.

All the other Indians seemed to have left the valley. But Carmena said that guards were always posted in the two main exits. Escape up Devil's Chute with a horse was impossible.

Beyond the narrow mouth of the Chute cañon the two skirted along the edge of the flourishing cornfields and the hay pastures of the lower valley. All the way they followed an irrigation canal of the ancient cliff dwellers that had been restored to use. It curved and twisted along the higher ground under the towering cliff walls.

At the foot of the Hole the valley narrowed, funnel-like, into a rather wide box cañon. The cañon bed offered a broad level runway down which a horse could have sprinted at top speed.

Carmena caught the glance of pleased surprise that Lennon fixed upon a heavy farm wagon that stood inside the mouth of the cañon.

"It's not so easy as you think," she said. "There's a thirty-foot cliff about a mile down. Nothing has ever come in or gone out that way except by rope, and the windlass is always guarded. Hell Cañon is no easier. It forks, and the forks both fork twice, and there's only one branch you can get out through. We might be able to make it, either route. But there's dad and Elsie."

"You spoke of bringing about a difference between Cochise and Slade," said Lennon. "What is your plan?"

"It all depends. I have several ideas. One is to offer Slade a share in your copper-mine deal. But we'll hold that back. He knows that matters must soon come to a show-down with the bunch. Cochise has been getting harder to hold for the past three years. You know, he claims that Elsie belongs to him."

Lennon stared in amazement.

"What! your sister—that little pink and white blossom?"

"But she's not really my sister. That's the pinch. Cochise brought her with him when he first came to the Hole, two years before Slade. He claimed he had found her over beyond Triple Butte. She was crazed from thirst—never has been able to remember what had happened or anything about her life before she came here."

"My word! Has no inquiry ever been made for her? Did you not advertise? What were her clothes like?"

"Rags and tatters. No one came. Nobody outside knows there is such a place as Dead Hole, except by vague report. Dad and I just happened to stumble into it. About advertising Elsie, we tried that some. There was no answer. We think she belonged to a stray family, out prospecting. The others must have died of thirst."

"Or were murdered by Cochise," put in Lennon. Carmena's eyes narrowed.

"Maybe—maybe not. It was just after he jumped the Reservation. But he was only a sulky schoolboy then, playing hookey. Besides, he had not harmed the child. He worked for Dad and was right decent, till he got in with Slade and the—business started."

Lennon was not to be diverted to another subject. The mystery of Elsie's parentage intrigued him. With the realisation that the two girls were not of blood kin, Lennon found himself dwelling upon the differences between them. Elsie, cleared of any kinship to Farley, at once became in his thoughts a being of finer nature than her foster-sister.

In contrast, Carmena now seemed to show distinctly the taint of Farley's blood. Her frank manner took on the tinge

of boldness. Her vigour and strength now seemed mannish, if not coarse.

Might not what he had taken for high spirit and courage be no more than callous hardihood? Was there not a certain garishness about her rich colouring? And was all the brown of her skin on the outside? Both her hair and eyes were dark, and there was her Spanish name—Carmena. Was she not, in part, of Mexican blood?

Some hint of Lennon's thoughts may have shown in his expression. Otherwise the girl's next remark was pure coincidence:—

"Ever since Slade added tizwin to the business, I've had to be pretty much the man of the family. He persuaded us that dad would die without a lot of stimulant. That's how he got hold of dad. Once the habit was fixed, I couldn't break dad of it. With you here, I'm hoping he may remember his old grit and pride, and brace up."

"But about your—foster-sister," said Lennon.

"Isn't she just too sweet for anything!" broke in Carmena. "I've tried to be the cactus fence to guard her against the trampling beasts."

"Such as this Cochise. You say he claims her?"

"For the last three years. Indian girls marry young. He'd have kicked a way through the cactus fence before this, if it hadn't been for Slade. You know, Slade has his own bunch of Navaho punchers. So, you see, Cochise has to——"

Carmena stopped to point across the upper end of the valley.

"Talk of the devil——" she exclaimed.

Over below the cliff house Lennon saw a small group of mounted men waiting for the basket that was being lowered to them on the hoist rope.

"If it's only Elsie's pies; if only they haven't bluffed dad into sending down a jug of tizwin!" murmured Carmena.

"We've been outplayed. We can't get back," said Lennon. "Shall I drive them off again with my rifle?"

"No. Cochise agreed to wait for Slade. I'm going to make him stick to it. We'll ride on around. Maybe they'll not wait."

The two had loped along under the precipices on the northwest side of the valley and were already near Hell Cañon, at the upper end. The mouth of the cañon belied its name. The bed, though rocky, was neither steep nor broken. Along the ledges of the cliff foot a canal had been chiselled in the solid rock by the cliff-dwellers. A small stream was flowing through it, down around the left corner of the cañon mouth.

Carmena noticed the look of professional interest that Lennon fixed upon the ancient water-way.

"You're an engineer," she said. "Pretty good piece of irrigation work for those old mummies, isn't it? All we had to do was rebuild the intake dam and clean out the ditch. Here's the tank."

The ponies slowed to a walk up the side of an enormous natural pothole, which the ancient builders had converted into a storage reservoir by means of an earthen dam.

Carmena jumped her pony across the intake canal and loped ahead toward the cliff house. Lennon was too intent upon overtaking her to more than glance at the stand of rough-made beehives, the kitchen garden, and the goat and chicken sheds, past which his pony galloped.

Carmena reined in to jerk her thumb at a tumble-down brush hut.

"Our home, till Slade got up the cliff."

"How?"

"Piecing ladders together, one a-top the other. There are our callers; and it's pie, thank goodness. Keep your gun down. Shake hands, if they offer; but let me do the talking."

"If you wish."

"I do. The one all in white man's clothes is Cochise. Next him, with the Mex sombrero, is Pete. He's one of Slade's Navahos. He stands in with Cochise, and I stand in with him. *Sabe?*"

"You mean he's your man—tips you off—all that?"

"Yes. I think we'll be able to count on him later, when it comes to the show-down. Don't forget now: That run 'cross the Basin never happened. We're all heap good friends and pards."

Lennon nodded. He did not fancy the situation, but he was willing for the time being to trust to his companion's lead. Side by side they rode up and stopped before the seven Indians. Lennon looked them over with the cool direct gaze of the dominant white man.

Five of them were replicas of the herdsmen down the valley. Pete the Navaho—he of the Mexican sombrero—also wore Mexican leg-buttoned breeches and a red cotton shirt, the tails of which hung outside. He looked to be the youngest of the group. He and Cochise were the only ones who did not avoid Lennon's eye.

Cochise the Apache leader proved a surprise to Lennon. He was as young as the white man and far from ugly. Though his head, under his old cowboy hat, was as square and massive as the cloth-bound heads of the other Apaches, and his shoulders were still broader, his face might have belonged to a Sicilian or Andalusian aristocrat—swarthy, bold-featured, and handsome.

Carmena raised her voice in cheerful greeting:—

"How, boys!—*Bueno amigo*, Pete. Howdy, Cochise. Fine day. Hope the pie was good. Shake with Jack, our new partner."

The Apache leader wiped the pie juice from his short, small hands upon his leather chaps, and replied with a show of geniality:—

"Howdy. Fine day. Glad to meet new pard. Shake."

Lennon offered his left hand. His bridle reins and rifle were loosely held in his bandaged right. Carmena was thrusting her rifle into its saddle-sheath. Instead of clasping hands, palm to palm, Cochise clutched Lennon's wrist in a grip that almost crushed the bones. His other hand closed on the hilt of a knife.

"Sit still, Jack," murmured Carmena.

The warning was needless. Lennon had not stirred in his saddle or made the slightest attempt to struggle.

"Who's the liar, now, Cochise?" reproached Carmena. "You said you'd wait till Slade came."

"I catch your pard. I keep him till Slade come. Then I have my fun. You swap my woman for him, I let him go now."

The girl smiled.

"Maybe you'll let him go anyway, amigo. I've got you covered, and I figure the first bullet will go through that pie you just ate."

The glittering black eyes of the Apache shot a sidelong glance down toward the girl's right hand. It had slipped into a pocket in the fold of her divided skirt. Her smile widened.

"Think it over," she advised. "What happens to us won't be any fun to you after you've got yours."

The steel-sinewed fingers that were clutched about Lennon's wrist opened.

"All dam' good joke—arm handshake," the Apache sought to explain away his treacherous attempt. "Make sure you got nerve. *Sabe?* Guess I got to go. Good-bye."

"Oh, do stay and visit a bit longer," Carmena smilingly urged him. "We can talk a while with you and Pete. But the others may as well be starting, don't you think?"

Something in her pocket thrust up the fold of her skirt. Cochise muttered a word or two that sent the other Apaches loping off down the valley. When they were some distance away, Carmena nodded almost gaily:—

"Well, boys, I suppose the pie is all gone. So, if you feel you have to go, too.... Good-bye, Pete. Maybe you know, Cochise, it's sometimes a sign of bad luck to look back or drop off your horse."

The two Indians wheeled their ponies and loped after the others.

Cochise did not look back.

CHAPTER IX

THE MAN WHO WAS

Lennon sprang from his pony and steadied his rifle across the saddle. Carmena drew in a deep breath.

"That's right," she approved. "Keep him covered. Shoot if he turns—but not Pete."

The Navaho had drawn rein to tail in behind the pony of his leader. He thrust a hand overhead in a swift sign gesture.

"You see, Jack. I knew we could count on Pete. The boy thinks a good deal of me. He was ready to shoot Cochise in the back."

"But you!" exclaimed Lennon. "That was ripping the way you—what d'you say?—got the drop on Cochise. My right hand is till too weak for a knockout blow."

Carmena gravely drew a sheath knife from the pocket of her skirt.

"He knows I usually carry my revolver," she said.

Lennon stared.

"Your revolver wasn't in your pocket? Yet you sheathed your rifle?"

"Didn't you notice his men had their guns pointed at us across their laps? Sheathing mine was what gave me the chance to bluff him. It's all right now. He won't try any more tricks this time."

She sent a clear call ringing up the cliff. At once the hoist rope began to reeve down through the pulley of the crane. The rope ladder soon lowered from the other opening. Both saddles were fastened to the hoist hook. But Lennon thrust his rifle through the back of his cartridge belt.

They found Farley in the doorway, nervously peering down the valley after the Indians.

"Cochise was hiding in Devil's Chute until you rode out of sight," he quavered. "He demanded tizwin. I convinced him that Slade took away every drop. He then threatened to seize you for his woman and torture Mr. Lennon, if I did not send down Elsie. I postponed the decision until your return."

"All right, dad. We persuaded him to let us come up. But now we're here, I think we'll take no more rides till Slade comes."

Lennon freed his rifle from the belt and stepped in through the doorway after the father and daughter. His first glance inside the cliff house showed him Elsie labouring at the windlass. He hastened to take the crank out of her plump little hands. His one-armed winding soon hoisted the saddles to the crane. The moment the load was safe, Elsie tremblingly lifted his hand to look at the blackening bruises left by Cochise's steel grip.

"Does it—does it hurt much, Jack?" she whispered. "Once I saw him snap a dog's leg."

Lennon smilingly denied the sharp pain of the strained ligaments. But inwardly his anger against Cochise hardened into enmity as he looked into the girl's innocent eyes and recalled that the brutal Apache considered her his woman.

His reassurance brought instant relief to her volatile mind. She began to chatter gaily about how she and Carmena would entertain him during the wait for Slade. In this the older girl joined with cordial heartiness. Elsie displayed a high stack of women's magazines, for which Carmena was a regular subscriber. Every three or four months they were brought in from the nearest post office by Slade.

Elsie fairly showered Lennon with naïve questions about the far-away land of cities and green trees and vast stretches of water. Aside from the magazines and what had been told her by Farley and Carmena, she had no knowledge of the world outside the Hole.

Beneath Carmena's quiet manner Lennon discovered an interest as keen as that of her foster-sister and very much more intelligent. She had childhood memories of Ohio. Much to his distaste, she persuaded Farley to remain most of the day with them in the living room.

But as the wreck that once had been a man listened to Lennon's talk, his bent shoulders began to straighten and his drink-bleared eyes cleared. By evening he was talking as one man of culture to another. He even showed occasional flashes of a once brilliant mind.

Carmena took care to keep her father stimulated with frequent cups of coffee. The whisky flask appeared to be quite forgotten. After supper, at his suggestion, Elsie brought out an old dog-eared set of Shakespeare. In the flaring light of a home-made tallow candle he read parts of King Lear and Hamlet, with his rapt eyes frequently off the page for a dozen lines or more.

Lennon's aversion to the broken old drunkard had by now mellowed to tolerance and a degree of pity. He realised what the man had been before sickness had pulled him down and drink degraded him. At times Farley's whisky-shattered mind tended to wander. But Lennon good-humouredly helped Carmena to bridge the gaps. When her father's face became gray and drawn, the girl said he was sleepy and took him off to bed.

She returned, to find Elsie perched on the arm of Lennon's chair. They were both peering at a magazine illustration, with their heads so close together that Elsie's yellow curls brushed Lennon's cheek.

The warm glow in Carmena's eyes faded; her smiling lips tightened. Her voice vibrated with a touch of sharpness:

"Sleep time, Blossom."

Elsie sprang to her light feet with docile obedience. But she lingered to eye Lennon wistfully as he stood up to meet Carmena's level glance.

"Aren't you going to say good-night, Jack?" she coaxed. "Don't—don't brothers ever kiss their sisters good night?"

Lennon cast a half-doubtful glance at the girl's unsmiling foster-sister, hesitated, caught Elsie's golden head between his hands and bent to kiss her forehead. She drew back, overcome with sudden shyness.

Carmena held out a firm hand to Lennon.

"Good-night, Jack—and thank you for—dad. It's two years since he has been anything like to-day."

"The pleasure was mine," replied Lennon.

His tone was not uncordial, but his eyes had turned to watch Elsie dance across to one of the inner doorways that led into a short passage. Carmena swung around after her foster-sister, with her head well up and her boot heels briskly clicking on the stone floor.

The discovery at his bedside of his own clothes thoroughly cleaned and his boots well oiled added a touch of gratitude to his tender, compassionate, delightful thoughts of Elsie. He lay awake for an hour or more, dwelling upon her dainty beauty and fascinating innocence.

But the bleak gray light of dawn brought sober reflections. What interest could he have in the young girl other than to help her escape from the savage Cochise? She was a waif, of unknown parentage. Mentally she was little more than a child, and all her conscious experience had been confined to the environment of this crude desert valley.

Lennon came out to breakfast with scant appetite. But his moodiness had company. Elsie sat at table tearful-eyed and drooping. Carmena's eyes were sombre and her expression was hard. In reply to Lennon's polite inquiry for Farley, she coldly replied that her father was not hungry.

Through one of the outer slit windows of the living room Lennon saw a thin column of smoke down the valley toward the corral. Carmena answered his unspoken question:—

"They're brand-blotting the last bunch of cattle brought into the Hole."

"Brand-blotting?"

"Yes. You wouldn't care to see it—especially when Cochise takes part."

Elsie uttered a smothered little gasp that quickened again all of Lennon's repressed tenderness and compassion. He looked around, trying to think of some means to divert her. His glance fell upon one of the bowls of ancient pottery.

"May I ask you to show me the rest of this cliff house? Or are the other rooms in ruins?"

Elsie instantly brightened.

"Oh, no, course not. Only some of the top ones have tumbled in. Dad won't mind if we show Jack the mummies, will he, Mena?"

"Fetch candles," directed Carmena, clearly as relieved as the others at the thought of diversion.

They started to ramble through the interior of the cliff house, taking with them a light ladder to climb to the upper stories. In the lower rooms at the near end were stored quantities of corn on the cob, dried fruit, and vegetables, honey, dried beef, bacon, and other foods. The family was sufficiently stocked to withstand a half year's siege.

The upper rooms were for the most part empty. Others showed only fragments of broken pottery. Some had been broken in through their side walls or were open above and littered with the debris of their roofs. Lennon surmised the existence of several sealed lower chambers at the back.

Carmena led the way down again and zigzagged through connected rooms toward the far end of the great community

house. To the rear of the front row of rooms was a large chamber heaped with cliff-dweller mummies.

"Slade had them all dumped in here," explained Carmena. "Like the Indians, Elsie is still scared of them. But they have been dead a long time, poor things. They'll not hurt anybody. They'd protect you, Blossom, if Cochise should get up the cliff and you hid in that corner. He thinks them bad medicine. Slade laughs at Indian spirits. He says that corn spirits are the only ones that can put a spell on a man."

"They—they've an awful hold on dad," quavered Elsie. "He didn't ever used to speak cross to me."

In the flickering candle-light Carmena's eyes glinted with a look that Lennon thought to be fierce resentment. She thrust past him to the door-way.

"Wait. I'll be back," she called.

Elsie was tremblingly eager to follow, but Lennon lacked her fear of the desiccated builders of the cliff house. At one end of the room he had come upon what to him was a very interesting heap of their no less ancient possessions. Most of the beautiful old pottery had been smashed, but among the fragments Lennon found several ceremonial stones and tablets, a bone awl, many obsidian arrowheads, and a few broken turquoise ornaments.

His search was cut short by the return of Carmena. She carried a modern Indian basket-vase that would have been very convenient for holding Lennon's collection. But she gave him no chance to ask for it. She stared in at him and Elsie from the doorway, her dark eyes glittering strangely in the candle-light. Her lips were hardset in a bitter smile.

"He's—asleep. Come," she said.

Lennon followed the eager Elsie, who was vastly relieved to leave the mummy vault. Yet she was no less mystified than Lennon by her foster-sister's manner. She shrank back behind him when, after passing through two corn-stacked rooms near the far end of the cliff house, Carmena stopped before an entrance that had been closed with a door of heavy planks. The thick iron hasp was secured with a big padlock.

Carmena handed her candle to Lennon and took a key from her basket.

"Oh, Mena!" whispered Elsie. "Oh, you can't be going to—to—— You know how angry dad—and Slade——"

For answer, Carmena thrust the key into the padlock.

CHAPTER X

THE SETTER OF TRAPS

The unlocked door squeaked shrilly on its hinges as it swung in before the heave of Carmena's shoulder. Elsie peeped fearfully back past Lennon. Carmena pushed on into the secret room.

Lennon had expected to see some kind of treasure-chamber. He stared blankly at the big object in the centre of the room—a complex object that somehow reminded him of his laboratory experiments in college. A step nearer, with his own and Carmena's candles upraised, gave him a clear view of the bulging copper boiler, the tubes and worm and fermenting vats. The air of the room was pervaded with a sour smell.

At his exclamation Carmena gave him a sombre glance.

"You see now?"

"A still," he said. "This tizwin you've been talking about—it's moonshine whisky. Your father——"

"No—Slade!" broke in the girl with passionate emphasis. "He brought the thing into the Hole and forced dad to run it. He's the one to blame—not dad. He bootlegs it to the Indians."

"Indians? That's a Federal penitentiary offence!"

"What could we do? If he's convicted, he'll swear that dad is just as guilty. You see why I couldn't go for the sheriff?"

"Yes," said Lennon; but he looked at Elsie.

Carmena's face whitened.

"If it hadn't been for dad, there's no telling what Cochise would have done with her. Anyhow, he's my father."

To this Lennon could make no answer. He turned again to stare at the big still. Fuel had been placed in the firebox, ready for lighting. Carmena knelt down before it and dipped her hand into the Indian basket. One after the other, she laid out the six sticks of dynamite and the caps and fuses that she had saved from Lennon's prospecting outfit.

She looked up at him, gravely expectant.

"You said you'd help us, Jack. I want this whole thing fixed so it will never make another drop of poison."

"At once?"

"No. They'd be sure we did it, and I figure—— Can you fix it so it will go off a quarter minute after the fire is lighted?"

"Oh-h, Mena?" cried Elsie. "What you going to do? You know dad always lights the fire."

"Never fear, Blossom. I'll take good care of dad. If Jack does what I want, there'll be no more of the nasty tizwin to make dad cross and sick."

Lennon found himself regarding the girl with rekindled admiration for her ingenuity and daring.

"So this is why you saved the dynamite?" he remarked. "Will it not be dangerous—I mean, to anger that man Slade, you know?"

"Anything to save dad—— If you're afraid, just tell me how to fix it. I'll do the work and take all blame—if it fails. You can go back with Elsie and be able to swear you didn't have a hand in it."

The girl's tone was as contemptuous as when, at their first meeting on the trail, she had jeered him into cutting across the desert with her. He looked the still over with a professional eye.

The chimney stones were laid in mud plaster. But the stones of the firebox, or furnace, were loose. On one side they extended out in a rough platform that held the water-cooled vat of the condensation worm. From the two-foot space between the furnace hole and the vat Lennon began to pull out the stones. He was able to make a hole down to the solid stone floor.

