The Queen of the Savannah

A Story of the Mexican War

by Gustave Aimard, 1818-1883

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Chapter I

The Expedition.

The story begins on May 5, 1805, in one of the wildest and most abrupt portions of New Spain, which now forms the State of Coahuila, belonging to the Mexican Confederation.

If the reader will have the kindness to take a glance at a numerous cavalcade, which is debouching from a canyon and scaling at a gallop the scarped side of a rather lofty hill, on the top of which stands an *aldea*, or village of Indios mansos, he will at the same time form the acquaintance of several of our principal characters, and the country in which the events recorded in this narrative occurred.

This cavalcade was composed of fifteen individuals in all; ten of them were lancers, attired in that yellow uniform which procured them the nickname of *tamarindos*. These soldiers were execrated by the people, in consequence of their cruelty. They advanced in good order, commanded by a subaltern and an alférez—an old trooper who had grown gray in harness, who had long white moustachios and a disagreeable face. As he galloped on, he looked around him with the careless, wearied air of a man for whom the future reserves no hopes either of ambition, love, or fortune.

About twenty paces from this little band, and just so far ahead that their remarks reached the soldiers' ears in a completely incomprehensible fashion, three persons, two men and a woman, were riding side by side.

The first was a gentleman of about thirty years of age, of commanding stature; his harsh, haughty, and menacing features were rendered even more gloomy by a deep scar of a livid hue which commenced on his right temple and divided his face into two nearly equal parts.

This man, who was dressed in the sumptuous costume of the Mexican campesinos, which he wore with far from common grace, was named Don Aníbal de Saldibar, and was considered the richest hacendero in the province.

His companion, who kept slightly in the rear, doubtless through respect, was a civilized Indian, with a quick eye, aquiline nose, and a wide mouth lined with two rows of dazzling white teeth. His countenance indicated intelligence and bravery. He was short and robust, and the almost disproportioned development of his

muscles gave an enormous width to his limbs. This individual must assuredly be endowed with extraordinary strength. His attire, not nearly so rich as that of the hacendero, displayed a certain pretension to elegance, which was an extraordinary thing in an Indian.

This man's name was Pedro Sotavento, and he was majordomo to Don Aníbal.

As we have said, the third person was a female. Although it was easy to see, through the juvenile grace of her movements and her taper waist, that she was still very young, she was so discreetly hidden behind gauze and muslin veils, in order to protect her from the burning heat of the sun which was then at its zenith, that it was impossible to distinguish her features. Long black locks escaped from beneath her broad-brimmed vicuña hat, and fell in profusion on her pink and white shoulders, which were scarcely veiled by a China crape rebozo.

At the moment when we approach these three persons they were conversing together with considerable animation.

"No," Don Aníbal said, with a frown, as he smote the pommel of his saddle, "it is not possible, I cannot believe in so much audacity on the part of these Indian brutes. You must have been deceived, Sotavento."

The majordomo grinned knowingly, and buried his head between his shoulders with a motion which was habitual to him.

"You will see, mi amo," he replied, in a honeyed voice, "my information is positive."

"What!" the hacendero continued with increased fury, "They would really attempt resistance! Why, they must be mad!"

"Not so much as you suppose, mi amo; the aldea is large and contains at least three thousand callis."

"What matter? Suppose there were twice as many, is not one Spaniard as good as ten Indians?"

"In the open, perhaps so."

"What is that you say—perhaps?" Don Aníbal exclaimed, turning sharply round, and giving his majordomo a glance of supreme contempt. "Really, Sotavento, your Indian origin involuntarily abuses your judgment by making you regard things differently from what they really are."

"No, mi amo. The Indian origin with which you reproach me, on the contrary, makes me judge the situation healthily; and, believe me, it is far more serious than you imagine."

These words were uttered in a serious tone, which caused the proud Spaniard to reflect.

Pedro Sotavento had been in his service for a long time. He knew that he was brave and incapable of being intimidated by threats or rodomontade. Moreover, he had always been kind to him, and believed himself sure of his devotion, hence he continued in a milder key—

"That is the reason, then, why you insisted so strongly on my taking an escort when we passed the Fort of Agua Verde?"

"Yes, mi amo," he replied, giving the soldiers a glance of singular expression. "I should have liked it to be more numerous."

"Nonsense, had it not been through consideration for the señora, whom I am anxious not to terrify in her present condition, I would not have accepted a single

soldier. We alone are more than sufficient to chastise these scoundrels, were there a thousand of them."

"Don Aníbal," the young lady here said in a soft and harmonious voice, "the contempt you profess for these poor people is unjust. Though they are of a different colour from us, and almost devoid of intellect, they are men for all that, and as such have a claim on our pity."

"Very good, señora," the hacendero answered savagely; "take their part against me, that will not fail to produce an excellent effect."

"I take no person's part, Don Aníbal," she continued, with a slight tremor in her voice. "I merely offer an opinion which I consider correct, that is all. But your outbursts of passion terrify me; perhaps it would have been better to leave me at the hacienda, as I expressed a desire."

"My family are never insulted with impunity, señora; I wished you to witness the vengeance which I intend taking for the insult offered to you."

"I made no complaint to you, Don Aníbal. The slight insult I received, even admitting that it was an insult, does not deserve so terrible a punishment as you purpose to inflict on these unhappy creatures. Take care, Don Aníbal. These men whom, in your Castilian pride, you obstinately insist on ranking with the brute beasts and treating as such, will grow weary one day. They already feel a profound hatred for you. The Indians are vindictive, and may wait perhaps for twenty years the opportunity to repay you the evil you have done them; but then their vengeance will be frightful."

"Enough, señora," the hacendero said roughly; "but while waiting for this vengeance with which you menace me in their name, I mean to treat them as they deserve."

The young lady bowed her head, and made no further remark.

"Oh!" the majordomo said, with a grin of mockery, "You can strike without fear, mi amo. The Indians have been too long accustomed to bend their necks for them ever to feel any desire to draw themselves up and bite the hand which chastises them."

These words were uttered with an accent which would have caused Don Aníbal to reflect seriously, had he not been so infatuated about his real or supposed superiority over the unfortunate race that formed the subject of the conversation we have just reported.

The opinion expressed by the hacendero was not so erroneous as it might appear to a European. The Spanish name was at this period surrounded by such a prestige; the hapless Indians were reduced to such a state of degrading servitude and brutalization; they seemed to have so thoroughly recognized the superiority of their oppressors, that the latter did not even take the trouble to hide the contempt with which these degenerate remains of the powerful races they had vanquished in former times inspired them. They affected, under all circumstances, to make them feel all the weight of the yoke under which they bowed them.

Still, under present circumstances, the proud Spaniard committed a grave error. For this reason:

The Indians against whom he was marching at this moment were not attached by any tie to those whom three centuries of slavery had rendered submissive to the Spanish authority. They had only been settled for about thirty years, through

their own free will, at the spot where they now were. This requires an explanation, which we will proceed to give, begging the reader to pardon this digression, which is indispensable for the comprehension of the facts which we have undertaken to recount.

There are races which seem destined by fate to disappear from the surface of the globe. The red race is of the number, for it has no fiercer enemy than itself.

The Indians, in lieu of making common cause against their oppressors, and trying to emancipate themselves from their tyranny, expend all their courage and energy in fratricidal contests of nation against nation, tribe against tribe, and thus help those who do all in their power to keep them down. These contests are the more obstinate, because they take place between men of the same blood and even of the same family for originally frivolous causes, which, however, soon attain considerable importance, owing to the number of warriors who succumb to the rage and ferocity displayed on both sides.

Hence entire nations, formerly powerful, are gradually reduced to a few families, and in a relatively short period become entirely extinct, the few surviving warriors seeking their safety in flight, or going to claim the protection of another nation with which they soon become blended.

Hence we may account for the fact that the names of the tribes flourishing at the period of the discovery of America are now scarcely known, and it is impossible to recover any trace of them.

The first conquerors, impelled by religious fanaticism and an unextinguishable thirst for gold were, we allow, pitiless to their unhappy victims, and sacrificed immense numbers in working the mines. Still, to be just, we must state that they never organized those grand Indian hunts which the Anglo-Saxons initiated in North America; they never offered a reward of fifty dollars for every Indian scalp; and instead of driving back the Indian race before them, they, on the contrary, blended the native blood with their own, so that the number of Indians has been considerably augmented in the old Spanish possessions, while they will ere long disappear in North America, where they are hunted down like wild beasts.