A crack gave opening enough to thrust the stiff fuse from the firebox into the hole. To make certain of results, Lennon used three pieces of fuse, which were attached with caps to the sticks of dynamite, in the bottom of the hole. He then put the stones back in their places. The ends of the fuses were hidden by the tinder of the fuel in the firebox.

When Lennon stood up and dusted off his hands, no slightest sign was left to betray that the charge of dynamite had been planted.

"There you are," he said. "The fuses are cut for fifteen seconds, and they will start burning as soon as the tinder is fired."

"You're sure the boiler will be blown up?" queried Carmena. "Your dynamite is out from under it, and there's all the rock in the way."

Lennon smiled at her ignorance of explosives.

"The stones will double the destruction. After that charge detonates, there will be a hole in the floor, a good deal of shattered stone, and some splinters and shreds of metal. Everything in the room will be smashed. Is that satisfactory?"

Carmena shuddered as if seized with a fever chill, but pulled herself together. "All right. We'll go now."

She picked up her basket, and backed out after the others, scrutinising the floor to make certain they had left nothing to tell of their visit.

"It's a secret, Blossom," she cautioned. "Promise you'll never tell any one?"

"But you'll have to tell dad, Mena. He always goes in with Slade and Cochise to measure the mash—— And you know he sometimes goes in first to start the cooking."

"Didn't I say I'd take care of dad?" reassured Carmena.

Lennon stopped before her, his gray eyes wide with dread.

"Wait," he demanded. "What is it you plan to do? Elsie says your father's partners—— But I have told you the dynamite will destroy everything in the room. If you scheme to get those men in there, give me that key. I shall not permit such a trap to remain."

"Why not? You promised to help."

"Not this way. It would be cold-blooded murder."

"You say that, when they——?"

Carmena checked her indignant protest and gazed down at her foster-sister.

"Well, then, how if I use that blast to blow Slade and Cochise apart?" she inquired. "Suppose I make each think the other put the giant powder in the furnace?"

"Too great a risk. We will explode the charge at once, or draw it."

Carmena's eyes flashed.

"No. They shall not make another drop of poison in that devilpot. But if we blew it up now, Slade will put the blame on us—— Tell you what—I'll just misplace the key. That will give us time to act after Slade comes."

"Have I your promise you will not try to get him into that death trap?"

"Yes."

Back in the living room they became aware that the day was almost gone. Carmena asked Lennon to cover her from above with his rifle while she went down to milk the goats. He offered to change places with her, but had to confess that he did not know how to milk.

The ladder had been drawn up. To save time, the girl directed Lennon to lower her by means of the hoist rope. Though there was no sign of an Indian nearer than the corral and she smiled at the suggestion of danger, he saw her slip

her small revolver into the bosom of her dress.

The moment the slackening of the hoist rope told him she had reached the ground he hurried with his rifle to an embrasured window in the living room. He looked down and saw her calmly walking away toward the goat pens. The goats flocked to nibble the salt that she had brought for them. She knelt down and started milking.

Elsie had already busied herself at the charcoal brazier. After a time, when her pots were simmering, she came to cuddle up in the window beside Lennon.

"My goodness, but hasn't it been an awful nice day, Jack," she sighed in heartfelt contentment. "Mena is—is the best sister in all the whole world. But it's doubly nice to have a brother like you. Isn't it, just?"

She snuggled her head against Lennon's right shoulder. He reached across and stroked her silky hair without looking away from the valley.

"I am glad you like me, Blossom. You know, Carmena brought me to help her get you away from this place."

"Me—and dad, Jack. Don't forget dad. Mena never does. And dad won't ever give up the Hole, 'cause he said so. That's why Mena shot your burro to make you fight Cochise."

Lennon chuckled.

"Carmena came along after the Apache shot my burro."

"Oh, but that's the joke," tittered the girl, in her turn. "Mena was the 'Pache. She shot your hat off and your burro to see how you'd behave, and when you didn't scare, she rode 'round to make you come with her."

The enlarged version struck Lennon as just so much the more preposterous.

"To be sure," he made mock agreement, "Only, by the way, what was the point of the joke?"

"You mean, why did she do it?"

"Yes. Why ruin a twelve-dollar sombrero and a ten-dollar burro?"

"So's you'd get mad and fight Cochise, of course. She was desp'rit, so she told him she'd get another man into the Basin to be caught and made to pay. But she planned, when she signalled them, to warn you and slip away while you fought them."

"Ripping!" praised Lennon. "Wonderful flight of fancy. And after the fight?"

"Oh, that depends. You'd prob'ly been dead. But if you'd killed all that part of the bunch, Mena would have brought you into the Hole to shoot up the rest and make Slade quit."

"I see. Quite in keeping with the burro. But why, then, did she help me run away?"

Elsie's playful tone sobered.

"Why, 'cause you couldn't fight, of course. After she signalled Cochise you went and got bit by the Gila monster and saved her life. Course she had to save you then."

"Saved!" bantered Lennon. "A fact—a solid fact at last, in this sea of fiction. What a slip! I was beginning to fancy you quite a consistent fairy-tale tinker, Blossom. Take that last touch about her signalling Cochise. She sent a message by wireless, I presume."

"Wireless? Is that what you call smoke signalling?"

"Smoke?"—Before Lennon's mental vision flashed a vivid picture of the puffs of smoke rising into the noontime desert sky from the ridge near the water-hole—"Smoke signalling!"

What a dupe he had been! Even now, when the truth had been spread out before his eyes, he had taken it for pure fiction. Yet every seeming absurdity in Elsie's account became credible the moment he considered the facts he knew, in the light of understanding.

Though Carmena had made much of probable danger from the "bronchos," she had sent up those telltale puffs of smoke. During the flight across the Basin she had changed from boots to moccasins, which he now knew to be of Apache style, if not of Apache make. They would account for the moccasin print behind the crag from which his hat had been shot off and his burro killed. For her to cut down to her pony, pull on her boots, and ride around to the wash along the trail had been easy.

The purpose of her strange attack clearly had been to break up his prospecting trip by the death of the burro and to test whether he could and would fight. No less clear now was the subtle manner in which she had both spurred his daring with her derision and appealed to his chivalry for protection against the murderous bronchos. All the time Cochise and his band were over in the Basin, waiting for her to lure a victim within their power.

On this point was it not probable that Elsie was mistaken? Had not Carmena's intention been to have her savage accomplices capture him and hold him for ransom? The game might well have included a pretended capture of herself, so that chivalry would lead him to pay a larger ransom.

No—Elsie's explanation was the more probable. And he could trust her truthfulness. Whatever he might think of Carmena, this child-minded girl at least was absolutely innocent of any scheming. Her dread of Cochise could not possibly have been feigned.

Even Carmena must be given her due. She had been driven desperate by the threats of Cochise to take Elsie as his squaw; and the partnership of her father in the illicit making and bootlegging of moonshine whisky had prevented her from appealing to the law for protection. But on the other hand she had deliberately taken the risk of killing the first chance stranger that came along the Moqui trail——

Lennon frowned as he pictured the hole through the crown of his sombrero. That had been an uncomfortably close shot. Why had not the girl met him face to face on the trail and frankly asked for his aid? Instead of that straightforward, above-board procedure, she had risked shooting him, had deceived him, had led him into a trap where he would have had to kill all the bronchos or be killed. In the first case, according to Elsie, she would have had him help her attack the rest of the Apaches in the Hole. But if he had been killed she undoubtedly had planned to put all the blame on him.

He was no coward. As he mulled over the situation his eyes sparkled at the thought of how, with his long-range rifle, he might have out-fought Cochise and his followers. But that was not the rub. Carmena had treated him as a blind dupe—had thrown dust in his eyes and beguiled him into the double snare that she had set for him and Cochise.

He would have been only too glad to take the venture with her if she had told him beforehand. But she had not trusted him. The accident of the Gila monster's bite alone had blocked her scheme to make him chance the sacrifice of his life in complete ignorance of her real purpose.

With his hand disabled, he of course had become valueless at the time as a tool to rid her of Cochise. Yet there was the chance that he could be used in the Hole. That would account for the seeming devotion and self-sacrifice by which she had saved him from the Gila monster poison, from death by thirst, and from Apache torture.

The prejudice that had been first implanted in Lennon's mind by the repulsiveness of the girl's drunken father now prevented him from making any allowances for her difficult position. Had it not been for her relationship to that weak-faced besotted moonshiner, Lennon might have stopped to consider how love for her foster-sister had driven her desperate, and how desperation might have kept her from telling the truth of the situation to the stranger on the trail.

The average stranger would have referred her to the sheriff—and she loved her father. But Lennon could see only her lack of trust in him and her deceit.

CHAPTER XI

CROSS CURRENTS

Elsie's childlike eyes had been watching the evening shadows of the cliffs creep along the valley after the retreating sunlight. Drawn at last by Lennon's tense silence, she looked up and saw his frown.

"Oh! oh, Jack!" she cried. "What is it? You look so cross! Is it—is it 'cause what I told you about Mena? Oh, it is! I know it is, the way you look! Oh, dear! Oh, dear! I'm 'fraid! It's a secret, and I promised not to tell. Mena was 'splaining all about you to dad, and I heard—and now she'll be so cross at me if she knows I told! Please, please Jack, promise you won't tell her I told you!"

Lennon put a comforting arm about the shoulders of the panic-stricken girl.

"You dear little frightened bird! Don't be afraid, I will not tell. And remember, I am to be a real brother to you. No matter what any one says, you are to trust in my care and protection."

One of Elsie's arms timidly stole up about his neck. From across the room sounded a hiccough that ended in a dry hacking cough. Lennon jerked his head around. The besotted face of Farley, ghastly white and blear-eyed, was leering at them through a hole in the rear wall.

Before Lennon could free himself from the soft clasp of the girl's arm and dash across the room, the eavesdropper had disappeared. Elsie darted after Lennon to clutch his half-raised rifle.

"Don't shoot—don't shoot!" she begged. "It's only dad. He's having one of his spells. But he won't hurt you—not if you keep by me."

Lennon peered through the hole in the wall. He made out the flaccid form of Farley outstretched upon the stone floor in a drunken stupor. The man evidently had been on the verge of unconsciousness when he leered through the hole. The chance was slight that he would ever remember anything of what he had seen or heard.

With a feeling of disgust that was not unmingled with relief, Lennon started back to the outer window. An odour of scorched food sent Elsie flying to her neglected pots. As half in the deep window embrasure Lennon paused to watch her, the overhanging cliff ledges reverberated with an impatient call. He reluctantly turned his gaze away from the graceful little cook to look down below the window. Carmena stood waiting, with the end of the hoist rope looped about her.

Lennon's steady winding at the windlass soon brought up the living load to the crane. Elsie darted out to swing her foster-sister around into the opening and take from her the brimming pail of goat's milk. Carmena looked down at Lennon's bandaged hand, which was gripped upon the crank of the windlass.

"You ought to be careful," she gravely warned him. "Working won't help your hurt."

"On the contrary, the wounds are fast healing, and use of the hand tends to bring back its strength. It is already much improved."

"Good."

"I shall leave off the bandages after to-night."

Carmena's eyes narrowed.

"No. You're to keep them on, and don't let any one else—even dad—see your hand. The more helpless Slade and Cochise think you are, the better."

To this Lennon readily agreed. His knowledge of the completeness with which the girl had duped him only added to his realisation of her ability. But he promised himself that any advantage gained by his pretence of helplessness should be used only with a view to Elise's benefit.

Such pity as he had felt for Farley before the discovery of the illicit whisky-still was now smothered in disgust. He would fight for Elsie, but he would not lift a finger to help rid Dead Hole of Farley's boot-leg confederates.

Carmena had turned about to peer down the half-shadowed valley.

"I thought sure Slade would get here to-night," she said. "He's overdue already. Well, we can count on him for to-morrow. Maybe you had better let me hide your rifle."

"Is that necessary?"

Lennon's tone was more curt than he had intended. The girl entered the living room and went on through into a rear room.

She did not come out again that evening, but sent word by Elsie that Farley was sick and needed nursing. Lennon was only too pleased to sup and visit alone with the younger girl. Elsie's piquant daintiness was more than ever fascinating to him. He spent a delightful evening, though at times his enjoyment was dampened by remembrance of the danger that threatened her.

Carmena came to the breakfast table pale and weary-eyed. From her laconic remarks to Elsie, Lennon gathered that she had spent the night waiting upon her father. After forcing herself to eat a hasty meal, she came around the table and laid an old short-barrelled revolver beside Lennon's bowl-plate.

"It's dad's," she said. "He's too sick to use it, anyhow. Put it in your pocket out of sight and have Elsie hide your rifle where either of you can readily get it. I saw the signal. Slade is coming."

Elsie almost dropped the pot of fresh coffee that she was settling. Carmena took it and a kettle of hot water and went out without looking at Lennon.

In the extreme corner of the room was a dutch-oven built of stone slabs. Elsie started a fire in it, placed large kettles of food on her brazier, and began to mix white flour dough.

"Slade likes pies as much as Cochise—and white biscuits. That's why he brings us flour. He says he's going to make me his cook. It always gets Cochise awful mad."

The bare suggestion that the doubtful partners of Farley were accustomed to imply ownership in the innocent, helpless girl brought an angry flush into Lennon's lean face. He unloaded the short-barrelled revolver, made careful test of its action, and as carefully reloaded the old style cylinder. The weapon was well suited for hip-pocket wear. At the suggestion of Elsie, he hung his rifle under his bed.

Carmena half carried her father into the living-room and seated him in one of the big chairs. He was very white and shaky, but rational. He had been bathed and dressed, and his eyes showed proof of soothing treatment. Though the sight and odour of the cooking nauseated him, he was braced by a drink made from some bitter desert herb known to the girls for its tonic effect.

"Now, dad, remember you're sick. Just sit here quietly and leave all the business to me," said Carmena. "Jack will keep you company."

She looked at Lennon, cool-eyed and self-possessed.

"Watch your bad arm, Mr. Lennon," she advised. "You don't want to go around with it loose like that. Elsie will fetch you a sling. I'm going to lower the ladder. Slade doesn't enjoy being made to wait."

Elsie brought one of her floursack dish-towels, which Lennon, with mock seriousness, permitted her to knot over his shoulder in a sling. The loop of cloth extended along his arm from elbow to finger tips without hiding the bandages.

Farley glowered at the sling with sour suspicion.

"You climbed the ladder with that arm when you first came," he snapped. "There has been all this time for it to improve."

"Do such poison wounds always improve?" parried Lennon. "I was willing to risk using the arm. But you heard what your daughter said."

He went across the room to look from an outer window. A large band of horsemen was racing full tilt up the valley. They were already near. At their head rode Cochise and a big red-faced white man. As Lennon looked out at them Carmena swung down the rope ladder.

The tall rangy American horse of the white man forged ahead of the Indian ponies and brought his rider under the cliff as Carmena reached the foot of the ladder. She called out to him in a tone of joyful greeting and hastened forward to offer her hand. The man ignored her welcome and jerked a thumb up at the window from which Lennon was looking.

Cochise came galloping to the cliff foot with his band of Apaches and four or five Navahoes. All reined their ponies to one side except Cochise. He sprang off to confront Carmena, with denunciatory words and gestures. The white man leisurely swung out of his saddle and took the attitude of a judge between the girl and Cochise. After no little disputing, he silenced the young Apache with a curt gesture and entered into a low-voiced conference with Carmena. Now and then Cochise broke in with guttural objections.

At last the three seemed to reach some kind of an agreement. They started up the ladder, Carmena waiting until the last. The white man, who undoubtedly was the partner called Slade, led Cochise. The crisis over, Lennon's presence in Dead Hole had come to a head. He felt certain that the period of waiting was about to end in some definite action either against himself or against the Apache leader.

The meeting was by no means unpleasant. After a short pause Carmena led the visitors in from the big anteroom. Cochise cast a covert glance at Elsie, and with an air of stolid indifference to the others sat down at the table. Slade was neither silent nor stolid. He stared hard about the living room and bellowed over to Elsie, who was raking her pies out of the dutch-oven:—

"Ho, howdy, Cookie Gal! 'Most ready to feed me, huh? Won't have to herd me to it. Lord, but I'm sick of Injun grub! Guess this trip I'll sure have to rope and brand you for my home corral!"

Carmena broke in on this coarsely jovial banter with smiling deference:—

"You see it's as I told you, Mr. Slade—Dad is almost used up. But I'll act for him and——"

Slade's ham-like hand came down upon Farley's stooped shoulder in a thwack that doubled the invalid over and set him to coughing.

"Brace up, dad," the trader-cowman rallied him in his bull voice. "You're not dead yet. Good thing for us your bark's worse'n your bite. Huh, Cochise?"

His massive body shook with a roar of laughter at the joke.

"This is Mr. Lennon—our guest," Carmena again interposed.

The big trader swung around to stare down upon the guest. Lennon stood a good six feet in his boots, but Slade

overtopped him by two or three inches and was no less thickset than tall. He looked Lennon straight in the eyes, crushed his left hand in a hearty grip, and greeted him in a tone of bluff cordiality.

"So you're Carmena's new pard. Glad to see you in Dead Hole. She says you want to dicker with us."

"I said he might want to," murmured the girl.

Slade grinned genially at the guest's bandaged arm.

"No might about it, Carmena. Your dad came into Dead Hole for his health. But I figger Lennon here knows it ain't no general health resort."

"Miss Farley will tell you, I was in urgent need of a change from the Basin," drawled Lennon, as he languidly sank back into his chair. "Deuce take it! The results of a Gila monster's bite are more serious than I would have anticipated."

"Sure—apt to be mighty serious, son, if you don't look out what you do," agreed Slade. "Guess, though, Carmena got you started off right. We'll see about it soon's I've fed. Here's my Cookie Gal dishing up."

He thumped down at the table and voraciously fell to upon the food that Elsie hastened to serve him and Cochise. While he plied knife and spoon he chaffed the blushing girl with a familiarity that made Lennon's blood boil. Elsie's forced smile and murmured responses did not conceal the painfulness of her embarrassment.

Yet Lennon's hot impulse to interpose was checked and cooled when he thought to look at Carmena. Like her father, she was smiling at Slade and at the same time covertly watching Cochise. The handsome face of the young Apache seemed utterly blank of all expression except gluttonish enjoyment of the food he was wolfing. But under the edge of the table Lennon saw his hand steal down and fondle the hilt of his sheath knife.

The game was now evident. If the rivals were permitted to attack each other, one or both would almost certainly be killed. A murderous feud between their men would as certainly follow. Lennon's anger against the unpleasant pair was intense enough for him to consider the scheme justified, though its suggestion of treachery deepened his prejudice against Carmena.

CHAPTER XII

A BARGAIN

During the meal prepared by Elsie a solemn avowal by Slade that the cook must go home with him brought the knife of Cochise half out of its sheath.

Slade either did not see the movement, or, if he did, he contemptuously disregarded its menace. He had turned to Farley, his big red face and pale blue eyes suddenly sober.

"Well, dad," he boomed, "guess we'd better hold a séance and git Brother Cochise back into a proper spiritual frame of mind. I got some converting work for him to go out and do."

Cochise shot a side glance at Elsie.

"You leave my woman—I go. *Sabe?*"

The trader burst into his hoarse laugh.

"Go to hell! Can't you take a joke? We're pards, ain't we? Can't I josh the gal without you gitting rattlesnakey? Don't

suppose I meant it, do you? Come on, dad. Git a hustle on you. We got to hold that séance."

He looked at Lennon with a hard smile.

"We run a lodge here—— Spirits Order Secret Scotch Rites. We'll go into a séance and find out whether to initiate you."

"Dad is too sick," interposed Carmena. "He can't help any. I'll take his place."

"No. He's going to come, and you'll stick here," ordered Slade.

Farley rose and tottered out into the anteroom with him and Cochise. Lennon sprang up beside the coolly smiling girl.

"You've permitted them to go—knowing what will happen!"

"Nothing will happen. I changed keys on dad. He'll come back. Then I will go in his place."

"You shall not," forbade Lennon. "I told you it would be murder."

"How about Blossom?" queried the girl. "Slade isn't joking and you know now what he is like."

Lennon looked at the prospective victim, hesitated and tightened his jaw.

"I must hold you to your promise. Set them upon each other, if you wish—— But it shall not be that other way."

"If you hold me to my promise," said Carmena, her eyes hot with scorn.

She started to help Elsie clear the food-splattered table.

Before many minutes Farley reeled in, speechless from terror. He collapsed into the first chair and held out a key in his wavering hand. Carmena looked at it, nodded understandingly, and hastened out, with a significant glance for Lennon.

He was not altogether reassured. After a few moments he followed her along the front row of the diff house rooms. He was close enough to hear the talk that followed when she joined Cochise and Slade at the padlocked door. The trader gruffly accepted her excuses for her father, but swore violently when the two keys that she had brought failed to open the lock.

She explained how she had changed her father's clothes, and took upon herself all the blame with regard to the misplacing of the key. After much soothing talk, she at last quieted Slade by promising to have a given quantity of whisky distilled before his next visit.

"That'll do," he conceded. "Look out you don't forgit it, though, or I'll take it out of dad's hide. Now, Cochise, you hit the high places for them hosses. Don't do no shooting this time. Just natchelly have 'em drift off. Git a move on you."

Had not Lennon been wearing moccasins he must have been caught. As it was, he glided back through the many rooms undetected.

Farley had crept into his own room. His absence gave Lennon opportunity to calm Elsie's fears and comfort her with the promise that he would save her from both Slade and Cochise. The tread of heavy boots sent her scurrying out of the living-room.

Slade strode in after Carmena and jerked a chair around to where he could look close into Lennon's face.

"Now, young man, what's this bunk about you and Carmena being pards?" he demanded. "What business you got in Dead Hole, anyhow? Cochise says you shot a hoss of hisn."

"I told you how that started," interposed Carmena. "It wasn't our fault that Cochise flew off the handle. Jack had to shoot to save me as well as himself."

Slade stared hard at the girl and then at Lennon.

"Well, supposing the young devil did break loose. What of it? How about this pard bunk? That's what I want to know."

"I fear that Miss Farley has found me rather a disappointment," put in Lennon, and he looked at his trussed arm.

"Not at all—just the other way 'round," Carmena glowingly asserted. "Figure it out for yourself, Mr. Slade. A man who could follow up a Gila monster bite by outrunning Cochise and his bunch across the Basin, and then make them back up. Can you wonder I think he's a man for us to tie to?"

"If we needed a new pard," qualified Slade. "Fact is, we don't, and you know it. We got enough a'ready to do the work and split up our profits."

Carmena cast a significant glance towards Elsie, who had ventured back to renew the fire in her oven.

"How about Cochise getting out of hand? All the time it's harder to hold him. He's beginning to bristle up even to you."

Slade's tobacco-stained teeth showed in a grin of contemptuous indifference.

"Bah, I'll pull his head off if he gits sassy, and he knows it."

"Of course. He'd have no show—unless a potshot or a knife in your back.— If only he was white!"

"Surely you do not mean to say, Miss Farley, that Cochise would attack his own partner," Lennon backed up the girl's play. "I saw him pull out that long knife of his under the table, but imagined it was merely the Indian way of easing his feelings against Mr. Slade."

"Pulled his knife on me, did he?" bellowed the trader, in a sudden burst of anger.

"And just because you dared speak kindly to Elsie," sympathised Carmena.

Strange enough, the barbed sting appeared to quiet rather than enrage Slade. He laughed.

"No four-flushing, Mena. Needn't try to pull the wool over my eyes. I can't run my business without Cochise, and you know it. You got to show me a deal with more in it, before you talk about a shift of pards. I'm running this shebang. There ain't no place for Lennon 'round Dead Hole. He best hit out back the way he come."

Carmena's look told Lennon that he must make the next play. He thought quickly. If the girl was not mistaken, Slade would take Elsie away with him and chance the revenge of Cochise. The Apache might be appeased by permission to follow his intended victim back into the Basin.

Had Lennon considered only himself he would have been willing to chance a fight with the renegade. But the mere thought of abandoning Elsie to either the Apache or this brutal trader was altogether unbearable.

"Indeed, yes—to be sure, Mr. Slade," he blandly made reply. "If you do not desire me as a partner, I have no wish to remain here. Doubtless I shall not require your aid to find the mine for which I am looking."

"Mine?" queried Slade, his pale eyes narrowing. "What mine?"

"It's the lost lode," cut in Carmena, her rich voice quivering with eagerness. "I couldn't say anything until Jack spoke. He was headed for the mine when his burro was shot and we had to leave his outfit—thanks to Cochise. But he knows where to find the lost lode. Got it from Cripple Sim—back east. It's somewhere near over Triple Butte. You see

now why I thought you'd be glad to have me bring Jack in as a partner?"

The red face of the trader fairly glowed with geniality. He held out his beefy hand to Lennon.

"Shake, pard. Why didn't you speak up sooner? I might have knowed you was O.K. But Carmena is only a gal, and we got to be careful of strangers in these parts. Bad place for hoss thieves and brand-blotters. That's why I put up with a mean Injun like Cochise. He and his bunch see to it we don't lose no stock."

"Yes, they're great on rounding up, and so far they have never committed any murders—that can be proved against them," put in Carmena, with an ironical smile. "Just the same, it wasn't their fault they didn't get Jack. Do you wonder he won't have them in on this lost-lode deal? Either he plays a lone hand, or we run Cochise out of the country."

"My offer is ten thousand in cash," said Lennon. "The copper company pays me twice that and——"

"Copper, huh? What's a copper company got to do with a gold lode?" demanded Slade.

"But Jack says the lost lode is copper, not gold," said Carmena. "Maybe we've been mistaken all these years. Sim told Jack it was a copper mine, and Sim ought to know."

Lennon caught the significant glance that the girl covertly gave to Slade. He was seized with black doubt whether her scheming was against Slade or with Slade against himself. Yet he continued to play to her lead.

"Yes, the discoverer of the mine should know whether it was gold or copper."

After some argument, Slade finally admitted that the old rumour about Cripple Sim's fabulously rich lost gold mine might be an "exaggeration." With much hemming and hawing, he then agreed that if the lost mine were rediscovered he would accept ten thousand dollars and rid Dead Hole of Cochise.

"We might git up a company our own selves, Lennon, but we couldn't bring in any railroad to develop a *copper* mine," he repeated what Carmena had already remarked. "Take what you can git and be thankful, is my motto. Soon's we find that mine, you can count on me to run Cochise clean out of the country."

Carmena drew in a deep quavering breath.

"That's such a relief, Mr. Slade! I've been so afraid for Elsie. I know that Cochise figures on making off with her at the first chance."

"He does, does he?" growled the trader. "Well, then, you're going to stick here and see he don't git no chance, while I go with our new pard. How's that, Lennon?"

"Good enough," agreed Lennon.

"Elsie and I will hunt up some tools," said Carmena and she hurried her foster-sister out into the store-rooms before Slade could voice an objection.

He at once began to give Lennon a pessimistic account of the small profits and many risks and hardships of a trader's life in this arid land of mesas and cañons. As for the cattle business, there was more work than money in it, what with mountain lions, wolves, and brand-blotters.

Lennon checked himself on the point of asking the meaning of the strange term. He recalled that Elsie had said something about mavericking and brand-blotting by the Apaches. Unless Farley and the girls were conniving with Cochise, the Indian could not be carrying on any work in the Hole unknown to Slade, and he had just intimated that brand-blotting was some kind of harmful or criminal action.

CHAPTER XIII

THE BLOSSOMING

At the supper table Slade returned to his jovial praises of Elsie as a cook. Under his bold admiring gaze the girl blushed much and ate little. Lennon kept his head with difficulty. To sit quiet and feign indifference required all his self-control.

Farley had been brought in by Carmena. Toward the end of the meal Slade began to browbeat the abject, liquor-poisoned man. Lennon had no pity to spare for his broken-spirited host, but his compassion for Elsie and his growing anger against Slade soon received fresh stimulation.

The trader made blunt demand that Farley should agree to give Elsie to him in marriage—Indian marriage. After considerable bullyragging, Farley weakly gave way. Carmena continued strongly to protest, but her plea was only for a legal marriage.

Slade contended that one kind of marriage was as good as another. But he finally said he would wait and take Elsie out to where they could get a licence and a minister. This would be immediately after the relocation of the mine and the driving off of Cochise.

Lennon was more than satisfied over the final agreement. Once rid of Cochise and out of the Hole with Slade and Elsie, he felt certain of his ability to save the girl from a forced marriage. In keeping with his assumed indifference to the affair he changed the subject by inquiring when the start for Triple Butte would be made.

"Daybreak," muttered Slade, and he fixed an intent gaze upon Elsie. "I'll be ready by then. I'll bunk with you to-night, dad. Come in and we'll check up on business accounts."

The moment the two older men left the living room Elsie burst into tears and began piteously imploring Lennon and Carmena to save her. Carmena clapped a hand over the quivering lips of the terrified girl and rushed her out of hearing of Slade.

At the same time Lennon stepped out after the trader to keep him from turning back. The massive bulk of Slade shadowed the light of the candle that Farley was carrying into a second of the inner rooms.

The trader looked back, but failed to see Lennon, who had stepped to one side of the living-room doorway. The bull voice rumbled in what was evidently intended for a murmur:—

"Well, dad, I guess Carmena ain't such a fool as you might expect from her being your gal. She sure got that tenderfoot roped mighty slick. Just wait and watch me hogtie the cripple. All I got to do is let him lead me to that there gold mine. Then I figger he's apt to git lost. Mebbe he believes that bunk about the lode being copper, and mebbe he don't. The point is, I git the mine, and he——"

The rest of the prediction was lost to Lennon. He went back into the living room and pulled his arm out of the sling to test his grip on Farley's short-barrelled revolver. His wounded hand had almost regained its full strength. As he replaced the arm in the sling Elsie peeped timidly into the room. She saw that he was alone and darted out to clasp his arm.

"Oh, Jack, dear Jack!" she panted. "You—you won't let Slade take me either, will you? You promised about Cochise. But Carmena—she says Slade—that maybe I'll have to marry him—unless you have heaps of grit. He's no better than Cochise. But at least he's not an Indian, Mena says."

Lennon patted the yellow locks of the girl's back-flung head.

"Never fear, Blossom. We will take care of you. Where is Carmena?"

"She's still looking for dad's old pick for you. We found the pan and spade. Mena says dad stumbled into Dead Hole 'cause he was looking for that lost gold mine of Cripple Sim's you're after. Then he went into stock."

"Was he—did he—er—brand-blot before Slade came?"

"Oh, no. Slade and Cochise started the business. Cochise rounds up the hosses and cattle when Slade tells him of a good chance, and the 'Paches rustle 'em and bring 'em into the Hole and make the brands over, and then they run 'em out to Hell Cañon, and Slade sells 'em under his other name. Dad's share is for the feed and the use of the Hole."

For the first time Lennon's suspicions of the Dead Hole partners were clarified and confirmed. The gang were not only moonshiners but horse and cattle thieves. Slade was the ringleader and brains of the gang, while Cochise and his followers were the crafty and probably murderous rustlers and brand-blotters.

Farley was a more or less willing accomplice. He may have been forced into the criminal partnership, but now refused to attempt an escape. Rather than give up his share of the loot, he chose to risk the great danger to his little foster-daughter.

The realisation that Slade was even more of a criminal than the moonshining and boot-legging had indicated, quickened Lennon's compassion for the girl. She was so artless and clinging and helpless——

He put his free arm about her quivering shoulders. In a twinkling her hands were clasped about his neck and she was smiling up into his face in naïve delight.

"Dear, dear Jack!" she whispered. "You're just awful nice to me. I believe, really and truly, I love you even more than Mena."

The girl was too childlike in mind to realise the meaning of her sweet emotion. Lennon made allowance for her innocence, but her allusion to Carmena startled him, though the words were ambiguous. Elsie may only have meant that she loved him more than she loved Carmena—not that she loved him more than Carmena loved him.

The girl's upturned piquant face was more than tempting. Its flowerlike delicacy and prettiness and the glow in her wide blue eyes were more than he could withstand. He bent down and pressed a kiss upon her half-parted lips.

"You darling!" he said. "You adorable little Blossom!"

She sought shyly to draw away from him. He held her fast. The kiss had put an end to his last doubt.

"Wait, dear, do not try to get away from me," he commanded. "I am going to keep you—always. Until I get you out of here—safe from Slade and Cochise—I shall be just your Brother Jack. But I love you, dear, and when we reach a town we shall be married."

"O-o-oh! Then I'll belong to you—I'll be your woman?"

"You will be my darling little wife. I will be good to you and take care of you—always."

"Oh, you dear, nice Jack! And Mena—she'll go along too and help take care of me and love us? Won't she? You know I couldn't ever bear to go away and leave Mena."

Along with his amusement over the child's naïve suggestion Lennon was conscious of an odd thrill. He remembered the look in Carmena's dark eyes when she saved him from the poison of the Gila monster and at the end of their desperate flight across the Basin. They had risked death together—and she was not a child.

But close upon these pleasantly disquieting remembrances of the older girl came the harsh afterthought of his suspicions against her. He bent to kiss Elsie with almost aggressive fervour.

From the doorway behind him came a stifled cry that might have been a sob. He held fast to Elsie and glanced over his shoulder. Carmena was standing in the doorway, with her head bent. As Lennon looked, she straightened and came toward him, cold-eyed and determined.

"What are you doing, Jack Lennon?" she demanded. "I trusted you. I believed that you were not the kind to take advantage of Blossom. I thought you——"

Elsie struggled free from Lennon to fling her arms about her foster-sister.

"Oh, Mena, please, please don't be cross with Jack! I love him so, and—and he loves me back!"

Lennon met Carmena's hard stare with a gaze no less cool and resolute.

"Elsie is to be my wife," he declared. "I shall marry her as soon as possible."

"Your wife? Marry her? You mean that?"

"Yes."

Carmena's fixed gaze wavered and sank. But almost immediately she looked up again, her eyes lustrous with soft radiance.

"She is very precious to me, Jack. She deserves to be safe and happy all the rest of her life."

Before Lennon could reply, the girl gently freed herself from Elsie and turned to go.

"Pardon me—one moment, Miss Farley," appealed Lennon. "There is something I must tell you. I happened to overhear Slade speak to your father. He insists that the lost mine is a gold lode and proposes to take possession when I have led him to it."

The girl smiled a bit mockingly.

"What else could you expect?" she asked. "If he hadn't believed it a gold lode he wouldn't have made the deal with you. When you show him the copper, it will be up to you to hold him to his bargain. We have no chance unless he splits with Cochise."

"Why not persuade your father to slip out of the Hole with us—start immediately? The Apaches have gone off. I'll engage to tie up Slade. We would have an all-night lead."

"No," refused Carmena. "The Hole belongs to dad. He will not leave it. Besides, there are at least three Apaches on watch in Hell Cañon."

Lennon realised the uselessness of arguing with the girl. If, as he still half suspected, she was scheming with Slade, the less said about her father's share in the stock stealing the better.

"Very well," he acquiesced. "I shall try to manage Slade. If he is unreasonable, I will do as I think best."

"So will I," replied Carmena, her eyes sombre. "Come on, Blossom. Slade said he would leave at daybreak."

She abruptly turned away, and made no remonstrance when Elsie offered her lips to Lennon for a good-night kiss.

Left alone, he sat down in one of the big chairs and fell to planning how, after the relocation of the copper lode, he would make his escape. He would bring a sheriff's posse to arrest Slade and his fellow criminals. Elsie would then be free from all danger, and the mine could be developed.

CHAPTER XIV

THE PROWLER

From his plans for the breaking up of the criminal gang Lennon's thoughts drifted into pleasant reveries about his adorable little wife-to-be. Drowsiness crept upon him. When the lone candle on the table burned down, flickered, and went out, he was too sound asleep to waken. But his sleep was troubled with uneasy dreams.

In the midst of a nightmare that lived over his flight from the bronchos across the desert, he was roused with a start to alert wakefulness. Some heavy-breathing creature was stealthily shuffling about in the black night of the unlighted room. A thump, followed by a muttered curse, betrayed the identity of the prowler.

With utmost caution Lennon slipped his arm from the sling, drew Farley's revolver, and barricaded himself behind the chair. Slade shuffled nearer—so near that his whisky-poisoned breath struck in Lennon's face. Again came a thud and a curse. The prowler had stubbed his stockinged toe against a chair leg.

Lennon aimed the revolver toward the sound, in expectation of an upflaring match. Discovery would mean instant attack by the huge-framed scoundrel. Of that he had no doubt. Slade would not be groping about in the dark in this stealthy manner unless intent upon an evil purpose.

But no match flamed. The shuffling feet moved past Lennon to the wall and along the wall toward the doorway that opened upon the short passage to the girl's room. No door barred the passage at either end. The purpose of the prowler was now unmistakable.

For the second time Lennon had cause to be thankful that he had not changed to his boots. His moccasined feet noiselessly felt their way after the heavy-footed shuffler. Slade was already through the doorway into the passage. Lennon followed. The finger-tips of his outgroping left hand touched the back of the prowler.

A startled grunt warned Lennon to dodge back a step and crouch. A heavier grunt told him of a violent out-clutch or blow, which, meeting only empty air, had wrenched the breath from the big body of the striker.

Again Lennon pointed his revolver—and again the expected match failed to crackle and flare. Slade stood silent for several seconds, holding his breath. But Lennon was no less still. The tense listener expelled his pent-up breath in a grunt of disgust.

"Huh! Must 'a' been the tizwin. Fools a man."

Lennon straightened up and again groped with his hand as he heard Slade shuffle on along the passage. There was need of utmost caution. He did not wish to shoot. But he knew that the grip of Slade's thick arms would be as dangerous as the hug of a grizzly.

This time the outstretched finger-tips barely grazed the prowler's shirt. Lennon took a quick step forward, clutched the back of Slade's neck as a guide for his blow, and struck him with the butt of the revolver under the right ear. The massive body of the trader slumped down as if hit by a sledge.

The weight of the falling man dragged Lennon after. But the utter limpness of the body under him stayed his hand from a second blow. He thrust the revolver back into his pocket and grasped Slade under the armpits. The body remained flaccid even when dragged out of the passage.

Lennon struck a match and bent low over the ghastly face of the man he had felled. The scoundrel was only stunned. Lennon's look of anxiety gave place to a stern smile. Though certain of the man's guilty intentions, he could not put an end to him.

He again grasped the unconscious man and dragged him across the living room and out beside the crane of the hoist. A loop of the rope-end about the clumsy ankles, and two or three turns of the windlass lifted the inert body so that it dangled head downward.

To swing the crane out through the opening and lower away on the rope was the easiest part of the undertaking. Lennon reversed the crank of the windlass, around and around, with purposeful deliberation. He hoped that Slade would recover consciousness while still swinging in mid-air. There was grim pleasure in the thought of how the scoundrel would first become aware of the dim starlit precipice beside him and then would rouse to the shame and danger of his hanging.

When the rope was rather less than half unwound from the windlass Lennon paused to shift his grip on the crank. At the same moment a candle that had been masked by a blanket glowed out at him from the doorway of the living room. The muzzle of a small revolver thrust forward above the candle.

"Hands up—quick—or I'll shoot," threatened a vibrant, low-pitched voice.

The menace was very real. Most men would have obeyed the command and let Slade drop to a head-foremost smash on the cliff foot. Lennon cried back at the threatener without releasing his hold on the windlass:—

"Pardon me, Miss Farley—I——"

"You!" Holding up the candle, Carmena stepped in to peer about the big anteroom. "Way you were stooped over I mistook you for—— Almost fired. What you doing?"

The query was charged with suspicion. Lennon thrust in the crank peg, folded his arms, and leaned against the windlass.

"I met your father's partner wandering about, and thought he needed an airing."

The girl stared from the windlass out along the taut rope.

"You don't mean——"

"Yes, dangling head down."

"Dead?"

"Merely knocked out—worse luck! But one way of restoring consciousness is to raise the feet above the head. He may wake up any moment and appreciate the situation."

"Any moment?" cried Carmena. She half-dropped her candlestick on the stone floor and sprang to the windlass. "Quick! We must haul him up before he comes to."

Lennon did not budge.

"No, Miss Farley. That beast shall not again set foot in this place until Elsie is safe away."

The girl's eyes widened. Her hand clutched and drew close across her rounded bosom the folds of the blanket that she had flung about her shoulders to cover her nightgown. Her face paled and as quickly flushed scarlet.

"I thought I heard sounds in the passage, but the rug curtain muffled them," she murmured. "Was he trying to—to ____"

"Had been drinking," replied Lennon. "My regret now is that the blow did not kill him."

"And leave us no chance against Cochise? He's the only living creature that Cochise fears. Can't you see we must make believe—must keep up with him until we are rid of the Apaches? Bad as he is, he's a white man. Cochise is a—"

devil! When he tired of Blossom, he'd give her to his men."

Convinced against his will, Lennon began to wind in on the windlass. Carmena went to the edge of the cliff. When the body of Slade came spinning and swinging up out of the gloom she held down the light and peered anxiously at the knot that held the rope about his thick ankles. It showed no signs of slipping. His down-hung head wobbled up into the flickering light of the candle. The face was purple; the bloodshot eyes were glazed.