According to a census made by the Washington Congress in 1858, the Indians scattered over the territory of the United States amount to 800,000.

In Mexico, where the population is only seven million, there are five million Indians and half-breeds; moreover, it is proved that in the time of Motecuhzoma the population never attained this high figure.

It results then from our remarks that the Spaniards who, during three centuries, incessantly massacred the Indians, succeeded in increasing their numbers; while the North Americans who are so philosophical and such philanthropists have attained a diametrically opposite result, and during the sixty years since they proclaimed their independence, in spite of all the efforts made to civilize the Indians, they have nearly exterminated those tribes which dwell on their territory.

It must be confessed that this is a most unfortunate result! We will stop here, for every thinking man will be enabled to draw the sole logical conclusion from our remarks without our dilating on them.

About forty years before the period at which our story begins, two of the most important tribes of the Comanche nation suddenly quarrelled after an expedition

they had made in common against the Apaches, the irreconcilable enemies of the Comanches, with whom they alone dare to dispute the supremacy on the great prairies of the Far West.

This expedition had been completely successful: a winter village of the Apaches was surprised by night, the horses were carried off, and sixty scalps raised.

The warriors returned to the gathering place of their nation, singing, dancing, and celebrating their exploits, as they are accustomed to do when, in an expedition of this nature, they have killed several of their enemies without any loss on their own side. This had been the case on the present occasion. The Apache warriors, aroused from deep sleep, had fallen like ripe corn beneath the tomahawks of the Comanches as they sought to escape from their burning lodges without thought of arming themselves.

In spite of all the care taken in the division of the plunder that each tribe might be equally favoured, the chiefs did not succeed in satisfying everybody; the warriors who thought themselves defrauded gave way to recriminations; tempers were heated, and, as always happens with men who constantly go about armed, they proceeded almost immediately from words to blows.

There was a battle; blood followed in streams, and then the two tribes separated, swearing a deadly hatred, though it was impossible to discover whence the quarrel originated, or which side was in the wrong. These two tribes were the “White Horse” and the “Red Buffalo.”

Then a war began between these old friends which threatened to be indefinitely prolonged; but one day the Red Buffaloes, being surprised by their enemies, were almost entirely exterminated, after a fight that lasted two days, and in which even the squaws took part.

The vanquished, reduced to about fifty warriors and the same number of women and children, sought safety in flight, but being hotly pursued, they were compelled to cross the Indian border, and seek a refuge upon Spanish territory.

Here they drew breath. The Spanish government allowed them to settle in the neighbourhood of the Fort of Agua Verde, and granted them the right of self-government, while recognizing the authority of the king of Spain, and pledging themselves to be guilty of no exactions of any sort.

The Red Buffaloes, pleased with the protection granted them, religiously carried out the conditions of the treaty; they built a village, became husbandmen, accepted the missionary sent to them, turned Christians, ostensibly at least, and lived on good terms with their white neighbours, among whom they speedily acquired the reputation of being quiet and honest people.

Unhappily, perfect happiness is not possible in this world, and the poor Indians soon learnt this fact at their own expense.

The ground on which their wretched village stood was surrounded by the lands of the Hacienda del Barrio, which had belonged, ever since the conquest, to the Saldibar family.

So long as Don José de Saldibar was alive, with the exception of a few insignificant discussions, the Indians were tolerably at liberty; but when Don Aníbal succeeded his father, matters at once altered.

Don Aníbal signified to the chief cacique of the Red Buffaloes, that he must allow himself to be a vassal, and consequently pay to him not only a tithe of his

crops, and the capitation tax, but also supply a certain number of his young men to work in the mines and guard the cattle.

The chief answered with a peremptory refusal, alleging that he was only dependent on the Spanish government, and recognized no other sovereign.

Don Aníbal would not allow himself to be defeated; he organized against the Indians a system of dull annoyance for the purpose of compelling them to give way; he cut down their woods, sent his cattle to grass in their fields, and so on.

The Indians suffered without complaining. They were attached to their wretched huts and did not wish to quit them.

This patient resignation, this passive resistance, exasperated Don Aníbal. The Indians let themselves be ruined without uttering complaints or threats; several of their young men were carried off, and they did not offer the slightest protest. The hacendero resolved to come to an end with these men whom nothing could compel to obey his will.

In spite of himself, he was terrified at the indifference of the Indians, which he fancied too great not to be affected; he went over in his mind all he had made the poor people suffer, and the injustice he had done them, and came to the conclusion that they were preparing to take some terrible vengeance on him.

He determined to be beforehand with them, but he needed a pretext, and this Sotavento, his majordomo, undertook to provide him with.

This Sotavento, of whom we have already said a few words, was himself of Indian race. One of Don Aníbal's friends had warmly recommended him, and for twelve years he had been in the service of the hacendero, whose good and bad passions he had contrived so cleverly to flatter, with that suppleness of character natural to the redskins, that the latter placed the most perfect confidence in him.

Sotavento, naturally, carried out his master's orders zealously, and eagerly seized every opportunity to injure the Red Buffaloes, for whom he appeared to entertain a profound hatred.

After consulting with his master, Sotavento managed matters so that one day Doña Emilia, Don Aníbal's wife, who had hitherto defended the poor people of the aldea under all circumstances, and had even succeeded in saving them from several vexatious acts, was, while taking a walk, insulted by an Indian, or at least a man wearing their costume, and was so frightened that she was confined to her bed for several days.

The hacendero made the more noise about this insult, because, as his wife was enceinte, the fright she had undergone might have had very serious consequences for her.

He proceeded in all haste to the capital of the province, had a long interview with the governor, and then returned home, certain this time of gaining the end at which he had so long aimed.

He had been accompanied from the city by a juez de letras, an insignificant person, to whom we have not yet alluded, and who appeared but little pleased with the duty confided to him, for he trotted timidly along upon a scrubby mule behind the soldiers.

Only stopping at the hacienda long enough to bid his wife mount her horse and come and see what was going to happen, Don Aníbal at once continued his journey, consenting with great difficulty, upon the repeated entreaties of his

majordomo, to accept the escort the commandant of the Fort of Agua Verde offered him, for he was so eager to revenge himself.

The country the travellers passed through was extremely picturesque; from the elevation they had reached, they surveyed an admirable landscape closed in on the horizon by lofty forest-clad mountains. In the west spread out the immense sheet of water, known as the Agua Verde, which the beams of the setting sun tinged with all the prismatic hues. Besides this, they could see the Río Grande, which was lost in infinite windings, the Fort of the Bahia, situated on a point of the river, and the green prairies of the Indian border, which were agitated by mysterious movements.

In the meanwhile the Mexicans continued to ascend, we dare not say the road, for no roads of any sort existed at that period in this savage country, and we doubt whether any exist now, but the track which led to the aldea of the Red Buffaloes.

This track, cut by human hands on the sides of the hill round which it wound, became more and more scarped, and at last resembled a staircase, which would have mightily staggered a European traveller, but these horsemen did not even seem to notice the fact.

All at once, Sotavento, who had pushed on slightly ahead during the conversation between the hacendero and Doña Emilia, uttered a cry of surprise as he stopped his horse so short, that the noble animal trembled on its hind legs.

“What is the matter?” Don Aníbal asked as he spurred his horse.

“Look there!” the majordomo replied, stretching his hand.

“Mil demonios!“ Don Aníbal shouted passionately, “What is the meaning of this? Who has warned the scoundrels?”

“Quién sabe?“ the majordomo said with a grin.

Several trees, to which the branches and roots were still attached, had been thrown across the track, and formed a barricade about ten feet in height, which completely stopped the way.

The travellers were compelled to halt before this impassable obstacle.

The hacendero was startled for a moment, but soon, shaking his head like a lion at bay, he looked around defiantly, dismounted, and drawing his machete, walked boldly up to the barricade, while Sotavento, motionless and with folded arms, looked cunningly at him.

The lancers, whom this compulsory stoppage had enabled to catch up the first party, cocked their carbines at an order from their commanding officer, and held themselves in readiness to fire at the first signal.

Chapter II

Redskins and Whiteskins.

Don Aníbal de Saldibar was gifted with a most energetic character and iron will; obstacles, instead of checking, only impelled him to go on at all risks, until he had carried out what he once resolved to do. In no case could any interference,

however powerful its nature, have induced him to hesitate in accomplishing his plans, much less make him give them up. Possessing great physical strength and unusual skill in the management of weapons, he was courageous after the manner of wild beasts, through an instinct for evil and to smell blood. Still he had as much contempt for his own life as for that of his opponent, and he never tried to avoid peril, but, on the contrary, felt a secret pleasure in looking it in the face.

The soldiers who accompanied him had assuredly furnished proofs of their courage long before. Still it was with a start of terror they saw him advance calmly and carelessly toward this barricade of verdure, which rose silent and menacing before them, and behind which they expected at each moment to see spring up a band of enemies, exasperated by long sufferings, and resolved to defend themselves to the last extremity. In the probable event of a collision, the position of the Mexicans was most disadvantageous.

The soldiers, grouped on a path only three feet in width, having on their right a perpendicular granite wall, and on their left a deep barranca, into which the slightest false step might precipitate them, with no shelter of any description to fight men hidden behind a thick barricade, were almost certain of being defeated, if a hand to hand fight began with the Indians. Hence the old officer who commanded the escort shook his head several times with a dissatisfied air, after he had hastily examined the probable fighting ground.

The juez de letras and the two alguaciles who served him as a guard of honour, evidently shared the lieutenant's opinion, for they had stopped out of gunshot and dismounted, under a pretext of tightening their mules' girths, but in reality to convert the carcases of the poor brutes into a rampart.

As for Sotavento, sitting motionless on his horse about ten yards at the most from the felled trees, he was carelessly rolling a cigarette between his fingers, while pinching up his thin lips, and letting a viper's glance pass through his half-closed eyelids.

He seemed, in short, to take but very slight interest in what was going on around him, and was prepared to be a spectator rather than actor of the events which would in all probability occur.

The hacendero had approached the barricade. His face was unmoved; with his left hand resting on one of the branches, and his body bent slightly forward, he was trying to peer through the intertwined branches and leaves at some of the enemies whom he supposed to be ambuscaded there.

Still, although this examination lasted for several minutes, and Don Aníbal, through bravado, prolonged it far beyond what was necessary, the deepest silence continued to prevail, and not a leaf stirred.

"Come," the hacendero said in a sarcastic voice, as he drew himself up, "you are mistaken, Sotavento, there is no one here. I was a fool to believe for a moment that these brutes would attempt to dispute our passage."

"Well, well," the majordomo said with a grin, "¿quién sabe? mi amo, ¿quién sabe? These brutes, as you very correctly term them, have not left their prairies so long as to have completely forgotten their Indian tricks."

"I care little," the hacendero answered drily, "what their intentions or the tricks they have prepared may be; dismount and help me to roll over the precipice these

trees which obstruct the path; at a later date we will proceed to punish the persons who have thus dared to barricade the king's road."

Sotavento hung his head without replying, and prepared to obey; but before he had drawn his foot out of the stirrup the branches parted, and in the space thus left free appeared a man wearing a gold-laced hat with a military cock, and holding in his right hand a long silver-knobbed cane.

As this individual is destined to play a certain part in this narrative, we will draw his portrait in a few lines.

He was a man of lofty stature, with marked features and an intelligent physiognomy. His black eyes, sparkling like carbuncles, and full of cunning, had a strange fixity, which gave him, when any internal emotion agitated him, an expression of cold ferocity impossible to describe. His complexion, which was of the colour of new red copper, allowed him to be recognized as an Indian at the first glance; although he had passed midlife, it was impossible to decide his age, for he seemed as vigorous and active as if only twenty years old; not a wrinkle furrowed his brow, not a single gray hair was perceptible in the thick black masses which fell in disorder on his shoulders.

Excepting his gold-laced hat, and his silver-mounted cane, which were the emblems of his rank as cacique or alcade of the aldea, his dress was very simple, and only consisted of worn velvet calzoneras, which but half covered his bare legs, and a gaily coloured zarapé, which was thrown over his shoulders.

Still, in spite of this miserable garb, this man had about him such an air of haughty dignity and innate superiority, that, on seeing him, his ridiculous attire was forgotten, and involuntary respect was felt for him.

This person was, in fact, the chief of the Red Buffaloes, their cacique, to whom the governor of the province had given the title of alcade.

His name was Mah-mih-kou-ing-atl, not a very euphonious name; but, like all Indian titles, it had a meaning, and signified literally "Running Water."

The hacendero and the cacique examined each other for a moment silently, like two duellists, who, before falling on their favourite guard, try to discover their opponent's weak point, and thus render their attack, if possible, decisive.

It was the first time they stood face to face, and hence the fixedness of their glance had something strange and fatal about it. Still, Don Aníbal's machete, raised against the barricade, fell without striking. The cacique, satisfied with this triumph, turned his head away with a gloomy smile. Each of these men had measured his foe, and found him a worthy one. The spectators, dumb and motionless, anxiously awaited what was about to take place. Don Aníbal was the first to break the silence.

"What is the meaning of this?" he asked, in a voice that betrayed dull passion; "By what right do you obstruct the king's highway?"

"Who are you, first, who question me in so haughty a fashion, and who authorizes you to do so?" the cacique answered drily.

"Who I am?" the Spaniard continued passionately, "Do you not know?"

"Whether I know or not is of no consequence; I wish to learn the fact from you. I am not acquainted with you, and do not wish to have any dispute with you."

"Do you think so, my master?" the hacendero retorted with a mocking smile, "If unfortunately you are mistaken, as you will speedily discover."

“Perhaps so,” the Indian replied disdainfully; “but, in the meanwhile, as you have no right to enter my village with soldiers, in my quality of magistrate, I order you to withdraw, rendering you and yours responsible for the consequences of your disobedience in the event of your refusing to obey my orders.”

While Don Aníbal listened to these words, with his arms crossed on his chest, and head thrown back, a smile of imperceptible meaning played around his lips.

“I fancy,” he said ironically, “that you attach greater importance to your dignity of alcade than it really possesses, my master; but I have not come here to discuss with you. Will you, yes or no, let me pass?”

“Why do you not try to force a passage?” the cacique said.

“I am going to do so.”

“Try it.”

Without replying, Don Aníbal turned to the leader of the escort.

“Lieutenant,” he said to him, “order your men to fire on that scoundrel.”

But the old officer shook his head.

“Hum!” he remarked, “What good would that do us? It would only cause us to be killed like asses. Do you imagine that man to be alone?”

“Then you refuse to obey me?” the hacendero said with concentrated passion.

“Canarios! I should think I do refuse. I was ordered to defend you from attack; but not to sacrifice the men I command in satisfying a whim. This individual, the deuce take him! Were he ten times the Indian he is, has the law on his side, ¡Rayo de Dios! You waste your time in arguing with him, instead of coming to an end at once.”

Don Aníbal listened to this remonstrance with ill-restrained impatience. When the lieutenant ceased speaking, he said with ironical deference, as he bowed to him—

“Pray what would you have done in my place, Señor Lieutenant?”

“Canarios! I should have acted in a different way. It is evident that we are not the stronger, and that if we attempt to pass as you propose, those red devils will only have to give us a push to send us rolling over the precipice, which, I suppose, would not exactly suit your views.”

“Well?” the hacendero interrupted with an impatient gesture.

“One moment, hang it all! Let us act legally since it is necessary. The alcade’s cane is at times stronger than the soldier’s sword, and to break it you require a stronger cane, that is all. Have you not brought with you a sort of writer or juez de letras, flanked by two alguaciles? The scoundrel must have some sort of authority in his pocket. But what do I know? Well, let the two black birds settle matters between themselves. Believe me, it is the only thing we can do in the present posture of affairs; we will see if these pícaros dare to resist a representative of his majesty, whom may Heaven preserve!”

“Viva Dios! you are right, Lieutenant; I perceive that I acted like an ass, and we ought to have begun with that. Give those persons orders to come up, if you please.”

The cacique had listened to the conversation, leaning carelessly on his cane in the trench behind the barricade; but, on hearing the conclusion, which he doubtless had not anticipated, he frowned and looked anxiously behind him.

At a sign from the lieutenant, several soldiers went in search of the juez de letras and his two acolytes. But it was no easy task to bring them to the front: officers of justice have this in common with the crow, that they smell gunpowder a long distance off.