Carmena swung in the crane and freed the rope the moment Lennon eased off. Slade was wheezing as if almost suffocated. At Carmena's urging, Lennon helped her drag the stupefied man back into the living room. The girl ran to fetch a bowl of water.

"Loosen your clothes," she whispered in Lennon's ear. "Hide your moccasins—look as if you'd just jumped out of bed—get your arm back in the sling. That's it. Now lift his head and shoulders up against this chair."

As Lennon raised the flaccid upper body, Carmena began to dash water into the purple face. The blotched skin gradually lightened to its natural red. The pale eyes lost their fishy glaze. They stared dazedly up into the deeply concerned face of Carmena. She flung the last cupful of water from the bowl. Slade roused enough to mumble virulent curses.

"Oh!" exclaimed Carmena, in a tone of sympathetic relief. "He's not dead—he's coming to. Oh, Mr. Slade, what happened? Did you fall against the table? Or was it a fit? You looked terribly black in the face, as if you'd had a fit. That's why I used the water. Jack held you up to drain the blood out of your head."

Slade scowled at his helpers. Lennon frowned back at him but followed up the girl's lead.

"Once saw a man taken with apoplexy—stroke of paralysis, you know. Not paralysed, are you? Try lifting your arms and legs?"

Slade glowered morosely, but caught the look of concern in Carmena's face and stiffened with sudden alarm. She watched with an intent scrutiny as he gingerly lifted one limb after another.

"Bunk!" he growled. "I ain't paralysed. Needn't think you can con me."

"Wait—your face!" warned the girl. "It looked queer. Try smiling."

"No, it's all right now," said Lennon. "Sometimes these first strokes of apoplexy paralyse only for a few moments."

Carmena changed her look of sympathy to one of sharp reproof.

"I don't think it's that at all. You've just been working on our sympathies, Mr. Slade. Own up now. You took too much tizwin to know what you were about. You came in here for a drink of water and fell against the table corner."

The glaring eyes of the trader narrowed in a look of crafty calculation. Lennon followed the man's thoughts by his expression. The effects of the moonshine whisky, of the blow under his ear, and of the suffocation had not yet passed. They had left him lax and shaken and rather muddled. He had been given his fill for one night. Carmena's reproaches disarmed his suspicion that she and Lennon knew what he had been about. His guilty anger at the two subsided into derision of their blindness.

"Well, what if I did git tanked up?" he growled. "It's my tizwin as much as dad's, ain't it? I'm going back to bed to sleep it off."

Lennon took the candle from Carmena.

"Permit me to carry the light for you, Slade. Your hand is too unsteady. I'm not so sure about Miss Farley's explanation of your mishap. I still believe you had a stroke—not as heavy a stroke as it might have been—not fatal, you know, but heavy enough to put you down and out."

Slade was staggering to his feet. Lennon followed him to the room where Farley lay sprawled in drunken slumber beside an empty whisky jug. As soon as Slade had dropped upon the bed Lennon took the candle back to the living room. Carmena had gone.

He gathered up an armful of Navaho rugs and moved one of the heavy chairs around to the doorway of the passage into the girl's room.

CHAPTER XV

CROOKED WAYS

At gray dawn Elsie started to go out into the living room. Midway of the dusky passage her foot struck against a roundish object. She bent down to look. A dim form was lying in the passage, with feet against the chair that blocked the outer doorway.

The girl's half shriek brought Lennon up at a bound, his revolver out.

"Who's there?" he demanded.

"Oh—oh, Jack!" the girl sobbed her relief.

He clasped her to him protectingly.

"All right, sweetheart—all right," he said soothingly. "You see, I have been here on watch. Slade—— But that is past. I see light outside. He will soon be leaving with me."

Elsie clutched him, in renewed panic.

"But I'm afraid! I don't want you to leave me, Jack. You'll never, never come back! I want to go along, too. If you leave me, I'm awful afraid Cochise'll catch me!"

"You dear little frightened Blossom! But I cannot take you now. You must stay with Carmena. She will keep you up here, safe from Cochise. I will come back—never fear. I will come back and take you away."

"Take me—away from Dead Hole? Oh, how wonderful! Mena says I came from outside, where are all the book things and people—like you. I can't remember, but I'll just love to go out and see the wide world with you—and Mena—and dad. Only dad doesn't want to leave the Hole at all."

"You shall go with me out of this place," replied Lennon. "I will bring the sheriff and have him arrest every member of this band of outlaws."

The rug curtains of the inner room flung apart. Carmena sprang out into the passage. She drew her foster-sister away from Lennon with a grasp as resolute as it was gentle.

"Go and start breakfast, Blossom," she directed. "The sooner they leave the better."

Elsie darted to the doorway and disappeared. Lennon started after her. He was checked by a low-spoken command from Carmena:—

"Stop. I want a show-down from you, Jack Lennon. I heard what you said about the sheriff. Good thing Slade wasn't in earshot. You'd have a bullet in you by now. You may yet. What are you aiming to do?"

"You say you heard me," said Lennon. "I spoke clearly."

"Do you count dad in the gang?"

"Don't you?"

In the brightening light of red dawn Lennon saw the girl's eyes cloud with anguish. At sight of her grief and suffering a wave of compassion surged up within him. The flood overwhelmed and submerged all his prejudice against her.

He started to express his pity and sympathy—only to be checked before the words could leave his lips. The girl's eyes were ablaze. Her mouth straightened in resolute lines.

"All right, Mr. Lennon," she said. "You've shown your hand. Here's mine: You'll give your pledge to leave the sheriff out of this deal, or you'll never reach the trail."

"Very kind of you, indeed, to warn me, Miss Farley. I presume you will tell Slade and Cochise to be ready if I attempt to escape."

Though the girl's lips remained firm, her eyes again dilated with anguish. She turned about and groped her way into the inner room. Lennon felt an odd mingling of shame and regret, of anger and an emotion that went far beyond sympathy.

Elsie soon came with a bowl of coffee, which Carmena had sent for Lennon to give to Slade. There was no need of words to make clear her wish to be rid of the visitors. Lennon found Slade lying as torpid as Farley. But the hot coffee roused him to morose alertness.

Breakfast was served by Carmena, though her excuse for the absence of Elsie failed to satisfy the surly tempered trader. The younger girl did not appear until Slade dropped the rope ladder and went scrambling down the cliff face. Carmena was already lowering Lennon's outfit to the trader's Navaho followers, who had come at dawn.

With a last word to Elsie to be brave but careful until his return, Lennon gently freed himself from her clinging embrace, put his arm back in the sling, and stepped into the loop of the hoist rope. The girls lowered him to the cliff foot.

The Navahos, who were dressed as Mexicans, already had the prospecting outfit lashed on a pack horse. At Lennon's request, Slade derisively ordered one of them to hold the tenderfoot's pony, Lennon nursed his arm and climbed into his saddle with a show of difficulty. The more awkward and disabled he could make himself appear to his travelling companions the better would be his chances later.

Slade put spurs to his big horse and galloped off down the valley, leaving Lennon to trail behind with the Navahos. The pace did not slacken until the party raced down into the lower cañon and around a double turn to the drop in the bed.

On the brink of the cliff was set a crane similar in design to the one at the cliff house but much larger. Hauled back, it was hidden from below by a corner of rock. Swung out, its block and tackle, operated by a one-pony windlass, could hoist or lower a two-pony load in the light basket cage woven of wire and withes. One of the three Apache guards hitched his pony to the windlass.

Slade went down first, with his horse and Lennon and one of the Apaches. Before the horse was led through the cage door out upon the smooth ledges at the foot of the cliff the Apache fastened thick pads of rawhide upon his hoofs. This was also done for the ponies as they swung down, two by two, in the cage.

Lennon had noted the arrangement and working of the crane and hoist with the eye of an engineer. When he turned his attention to the hoof pads, Slade gratuitously explained that the rawhide was needed to keep the horses from slipping on the ledges of the cliff. Lennon took this with a careless nod.

He had already inferred the true reason for the practice. The ledges were neither slippery nor steep. But scratches made by ironshod hoofs on the rocks might have led expert trackers to suspect the hoisting of stolen stock up the cliff.

Down where the bed was of loose stones and gravel a rough trail from the lower cañon twisted up a side gorge. Pursuers trailing a bunch of stolen cattle or horses would, of course, turn up the gorge. A glance or two at the sheer thirty-foot wall of the upstep in the bed of the main cañon would convince the most astute of cowboys that not even a puma could go up that way.

At the edge of the trail the Apache took off the hoof-pads and returned to the cage. He was being hoisted up the cliff when Lennon loped after Slade down-trail around a sharp bend in the cañon.

A hard ride down the cañon for five miles or more, then up a steep break and across cedar-dotted mesas, brought the party out to the Moqui trail shortly after mid-morning. Lennon frowned at the clear-marked trail.

His plans as first made had been to cut and run for the railway the moment he should reach the main trail. But he had discovered that his pony was the slowest of the mounts and that the four Navahos always kept behind him. He could neither drop to the rear nor race ahead of Slade's big American thoroughbred.

Slade turned to the right, away from the railway, and pushed the pace for another hour. The trail led through a rather wide valley. Near the head they came to a well-watered oasis of corn and bean fields. Across from the trail stood an abandoned Moqui pueblo.

The ruins had been sufficiently restored to house Slade's trading establishment and the score or more families of his Navaho cowpunchers. The small store-room was crowded with bales and boxes, but Lennon noticed that behind the front piles many of the boxes were empty. This legitimate business was more or less of a sham to cover the whisky running.

Slade's quarters in a half-detached group of stone rooms were somewhat incongruously furnished. A rather handsome but sad-eyed young Indian woman in a dirty blue wrapper covertly "dished up" a noon meal for her master and Lennon on the fly-covered table.

The greasy warmed-over chile con carne, the half-cooked tortillas and the muddy coffee accounted for Slade's praises of Elsie as a cook. The Indian girl slunk and cowered under his curses. Whenever she passed him she cringed as if expectant of a blow. Lennon was doubly relieved when Slade's impatience to be off on the search for the lost lode hurried him out into the clean open air.

The horses had been fed and watered and were waiting near the spring, beside a young peach tree. Slade paused to bellow guttural commands at a Navaho shepherd who was driving a small flock down the valley.

Lennon hastened ahead toward the spring, eager to seize his opportunity. He had only to secure his rifle, leap on Slade's big thoroughbred, and race away down the back trail. The American horse could easily outrun the Indian ponies. Once beyond rifle range of the pueblo his escape would be certain.

The horses were soon only a few steps away.

Lennon nerved himself for the dash. From behind a scraggly bunch of scrub that appeared too thin to screen even a coyote rose all four of Slade's personal retainers. Though they were as stolid and silent as wooden Indians, each had his rifle in hand. Lennon thought he caught a glitter of suspicion in their covert glances.

Bitter as was his disappointment, he was quick to make the best of the situation. A sharp command and jerk of his thumb toward Slade led them to believe he had come for them at the order of their master.

Slade hailed the tenderfoot with bluff cordiality when the mounted party loped up the slope to him.

"Gitting het up, huh? You act like an old-timer on a gold stampede. Never before knew a prospector to go loco over copper."

"You should bear in mind I am an engineer, not a prospector," replied Lennon. "If I am successful over this copper project and it proves to be as large as I have been led to expect, I shall have won a place well up in my profession."

Slade grunted contemptuously and spurred his horse into a gallop. Within a mile he turned off trail to cut across country. Beyond the first mesas, which were a part of the trader-cowman's cattle range, came a jumbled waste of crags and broken ridges.

On the edge of this devil's door-yard of bare rocks and no less dry and sterile ravines Slade gave over the lead to the oldest of his Navahos. A white man could have found his way only by blind chance through the maze of twisted clefts that seamed the unscalable cliffs and crags.

Lennon soon lost all sense of direction. He realised that he could not hope to find his way out of these worst of bad lands without a guide. He must put off his plans to escape until the return to the trail. He began to surmise that Cripple Sim's inability to relocate the lost lode may not have been due altogether to his maiming by Apache arrows.

But this jagged waste that had kept the secret of the mine hidden for a generation would offer an impassable barrier to any railway. Unless an easier route could be found, the entire project was already proved hopeless. Even a vein of solid copper could not be worked at a profit if the metal had to be packed out on burros.

Yet there remained the chance of another route to the lode; and Lennon was not minded to confide his disappointment to Slade. He spurred his pony to keep pace with the others. The sooner the mine was relocated and the party back at the trail, the sooner he could make his attempt to escape. After Elsie had been freed from her dangerous prison in Dead Hole he could take time to search for a feasible route to the mine.

Toward sundown the old Navaho led the party clear of the shattered rock maze and up the side of a small mesa. From the table top Lennon saw the mighty towers of Triple Butte startlingly close ahead. Slade reined in to stare hard-eyed at the engineer.

"There's your butte," he rumbled. "Which side do we head?"

"North," replied Lennon, without a moment's hesitation.

Though he had been lost since leaving the trail, he clearly remembered all the directions given by the old prospector as to the position of the lode in relation to Triple Butte. From the top of the mesa practical railway routes appeared to offer to the east and north of the great butte.

Lennon studied the landscape until he noticed that the Navaho leader had headed south of east instead of north. Certain that his reply to Slade had been misunderstood, he spurred forward to explain that they were veering away from the lost lode.

Slade rode on without a word of acknowledgment. The presence of the Navahos made his contemptuous silence doubly galling. Lennon took it as a foretaste of what was to come and masked his chagrin. For Elsie's sake, he could not afford to quarrel with Slade at this stage of the dangerous game that must be played.

CHAPTER XVI

THE DROP

At sunset the reason for the guide's choice of route disclosed itself. The party came to a group of small springs.

Lennon's throat had been parched for the last two hours. He spurred his jaded pony forward to the mesquite bushes where the Navahos were unsaddling, and slipped off to dip his empty canteen in the largest spring.

The guide muttered gutturally to Slade, who was staring up narrow-eyed at the broken shoulder of Triple Butte. He

wrenched himself about to scowl at Lennon. The engineer had straightened and was raising the half-filled canteen to drink.

"Hey, you!" bellowed Slade. "Drop that!"

The bullying command was more than Lennon could endure. He waved the canteen ironically at the trader, turned half-away, and put the opening to his mouth. Slade whipped out his revolver and fired. The canteen flew out of Lennon's hand and thumped down upon the stone beside the spring.

For a moment Lennon was so astonished that he stood motionless, staring down at the canteen. The water gushed and gurgled through the holes, pierced through the middle of the vessel by the heavy bullet.

The first coherent thought of the engineer was that Slade had intended to murder him. He put his hand to the pocket that held Farley's revolver, and turned to face Slade. The trader's weapon was already back in its holster. His stained teeth showed in a wide grin.

"May I ask what you mean by shooting at me?" demanded Lennon.

Slade's mirth burst out in a roar of laughter.

"Shooting at you—shooting *now*?" he jibed when he could speak. "You must figger I'm plumb loco. Any fool ought to know anybody would hold off till you located the mine. Even supposing I was going to plant you, I'd wait, wouldn't I, huh?"

Lennon saw the point even clearer than the trader intended. He was supposed to take the piece of grim humour as a reassurance. The derisive banter was an unintentional notification that he could expect to be murdered immediately after the finding of the lost lode. But until then he must continue to play the dupe.

"I must confess I do not fancy your Western jokes," he said. "You have spoiled a perfectly good canteen."

"Happens you're worth more to me than it; and you was dead set on filling up with that poison water," rejoined Slade.

"Poison?"

The old Navaho was drinking from the second spring, less than two paces away from the first. Lennon pointed at him.

"Sure," said Slade. "It's not the only case I know of finding good water 'longside arsenic, in a copper district."

The actions of the Indians bore out the truth of their master's assertion, or at least proved that they believed the first spring poisonous. The horses were picketed well away from it and from the joint rill of the two springs, which trickled down slope a few yards before seeping away among the stones.

The camp supper of bacon and flapjacks was soon followed by the spreading of blankets on the nearest stretches of sand. The Navahos went off to one side. Slade ordered Lennon to keep near him and carefully encircled their bedding-down place with the coils of a horsehair lariat.

The purpose of the lariat became apparent to Lennon when he was roused by the chill of dawn. He saw one of the Navahos rake out of the embers of the evening's fire a torpid tarantula as big as his hand.

Lennon thought of Elsie's daintiness and soft ways. The girl was utterly out of keeping with this fierce land of desolation and thirst, of thorns and poison springs, of venomous reptiles and insects, of ferocious beasts and men. She did not belong and never would. She was a garden flower.

Carmena was different. Her rich bloom was more like the flowers of the desert growths—the thorn-guarded yucca

and needled cactus. There was nothing soft and cuddly about *her*.

At the realisation of where his thoughts were drifting, Lennon wrenched his mental focus back to Elsie. What concern could the fate of Carmena be to him? She belonged with her drunken, criminal father in Dead Hole. All thought and effort must be centred on the rescue of Elsie.

After a hasty meal of flapjacks, bacon, and coffee, the party started out to work north around Triple Butte. The country was now unknown ground even to the old Navaho guide. But he showed great craft in puzzling out the directions given to him.

An inner pocket hid the map that Lennon had brought from the East. He took care that Slade and the Navahos thought he was going by memory. Had he told of the map at any time after reaching Dead Hole he now felt certain that he never would have lived to get this near the mine. Slade would have taken the map and killed him out of hand. So at least Lennon believed.

Once the party rounded upon the northern slopes of Triple Butte, the points described on the map became easily recognisable. All that remained to do was to ride around a spur ridge and slant into the valley that headed up between the western and central towers of the great butte. Here the searchers came upon trees and grass and running water. Farther up stood a small cabin, near a spring that had been blasted out and rimmed with rock to form a convenient basin.

Lennon spurred forward beside Slade.

"Promising. What?" he remarked.

"Not what, but where?" growled the trader. "Hold on—that looks like an old burro trail."

"Yes. Up first ravine toward left edge of middle butte, half a mile to lode," Lennon quoted the last directions that he had read on the map.

Slade signed for the Navahos to wait at the spring. A brutal jab of the spurs sent his horse bounding off at top speed. Lennon's pony was left behind until the leader wheeled into the first ravine and came up against a steep slide of loose rock. To force even the nimblest of mounts to attempt such an ascent would have meant risking a bad fall.

As Lennon loped his pony into the ravine the trader swore blasphemously and swung out of his saddle to scramble up the slide. Great as was his strength, it was offset by the fact that his weight tended to bring the loose stones sliding down at every step. Lennon was not only lighter and more agile but had the advantage of better wind.

He was but a few steps below when Slade reached the head of the slide. Close above them the ascent was barred by high ledges that dropped off from the upper part of the ravine. Slade stared savagely at the dull reddish-brown face of the ledges. The metallic surface plainly showed the use of pick and dynamite. He uttered a furious oath as he turned upon Lennon.

"You lying skunk!" he bellowed. "This ain't no gold mine!"

All the way up the slide Lennon had perceived the copper in the float rock. He was prepared for the trader's outburst. Farley's revolver lay ready in his grasp, behind the sling on his right arm.

"Have you—what do you call it?—gone loco?" he asked. "I told you distinctly my search was for a copper mine. The gold lode was your own fancy. You will now apologise for that term you used."

Had one of his Navahos made the demand, Slade could not have been more amazed. He gaped dumbfounded. Then his rage burst out again with redoubled fury. But the sight of Lennon's revolver muzzle put an abrupt end to his violent curses.

"Good enough," said Lennon. "Now my apology, if you please."

The cool politeness of the request emphasised its deadly earnestness. Lennon was keen for an excuse to shoot the big scoundrel. The look in his eye was unmistakable.

"All right," grunted Slade. "Have it your own way. I back up."

"You apologise?"

"Sure. Even a tenderfoot is entitled to that—when he gits the drop on you."

"Quite true," agreed Lennon, and he thrust the revolver into his pocket. "Now, with regard to the lode, our next step will be——"

"What'd you say you was to git from your copper company?" broke in Slade, suddenly straight-eyed and cordial.

"Twenty thousand bonus for relocating the lode, and——"

"You can draw on 'em for it?"

"For half, at least. You shall have your ten thousand as soon as you rid the Farleys of Cochise and his gang. That was the agreement."

The trader thwacked his beefy hand down on Lennon's shoulder.

"That's a go, pard. I own up honest I figgered your talk of copper was all bunk. But I aim to stand by my bargains. Only you're sure now this here lode ain't no blind, are you? You ain't got that gold mine, too, hiding out hereabouts?"

"I give you my word, Slade, this is the only mine or lode of which I know."

Slade's look was more profane than a spoken curse.

"Huh—another El Dorado lie roped and branded. Only thing to do is to go after that bonus of yours."

"I must take samples and measurements for my report," said Lennon. "The company does not pay for the guesses of its engineers."

None too willingly Slade took the end of the small steel-ribbon engineer's tape that was held out to him. Lennon measured the width of the copper ledges, noted the trend and dip of the immense lode, and calculated its thickness where exposed. Samples were then gathered.

Upon the return down the slide the trader suddenly paused to point at the skull of a half-buried human skeleton.

"Huh," he grunted. "Cripple Sim didn't have no pard. But look at the pick—another prospector. Must 'a' stumbled on the mine. Lots of good it done him. See that hole? His pard plugged him through the head, streaked out, got lost, died. That's how I figger it."

"Poor chap!" Lennon murmured his pity for the murdered man, and he lingered to cover over the skeleton with a pile of loose stones.

At the spring he found the Indians cooking another round of flapjacks, bacon, and coffee. After the meal the party waited through the heat of midday while the horses cropped the grass along the banks of the spring rill.

At first there seemed nothing of interest about the old cabin. The thatch had half blown off; the adobe-plastered stone fireplace and chimney had tumbled down, and sand had drifted in past the broken wattle door. But when Lennon went in to take advantage of the patch of shade that was offered, he was shocked to find the skeleton of a woman huddled in the far corner.

Summoned by his call, Slade eyed the skeleton with callous indifference.

"Well, what you kicking up such a fuss about?" he growled. "Mebbe it's a squaw—mebbe a white woman. What's the difference? Been dead eight or ten years, by the look of things. Must 'a' got hers same time as the man. We're lucky they didn't git our mine."

The start back was made so late that the party did not reach the arsenic spring until dusk. Lennon had convinced himself that Slade planned to return to Dead Hole and at least make a pretence of earning the ten thousand dollars.

His own scheme was to seize Slade's horse and make a run for the railway. But first he must wait to be guided back through the devil's door-yard of crags and clefts.

He fell asleep with his hand upon the butt of his revolver and the revolver under his body. He awoke at dawn to find his wrists lashed together. One of the Navahos stood on guard beside him. The revolver was gone. Slade and the others were already eating.

No food was brought to Lennon. But after he had been roughly tossed into his saddle by the Navahos, Slade brought a drink of water from the arsenic spring and offered it with mock hospitality.

"It's a dry ride," he urged. "Take a good swaller, son. It'll keep you from gitting thirsty."

Lennon looked at him steady-eyed.

"May I ask what you expect to gain by this, Slade?"

"Gain?—me?" The trader stared back no less unwaveringly. "I just done it to save you gitting in trouble. You're too careless—way you handle a gun. Might hurt somebody one of these here days. Anyhow, this'll help you think things over. *Sabe?*"

The poison water splashed down upon the dry rocks. Slade mounted, to ride off after the guide. The other Navahos lashed Lennon to his saddle and drove his pony before them, along with the pack horse.

Though the old Navaho found a rather shorter way out through the jumble maze of the bad lands, Lennon's mouth and throat were dust dry and his tongue swollen before the party reached the trail.

The thirst torture continued until the arrival at the pueblo. There Slade at last gave drink to his prisoner and disclosed his purpose, with a pretence of indignation.

"You ought to be strung up for trying to shoot me, Lennon. But I'm an easy-going man—easy and forgiving. You only got to make out your report and send for that twenty thousand. When it comes on, I'll let you go."

"Very kind of you, I'm sure," replied Lennon, after he had drained the last drop of water from the jar. "However, I am in no hurry to make my report. I shall send it on and draw your half of the money—after you have kept your bargain with regard to Cochise."

Slade deliberately drew his revolver and aimed it between Lennon's eyes.

"Just remember, your riding in the way you did was to set you to thinking," he reminded. "This ain't no joke. Guess you'll agree now to git started on that report, huh?"

Lennon smiled at the revolver and the still more menacing steel-white eyes that glared at him along the barrel.

"Is it not time you set to thinking yourself, Slade?" he suggested. "Alive, I am worth ten thousand dollars to you, as soon as you keep your bargain. Dead, I would not be worth a penny to you or any one else."

The brick red of the trader's big face purpled and the hand that gripped the revolver shook with the excess of his rage as he jammed the weapon back into its holster.

"Wait," he said. "We'll see what Cochise can do to make you behave."

CHAPTER XVII

DEATH PLAY

Fresh horses were saddled, and Lennon was tied on as before. His last hope of escape went glimmering. He realised that he had missed his one chance when the party first reached the main trail, coming out of Dead Hole.

To have attacked even then would have been a desperate undertaking—one man against five. But he would have had at least a fighting chance. Now he was unarmed and bound, unable even to shift in the saddle.

Slade set a hot pace that fast ate up the hard miles of the return trail. But no pony could carry his massive weight as had the horse. Before the main cañon was reached, his mount began to flag. Only the most merciless of rowelling could goad the jaded beast out of a jog except for short spurts. In the descent to the cañon the pony began to stumble badly. But Slade held him up with an iron grip on the jaw-breaking Spanish ring-bit.

The smooth cañon bed was only a few yards below when, at the last sharp twist in the descent, the still air vibrated with a sibilant rattle. Slade's pony snorted and jumped sideways, leaving Lennon a clear view of the big diamond-back rattlesnake that lay coiled in the middle of the trail. The gaping jaws of the angry snake and the peculiar billowing of its body so fixed Lennon's gaze that he only half glimpsed the final stumble of Slade's pony.

Unable to keep his footing among the loose stones of the side slope, the exhausted animal plunged headlong. Slade managed to fling himself clear, but fell prone on the sharp-edged stones. His nose was skinned and one cheek gashed. He bounded up, fairly beside himself with rage, and began to kick the head of the fallen pony.

The luckless beast struggled to rise, got half to his feet, screamed, and fell over. Something about his hindquarters had been wrenched or torn or broken. Slade swore furiously and jerked out his revolver to fire repeatedly into the body of the struggling beast. The fourth shot was through the head.

At the sudden stilling of his victim's struggles, the trader's half insane rage cooled from its mad heat without losing any of its virulence. One of the Navahos had dismounted and run forward to stone the rattlesnake. Slade uttered a guttural hissing command. Instead of crushing the snake, the Indian teased it with the butt of his leather quirt.

The reptile lashed out in a vicious stroke. An instant later the Navaho straightened up with his hand gripped about the snake's neck close behind the deadly triangular head. He gave no heed to its five-foot body writhing and coiling about his bare arm.

Slade swung up into the path and looked from the new prisoner to Lennon with a glint in his pale eyes as malignant as the cold glare of the snake.

"You're one of these here science sharps," he jeered. "We'll have you test out if a Gila monster bite fixes a man against rattler poison."

"Rather a costly experiment for you if I prove not to be immune," rallied Lennon. "You must have a keen interest in science so to risk your ten thousand."

"Mebbe. It ain't much of a gamble, though. I stand to rake in twenty thousand if I win, and you ain't liable to let it go as far as the bite."

"Twenty thousand?" questioned Lennon. "If you take Cochise in on this blackmailing scheme, you will have to divide the proceeds with him. Why not keep your bargain and earn your half of the bonus without this risk of losing all?"

The trader's eyes narrowed in crafty calculation. He looked about at the snake and then down at the slaughtered horse. A sudden grin twisted his coarse mouth.

"You're right, son," he chuckled. "Why split the twenty with a dam' Apache? Ain't time now to make the Hole 'fore dark, anyhow—and here's our rawhide. We'll try out that science experiment right here."

He signed for the man with the snake to go on down into the cañon bed. The other Indians were already unsaddling the dead burro. Slade muttered a command to them in the thick indistinct intonations of their language. They at once started to flay the pony.

Slade led Lennon's mount down where the snake holder had halted beside a sangre de dragon tree. One of the Indians followed and began to cut stakes from the tree. The sap of the tree was as red as blood and so astringent that when Slade dabbed a little on his cheek the wound at once ceased to bleed.

The flayers soon came with the limp rawhide. Slade turned along the cañon to a spot where the rays of the low western sun still slanted down between the cliffs. He spoke again in the Navaho tongue. The Indians drove a stake firmly into the sand and tied the rattlesnake to it with a three-foot thong cut from the pony skin.

Lennon was now pulled from his pony and stretched out, face down, just beyond reach of the snake. Regardless of the bandage on his hand, his arms were jerked out sideways and fastened with yard-long thongs to stakes driven at right angles to a point a foot or so in front of his head. From stakes set on the opposite side of the snake several lines cut from the raw pony hide were flung across past the snake and bound to Lennon's arms at the shoulder.

By hauling on the lines from ahead, the Indians dragged Lennon an inch at a time toward the snake. He heard the sharp ominous rattle, and twisted his head up out of the sand to face the danger. The snake had coiled in front of the first stake. Though its venomous head was drawn back, the long curved fangs of the gaping jaws were less than three feet before Lennon's eyes.

Even as he looked up, the reptile shot forward straight at his face. He involuntarily blinked. In the same instant a drop of fluid splattered against his closed eyelid and he heard a soft thud in the sand close before his chin. A puff of dust whiffed up into his nostrils. It clotted the dewlike drop of liquid on his eyelid.

He opened his eyes in a wide stare. The head of the big rattlesnake lay flat on the sand, less than eight inches before his face. It had lashed out to the full length of the thong. Had the thong broken, or even had its loop about the reptile's neck slipped, the poison-dripping fangs must have lashed Lennon's face.

Intense as were the heat and dryness of the cañon bed, Lennon suddenly felt his skin bathed in clammy sweat. For the first time in his life he knew terror. He glared into the cold, malignant eyes of the snake and saw death, certain and horrible. Panic seized him. He writhed and dug his fingers and boot toes into the sand in a frantic attempt to work himself back away from the hideous forward-straining reptile.

The desperate struggle was utterly futile. The lines ahead had been stretched taut and knotted fast to their stakes. With his arms outstretched he could get very little purchase for thrusting himself back against the elastic pull of the rawhide ropes.

But he was no coward. Realisation of his helplessness brought him the resignation of despair. With resignation came a stilling of his wild panic. Frantic terror gave way to reasoning thought.

Had his torturer been Cochise, there might have been no room for hope. But Slade was a white man. He might prefer gold to the lust of torture. The death of his victim would mean the loss of the ransom money. Lennon's tense nerves and rigid muscles relaxed. He allowed his upward and backward-strained head to sink down until one cheek rested upon the hot sand. The change of position brought the top of his head very close to the snake. But he trusted to Slade's avarice to see that he escaped the fangs.

Slade and the Indians had been gloating upon the struggles and terror of their victim. At Lennon's quieting down the trader burst into a derisive laugh.

"Sort of wilted a'ready, huh?" he jeered. "Well, you're wise to take a rest while you still got time. Rawhide shrinks a whole lot when it gits to drying. Only question is how much slower the rattler's whang strap'll shorten up than your lines."

For the first time a clear perception of the real devilishness of the torture flashed into Lennon's abnormally active mind. He was to lie outstretched through the long hours, without food or water, while the shrinking rawhide dragged him with frightful slowness closer and closer to those fangs of death.

The thong of the snake also would be contracting. But it was much the shorter, and therefore would shrink less. The uncertainty of how fast and how much the different fastenings would contract doubled the torturing knowledge that the shrinking must inevitably pull him within reach of the snake.

Physical agony would then soon be added to the mental anguish of dread. For, once the snake's horny snout grazed the top of his head, he would be forced to keep his head raised, on penalty of being pierced by the fangs if he should seek to rest.

Then was when Slade no doubt felt certain that the overstrained nerves of his victim would give way. Lennon foresaw that if worse came to worst, he must agree to terms. After holding up his head as long as his strength lasted, he would be forced to yield. Why not yield at once and save all the torture?

As he asked himself the question, a grateful shadow swept down the cañon. The sun was setting. Lennon reconsidered his half-formed decision. During the night the rawhide might continue to shrink a little in the dry air, but the darkness and chill would quiet the snake. It would lie still until sunrise. Time enough to yield when yielding should become inevitable!

"If you'll pardon me, Slade," he said, "I believe I'll take a nap. Good-night. Pleasant dreams."

Slade started to curse but ended in a derisive laugh.

"Think you'll fourflush, huh? Well, we'll see after sun-up."

He turned his back on the prisoner and walked over to where the old Navaho was starting a fire for the inevitable flapjacks, bacon and coffee. The thought of food nauseated Lennon. But he would have given a thousand dollars for one of the canteens of water. Regardless of a hiss from the half-strangled snake, he laid his other cheek over on the cooling sand.

After a time Slade came with a blazing stick for torch to wish him a mocking good-night. Lennon smiled back at him with a show of confidence. The trader cursed but soon went off to roll in his blankets. This proved Lennon's surmise that the real test would not come before morning.

He lay for a long time wide-eyed, forcing himself to consider in detail every aspect of the situation and to calculate his chances. Beyond question, Slade intended to murder him. But there was first the ransom money to be secured. Would he wait for it, as in the case of the cowman whom Elsie had told about? Or might he not fall into a rage and destroy his victim as he had killed the pony?

If he could keep his temper, the probabilities were that he would prolong the torture until he had gained his end. After that might come a short respite for the victim.

Lennon next recalled all he knew about snakes and their poison glands. After that he closed his eyes and relaxed both mentally and physically. The cool of nightfall had somewhat eased his thirst and the ache from the strain of the rawhide lines on his shoulders. He dozed off to sleep.

He was so far spent and his last thought so calm that he slept soundly all night. But the chill damp of dewfall roused him at the first graying of dawn. To the shivering of his cramped body from the cold was soon added a shudder of fear and loathing. Against his head, just above the forehead, was pressed a cold hard object—the snout of the rattlesnake.

But the reptile was too torpid from the cold to strike. After a time the slight moistening of the rawhide by the dew enabled Lennon to force himself back nearly an inch. This was at sunrise. Slade came to gloat at his struggle.

"Go it," he mocked. "Wiggle while you can. Both them lines and the rattler'll git busy soon's the sun hets up a bit. Excuse me while I feed. I'll git back in time for the fun."

The breakfast fire was beside a patch of thorn-scrub several yards away. Lennon watched until his enemy had sat down on the sand opposite the Navahos. He then lifted his head.

The first rays of the sun had begun to warm the snake. At Lennon's movement it stirred sluggishly. The dull eyes began to brighten with the glare of returning life and anger. Lennon dropped his head forward.

Enraged by the feigned attack, the snake struck. The long fangs came so near their mark that Lennon felt them or the snout pass through his hair. spurts of venom from the overcharged poison glands sprayed in against his scalp.

For the second time since being pegged out Lennon felt his skin go clammy with cold sweat. His flesh crept with horror. Death had grazed him by a fraction of an inch. Another stroke might break or loosen the snake's bond. Yet he nerved himself again and shook his head from side to side.

The movement roused the snake to fury. It lashed out in stroke after stroke. But the very excess of the reptile's anger quickly exhausted its strength. The hideous head flattened down on the sand.

A sideward glance told Lennon that his deadly play had not been heeded by Slade and the Navahos. But he knew he had no tune to spare. He filled his parched mouth with sand and raised his head. The snake did not move.

Lennon blew sand into the glaring eyes of the rattler. The jaws gaped angrily. He blew all the remaining sand in between the high-curved fangs. The snake struck viciously and sank down, inert. A film closed over the sand-filled eyes.

By pulling himself forward, Lennon gained a little relaxing of the thongs that held his arms outstretched. He drew up his knees and flung his body up and forward. From a height of several inches his breast came down squarely upon the head of the snake, with all the weight of his body in the blow.

When Slade rushed cursing from the fire, Lennon lay in what appeared to be a swoon, with the body of the rattlesnake writhing about his head. At the angry bellow of the trader the Indians came running to slash Lennon's bonds and jerk him away from the snake.

Slade ripped out an astounded oath.

"He's beaten the game!" he cried.

The head of the reptile had been crushed.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE ATTACK

The trader possibly may have been overcome with admiration for his victim's courage. More probably he was moved by the need to keep him alive for further torture. He signed one of the Navahos to use his canteen. Lennon had feigned unconsciousness in the hope of this result.

He permitted a good quart of water to trickle down his parched throat before he showed signs of reviving. Even after he thought best to feign stupor no longer he made a show of great weakness. When jerked to his feet by the Indians,

he tottered and crumpled down again. Slade swore, but ordered food and coffee brought.

Lennon's tongue was still too swollen for him to eat much of the greasy solids. The strong coffee, however, both stimulated him and completed the quenching of his thirst. The old Navaho held the spout of the big tin coffee pot to his lips and poured until the last drop of muddy black fluid drained from the grounds.

The ponies were saddled, and Lennon was lifted upon his mount none too gently. He swayed in the saddle and clutched the horn. Slade made a sign for the prisoner's hands to be left unbound. During the ride up the cañon Lennon continued to feign weakness, lurching and swaying in the saddle.

Slade had taken the pinto pony of the youngest Navaho, who rode double with one of the other men. The five miles to the cliff break in the cañon bed, down which they had been lowered in the basket, was covered at a lope.

As the party came galloping to the under ledges Slade bellowed a deep-chested hail that boomed in loud reverberations upon the lofty precipices of the cañon sides. But no answering cry came down from the cliff, nor was there any sign of the hoist cage basket.

The old Navaho raised a shrill quavering wail that carried like the howl of a coyote. Again the reverberating echoes ran up the precipices and slowly died out far above, and again no response came from the top of the cross barrier.

"The lazy skunks!" growled Slade. "Off watch, huh? Keep me waiting, will they? I'll tan their dirty hides for 'em."

He rode down cañon a few yards and emptied his revolver into the air, firing the shots in couples. This time the echoes had not died out skyward before a dark face with cloth-bound forehead peered down from the brink of the cross cliff. Slade roared up an angry command—and abruptly fell silent.

The downlooker was making some quick gestures, Slade flung up his hand in an answering gesture. The signaller disappeared. Slade shouted an order to the best mounted of his men. The Navaho wheeled his pony and raced away down cañon on the back trail.

The basket cage of the lift swung out over the cliff brink. It began to lower. Regardless of hoof marks, Slade spurred his pony up the foot ledges. Lennon followed with the others.

A glance at the trader's face had told him danger was toward.

Lennon could think of but two explanations. Either a band of vengeful cattlemen had discovered and attacked the rustlers' secret stronghold, or Cochise had returned and taken advantage of Slade's absence to carry out his designs against Elsie.

The man sent back by Slade evidently was riding to summon reinforcements of Navahos from the pueblo. Whether they were to be used against the Apaches or to aid them against an outside posse, was the question. If the first were the case, Lennon felt that he must be armed to fight.

The thought of either Elsie or Carmena in the clutches of Cochise filled him with dread and horror. The suspense of the uncertainty was unbearable. He forced his pony up beside the trader's pinto while the basket cage was yet several feet overhead.

"See here, Slade," he said, "you've given me a rough deal. But we're both white men. We can't permit Cochise to have Farley's girls. That is unthinkable. I'll agree to forget the snake. Give me my rifle and we'll go through with our bargain."

"Like hell we will!" growled the trader. "Minute I turned my back you'd pot me."

"No," pledged Lennon. "I give you my word."

Slade continued to scowl with surly suspicion.

"Guess we'll take a look first. Git a move on you. Pile in. No time to hoist the hosses."

He swung from his saddle, with Lennon's rifle in one hand and his own in the other. Both cartridge belts were buckled about his massive body. He sprang into the wicker cage of the lift as it bumped upon the ledge. Lennon and the three Navahos crowded in after him.

The Indian above peered over the cliff brink. At a signal from the Navaho he again vanished. The hoist rope tautened. With a creak, the cage scraped on the ledge and began to swing up the cliff face above the abandoned horses.

To Lennon the ascent seemed maddeningly slow. The Navahos leaned against the wicker sides of the cage in stolid silence, their faces more than ever like bronze images. None cast a glance upward. But Slade could not hide his mingled uneasiness and anger.

"Didn't think the young devil had the gall," he muttered. "Acting like he'd been bit by a hydrophoby skunk. Nothing meaner 'n a mad wolf. I'd 'a' give him Carmena quick enough.... Learn her not to pass up a white man agin when she had her chance. But the young gal—— Blast Cochise. When I told him flat——"

The cage crept up over the brink of the cliff. One of the Navahos leaped high to grasp the guy rope of the crane. His pull swung crane and cage around toward the horse windlass. The moment the occupants jumped from the cage the Navaho allowed the crane to swing out again over the cliff edge. The pony that was hitched to the bar of the windlass started to lower the cage by reversing at a jog-trot.