The poor devils, entrenched, as well as they could manage, behind their mules, were trembling all over, while waiting for the action to begin; when they saw the soldiers galloping toward them, they fancied their last hour had arrived, and they began commending their souls to Heaven, while repeating all the prayers they could call to mind, and beating their chests powerfully, as they invoked all the saints of the interminable Spanish calendar.

At the first moment the soldiers were greatly amused at their terror, and laughed heartily at their pale faces and startled glances. On hearing the lancers laugh, the juez de letras, who, apart from his poltroonery, was a clever and sensible man, began reflecting, and suspected that the danger was not so great as he had at first supposed it.

He got up, carefully arranged his attire, and asked the soldiers for news, which they gave him, laughing most heartily the while. The juez then drew himself up in a dignified manner, mounted his mule, and addressed his alguaciles, who were still hidden behind a bend in the path—

"Well, scamps," he said to them, while attempting to reassume an imposing air, as became a magistrate of his importance, "what is the meaning of this? Heaven pardon me, but I believe you are afraid. Is that the way in which you sustain the honour of the gown you wear? Come, come, mount without further delay, and follow me smartly."

The alguaciles, abashed by this sharp reprimand, got on their mules, offering the best excuses they could, and ranged themselves behind their superior officer.

Still the worthy juez de letras was not so reassured as he wished to appear, and we are forced to confess that the nearer he drew to the barricade, the more formidable it seemed to him, and the less at ease did he feel as to the results of the mission he had to carry out.

Still, hesitation was no longer possible, he must bravely go through with the affair; and pluck up a heart. No one is so courageous as a poltroon driven into a corner; fear in him takes the place of bravery, and he becomes the more rash in proportion to his former terror.

The juez de letras gave a proof of this, for instead of halting a reasonable distance from the barricade, he advanced till he could almost touch it. Perhaps, though, this did not result entirely from his own will, for the soldiers had maliciously given the poor mule several vigorous blows with their chicotes, so that it pricked up its ears and dashed madly onward. The fact is, that, whether voluntarily or not, the juez found himself side by side with Don Aníbal.

The lieutenant's advice was, as he had said, the only mode of putting an end to the cacique's resistance. At the period when this story takes place, the liberal ideas which overturned and regenerated the old world had not yet reached the Spanish colonies, or, if they had reached them, had not penetrated to the lower classes, who, besides, would not have understood them.

The King of Spain, owing to the system adopted by the Peninsular government, was revered, feared, and respected like a god; the lowest of his representatives, the

mere flag hoisted over a conducta de plata, were sufficient to protect the millions that traversed the entire length of Mexico to be embarked on board the ships; in a word, it would not have occurred to anyone in New Spain that it was possible to rebel against the mother country or disobey the lowest or most insignificant of the officers of the sovereign beyond the seas.

Still, in spite of the knowledge of their power, the Spaniards were slightly alarmed by the coldly resolute attitude of the Indian cacique; the more so, because this man belonged to that haughty Comanche race which preferred to return to the desert sooner than bend beneath the Spanish yoke. It is true that Running Water, on settling on this side the border, had recognized the suzerainty of the King of Spain; but it was so recently that this fact occurred, that there was reason to fear lest the Red Buffaloes, driven to extremities by the countless annoyances they had endured, might be resolved to take an exemplary vengeance on their enemies, even though that vengeance entailed their utter ruin.

Such instances as this had already occurred several times in the colony. Another reason also heightened the apprehensions of Don Aníbal and his companions; in spite of the secrecy in which his plans were arranged and his rapidity of action, the Indians had been warned of what was being prepared against them, which was superabundantly proved by the measures they had taken to defend themselves against an attack which nothing could have led them to suspect.

The hacendero had, then, been betrayed; but who was the traitor?

At a sign from Don Aníbal, the juez de letras prepared with considerable assurance to exhibit his titles and quality. After securing himself firmly in his saddle the magistrate drew a paper from a portfolio one of the alguaciles handed him, the contents of which he read in a loud, firm voice.

This document was to the effect that the Comanche Indians, called the Red Buffaloes, who had sought shelter on the Spanish territory, and to whom the government of his majesty had deigned to grant asylum and protection, had rendered themselves unworthy this protection by their misdeeds, a long list of which was quoted. The Viceroy of New Spain, listening to the repeated complaints which were made from all sides against them, recognizing them as ungrateful and incorrigible felons, withdrew the hand he had hitherto extended to protect them, and ordered, in consequence, that they should be compelled by all legal means at once to abandon their place of residence, and repass the border, after their village had been utterly destroyed in their presence. Any disobedience would be punished with death, etc., etc.

This document was listened to in religious silence by the cacique, with downcast head and frowning brow, but without the slightest mark of impatience, anger, or sorrow. When the judge had finished he raised his head, and looked at him like a man awakening from sleep.

“Have you ended?” he asked him in a gentle voice.

“Not yet,” the magistrate answered, amazed and emboldened by this mildness, which he had been far from anticipating.

“Do so,” he said.

The judge continued:

“Consequently I, Don Ignacio Pavo y Cobardo, juez de letras of the town of Mondovo, by virtue of the powers conceded to me by the most serene Governor of the Intendancy, summon you, alcade of the aldea of the Red Buffaloes, in the name of his Majesty, whom may Heaven preserve, to obey this order at once without any resistance.”

Running Water drew himself up, gave the spectators a glance of strange meaning; then, without uttering a word, he took off his hat, which he threw over the precipice, broke his cane across his knee, let the pieces fall at his feet, and said to Don Aníbal—

“You wish for war, be it so! I accept. You can now pass, and no one will oppose you.”

He fell back a step, shouted in a thundering voice, “We shall meet again,” and then disappeared.

Chapter III

The Red Buffaloes.

The startled Mexicans looked at each other with dumb terror; for several minutes after the disappearance of the cacique they remained thus gloomy and hesitating, fearing a trap, and not daring to put faith in the words of an Indian.

At length the hacendero, ashamed of showing the terror he felt, haughtily raised his head, and angrily stamped his foot.

“Viva Dios!” he shouted, “Are we timid women to let ourselves be frightened by the threats of a maniac? I will go on, even if I should be murdered.”

And before anyone dreamed of preventing him, he forced his way with great difficulty through the branches, machete in hand, and ready to sell his life dearly. But Running Water had told the truth; the passage was free far as eye could extend, and the path was entirely deserted. Don Aníbal rejoined his comrades.

“There is nobody,” he said, with an accent of regret. “Aid me to throw these trees over the precipice, and let us continue our journey. Let us make haste though, for, if I am not mistaken, we shall find the resistance which is not offered us here at the village.”

The path was soon cleared, and the trees hurled into the barranca, down which they rolled with a sinister noise. They continued their march, and at the end of an hour reached the plateau on which the village stood. But they found the huts a pile of smoking ashes, while a long line of flame was rapidly running along the side of the hill, and devouring the crops. The Red Buffaloes had not waited for the arrival of the king’s people; they had themselves destroyed everything.

The Mexicans only found shapeless ruins; as for the Indians, they had disappeared, and it was impossible to discover in what direction they had fled. The old officer gazed for a moment pensively at this scene of desolation, and then walked up to Don Aníbal.

“Señor de Saldibar,” he said to him solemnly, “take care!”

“Take care! I?” he answered haughtily, “Nonsense, Lieutenant, you are jesting.”

“I am not jesting,” the soldier answered sadly, “I have known the Indians for a long time. They never forgive an insult. For them to consent to consummate their ruin, and unresistingly abandon a spot which must for so many reasons be dear to them, they must be meditating a terrible revenge upon you; so, I repeat, take care.”

In spite of his ferocious courage and indomitable pride the hacendero was struck by the tone in which these words were pronounced by a man whose courage could not be doubted; he felt a shudder pass over his limbs and his blood run cold in his veins; for a moment remorse entered his heart, and he regretted having driven to desperation these peaceable men, who only asked for their share of air and sunshine.

But stiffening himself almost immediately against this emotion, of which he had not been master, the haughty Spaniard smiled bitterly, and answered the officer with a look of defiance—

“What can such wretches effect against me? It is not I who have to fear; but they will have cause to tremble if ever they cross my path again; but as we have nothing more to do here, let us be off, for it is growing late.”

The officer made no answer; he bowed, remounted his horse and ordered the bugles to sound. At the base of the hill the band separated; the escort returned to the fort of Agua Verde, and the hacendero, only followed by his wife and his majordomo, started in the direction of the Hacienda del Barrio. The juez de letras and the two alguaciles, who had not quite recovered from their terror, preferred to follow the soldiers in spite of the offer Don Aníbal made them of receiving them into his house.

The journey was sad, for the hacendero was dissatisfied, though he did not wish to show it. His plans had succeeded, it is true, but not in the way he had intended; hence, his vengeance was not complete.

These people, whom he wanted to drive from their hearths, on whom he wished to inflict chastisement for the insult offered his wife, had destroyed their village with their own hands, and they robbed him thus far of the pleasure of doing it.

Doña Emilia was sorrowful and thoughtful; this hatred, accumulated on her husband’s head, which would doubtless fall on her, though she was innocent, terrified her. She did not dare express her feelings aloud, but she gave full scope to her thoughts, and with the exquisite sensibility, and prophetic intuition which loving women possess, she foresaw a future big with misfortune and gloomy catastrophes.

The majordomo appeared as careless and indifferent on the return as when he went to the village. Still, anyone who could have examined him carefully, and seen the wicked flash of his eye when he took a side-glance at his master, would have suspected that this man was playing a part, that he had taken a greater share in recent events than was supposed, that his indifference was feigned, and that he alone of the three travellers had a glad heart, although his countenance was sorrowful.

Anyone who had had this idea would perhaps not have been completely mistaken, for we must not forget that Señor Sotavento was an Indian, although he appeared a Christian, and almost civilized.

Nothing occurred to interrupt the monotony of the journey, no annoying accident troubled the tranquillity of the travellers, who reached the Hacienda del Barrio a little before sunset, at the moment when night was beginning to hide the valleys in the transparent shadows of dusk, while the tops of the mountains were still tinged with a pinkish light.

The hacienda was a substantial building of hewn stone, such as the first conquerors liked to erect to prove to the conquered that they would never abandon the soil of which fortune had rendered them masters. This house seemed a fortress, so massive was it; and built on the top of a rather lofty hill upon a rock hanging over the abyss, it could only be reached by a narrow, rugged track cut in the rock, on which two horsemen could not ride abreast. This track wound round the side of the hill and led to the great gate of the hacienda, which was defended by a drawbridge, usually down, but which it would have been an easy task to raise. The walls, which were thirty feet high and of proportionate thickness, were surmounted by those almenasor battlements which were a sign of nobility, and which the old Christians, that is to say, the true Castilians, never failed to place above their houses; for the hacenderos must not be confounded with our farmers, for that would be a great error.

The hacenderos of New Spain are great landowners, whose possessions are often more extensive than one of our counties. In the time of the Spaniards, they led the life of feudal lords in the midst of their vassals, acting as they pleased, and only accountable to the Viceroy, who, residing in Mexico, or a great distance off, had something else to do than look after the way in which these feudatories managed their estates. The latter cultivated their land, worked their mines, fattened their flocks, and reared their horses, without anyone dreaming of asking any account of them as to the means they employed to augment their fortunes, or the manner in which they treated the Indians who fell to their share upon the grand division of the Mexican population among the conquistadors.

On this subject we will hazard a parenthesis. Since Mexico has proclaimed her independence, slavery is abolished *de jure* in the country, but still exists *de facto*. In this way: The rich landowners whom the philanthropic law utterly ruined, instead of crying out and complaining as certain slaveholders do in North America, hit on a clever and successful plan.

The hacenderos assembled their slaves and informed them that slavery was abolished, and that consequently they were free, and could go wherever they thought proper. The poor devils were, at the first moment, stunned by the news, and did not at all know what would become of them. In fact, while they were slaves, they lived without having the trouble of thinking. They worked, it is true, but they were fairly fed, clothed after a fashion, and taken care of when ill. Now they were free, they would have to seek the food, clothing, and medicine which they had hitherto ready to hand without the trouble of looking for it. The question was a delicate one, for they had nothing at all.

The hacenderos appeared to take pity on their hapless fate; they were moved with compassion, and told them that, as they would require peons to do the Work the slaves had hitherto done, they would engage them at the rate of three reals a day, but they would have to feed and clothe themselves. “Moreover,” the hacenderos added, “to facilitate your getting a start in life, which is rather difficult,

we will advance you all you require, and stop it out of your wages. In this way you will be free, and you can leave us whenever you think proper, after paying off the advances we have made you."

The ex-slaves accepted with transports of joy and became peons. Then it came about that they could never pay off the advances, and as they still wanted food and clothing, the debt increased like the memorable snowball, and the peons were forced to give up all thoughts of leaving their masters, as they had no other than personal security to offer. The result is, that at the present day they are greater slaves than ever.

The only persons who gained by the transaction were the hacenderos. The reason is very simple: it has been calculated that the cost of maintaining a slave is six reals a day, and the peons cost them three. Hence there is a clear profit of one half; moreover, the masters supply the food and clothing, and heaven alone knows what price they charge the peons.

This is the way in which the Indians, who were slaves in the Spanish possessions, have become free, thanks to the declaration of Independence. Is this progress? I do not think so. But to resume our story.

Days, weeks elapsed, and not a word was heard of the Indians; they seemed to have disappeared for ever. By autumn the recollection of the expedition faded away, and then it was utterly forgotten, and nothing was said about the Red Buffaloes or their threat of vengeance, which was regarded as braggadocio.

A year passed away, and we reach the second half of 1808. The political horizon was beginning to grow overcast; in spite of the care the Spanish government took to isolate the colonies, and prevent European newspapers entering them, the arrival of French troops in Spain was vaguely discussed; minds fermented and attempts at revolt were made in several provinces. Don Aníbal, who at this time was at Leona Vicario, whither he had taken his wife a few months before for her confinement, resolved to leave the town and return to his hacienda.

He was the more eager to carry out this resolution because the Indians of the Presidio de Río Grande, only a few leagues from his estate, had risen in revolt, and after burning the fort and massacring the garrison, had spread over the country like a torrent which had burst its dykes, and were plundering and destroying everything they came across. An atrocious fact was stated in connection with the capture of the Río Grande Fort, which heightened the hacendero's apprehensions, by leading him to suppose that his old enemies, the Red Buffaloes, were connected with this sudden insurrection.

Count Don Rodrigo de Melgosa, commander of the Presidio, and brother of the governor of the Intendancy, was detested by the Indians, whom he treated with the utmost rigour, and it was rumoured that he had several times been guilty of unjustifiable acts of cruelty and barbarity. When, after a desperate resistance, the Indians stormed the fort, they killed Colonel de Melgosa by pouring molten gold into his mouth, saying that, "Since he was so fond of gold they were determined to make him eat it," and the unhappy man died under horrible sufferings.

Then the Indians cut off his head, wrapped it up in a zarapé, and sent this horrible trophy of their victory to the colonel's wife, who happened to be staying with her father-in-law at Mondovo. At the sight of this scalped and fearfully mutilated head, the unhappy woman all but went mad.

It was in vain that the governor—whose only son, quite a lad at time, was at the time in the fort with the colonel, and had disappeared, carried off by the Indians, or, as was more probable, had been sacrificed to their implacable vengeance—tried by all the means in his power to discover the man who had undertaken to deliver this horrible message; all his researches were fruitless, and the unhappy father, a prey to impotent despair, remained in the most perfect ignorance as to the fate of his child.

Strange to say, the murderers had designed on the victim's forehead a buffalo with their scalping knives. Don Aníbal knew that the buffalo was the totem, or emblem of the Indian tribe which he had so brutally expelled from his domain a year previously, hence his anxiety was great, for it was evident to him that the Red Buffaloes were the authors of the death of the unfortunate Colonel de Melgosa, and of the rape of his nephew.

He completed his preparations in all haste, said good-bye to Doña Emilia, whom, in spite of her entreaties, he would not consent to take with him, and started. Nine days later he reached his hacienda, where bad news was awaiting him; all was in disorder. This was substantially what he learned:

Most of his cattle had been carried off, as well as his manadas of horses; several peons had been killed in trying to prevent the robbery of his animals; his fields had been fired and his vines uprooted, indeed the destruction was immense; and in order that the hacendero might be thoroughly aware who the culprits were, a long pole was found planted in the middle of a field, from which was suspended a half-tanned elk skin, on which a buffalo was drawn. This time there could be no mistake; it was really the totem of the hacendero's enemies, for the buffalo was red.