Though the Indian with the pony wore an Apache head cloth, Lennon recognised his ugly young face at the first clear view. He was Pete, the Navaho who had been with the Apaches under the cliff house on the day that Cochise had trapped Lennon and Carmena. Slade's manner toward him was that of a half-distrustful master. He questioned him hastily in English.

Pete answered haltingly, with frequent lapses into the gutturals and hissings of his native tongue. His eyes glittered with fierce excitement. Lennon gathered that Cochise and his men were in the midst of an attack on the cliff house. This would seem to prove that the girls were still safe—and would remain safe. How could the Apaches hope to scale the sheer cliff without aid from above?

But Slade's scowl showed that the situation by no means pleased him. He mounted Pete's pony and rushed the party up to the head of the cañon. Instead of preparing to hold this position until the arrival of his reinforcements, he kept on up the valley at a jog trot. Once clear of the cañon, Lennon could make out the sound of distant shots echoing down the valley along the cliffs.

Within the first half mile the rescuers came upon a drove of big American horses. Every one showed signs of cruel driving over rocks and through thorn-scrub and cactus. When they scented the Navahos they snorted with terror, and all but two managed to bolt clear.

In a trice the Indians had each of the frightened pair bridled with a leather thong fast about the lower jaw. Pete mounted the better animal. Slade drew rein beside the other horse and glowered at Lennon.

"How about it?" he demanded. "You said you'd back me up. How do I know I can count on you not knifing me?"

"You have my word," replied Lennon, striving hard to repress his eagerness.

The irregular firing up the valley became more rapid. Slade scowled and thrust out Lennon's high-power rifle.

"It's a go—that new deal. Take your belt, too. Guess I can count on you till Cochise is made a good Indian."

With the white men and Pete mounted and the unmounted Navahos each gripping the mane of a horse, the party rushed up the valley at redoubled speed. Midway Slade angled down into the bed of an arroyo that curved around on the

right of the corral and up to the mouth of Hell Cañon. Though the horses were kept at a fast trot, the Navahos ran along beside them, seemingly without effort.

As the head of the valley was neared, the irregular crackling roar of the rifle shots abruptly ceased. Lennon's heart skipped a beat. The sudden hush might mean that Cochise had given up his attack on the cliff house. On the other hand, it might be due to an overwhelming of the defence.

Slade sent one of his men springing up the side of the arroyo. The Navaho glanced over the edge of the bank toward the cliff house and dashed obliquely back into the dry channel, his hand twisting in swift signs. Slade held on up the arroyo. Near the mouth of Hell Cañon he flung himself off and motioned Lennon to follow.

The old Navaho led the way up the side of the reservoir, with Pete a close second. Near the top the leaders flattened down to crawl over the round of the ancient dam. The others crept after them. A muttered command from Slade had kept Lennon in the rear. But a sudden fresh outburst of shots cut short his frightful suspense. The Apaches had neither abandoned their attack nor had they yet captured the cliff house.

Elation mingled with renewed fear for the girls sent Lennon scrambling up beside the leaders. He came to where they were peering over the crest of the dam. Slade growled a command for the fool tenderfoot to get down out of sight. But after Lennon's first look across the top of the embankment main force would have been required to drag him back.

He had already guessed that Pete had stolen away down into the lower cañon, unknown to the Apaches. The only other explanation was that the Navaho had been posted as guard at the cross cliff. This was improbable, as the only need for watchers was to help incomers up the otherwise impassable barrier. That Pete had not been missed was evident from the failure of the Apaches to oppose the rush of the rescuers up the valley.

The mystery of how Cochise hoped to take the cliff house became clear to Lennon at the first glance. The ancient stronghold was less than half a mile away from the reservoir. In the crystal-clear air Lennon made out a crooked line of poles and what appeared to be three or four sacks of corn lying upon the cliff foot. Above these objects eight or nine Apaches were raising a long ladder of spliced poles against the face of the rock wall. The fallen poles were the shattered remains of a first ladder that had collapsed.

The ladder raisers were protected in their work by the incessant shooting of the other members of the band. From a crescent of positions well out in the valley the riflemen poured a cross-fire of bullets into all the openings of the cliff house. The Indian at the nearest end of the crescent lay not more than a hundred yards beyond the far side of the reservoir.

Even as Lennon grasped the plan of attack, the heavy-butted ladder came to an upright position directly under the main doorway of the cliff house. On the instant a pair of nimble Apaches scrambled to the top, dragging with them a shorter ladder. They hoisted it above them and spliced its foot to the head of the main one.

No less swiftly, another ladder was passed up and lashed to the top of the second. The new top reached within two yards of the brink of the forty-foot cliff. A third Apache started to carry up a short ladder. After he passed the middle of the ascent, his weight, added to that of the men above, made the much-spliced main ladder bow and sway.

One of the upper men crawled through the rungs to wedge himself between the top and the cliff. The third man handed up the short ladder and began to creep down again. The second topman gingerly hoisted the last link in the shaky line of ascent.

The Apaches lying out from the cliff concentrated their fire on the opening above the ladder. For any one in the cliff house to have ventured into the doorway would have meant certain death.

Protected by the storm of bullets, the topmost Apache held up the last ladder while his mate against the cliff spliced it fast. The top rung stood level with the sill of the doorway.

The third man had stopped his descent ten or fifteen feet below. As soon as the splicing was secure the first man drew something from the belt of his breech-clout and started up the last rungs.

Lennon could restrain himself no longer. He thrust his rifle forward to take aim. From beside him a big hairy red hand reached out to clutch the barrel. Slade's deep voice growled a command:—

"Wait! If they ain't got Carmena a'ready——"

"But if once he gets in!" cried Lennon. "He must have a revolver!"

"Knife too," added Slade. "Wait, though. We'll all put our sights on him. But don't shoot, unless he gits half through the door."

A glance at the Navahos showed Lennon that they were already taking aim. The trader clearly had some good reason for waiting. Lennon nodded.

"Very well," he agreed.

Slade drew back his hand. As Lennon again took aim he saw the first of the Apache attackers thrust up an arm to grasp the corner of the sill stone. The man paused while the riflemen poured an extra violent volley of bullets into the doorway. He then made a quick gesture.

The shots continued, but they were aimed high. Otherwise the attacker must have been struck as he flung himself up before the opening. The catlike movement brought him head and shoulders above the sill. He twisted forward to writhe into the doorway. Lennon's finger started to crook against the trigger of his rifle. But he did not fire.

Instead of thrusting forward, the Apache straightened upright with convulsive suddenness. His outclutching arms beat the empty air. He toppled sideways and plunged headlong.

"Through the brain!" chuckled Slade. "No, they ain't got Carmena—yet."

CHAPTER XIX

OUT OF THE FRYING-PAN——

Before the falling Apache smashed down upon the cliff foot the man who had last climbed the long ladder made an upward rush. He was within half a dozen rungs of the top when a large round object rolled out of the doorway. With the quickness of a puma he swung off to one side. The big missile grazed past the dodger. Three or four yards farther down it crashed upon the ladder. All the mid section of the wobbly structure was shattered to flinders. The lower part slithered sideways along the cliff face, the upper part and the two climbers plunged downward.

The cliffs rang with the yells of the ladder holders as they leaped away. They bounded like startled deer. But one was struck in the back by the splintered end of a falling ladder pole. He pitched on his face, rolled over, and lay as still as the fallen climbers.

"Four!" exultantly exclaimed Slade. "Four—done up by a keg of water. And the three first," Lennon had thought them sacks of corn at the foot of the ladder, "seven and Pete with us—leaves less 'n twenty of 'em, counting Cochise. And mebbe Carmena has potted one or two more out in the scrub."

"You'll attack?" asked Lennon.

"Sure. No chance of holding Cochise after him losing them men. The others would turn on him like mad coyotes if he backed up. Just hold your hosses a bit, though, till I tell you."

Lennon impatiently glanced away from his rifle sights. For the first time he saw that the Navahos were no longer

alongside him. Pete was creeping aslant the dam towards the cliffs. The three others had circled to the left and were disappearing into the irrigation canal where it curved down valley below the reservoir.

"Got to flush them snakes in the grass," explained Slade. "Pick your mark and wait. I'll start off with this here devil across the tank."

The scattered ladder raisers were bunching again close under the cliff, to one side of the cliff house openings. One of them made signs to the outlying riflemen. The others began to work on the broken ladders. The firing had almost ceased.

Slade moved a few yards along the dam. Lennon drew back his rifle, looked carefully at the lock and magazine, and took up a position from which he could fire with the greatest rapidity. He had been ready only a few minutes when from the irrigation canal, down the valley behind the Apache riflemen, came the reports of three shots, fired in rapid succession.

A fourth shot roared from Slade's rifle. Lennon began to fire as fast as he could take aim. His mark was the group of Apaches on the cliff foot. One fell and lay motionless. Another tumbled over, but rebounded to join in the dash of his companions down the slope.

The bare ledges of the cliff foot offered no shelter. The nearest cover was the ruined Farley ranch hut a hundred yards or more away, in the direction of the reservoir. But as the Apaches raced for the refuge first one of their leaders and then another pitched to the ground.

The others swerved and went flying out toward the irrigation canal. A burst of shots from the canal again forced them to swerve. They fled toward a patch of rocks and cactus in the direction of Devil's Chute. Only four reached the cover.

As Lennon had emptied his magazine during the first few seconds, he knew that he could not have shot more than one of the fugitives. The three Navahos had spread out along the canal, and Pete had hidden at the ruined hut. They had the Apaches under fire from flank and rear. Slade had dodged down to run around the head of the reservoir and leap the inlet canal.

The thwack and screech of a glanced bullet that nicked a spurt of gravel into Lennon's face, warned him that the Navahos were not doing all the firing. Though so many of the Apaches had been killed in the surprise of the counter attack, the survivors of the band still outnumbered the rescuers two or three to one.

Lennon knew enough to creep back under the round of the dam. Once safe below the crest, he sprinted after Slade at top speed. He was under cover until he leaped the inlet canal and skirted along the natural rock rim on the far side of the reservoir.

The problem now was to find a sheltered way from the brink of the run over and down into the Farley's kitchen garden. Slade had somehow made the crossing. He was safe in a position of vantage—at the goat pens.

Before Lennon could locate the sheltered line of descent he noticed that some of the shots sounded from farther down the valley. His first thought was that more Apaches were coming to join in the fight. Slade's reinforcements from the pueblo could not be expected before late in the day.

For a moment the situation appeared truly desperate. The odds were already heavy enough, without the addition of more Apaches. But a cautious peep over the rock rim disclosed to Lennon the happy truth. Out-manoeuvred and cut off from the best cover, the Apaches were beginning to fall back down the valley.

By close scrutiny, Lennon made out a brown form wriggling away behind a clump of cactus that shut off the view of Slade and the Navahos. At the second bullet from the high-power rifle the creeping Apache rolled over. There was no need for a third shot.

After this hit Lennon saw not the slightest sign of the retreating band. But he continued to rake the rocks and cactus

clumps with frequent shots, while the Navahos in the ditch followed along the flank of their half-exposed enemies.

Lennon became aware that shots were being fired from the cliff house. Soon afterwards he saw Slade rush boldly along the cliff foot. The Apaches were too intent upon flight to fire at the now distant enemies in their rear. One glance at the trader sent Lennon bounding up over the rim of rock and down the slope.

The rope ladder dropped from the cliff house doorway. By the time Lennon reached the tumble-down ranch hut Slade was at the top of the ladder and Pete was beginning to climb. Lennon dashed on along the cliff foot. He gave no heed to the dead Apaches that lay huddled or sprawled amidst the wreckage of the wooden ladder poles and rungs. At the foot of the rope ladder he thrust his rifle through the back of his belt and swung up as fast as he could climb.

Before he had ascended twenty feet a half-spent bullet thudded against the cliff face at his elbow. Another grazed his side. At least one of the distant Apaches had turned about and was making uncomfortably close shots at the climber. Lennon stopped short. A bullet struck less than a span above his head. He hurried on up by irregular jerks and dashes.

More bullets struck around him. One seared his thigh. Owing, however, either to sheer good fortune or to his jerky ascent, he reached the top of the ladder without a serious wound.

Pete lay flattened out in the doorway behind a sack of corn. He was firing down the valley, Lennon flung himself in past the young Navaho. Safe within the cliff house, he reeled against the massive wall and stood panting for breath.

From the doorway of the living room came a happy cry. Elsie darted out to fling her arms about Lennon.

"Oh! oh! oh! You did get up, Jack—you did!" she cried. "Mena was dreadfully afraid for you. The 'Paches have killed one of Slade's punchers and are chasing the others back."

Lennon kissed the quivering girl and thrust her from him to grasp his rifle.

"We're safe now, Blossom. But I must help to cover the retreat of our men."

He ran to the crane-hoist opening. Slade was crouched behind a barricade of corn-filled sacks, hotly blazing away down the valley. Lennon hurried on into the living room.

Beside the nearest outer window Farley lay upon a pile of rugs very white and still. His neck and right leg were swathed in bandages. The rifle under the window showed that the broken drunkard had not lacked courage to join in the defence of his home.

Carmena stood at the next window, too intent upon her firing to heed her exposed position. A bullet had grazed the side of her head. At sight of the blood trickling down on her cheek Lennon felt an almost irresistible impulse to run over and draw her out of danger.

But the angle of the girl's rifle barrel told him that the fight was rapidly coming back up the valley. He sprang to Farley's window. As he looked down, the two Navahos broke from the last scant cover and came leaping and zigzagging up toward the cliff foot.

Lennon thrust out his rifle and began to pump shots at the scrub and cactus clumps above which rose thin puffs of semi-smokeless powder. A bullet nipped the point of his shoulder. He jumped back to refill his magazine. Before he could again empty it, another bullet seared across the top of his head. He reeled and fell senseless.

When he recovered consciousness he was first aware of the face of Carmena. In his first daze, he fancied that he was out on the far side of the Basin, lying upon the sand under the cliff where the Gila monster had bitten his hand. The girl's eyes were clouded with the same look of profound concern that he had then seen in their shadowy depths.

But as his own gaze cleared he noticed two marked differences in her appearance. One of her pale cheeks was streaked with crimson, and the dark eyes were wide not with dread alone. They gazed down at him heavy with the anguish of mingled grief and yearning. He knew that he was looking into the girl's inmost heart.

A hand was thrust between their faces—a little dimpled hand that held a bowl of red liquid. Elsie's voice quavered urgently:—

"Let me fix your hurt with the dragon sap, Mena. He's alive again."

Carmena's long lashes drooped upon her white cheeks. She drew back. Lennon turned aside his violently aching head. Across the living room he saw Pete cauterising a bullet wound on the bare arm of a fellow Navaho with the astringent red sap of the sangre de dragon tree.

Elsie noticed Lennon's roving look of inquiry.

"They shot the other one on the ladder," she explained. "But Slade isn't hurt, and he hauled the ladder up. Cochise can't get us now."

"Not now," whispered Carmena. "But if Slade——"

Her low-pitched voice broke and hushed to a frightened silence.

Slade swaggered in from the anteroom and stood grinning as if very well satisfied with what he saw.

CHAPTER XX

INTO THE FIRE

Carmena rallied and smiled up at the big trader with a show of trustful confidence.

"I knew you'd keep your part of the deal, Mr. Slade," she said. "You've fought off Cochise and saved us, and there's a good big hole in his bunch. All we need do now is wait for your punchers to come in and wipe out the rest."

"Sure!" agreed Slade. "I done it. Now I got a dead cinch all 'round."

He drew his revolver and twirled the cylinder as if to make certain that it had been fully reloaded.

"Yep—a dead cinch. With me up here, Cochise won't try no more pole ladders. You and my Cookie Gal better hustle up some feed. Ain't had nothing but bacon and flapjacks since I left."

Elsie fluttered across to light her charcoal brazier. But Carmena lingered beside Lennon.

"Huh," muttered Slade. "Where'd sonny boy git hit? Ain't plunked bad, is he?"

"Oh, no. I——"

"No, not fatal," Carmena broke in on Lennon's disclaimer of serious injury. She gave Slade a significant side glance.

"No, I'm sure it won't prove fatal—just cut the bone a bit. Jack'll get over it all right if he keeps perfectly quiet."

Slade's big face took on a look of solemn concern.

"Quiet—huh? Can't let him take no risks. He's worth ten thousand to me. Here, you, Pete—and you——"

A guttural command in Navaho and a careless wave of the revolver brought Pete and his wounded but still active

companion hurrying forward.

Carmena sprang up and held out her arms to the trader. Lennon failed to see her face. He saw only how Slade swept his left arm about the girl and swung her around in a bearlike embrace. Lennon sought to leap up. The Navahos seized him on either side and forced him down again.

He caught a glimpse of Carmena futilely clutching for Slade's throat. The big man burst into a bellow of contemptuous laughter and flung her from him.

"Bah!" he jeered. "What you bucking about? Don't figger I want *you* any more, do you?"

"No—no, of course not. I—— But Jack's head—— If you hog-tie him——"

"Got to be kept quiet, ain't he? You said it yourself. What you hanging fire for, Pete?"

The heavy revolver swung around in another seemingly careless gesture. Pete and the wounded Navaho hog-tied Lennon with expert quickness.

Slade shifted around to nudge Farley in the ribs with the toe of his cowhide boot. The badly wounded man stirred and opened his haggard eyes to blink at the disturber.

"Has—Cochise—— What! you?" he murmured. "You have run off the devils? Girls safe?"

"You bet they're safe, Dad. How you feeling? Looks like they plugged you pretty bad."

"Very—very bad," gasped Farley. "I—do not expect to—survive."

"Aw, keep a stiff upper lip. You'll pull through."

Farley's discoloured eyelids quivered and drooped. Slade had been peering sideways at the rigidly posed Carmena. He laughed good-humouredly, put up his revolver, and grinned towards Elsie.

"I smell grub—real grub. Carmena, you git over to the far window and keep a lookout while I feed up. Just leave your gun lie. We don't want to rile up Cochise till we git him cornered."

The girl looked at Lennon and hesitated. Slade rested his hand on his hip. She hurried off to the window toward which he had pointed.

Seated alone at the table, the trader feasted upon the food set before him by Elsie. While he gormandised he tormented the shrinking girl with his coarse gallantry. When at last his gluttonous appetite was satisfied he called for another pie. Elsie obediently brought the last of her baking and bent over the corner of the table to set it before him.

With the quickness of a striking grizzly, Slade lunged forward and clutched her soft round arm. At her startled shriek he wrenched his massive body half around and menaced every one in the room with a sweeping wave of his revolver.

Lennon had been bound too tightly to do more than writhe. Pete and his fellow Navaho stood as if turned to stone. But Farley had twisted about on the floor, and Carmena was springing away from her outlook window toward the table. The revolver barrel paused in line with her forward-rushing figure.

"Stop!" bellowed Slade.

The savage roar threatened instant death. Carmena came to a sudden halt. She stood panting and quivering, her face white, her eyes dilated with horror.

"Huh! Thought you'd rush me, did you?" growled the trader. "You didn't stop any too soon to save your bacon, you she-wildcat. Stand still now, or you'll git gentled with a club."

"But—but, Mr. Slade——" gasped the horror-stricken girl. "Blossom—she's only a child. She's so young and—and innocent! Oh, won't you—won't you please take me instead?"

"You?" sneered the trader. "Jealous, are you? Well, you're too late now. Wouldn't take me when you had the chance. Now I wouldn't have you even if I couldn't git her."

"But she—little Blossom! Oh, you can't—you can't be so heartless! You promised to wait——"

"Wait?" Slade jerked the half-fainting Elsie around the corner of the table.

"Ain't I waited all this time? This is same as Injun country, and squaws mate-up young. I'm going to take my Cookie Gal now. *Sabe?* Injun marriage is good enough 'round these parts for any woman, white or red."

"You—beast!" cried Carmena, and she flung herself at him in a fury of despair.

A few seconds before he would have shot her down. Now, instead of firing, he released his hold on Elsie's arm and thrust out to meet the frantic rush of her foster-sister. The big red hand clutched fast on Carmena's throat and held her off at arm's length. Contemptuously heedless of her frenzied struggles, he fixed a hard stare on Pete.

"You," he ordered, "git a hustle on. Rope this hellcat, pronto."

Though Pete's hesitancy was almost imperceptible, Slade's revolver swung up toward him. The young Navaho sprang forward, jabbering to his fellow tribesman. As the two seized and started to bind Carmena, Slade grinned at her derisively.

"Guess you wish you hadn't," he jeered. "I'll learn you who's boss. How'll you like being let down to Cochise, huh?"

The danger to Elsie had horrified and enraged Lennon no less than Carmena. He had been writhing in his rawhide bonds, in a furious struggle to break loose. Now he lay exhausted and hopeless, his wrists and ankles cut and bleeding from the cruelly tight thongs. Even the hideous threat against Carmena could not goad his flaccid muscles to renewed efforts.