The hacendero burst into a frightful passion, and swore to take exemplary vengeance for this insult. He immediately wrote letters to several neighbouring hacenderos exposed like himself to the depredations of the marauders, and sent off couriers in all directions. The hacenderos, who were as desirous as he was to be freed from these demons, whose audacity, heightened by impunity, no longer knew any limits, and threatened, if they were left alone, to ruin the entire province, did not hesitate about joining Don Aníbal de Saldibar, and a veritable manhunt was organized against the redskins.

The Count de Melgosa, burning to avenge his brother's death, and, moreover, hoping to recover his son, placed two squadrons of dragoons at the service of the confederates, whose numbers were thus considerably augmented, and Don Aníbal, who took the command in chief by general acclamation, found himself at the head of a real army.

The hostilities commenced immediately. The confederates divided into three bodies and set out in search of the Indians. The preparations for the expedition had been made with such secrecy, that the redskins, who were far from suspecting what was going on, were surprised only a few leagues from the Hacienda del Barrio, in a valley on the banks of the Río del Norte, where they had established their camp.

Although suddenly attacked by an enemy superior in strength, the redskins did not the less try to defend themselves, and bravely opposed the white men. The combat was terrible, and lasted a whole day; the Indians fought with that energy

of desperation which doubles the strength and equalizes chances; they knew they had no quarter to expect, and hence preferred death to falling alive into the hands of their implacable foes. The massacre was terrible, and nearly all the redskins succumbed; some, but they were a small number, succeeded in escaping by leaping into the Río del Norte. The Mexicans took no prisoners; men, women, and children were pitilessly sacrificed.

After the battle, Sotavento, who had truly done his duty by his master's side, brought him a boy of about five or six years of age, who was crying bitterly, and who had been delivered to him during the massacre by a Canadian wood ranger. He declared that he had not the courage to kill the child, the more so because his pale skin might lead to the supposition that he was the son of a European. The hacendero shook his head angrily at the sight of the boy; still, not daring to prove himself more cruel than his majordomo, he consented to the poor little wretch being spared, and even carried his clemency so far as to allow him to be taken to the hacienda.

This battle ended the campaign. The confederates separated, satisfied with having exterminated their enemies and taken such a prompt revenge for their outrages. The redskins, at least for a lengthened period, would be unable to take their revenge, and the lesson had been perfect.

Chapter IV

The Cascabel.

The French Revolution not only shook the old European thrones, which it made quiver to their foundations, but the terrible blow it dealt the world was so violent, that the counterstroke was felt even in the indolent and voluptuous Spanish colonies.

In response to the echoing footsteps of those generals of the young French Republic who marched from prodigy to prodigy, improvising soldiers and organizing victory, a lengthened electric current ran along all the coasts of the New World, and revealed to the inhabitants that, like their brethren in North America, they too might someday become free.

Like a deafening thunderclap, leaping across the Atlantic Ocean, the echo of the battles of giants of that Sublime epic power called the Empire, caused the hearts of Americans to beat, and inflamed them with a noble ardour which the Spanish Viceroys were powerless to extinguish.

The occupation of the Peninsula by French armies, by forcing Spain to defend her own territory, which had almost entirely fallen into the enemy's power, obliged her to concentrate all her strength in order to sustain the extraordinary struggle that was preparing, and compelled her to abandon her possessions beyond the seas to their own resources, while she could only form sterile vows that they might not slip from her grasp.

The colonies, which had long been worn out by the yoke the mother country implacably made them wear, considered the moment favourable; generous hearts were affected, and in an instant Peru, Mexico, Chili, Buenos Aires formed secret societies, whose common branches, passing through all classes of society, ended by enveloping the colonial governments in an inextricable net.

Then, when all preparations had been made, when the chiefs had been elected, soldiers enrolled, and the headquarters of revolt chosen, a long cry for liberty was raised to heaven on twenty sides simultaneously; the insurgents rose, calling their brethren to arms, and the systematic opposition of the conspirators was all at once followed by an obstinate war without truce or mercy, of the conquered against the conquerors, of the oppressed against the oppressors, whose watchword was Liberty or Death!

A holy war, an extraordinary struggle, in which the Americans, inexperienced, and having no acquaintance with arms, had but one insatiable desire, to shake off the yoke, an energy which no reverse could crush; and an unflinching resolution to oppose the old Spanish bands, hardened by long fighting, and whom the habit of warfare rendered almost invincible in the sight of these men, in whom they inspired a species of instinctive and supernatural terror.

We will not describe here the history of this war, which was so grand, so noble, and so full of heroic devotion, affecting incidents, and traits of bravery, self-denial, and disinterestedness, worthy the most glorious days of antiquity; our task is more modest, and certainly more easy, for we will limit ourselves to penciling a few private details of this grand drama, which have been neglected by the disdainful muse of history, but which we believe will serve to complete the magnificent tableau of the struggle of progress against barbarism in the first years of the 19th century.

The Mexican revolution had this strange thing about it, that the clergy gave the first signal of revolt. In the provinces the Curas preached insurrection to their parishioners, and seizing a sword in one hand, a cross in the other, led them to the field.

Don Aníbal de Saldibar, although a cristiano viejo, that is to say, belonging to a family originally Spanish, and of which not a member had become allied with the Indians during several ages, did not consider himself obliged to join his fellow countrymen, but, on the contrary, attached himself to the insurrectionary movement.

Father Sandoval, chaplain at the Hacienda del Barrio, was to a great extent the cause of this determination. In Mexico, where the towns are far distant from each other, each hacienda has a chapel served by a priest, whose duty it is to baptize, marry, confess, and guide the Indians, but, before all, keep them in order by the fear of future punishment. Father Sandoval, about whom we shall have a good deal to say during the course of this story, was a simple-hearted, kind, intelligent man, gifted, with great energy of character, and his education had not been so neglected as that of the majority of the priests at this period.

In a word, he was an honest man and true priest before God; the Indians adored him, and would have gone through fire and water for him. Still young, belonging to a rich and respected family, possessing that severe and calm beauty which attracts confidence and excites sympathy, this man who, had he liked, could have

attained the highest dignities of the church, preferred this obscure position through his devotion to that persecuted class which Las Casas loved so deeply, and for which he himself felt immense pity.

As friend and fellow student of the Curé Hidalgo, who was destined to become so celebrated, he professed liberal principles and hatred of the Spanish yoke. Don Aníbal, like all weak-minded men, unconsciously yielded to the influence of this chosen vessel, and had for him a friendship mingled with respect and veneration. Protector of the Indians, Father Sandoval defended them under all circumstances, and had often succeeded, by the mere force of his eloquence, in saving them from the severe punishments to which Don Aníbal had condemned them in a moment of passion. He easily proved to the hacendero that it was to his interest to embrace the revolutionary cause. The latter, dissatisfied with the Spanish government, against which he had long been carrying on a lawsuit, raised no serious objections; and as certain natures only require a lash to make them go faster than is necessary, and pass the goal for which they are started, so soon as Don Aníbal had consented to what Father Sandoval asked of him, he wished to force the latter to place himself by his side at the head of the hacienda peons capable of bearing arms, and proceed to join the Curé Hidalgo, who had just raised the standard of revolt, and was preparing, at the head of his parishioners, armed with bows, arrows, and slings, to face the army of the Viceroy.

As this project was excessively imprudent, the chaplain combated it; but the hacendero, one of whose slightest faults was obstinacy, declared that he must give a pledge to the revolution, and the best way was to range himself beneath the insurrectionist banners. Still, by force of reasoning, supported by the entreaties of Doña Emilia, whom the fear of a separation and the prospect of remaining alone and unprotected at the hacienda with her child, which was scarce fifteen months old, filled with terror, Father Sandoval succeeded in modifying Don Aníbal's resolution, if he did not completely alter it. He made him understand that his hacienda, situated on the Indian border, close to several important presidios, ought to serve as headquarters for the insurgents of this portion of Mexico, who would rally round him and hold the Spanish garrisons in check, so as to prevent them joining the troops General Callega and Count de la Cadena were raising to offer battle to the rebels commanded by Hidalgo, Allende, etc., and who were preceded by the Virgen de Los Remedios, attired as a generalísimo. In a country like Mexico, where religion is all in all, and at the head of an army most of whose generals and officers were priests and monks, this banner was not inappropriate.