Behind him he heard a peculiar wheezing. He twisted his head about to look. Farley was creeping along the floor. As Lennon caught sight of him, the desperately wounded man clutched his rifle and straightened up on his knees. His ghastly face was blotched with angry purple. His sunken eyes flamed with vengeful fire. He raised the muzzle of the rifle toward Slade with the last flare of his failing strength.

"You scoundrel!" he shrieked. "Harm my daughter, would you?"

Slade's savage bellow was drowned in the crash of the rifle. The bull-like roar of the trader sharpened to a yell of pain. An instant later two answering shots came back at the swaying avenger.

Farley fell upon his back, with his arms outflung crosswise and his glazing eyes upturned. As he lived, so he had died—futilely. Yet he had at least made the attempt to rise above his weakness and degeneracy. He had died like a man.

Slade stood at the end of the table, mopping the base of his neck with his dirty neckerchief. The rifle had missed his jugular vein by little more than an inch. He cauterised the wound with *sangre de dragon* sap, cursing blasphemously and barking commands at the Navahos.

Pete ran to signal from the nearest window. His companion hurried to make certain that Farley was dead. Slade shouldered past the half-bound Carmena and came to stare gloatingly down at Lennon. Between his thick legs Lennon saw Carmena twist about and roll over toward her terror-stricken sister. Slade was too intent upon mocking his other prisoner to look about at the girls.

"Well, son, you seen what happened to dad, trying to murder his pard," he admonished. "Hope it'll be a warning to you. I'm a peaceful man. I got to have law and order. Cochise ripped loose with his bunch. You seen how I smashed his

play. 'Fore night my Navahos 'll clean up what's left of 'em all."

Lennon choked down his rage and loathing. Not he alone was in the power of this brutal scoundrel. For the sake of the girls he must play for time.

"Yes, to be sure!" he said. "That was clever generalship on your part, Slade. As for Farley—you, of course, had to shoot him, in self-defence. But now all is settled. You will keep your word to go through with your bargain."

"I will, will I, huh?"

"How else? We have had our little misunderstandings. But you are a white man and you gave your word to go through with our deal."

The trader's face blackened with a ferocious scowl.

"Try to be funny with me, will you? I'll skin you alive!"

"You misunderstood me, quite," said Lennon, soothingly. "How could I think other than that you intend to keep your bargain. I mentioned it because I wish to suggest an addition to the terms. If you will release Carmena and postpone your marriage to Elsie until we can get a licence and a minister, I shall be pleased to give five thousand toward the bride's trousseau."

For a long moment Slade stood glowering, morosely suspicious of the proposal. When he sensed its precise meaning, he burst into mocking laughter.

"So that's what you're after, huh? Think you can bribe me, do you? Well, just let me tell you, sonny boy—when I want a squaw I take her. As for that she-wildcat, she's going down to Cochise right now. What's more, you're going with her, if you don't agree to write that mine report and shell out the whole twenty thousand."

"You devil!" cried Lennon. "I'll give you all—everything I possess—to save the girls from you. But if you harm either one of them—if you refuse to set them both free—you shall not have a dollar of my money."

"Huh—I shan't, shan't I?"

"Not a cent! You are a thief, a murderer, a liar—and you know it. Your word is not to be trusted. Take your choice. Kill me, or accept my pledge to pay you the money when you have brought me and the girls safe to the nearest town."

The corner of Slade's coarse lip drew up in a wolfish snarl.

"Kill you? Just wait and see. Killing's a heap too easy. Wait till Cochise has had a little fun with you. Mebbe you won't agree to be reasonable then, huh?"

The pale eyes of the trader glittered with cold malevolence as he swung around to the window from which Pete was signalling. He boldly thrust his head out and shouted to the Apaches in their own tongue. From below came an answering shout. Slade called down to them for several moments in hissing thick-tongued gutturals.

When at last he drew back and faced about, his mouth was twisted in a grin of evil satisfaction. He stared across the room, blinked, and stared again, with his grin distorted into an angry menace.

Carmena lay where he had last seen her. But Elsie was nowhere in sight.

CHAPTER XXI

TREACHERY

The inaction of the trader was brief. At his harsh question the wounded Navaho thrust out a slim finger toward one of the rear exits from the living room. Slade spoke a fierce command to Pete in the Navaho tongue and rushed out through the opening to which the Indian had pointed.

Carmena uttered a horrified cry and sought to struggle up on her bound feet. As she fell, Pete and the other Navaho caught hold of her. They carried her out into the anteroom, without paying the slightest heed to Lennon's threats and pleadings. He writhed and twisted himself toward the door-way. Before he had reached the opening, the wounded Navaho bounded back into the room. He seized Lennon and dragged him out.

Pete had squatted down to fasten a loop of the hoist rope about Carmena, who lay behind the sacks of corn that barricaded the crane-hoist entrance.

She was speaking rapidly to the young Navaho in mingled Spanish and English. At sight of the other Navaho and Lennon she paused.

Pete took the opportunity to mutter a sullen reply:—

"*Basta*. Slade, him bad med'cine. Me no fight him. You go Cochise, *muy pronto*."

"Wait!" urged the girl. "You want me to be your woman. Remember what I promised if you'd help Slade to get up the cañon against Cochise. I'll promise more now. I'll give you all those horses and cattle—and I'll give you myself. *Sabe?* I'll be your woman."

The Indian's eyes gleamed with avid desire. But he did not falter.

"Woman no good, me dead."

"Afraid—you girl!" taunted Carmena. "He's only a man. A single shot will kill him. You have only to——"

"*Basta*. Him big devil. Me no shoot him. Him say you go Cochise, *muy pronto*."

The stubborn coward turned away toward the windlass. Carmena glared after him in agonised desperation.

"All right—all right, Pete!" she cried. "Lower me to Cochise. But listen! You needn't fight Slade or any one. You heard how he fooled Cochise—made him feel good by promising him me and Jack?"

"Me send you down, *pronto*."

"Yes—yes. Only first, if you want me to be your woman, listen. You lower me, I make bargain with Cochise and ——"

The rest of the fiercely urgent proposal was in Spanish. Pete came to a pause and cast a stealthy glance at his fellow Navaho. The man had dragged Lennon out past the windlass and turned back to grasp the crank handle.

"You damn sure Cochise him no kill me? You no lie?" demanded Pete.

"Won't you be proving you are his friend?" countered the girl. "You know Slade only half trusts you. He'll be sure to shoot you, soon as his punchers come. How about it? Do you promise? It's your only chance to get me, so long as you daren't tackle Slade yourself."

"Slade, him big devil. Injun no can——"

"Just wait and see," broke in Carmena. "Remember, there'll be tizwin for you—all you can drink—heaps of tizwin!"

"Ugh!" grunted Pete. "Slade no come. *Bueno*—me do him you say."

He grunted to the other Navaho and swung the crane outward as the tightening rope lifted the girl above the sacks of corn. She disappeared from view below the barrier. The Navaho lowered away with a deliberation that set Lennon's teeth on edge. The strain on his nerves was not lessened by the total silence of the waiting Apaches down below.

At last the rope slackened. After a brief pause it was rapidly wound in on the barrel of the windlass. Pete had already dragged Lennon to the opening and heaved him up on the barricade. When the rope loop came up to the crane, he jerked it in, made fast to Lennon, and shoved him off into space.

Lennon plunged down nearly a dozen feet before the tautened rope stopped his fall with a violent jerk. He hung dangling, with nothing between him and the wreckage-strewn ledges of the cliff foot, thirty feet beneath.

The first jerk had started his body to gyrating. The rapidity with which he was lowered increased the movement. By the time he reached the cliff foot he was spinning like a roast before an old fireplace.

At first he had been able to make out Carmena standing in the midst of a close group of Apaches. But she and the Indians and the cliff wall had all merged into a blurred whirl before his dizzy eyes by the time he struck the cliff foot. With the slackening of the rope he rolled over, too giddy even to attempt to steady himself with his bound hands.

While his eyes were yet too dazed for clear vision, he heard Carmena's voice, low-pitched and vibrant with passionate pleading.

".... And him, too, Cochise. I'm not asking you to give up your fun with him. Only wait till you've made sure of Slade. There's not a second to lose. You have us. We can't get away. But if you don't do what I ask, you won't get Slade. He'll be up there—safe—with your woman! And his Navahos will trap you here in the Hole."

"You lie!" grunted the young Apache. "Slade send you down to git his noose on me. I haul up pony lift—hit out Hell Cañon—take you and white fool. Heap fun with you and him!"

"What then?" queried Carmena. "You know you'll have Slade on your trail—Slade and a posse and the soldiers. Slade will have to wipe you out to cover up what we've been doing here. He'll lay it all on you and your bunch—all the stealing. Can't you see? If he can't wipe you out himself, he'll set the soldiers on your trail."

Lennon looked up and saw before his clearing eyes the dark evilly handsome face of the Apache leader. It was as stolid as the faces of his uncomprehending followers. But his black eyes were fierce with hate.

"You lie!" he repeated. "You say, kill Slade. You say you no care what become of you."

"Because I know you, Cochise," cajoled the girl, her voice soft and confiding. "Weren't we friends before Slade came? Weren't we good to you? Remember how we kept you hid in the Hole and never told the Indian Agent? You'll not forget that. You'll treat me and Jack, my new pard, all right when I've helped you kill Slade."

"Dam' friend—you," jeered the Indian. "You kept my woman."

"What if I did? How about now? Do you want Slade to have her? You know he has been scheming all along to take her from you. Are you going to let him do it? Think about her—and about the tizwin—that tizwin hidden from you by Slade—barrels of tizwin! All yours if only you have the nerve to go up after Slade!"

Cochise looked up the cliff, with a sudden ferocious scowl. Lennon was gasping for breath against the frightfulness of what he had heard. To save herself, Carmena was betraying her foster-sister to the fiendish savage. Elsie's fate in the hands of Slade was fearful enough without the added horror of what she would suffer in the hands of Cochise.

"Carmena!" he cried. "Carmena, are you mad? Think of Blossom! What does it matter if we are tortured? Surely you can't intend——"

"Why not?" cried back the girl, her face aflame with vengeful anger. "That big beast first ruined my father; now he

has murdered him. Cochise, you'll have to choose quickly. Run off with us and have your fun, and have Slade trail you down; or kill him and get your woman and the tizwin—Barrels of tizwin!"

The young Apache plucked out his knife and sprang at the girl. A stroke slashed through the thongs that bound her wrists. Her ankles had already been freed. Cochise made a sharp upward gesture. Carmena shook her head and pointed to Lennon.

"Let him lead the way up—unarmed," she suggested,

The advantage of the plan was instantly grasped by the crafty Apache. At his command, two of his men cut loose Lennon's bonds and jerked him to his feet.

"Wait, Carmena! Wait!" begged Lennon. "Think of Elsie!"

But the girl had already signalled to those above. The rope ladder came slipping down the cliff face. Lennon fell silent. Protests were now useless. The lowering of the ladder laid the cliff stronghold open to the merciless Apaches.

He turned away from the girl, full of loathing. Slade might possibly have refrained at the last moment from wronging Elsie. But Cochise——

There was no need of the Apache's prodding knife point to start him up the ladder. Though he did not relish having to act as a living shield for the attackers, he was more than willing to go first. Unluckily the tightness of his bonds had so bruised the ligaments of his wrists and ankles and left his limbs so numb that he had to climb with painful slowness.

Cochise following at his heels, cursed and jabbed his knife into Lennon's leg. The cruel goading stung the benumbed muscles to quicker action. Lennon sprinted up the ladder, clear of his torturer. A glance down the rungs showed him three Apaches below Cochise, and Carmena at the foot, waiting with the remainder of the band. The ladder would not safely bear more than five climbers at a time.

Spurred even more by the plan that he had in mind than by the threat of the knife, Lennon sought to increase his lead over Cochise. But the Indian's wrists were not strained, and his flexible moccasins gave a better hold on the ladder rungs than Lennon's stiff boot soles. With the knife between his teeth, the young Apache swung up in swift pursuit.

Instead of gaining, Lennon lost his lead. Another downward glance, as he grasped the last rung below the sill of the cliff house doorway, showed him that Cochise was again at his heels. He must change the tactics of his plan. He uttered a startled cry and pretended to slip down a rung.

Cochise let go the ladder with one hand to jab his knife at Lennon's leg. Lennon jerked up the leg and kicked down with all his strength. The heel of his boot struck squarely in the upturned face of the Apache. The downward and outward force of the blow jerked loose Cochise's one-handed grip on the ladder. But even as he toppled backward, he crooked a leg with catlike quickness over one of the rungs.

Lennon saw only that his enemy was falling. His hand had already groped over the edge of the sill. Without another downward glance, he flung himself up and into the doorway. The wild scramble and plunge all but drove him headlong over the sack of corn and against the menacing muzzle of Pete's rifle.

That double traitor stood crouched at the inner side of the thick-walled entrance, torn between fear of Cochise and terror of Slade. Lennon had counted upon this dread and uncertainty of the young Navaho. He flung out his hands to him in urgent gestures.

"Quick—quick!" he cried. "Cut loose the ladder! Cochise will kill you! He's coming! Cut the ladder!"

The Indian shrank back to peer at the inner openings of the cliff house.

"Carmena—him no lie," he muttered. "Cochise kill 'um Slade."

"But you first!" urged Lennon. "He will——"

The band of an Apache head-dress shot up above the edge of the door sill. Lennon sprang at Pete to clutch his knife. The Navaho flung up his rifle. A chance blow of the barrel sent Lennon staggering half across the anteroom.

The Apache writhed up into the doorway and bounded over the sack of corn, his knife poised to strike. Pete whirled and fired from the hip. An instant later he was locked in the clutch of the yelling, slashing Apache. As they crashed down together in a furious death grapple, a second Apache came scrambling in over the cliff edge. Side by side with him appeared Cochise, the print of Lennon's boot-heel already blackening on his ferociously scowling forehead.

Pete's rifle had fallen outward into the doorway, alongside the sack of corn. Lennon was unarmed. There was no time for him to wrest the knife from the wounded Apache and slash the ladder ropes. Cochise clutched Pete's rifle and started to swing it around. His companion thrust out a revolver.

The shot missed Lennon by inches as he leaped to the side opposite the living room. He dashed out the first opening and started to run through the front row of rooms, shouting at the top of his voice.

"Slade! Slade!" he yelled. "Cochise—Apaches! Defend yourself!"

From the inner rooms on his right came back an angry bellow. "What the devil?"

Lennon twisted aside through a black doorway. Farther in he saw a glimmer of light. Sharp turns through two more doorways brought him into a kiva, or sacred chamber of the cliff dwellers, that was lighted by a pair of candles. Slade stood beside the broken-edged entrance hole with drawn revolver. The wounded Navaho was peering down from a hole in the ceiling.

"Elsie!" panted Lennon. "Hide her! Pete betrayed you! All the Apaches—coming up the ladder!"

Slade sprang sideways along the figure-decorated wall of the kiva. He leaped to grasp the edge of the ceiling hole. The Navaho helped him draw up into the dark room above. As his feet swung clear Lennon leaped in turn to grasp the edge of the hole.

"Give me a hand up," he called. "I'll help you defend Elsie."

"Sure. You'll serve for wolf bait," jeered Slade.

His big hand thrust down and tapped the butt of the heavy revolver on the top of Lennon's head.

CHAPTER XXII

THE SACRIFICE

The treacherous blow was just hard enough to stun Lennon. His unconsciousness probably lasted only a few seconds. He roused to the sound of heavy firing and the pungent odour of powder. He opened his eyes.

One of the candles had been extinguished. The other showed one wounded and two dead Apaches lying upon the floor of the kiva. At the entrance other attackers were stealthily thrusting in to fire at the hole in the ceiling. The flash of answering shots spewed out of the black space above the hole.

Lennon had enough presence of mind to lie still. Dislodged by the fusillade of bullets, the dry materials of the ancient ceiling showered upon him. In the room above he heard the shriek of a mortally struck man. Another fusillade followed. Then a revolver came whirling down out of the darkness.

The Apaches yelled and burst into the kiva.

They rushed toward the hole, firing upward as fast as they could pump their magazines. Unnoticed in the excitement, Lennon rolled clear of their trampling feet and sought to grasp Slade's fallen revolver. A chance kick sent it out of his reach.

Wild with blood-thirst, the last Apaches were trying to climb up the backs of those who had first leaped to seize the edge of the ceiling hole. Under the strain of their jerking weight one of the ancient beams gave way.

Down crashed a part of the floor above. With it came Slade, bellowing with rage, bleeding from several wounds, and his right arm shattered. His massive body fell upon and knocked down two of the crowding Apaches. He staggered up and struck out with his maul-like fist.

The voice of Cochise sounded above the din of the fight. The Apaches flung themselves at Slade like wolves attacking a maimed bull. But they used neither rifles nor knives. The trader was borne down by the weight of numbers and his left arm lashed fast to his backward twisted feet.

Cochise had caught up the flickering candle. He sprang upon the back of another man and peered into the room above. When at last he jumped down his face was distorted with anger. He shook his knife in Slade's face.

"Where you hide my woman?" he demanded.

"She hid herself," growled Slade. "I was still looking for her."

"Big mouth—big lie!" scoffed Cochise, and he thrust the flame of the candle against Slade's nose.

The trader puffed out the light. Lennon had been edging around toward the door. He took instant advantage of the darkness to slip out and run toward the living room. There he might hope to find a rifle and die fighting.

In the anteroom he came face to face with a pair of Apaches, who stood on guard over Carmena. At their gestures, emphasised by half-raised rifles, he backed into the corner beside the girl. She flashed him a look of profound relief and put a tremulous hand on his arm.

"Jack—I thought they'd killed you. Slade?"

"Prisoner, like ourselves. But they've still to find Elsie—no thanks to you!"

He drew away as if her touch were a pollution. She flushed, hesitated, and opened her lips to speak. With a burst of yells, the Apaches rushed in, dragging Slade in their midst.

At sight of Lennon, Cochise wrinkled his bruised forehead in a scowl of evil satisfaction. But when he swaggered forward he looked only at Carmena.

"Slade swear you hide my woman," he said.

"How could I?" replied Carmena. "He had me tied up and lowered to you. He was up here with her all that time."

The face of the young Apache became impassive. He turned about and spoke softly to Slade. The trader, half dead from his wounds, raised his big head to mumble a denial.

At a word from Cochise, one of his men ran to fetch Elsie's brazier from the living room. In the bottom of the brazier was still a bed of glowing coals. The Apaches cut free one of Slade's feet and started to thrust it in upon the fire.

Carmena flung up her hands before her eyes.

"No!—no, Cochise!" she cried. "Kill him—he deserves to be killed! But not the torture—I can't bear it! I'll try to find Elsie for you. I think I know where she's hidden."

Lennon stared, more than ever filled with horror of her treachery.

"You—you!" he gasped. "That child—give her, to save that scoundrel?"

"And ourselves," added Carmena, her lips curved in a cajoling smile at Cochise. "When I've found her—and the tizwin—we'll be friends. Won't we, Cochise?"

"Sure. Dam' good friends," smoothly agreed the Apache. "You find my woman quick, I let you go. *Sabe?*"

"*And* the tizwin—the barrels of tizwin," added Carmena. "Come on, all of us together—— You, too, Jack."

She signed to the Apaches and called out a few words in their own thick guttural tongue.

Lennon did not hang back. Great as was his abhorrence of the girl, he started forward beside her. Probably owing to his ready advance, he was not again bound, though Cochise ordered a pair of his followers to guard the white man. The other Apaches pressed close after the leaders, drawn by their fierce craving for tizwin.

Regardless of Lennon's look of loathing, Carmena lighted a candle and led the way direct to the mummy room. From a ceiling beam of the room had been hung a crudely stuffed horned owl with wide-spread wings. At sight of the big gray-white bird and of the mummies even Cochise advanced less than a step inside the entrance.

Carmena went in with the candle and methodically peered among and behind all the heaps of rubbish. When she came back to the entrance her dark brows were drawn together in a frown, as if she were puzzled and trying to think of another hiding-place. She looked at Lennon with a level glance.

"Hereafter you will recall that the quick and the dead are associated," she murmured.

She faced about to the superstitious Apaches.

"You see, Cochise. Your woman doesn't like these old dried spirits any more than you do. Come on."

Cochise and his men drew back before her advancing candle. They had no fancy to be left in the darkness with the bird of night and the "dried spirits" of the ancient cliff dwellers. They were not so backward, however, in the other inner rooms to which Carmena led them. Where there was a ceiling hole, one or more readily mounted with the candle to search the space above.