Don Aníbal yielded with great difficulty to Father Sandoval's objections; but, feeling flattered by the part he would be called on to play, he at length consented to follow the advice given him by a man who was wiser and more prudent than himself. The Hacienda del Barrio was therefore converted into a fortress; Don Aníbal incited the Indians to revolt, and organized on this frontier a partizan war against the neighbouring garrisons, after having sent to join Hidalgo a body of two hundred well-armed and mounted horsemen under the orders of his majordomo. We see that Don Aníbal thus frankly threw away the mask and boldly burnt his vessels.

The war soon assumed much larger proportions than had been thought possible. The government had remained attached to the King of Spain, and most of

the rich landowners followed this example; so that the insurrection, which was at first formidable, became to some extent isolated, and reduced to act on the defensive. Don Aníbal was too greatly compromised to hope for a pardon, which, indeed, he was not at all inclined to solicit. On the contrary, he suddenly dashed from his eagle's nest on the Spaniards who scoured the country, and though not always the victor, he did them sufficient mischief to prevent them going too far from the presidios or leaving the province. The governor, at length wearied by the incessant attacks of his unseizable foe, resolved to finish with him, and besiege him in his lurking place.

Don Aníbal, warned by his spies of what was preparing against him, resolved on a vigorous resistance; but as he really loved his wife, and did not wish to expose her to the hazards of a storm, and the sight of those atrocities which are the inevitable consequence of it, he arranged with Father Sandoval that he should remove her from the hacienda as soon as possible, and place her and her child in safety. When these arrangements were made, the two gentlemen proceeded in search of the señora, to tell her of the plan they had formed.

Doña Emilia spent a very dull life at the Hacienda del Barrio. Her husband, who was elsewhere engaged, often left her for days, only seeing her for a moment at meals, and addressing a few unmeaning words to her during the quarter of an hour they were together. Fortunately for the poor lady, the hacienda possessed a magnificent garden. She spent nearly the entire day in it under an arbour of orange and lemon trees, reading pious books and watching her child, who was nursed by a quadroon to whom Doña Emilia was sincerely attached, and had married to a peon of the hacienda.

On the day to which we allude, at about two in the afternoon, the warmest hour of the day, Doña Emilia, according to her wont, was indulging in a siesta in a hammock suspended from two enormous orange trees, whose tufted crests almost entirely overshadowed the entire nook. A few paces from her, Rita, the quadroon, was carelessly rocking in a butaca, and giving the breast to the child.

As we have said, the heat was stifling. The burning sunbeams made the sand on the garden walks sparkle like diamonds; there was not a breath of air; the atmosphere, impregnated with the sweet exhalations of the flowers and fragrant woods, was intoxicating, and conduced to slumber. The birds, hidden under the leaves, had ceased their song, and were waiting till the evening breeze refreshed the soil; a solemn silence brooded over nature, and the fall of a leaf would have been heard, so profound was the calm. Rita, involuntarily yielding to the narcotic influences that surrounded her, had fallen asleep with the child still clinging to her breast.

All at once a strange, terrible, frightful thing occurred—a horrible scene, which we feel a hesitation to describe, although we had the fact from a credible witness.[4-1] The branches of a dahlia bush were gently and noiselessly parted, and in the space thus left free appeared the hideous and distorted face of Running Water. This man had, at the moment, something fatal and satanic in his physiognomy, which would have filled with terror anyone who saw it. After remaining motionless for an instant, which he employed in looking around, through fear of being surprised, he laughed cunningly in the Indian fashion, and began crawling softly till his entire body had emerged from the bush. Then he

rose, carefully repaired the disorder his passage had caused in the bush, advanced two paces, placed on the ground a rather large bag he held in his right hand, folded his arms and gazed at Doña Emilia, who was sleeping calmly and peacefully in her hammock, with a strange fixedness, and an expression of hatred and joy impossible to describe.

How had this man contrived to penetrate into the hacienda, which was so strongly guarded, and whose walls were almost insurmountable? Why had he entered alone the garden of a man whom he knew to be his most implacable foe? He doubtless meditated vengeance, but of what nature was it? Running Water, whom the hacendero had strove so hard to injure, and to whom he had done such hurt, was not the man to content himself with ordinary revenge. The redskins have refinements of cruelty and barbarity of which they alone possess the secret. What did he intend doing? What was his object? The Indian chief alone could have answered these questions; for the redskins are well acquainted with the proverb, that “revenge is eaten cold.”

I know not what gloomy thoughts agitated this man while he gazed at the sleeping lady, but his countenance altered every second, and seemed to grow more and more ferocious. He made a move as if about to seize the bag on the ground in front of him, but suddenly reflected.

“No,” he muttered to himself, “not that; he alone would suffer; the hearts of both of them must bleed. Yes, yes, my first idea is the best.”

Then, after taking a parting glance at the lovely, sleeping lady, he stooped with a terrible smile, picked up the bag, which he placed under his left arm, and went away with a step light and stealthy as that of a tiger preparing to leap on its prey. Still, he only went a few paces. Turning suddenly to his right, he found himself in front of the nurse. The latter was still sleeping, intoxicated by the smell of the flowers which appeared to bend over her, as if to shed sleep more easily upon her. Rita was sleeping like a child, without dreams or fears. Rita was young and lovely; anyone but a ferocious Indian, like the man who gazed at her at this moment, and devoured her with his eyes, would have felt affected by such confiding innocence.

With the upper part of her body indolently thrown back, with her eyes half closed and veiled by her long black lashes, and her rosy lips slightly parted so as to display her pearly teeth, the young quadroon with her slightly coppery complexion was delicious. We repeat that anyone but Running Water would have felt subdued and vanquished by the sight of her. Her two hands, folded over the little girl, held her against her bosom, and seemed trying to protect her even in sleep. The infant was neither asleep nor awake. She was in that state of lethargic somnolency which seizes on these frail creatures when they have sucked for a long time. Clinging to the breast, on which she had laid her two small, snow-white hands, the child, with her eyes already closed to sleep, was imbibing a drop of milk at lengthened intervals.

The Indian regarded this group with a tiger’s glance, and for some two or three minutes, involuntarily fascinated by this picture, whose innocence and candour no artist would be able to depict, he stood gloomy and thoughtful, perhaps hesitating in the accomplishment of the infernal work he had meditated so long, and to execute which he had treacherously entered the hacienda. But Satan, conquered for a second, regained his ascendancy in the redskin’s heart.

“It is well,” he muttered in a hollow voice. “The babe will die. The death of the child kills doubly father and mother.”

And he smiled once again that terrible and silent laugh which would have caused anyone who saw it to shudder, and which was habitual to him. He fell back a step, and with a look around him he explored the neighbourhood in its most hidden corners. Assured at length that no one could see him he fell back till he reached the hole in one of the orange trees from which the hammock was hung, and which was exactly opposite the nurse; then he carefully concealed himself behind a tree, and laid his bag on the ground. This bag was of tapir hide, and fastened up with the greatest care.

The Indian stood motionless for a second, then drawing his dagger he did not take the trouble to cut the leather thongs that closed the bag; on the contrary, throwing himself back as if afraid of the consequences of the deed he was about to do, he ripped up the bag its entire length, and at once disappeared behind the trunk of a tree. The body of a cascabel, or rattlesnake; appeared in the gaping orifice of the bag. Indian manners brand as infamous any man who, excepting in Combat, strikes and kills a child at the breast. Hatred is intelligent, and Running Water had found the means to satisfy his upon the poor little creature without breaking the rules of his tribe. He had gone in search of a snake, which was not difficult to find. He enclosed it in a bag of tapir hide so that it could not escape, and kept it for several days without food so as to restore to the animal, which he had surprised while digesting a gorge, all its original ferocity. When the redskin supposed that the snake was in proper condition, he entered the garden as we have seen.