But nowhere was trace found of Elsie, though the candle had burned to a stub when the searchers reached the last inner room. They came from it into a front room, one exit of which was closed with a padlocked door of heavy planks. Lennon recognised the entrance to the still-room.

Carmena handed a key to Cochise and stood shielding the flickering flame of the candle.

"Maybe we'll find both together," she said. "It would have been just like Slade to lock your woman in with the tizwin."

She added a guttural murmur in Apache. The Indians pushed forward as their leader snapped open the padlock. The heavy door swung open. All surged into the still-room except one of Lennon's guards, and he craned his neck to gape at the still. Into Lennon's ear breathed a faint whisper: "Keep back."

A moment later Carmena was darting in after the Apaches. She took her shielding hand away from the candle to point at a pile of jugs behind the still. With the gesture she called out in Apache. Cochise and all the others rushed to dig into the pile of jugs. Carmena glided to the still and bent down. She thrust the candle into the opening of the firebox.

For the first time Lennon grasped what the girl was about. And with that he realised in a flash all the cool courage and cleverness and self-sacrifice of the plan that she had schemed out against the brute force of Slade and the cruel cunning of Cochise. Elsie was safe hidden in the mummy room, Slade was dying or dead, and now she had lured Cochise

and his murderous followers into the death trap!

He saw the flare of the lighted tinder in the fire-box. The fuse must already be burning. Yet the girl remained stooped before the still. She would be blown to pieces no less certainly than the Apaches.

Lennon glanced desperately at his guard, who stood beside him in the doorway. The almost naked Apache was a mass of sinewy muscle, and his beady eyes were fixed upon the prisoner in alert watchfulness. Yet he was not quick enough to dodge Lennon's uppercut. He sprawled backward and struck his shock head upon the stone floor.

Carmena had straightened and faced about. At sight of Lennon bounding toward her she thrust out her hands in a repellent gesture.

He clutched her outflung hands and dragged her toward the door. From behind the still came an answering yell. Cochise and another Apache rushed around at the couple. Carmena lunged forward, to thrust Lennon at the doorway. Unbalanced by the shove, he stumbled over the Apache whom he had knocked senseless.

Carmena fell, rolled to one side, and struggled to her knees as Cochise leaped to the doorway after Lennon. Behind them roared a deafening detonation.

Though Lennon was out in the anteroom, he was hurled down by the force of the explosion. He staggered to his feet and faced about. In the thick of the smoke that spumed from the still-room Cochise bounded from the floor and came at him with upraised knife. Lennon barely saved himself by the quickest of side-stepping.

Cochise shot past, whirled, and closed in with the fury of a wildcat. Lennon's parry of the knife stab was sheer luck, but not the blow that he drove to the solar plexus. Superb as was the physical condition of the young Apache, that solid jolt sent him reeling back, gasping for breath.

Lennon closed and sought to wrest away the knife. He twisted down on the Apache's wrist. The knife fell to the floor. He bent to grasp it. Cochise dropped upon him and seized his throat. The slender sinewy hands tightened with frightful force. A few seconds of that throttling pressure would have brought unconsciousness to Lennon. In vain he sought to tear loose the strangle hold.

He was on the verge of frantic flurry when his failing reason fixed upon the fact that there was a lump under his down-pressed back. By great effort he wrenched his body around. His groping hand grasped the fallen knife.

At the second stroke the terrible clutch on his throat relaxed. Cochise twisted convulsively and rolled over on his back.

Lennon wheezed, felt his throat, and jerked himself over, ready to drive the knife into the heart of his merciless enemy. Cochise lay inert, his mouth agape and his eyes rolled up so that only the whites could be seen. Lennon's deep-drawn sigh of satisfaction over that death-mask face caught in the midst and turned into a gasp. He flung himself about to the doorway of the still-room. Where the still had stood was now only a hole in the stone floor. He did not look too closely at the general wreckage.

His half-dazed roving gaze fell upon Carmena. She lay as inert as Cochise and the Apache guard. Yet she was not dead. A fragment of stone or metal, or the shock of the explosion, had injured her back.

He carried her out into the anteroom. She revived. But when she sought to rise, she sank back with an ominous limpness.

"Carmena!" he cried. "Carmena—what is it? You're hurt?"

She smiled up at him, her dark eyes radiant with infinite tenderness and devotion.

"It's all right, Jack—all right," she murmured. "I wanted to do it—for Blossom—and you, dear. Now you are safe. The way up the cañon is clear. Take the right fork, then, each time, the left of the next forks. The trail is only a few miles

west, over the mesas. You'll find Blossom in the mummy room. Hurry off with her before Slade's men come. Hurry—don't linger——"

"You——" broke in Lennon. "Can you think I would leave you here?"

"There's no other way. My back—I can't sit up, and my legs are numb. I can't move them."

"I'll carry you, and there's the hoist rope."

"No use. I couldn't ride."

"I'll carry you," repeated Lennon.

The girl laid a gently caressing hand on his arm.

"Don't you understand, dear? My back—it must be broken. We must think of Blossom. You must hurry off with her while there is time. Isn't it good that you love her?"

Lennon uttered a choking cry and caught the girl up in his arms. He clasped her to him in an agony of love and remorse.

"Carmena! To have thought so wrong of you—of you who were giving your life! I've been a fool—a blind fool. Forgive me! That child—— My God! I can't give you up—I'll *not* give you up!"

"Then—you do—love me, Jack," sighed the girl. Her arms crept up about his neck. "You do love me—I'm glad now you did not let me die—at once—in there."

"Nor at all!" vowed Lennon. "Even though your back—— You'll not die."

"I can't live—like this, dear. And there's Blossom. You must get her away before Slade's men—— But first find me my little pistol. I gave it to Blossom—to use if there was no other way left. Leave it with me, and hurry off with her while there's time. Hurry!"

Lennon's clasp tightened.

"No. I'll never leave you—never while——"

From the inner rooms of the cliff house came a burst of piercing childish shrieks. Carmena twisted about in Lennon's suddenly loosened embrace. There was a sound like the snap of a dry twig. Carmena screamed and fell over sideways in a death-like faint.

CHAPTER XXIII

OUT OF THE PAST

As Lennon knelt beside the swooning girl the shrieks rang nearer. Elsie came flying through the rear opening, in wild fright. Her dress was torn and her yellow hair full of dust and wooden bits. Lennon sprang up, certain that the Apache who had been wounded in the kiva was pursuing her.

In her flurry she appeared to heed nothing until almost upon the body of Cochise. But one glance at the ghostly whites of the Apache's upturned eyes sent her shrinking backward, stricken to horrified silence. Her wild stare fixed first upon Carmena and then shifted to Lennon. With a shriek she flung herself upon him, clutching him about the body in

frantic terror.

"Oh! oh! Papa! Papa! Papa!" she screamed, in a childish treble. "Bad Indian! He's hurting mamma! He's choking mamma!"

Lennon pressed her face hard against his breast to stifle her shrieks.

"Be still," he shouted. "Stop that noise. You're safe. Be still. Hear me? You're safe."

Checked by the sternness of his voice the distracted girl hushed her hysterical cries. When he repeated that she was safe, she at last seemed to grasp the fact. Yet she continued to cling fast to him.

"Tell me quick," he demanded. "Is an Indian following you?"

"No-no-no!" she babbled. "It's mamma—he's choking her! He——"

The tremulous words broke off in a gasp of astonishment. The wild blue eyes stared up at Lennon in bewildered lack of recognition.

"Why—why, you're not my papa!" she cried.

"Of course not, Blossom. I'm Jack—— Brother Jack. Don't you know me?"

The girl shrank back.

"You're not my brother. Let me go. I haven't any brother. I never saw you before."

"Oh, Blossom!" came a cry beside them.

Lennon's glance darted aslant.

Carmena had risen to a sitting position with her arms outstretched toward Elsie. Her face was white from pain, and she was swaying—but she was sitting upright. Realisation of what that meant burst upon Lennon like a flood of golden sunshine.

He dropped on his knees to fling a supporting arm about the girl's shoulders.

"Dearest, it's not true—not true that you—— Your back! You're able to rise!"

Carmena lowered her gaze from her bewildered sister.

"What, I——" she murmured. "Why, so I am! There was a snap, and then, oh, such a pain! It must be the bone had only slipped. That twist snapped it back into place.

"But the pain, dear?"

"It's getting better. It's good pain. It proves I'm alive again—all alive. Raise me up, Jack. I want to see if I can stand."

He lifted her with utmost gentleness. Her teeth clenched upon her lip. But, once she was upright, the pain again eased. She was delighted to find that she could stand with no more than half support from him.

"Yes—all alive," she repeated and she turned to Elsie. "With a brace I'll be able to rise. Blossom, you can bind on ——"

"I'm not Blossom. I'm—I'm Elsie Lane," faltered the younger girl. "And you're not my mamma, no more than he's my papa."

Lennon and Carmena stared at each other questioningly. The girl seemed rational, yet clearly she recognised neither of them. Carmena was first to catch an inkling of the truth.

"No, dear," she soothed. "Of course we're not your papa and mamma. Of course you're Elsie Lane. But we want to help you. We are your friends, dear. What has happened? Tell us?"

The girl stared from them to her surroundings, more than ever bewildered. But the hideous gape of Cochise's mouth and his upturned glassy eyes drew from her a whimpering cry. She shrank around to hide behind Lennon and clutch his arm.

"Oh! That man—that bad Indian—he came after papa found old Sim's mine, and mamma fed him, and—and then he choked her, and I ran to get papa, and papa was lying down at the bottom, with an awful red hole in his head—and I ran back to mamma—and she was dead. The bad Indian was chasing our ponies. I was 'fraid he'd kill me, too, and I ran and ran and ran, right up past the middle tower of the giant's castle and down the other side, and I got awful thirsty. Then—then I went to sleep—and when I woke up the roof was falling on me and it was night, and when I got out here, you weren't my papa and mamma, but there was that bad Indian."

Lennon needed no verification of the tragedy that the girl evidently remembered as having occurred only a few hours past. Before his mental vision rose the gruesome images of the skeleton at the foot of the mine slide and the skeleton in the cabin.

"I've been blind," he murmured to Carmena. "Sim told me that nine years ago he gave maps of his mine and the Triple Butte region to a doctor named Lane."

Carmena was gazing yearningly at the unresponsive Elsie.

"All these years!" she sighed. "First her childhood all a blank to her, and now all the years with me lost! I'm a stranger to her—to my little Blossom! Oh, Jack!"

"Give her time. She will remember. Such cases are not unknown," comforted Lennon. He turned to Elsie.

"Listen, dear. I found your papa and mamma and buried them. Now I have killed the bad Indian. But you have been sick—out of your head a long time. This lady—Carmena—has taken care of you and she loves you."

The child-minded girl peered up at her foster-sister.

"You—you love me? But I know it. You look at me like mamma does."

Carmena smiled radiantly. Lennon hastened to add an urgent appeal.

"She is hurt, Elsie, and more bad Indians are coming. Won't you help me get her safe away from here?"

The request diverted the girl's thoughts before she could yield again to panic. Instead of going frantic and becoming a drag upon Lennon's efforts she helped support Carmena through to the hoist room.

Slade was lying as the Apaches had left him beside the charcoal brazier, his left arm still lashed behind to his right foot. He had died from his wounds. As they passed by, Lennon shielded Elsie from the unpleasant sight. But Carmena looked full at the big twisted body of the man who had ruined and murdered her father.

"He deserved it all, and more—far more," she murmured. "First to make dad believe the brand-blotting was a part of his honest cattle business and then——"

"What's that?" interrupted Lennon. "You mean he deceived your father? I did not understand it that way."

"Yes. He lied. Dad was an Easterner, like yourself. Slade had him incriminated before he knew it was stock stealing. Then he forced tizwin making upon us. You know the consequences to poor dad. And what if the big beast had

found Blossom! Oh, I should have waited for Cochise to torture him. But I could not bear it."

"Because you are yourself, Carmena—as tender-hearted as you are strong and brave and wise."

"Silly, you mean—to lose a single moment now in talk. Put me down here. I can get to the hoist. Hurry with Elsie—get saddles, food, your rifle. Hurry! We must get out of the Hole before Slade's punchers come."

Lennon eased the girl to the floor and ran into the living room. Elsie darted after him. Nor did she stop to be directed. She went straight to her food cupboard, without paying the slightest heed to the outstretched body of the luckless Farley. Lennon threw a rug over the pitiful form and hastened to drag three saddles and as many canteens out to the hoist.

Carmena had crept back close to the body of Slade. She waved Lennon to hurry. He ran back for his rifle and the food. Elsie already had packed two pairs of saddlebags with flour, bacon, and dried meat, and was unlashng the broad stiff hair girth from another saddle.

"Here's just the thing to brace Mena's back," she said.

"Good enough. It will go round her two or three times and——"

Lennon stopped short to stare at the eager girl.

"Why, Blossom, you call her Mena—and you went direct to the food cupboard. You've remembered all!"

The girl gazed up at him wide-eyed.

"Oh, did I? Have I! I did it without thinking. It just seemed natural. But my name isn't Blossom—and it's—it's awful queer—I never saw this place before."

"You have," contradicted Lennon. "It has been a long, long dream, little Blossom. You are beginning to remember it now."

"O-oh—like a dream—— It does seem as if everything—and you—you're Brother Jack, who was going to marry me. But how silly—when I'm only ten years old! Of course it's just all a dream."

Lennon caught at the point—

"Yes, yes, that's a dream, only a dream, about our marrying. You've been dreaming for years, and now you're much older than ten—much older. But that other is only a fancy—a mistake. It's Mena I'm to marry, and you're to be our dear little sister. Remember, I'm to be your brother—your Brother Jack."

"I'll remember," promised Elsie. "You're good, like her. You buried papa and mamma and you killed that bad Indian."

A cry from Carmena sent Lennon bounding out into the anteroom, with his rifle ready to fire. The girl had crouched low behind the massive body of Slade. She pointed to the far corner of the room, and shrilled warningly:—

"Look out, Jack! Cochise!—there in the window!"

Lennon dashed straight at the dark opening where he had seen the gray face of Farley on his first coming to the cliff house. He thrust in the muzzle of his rifle and then his head. Though shadowed, the inner room was light enough for him to see that it was empty. He went back to Carmena.

"No one there," he said. "Just your fancy, dear. You're nervous—overwrought. But no wonder. The sooner we're down and away from here, the better."

"Wait. First take this," replied Carmena. She held up a thick-padded leather belt.

"Slade's," she explained. "I guessed he might be carrying it. It's his money-belt, stuffed with big bills. He lied about the partnership bank-account. Take it, Jack—for Elsie and me. It's ours by rights. He cheated us of our heritage. We have to leave dad's ranch."

The belt was already fast about Lennon's waist. Elsie appeared, dragging the saddle-bags and the girth. Lennon brought the wide cinch to wrap around Carmena's waist. The double fold lashed fast with the straps made a broad stiff corsage support for her wrenched back.

In quick succession, Lennon then lowered, over the sacks of corn in the hoist opening, first Elsie, then the outfit, and lastly Carmena. She asked to see her father, but Lennon dissuaded her. He thought best that her last impression of Slade's victim should be the broken man's redeeming flare of vengeful love and fatherhood.

The moment the slackening hoist rope told him that Elsie had steadied her foster-sister down upon the cliff foot, Lennon ran to descend the rope ladder. Time was passing, and there was still much to be done. He must catch and saddle three good horses. Slade's punchers might not come for four or five hours. But the earlier the start of the fugitives, the better would be their chance of escape if the Navahos should seek to track them down.

Elsie had drawn Carmena away from the heap of saddles and bags to a seat on a ledge. As Lennon sprang toward them from the foot of the shaking ladder Carmena called out and pointed over his head. One rope of the ladder had sagged as if broken. A moment later the ladder came slithering down the cliff face.

"Cut—— That face in the window—Cochise! He's not dead!" cried Carmena. "Oh, Jack, if you hadn't come down fast! He tried to make you fall!"

Lennon was already running out to aim his rifle at the doorway from which the ladder had fallen. There was no sign of the ladder-cutter. Out of the side of his eye Lennon saw the crane swing back into the other opening and the hoist rope jerk upward. He swung his rifle to that side.

The top sack of corn in the barricade slewed out over the brink. It toppled and came plunging downward. Above it a dark head came into sight, half out-thrust over the top of the other sacks.

Lennon fired up past the falling bag of grain. The head jerked upward, twisted, and lay still on the edge of the barricade, as the sack of corn thudded and burst on the cliff foot within two feet of the saddles. To make doubly certain, Lennon sent up another bullet, as well-aimed as the first.

His lips were set in a smile of stern satisfaction as he came to where Elsie was cowering in the arms of Carmena.

"You were right—as usual," he said. "The knife could only have knocked him out for a time. He must have played 'possum. But he was disabled. Crawled after us—couldn't get a gun till we left and too eager to wait—thought we'd be under the hoist. Yet why he should have exposed himself——"

"His wounds," divined Carmena. "The strain of heaving over the sack was too much for him. He collapsed. You're sure you didn't miss him, Jack?"

"No. Through the head—same as he shot Blossom's father."

CHAPTER XXIV

HIS DAUGHTER'S FATHER

Carmena stroked the dishevelled Elsie's yellow locks.

"There, there, sweetheart," she said soothingly. "The fighting is all over. The bad Indian really is dead this time. You've no more need to be frightened. Brother Jack and I will take care of you."

Elsie gazed up into the loving dark eyes of her comforter.

"Why, of course, Mena, when you've always——"

The blue eyes suddenly widened.

"But—but not always—papa and mamma—it seems only yesterday—— No, you—all these years—— But then I can't be only ten! My goodness, what a funny rumbly-wumble in my head—just like two dreams mixed up—only they're real—both of them!"

"Yes, both real—all real, Blossom."

"Except one thing," hastily put in Lennon. "It is Carmena whom I am going to marry, Elsie. Remember that."

The girl looked at him, blushing and dimpling with shy delight.

"Oh, it'll be ever so much nicer, 'cause then I can be just your dear little sister, and Mena loves you a thousand times more."

Carmena's cheeks flooded with scarlet, but she faced Lennon with a look of unflinching candour.

"Yes, Jack, I do. I tricked you into the Basin. For dad's sake, I was ready to lead you to almost certain death from Cochise and his bunch. But after that Gila monster I loved you—I put you above all else except Blossom's safety and dad's good name."

Lennon glowed back at her, proud that he had won the love of such a woman, yet humble over the consciousness of how he had misjudged her.

"You had no thought for yourself," he said. "You would have given your life—and more. You failed to save your father's life. But we shall save his name. Did Slade's Navahos share in the stock stealing?"

"Only Pete. Of the others, Slade's four bodyguards alone knew about the Hole. But, once in, any of the punchers can trail us."

"No," declared Lennon. "To be sure, there is one of the four left. But what if he does bring the punchers? All I need do is catch a pony, ride down the valley, and haul up the lift in the lower cañon."

"Of course!" agreed Carmena. "What a loon I've been not to think of it myself! Of course, Cochise would have done it if we hadn't got the bunch up the cliff when we did. It will take the Navahos till noon to-morrow to ride all the way back and round to the head of Hell Cañon."

"Good enough," said Lennon. "That solves all our difficulties. We can go out the cañon to-night and have a long start for the railway. There we will report how Slade and your father have been killed in a fight with a band of Apache stock thieves."

"Oh, Jack! And Slade's Navahos will scatter when they hear he is dead, and they'll never talk. They're Indians. But the stock here in the Hole, what if the sheriff wants to investigate?"

Lennon pointed upward.

"If he should manage to get into the cliff house, there's nothing incriminating left. The dynamite obliterated the still. As for the stock, we will drive it out with us and deliver it up as part of the loot retaken by us from the thieves."

Carmena put Elsie aside and rose to lay her hands on Lennon's shoulders.

"Now I know for sure you love me," she said. "You love me enough to forget dad as you knew him, and to remember only that he was my father. You would shield his good name as you would shield your own. Yet I am the daughter of a rustler, of a moonshiner, of a drunken criminal."

"No," denied Lennon. "You are the daughter of an unfortunate gentleman, who paid bitterly for his mistakes—who gave his life in an attempt to save you and the child whom he had taken in and sheltered. Let God judge whether he was not far more victim than wrongdoer."

"But the daughter of a weak man——"

Lennon smiled into her troubled eyes.

"You glory of the desert—you cactus blossom! It was your very strength that repelled me, like the spines of the cactus. I never had known your like. I thought a woman must be weak and clinging."

He cast a smiling glance at the wide-eyed Elsie.

"But now, dear, I know that the bloom of the desert thorn may be even more fragrant and lovely than any garden flower."

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