The snake, suddenly liberated from the dark and narrow prison in which it had been so long confined, began unrolling on the ground its monstrous coils. At first half asleep and dazed by the bright light of day it remained for a moment in a state of stupor, balancing itself to the right and left hesitatingly on its enormous tail, throwing its head back and opening its hideous mouth till it displayed its awful fangs. But gradually its eye grew brighter, and breathing a strangled hiss it rushed with undulating bounds towards poor Rita.

The Indian, with his body bent forward, heaving chest, and eyes enormously dilated, looked after it eagerly; at length he held his vengeance in his grasp, and no human power could take it from him. But a strange thing happened, which filled the Indian himself with horror. Upon reaching the nurse the snake, after a moment’s hesitation, gave a soft melodious hiss, apparently indicating pleasure; and rising on its tail with a movement full of grace and suppleness, enwrithed the nurse’s body in its huge folds, gently pushed the sleeping babe aside without doing it the slightest injury, and seizing the nipple the little creature had let go, glued its hideous mouth to it.

Running Water uttered a cry of rage, and stamped his foot in desperation. He had forgotten the frenzied passion snakes have for milk, especially that of women. This time again the Indian’s calculations were thrown out, and his vengeance slipped from him. What should he do? To try and tear the snake from the prey it had seized would be incurring certain death; and then, fascinated by the horrible spectacle he had before him, the redskin felt incapable of collecting his ideas. He looked on, suffering from a frightful nightmare, and awaiting with the most lively

anxiety the conclusion of this frightful scene. Rita still slept on, and the child even had not noticed its changed position, so gentle and measured had the snake's movements been, and was still slumbering. The cascabel, however, drank with such ardour the quadroon's milk that the blood poured down her breast, and she was aroused by the pain from her deep sleep. She opened her eyes, and perceived the horrible animal.

Rita endured a second of indescribable agony and despair, for she felt that she was hopelessly lost. Then, wondrous to relate, this half-sleeping woman, seeing herself through a mist of blood in the power of the monster, suddenly formed an heroic resolution. She recognized with remarkable lucidity her fearful situation, and completely forgetting herself had but one thought, that of saving the child.**(4-2)** A woman is a mother before all. God has placed in her heart a flame Which nothing can extinguish.

With her features distorted by terror, her temples inundated with cold perspiration, and her hair standing on end, she had the immense courage not to tremble or stir, and held back in her parched throat the cry of horror ready to burst from it: in a word, she remained in the same position as if she were still asleep.

The Indian himself, struck with admiration at this sublime emotion, felt his iron heart melt, and he almost regretted being the cause of this fearful catastrophe. The snake still enjoyed its horrible repast, and gorged itself with the milk mingled with blood which it drew from the breast of its hapless victim. At length its coils relaxed, its eye gradually lost its fascinating lustre, and with an almost insensible undulation it left the prey to which it was clinging. Completely gorged with milk, it rolled off to the ground, and crawled away in the direction of the shrubs. The mulatto then seized the child in her clenched hands, sat up straight as a statue, and uttered a fearful cry.

"Mother, mother!" she said with a sob that lacerated her throat, "Take your child."

Doña Emilia, aroused by this cry, bounded like a lioness from her hammock, and seized her babe. Rita then fell back, with her breast bleeding, and her features distorted by pain, and writhed in frightful convulsions. Doña Emilia leant over her.

"What is the matter, in Heaven's name?" she asked her in horror.

"The snake, see the snake, mother!" the quadroon exclaimed, as she raised herself with a last, effort and pointed to the reptile which was quietly gliding along the sand; then she uttered a fearful groan, and fell back—dead. Don Aníbal and the priest, attracted by the cries, rushed into the arbour, and at once comprehended the frightful accident which must have occurred. The hacendero ran up to his wife, while Father Sandoval bravely attacked the snake and killed it. The Indian chief had disappeared with the bound of a wild beast, after exchanging with Doña Emilia a glance of awful purport.

The lady, with calm brow and a smile on her lip, nursed her babe, which was now awake, while singing one of those touching American tunes with which these innocent creatures are lulled to sleep. She was mad!

Don Aníbal, crushed by this terrible catastrophe, tottered for a moment like a drunken man, then raising his hands to his face with a cry of despair, he fell

unconscious on the ground. His rebellious nature had at last been vanquished by grief.

"It is the finger of God!" the priest murmured, as he raised his tear-laden eyes to heaven.

And kneeling by the body of the poor quadroon he prayed fervently. Doña Emilia was still singing and lulling her child to sleep.

Two days later the hacienda was invested by the Spaniards. Don Aníbal defended himself for a long time with heroic courage, but the Spaniards at last stormed the fortress, and made a horrible massacre of its defenders. Don Aníbal, bearing his wife across his horse's neck, and the priest carrying in his arms the baby and the boy saved a short time previously upon the defeat of the Indians, succeeded in escaping, through the courage of some twenty peons who resolutely collected round them and made a rampart of their bodies.

Hotly pursued by the tamarindos, the fugitives wandered for a long time haphazard in the forests, tracked like wild beasts by their implacable victors; but at last, after extraordinary privations and innumerable dangers, they succeeded in reaching Santa Rosa, where the miners offered them a shelter. The revolt having thus been drowned in blood in this province by the Spaniards, they had a lengthened breathing time; for the patriots were dead or so utterly demoralized that a fresh insurrection need not be apprehended.

Chapter I

The Adventurers.

The daring revolt of the Curé Hidalgo opened against the Spanish government that era of sanguinary struggles and obstinate contests which, thirteen years later, on February 24, 1821 was fated to end in the proclamation of Independence by Iturbide at Iguala. This proclamation compelled the Viceroy, Apodaca, to abdicate, and the Spaniards finally to abandon these magnificent countries which they had ruled with a hand of iron for more than three centuries. But during these thirteen years what blood had been shed, what crimes committed! All Mexico was covered with ruins. The unburied corpses became the prey of wild beasts; towns taken by storm burned like lighthouses, and the flames were extinguished in the blood of their massacred inhabitants.

The Mexicans, badly armed and disciplined, learning through their very defeats the art of beating their conquerors, struggled with the energy of despair; incessantly defeated by the old Spanish bands, but never discouraged, deriving strength from their weakness and their firm desire to be free, they ever stood upright before their implacable foes, who might kill them, but were powerless to subjugate them.

In no country of the New World did the Spaniards offer so long and desperate a resistance to revolution as in Mexico, for Spain was aware that once this inexhaustible source of wealth was lost, her influence and prestige in the Old World would be utterly destroyed. Hence it happened that the Spaniards quitted Mexico as they entered it, on ruins and piles of corpses. And their power, inaugurated by Hernando Cortés by the light of arson, and amid the cries of the victims, slipped in the blood of millions of murdered Indians, and was stifled by their bodies. It was a hideous government, the offspring of violence and treachery, and, after three centuries, violence and treachery overthrew it. It was a grand and sublime lesson which Providence gave the despots through the inflexible logic of history, and yet despots have ever refused to understand it.

We shall resume our narrative on September 20, 1820, between five and six in the afternoon, at a period when the struggle having been at length equalized between the two parties, was growing more lively and decisive. The scene is still laid in the same part of the viceroyalty of New Spain in which the prologue was enacted, that is to say, the Province of Coahuila; owing to its remoteness from the centre, and its situation on the Indian border, this province had suffered less than the others, though the traces of war could be seen at each step.

The rich and numerous haciendas which formerly studded the landscape were nearly all devastated, the fields were uncultivated and deserted, and the country offered an aspect of gloomy desolation painful to contemplate. The revolution, violently compressed by the Spaniards, was smouldering beneath the ashes; a hollow fermentation was visible on the surface, and the Indian guerillas who had not ceased their partizan warfare, were beginning to combine and organize, in order to deal the Castilian colossus a decisive blow. The insurrection of the Spanish liberals, by creating fresh embarrassments for the mother country, restored Mexico, not its courage, for that had never faltered during the long struggle, but the hope of success; on both sides preparations were being made in the dark, and the explosion could not long be delayed.

Five or six well-mounted and armed horsemen were following a narrow track marked on the side of a hill in that wild and mountainous country which separates the Fort of Agua Verde, of which the Spaniards were still masters, from the little town of Nueva Bilbao. Of these six travellers, five appeared to be peons, or servants, while the sixth was a man of some forty years of age, of lofty stature and haughty demeanour, who kept, as far as the road allowed, by the side of his servants, and talked to them in a low voice, while looking at times at the gloomy scenery that surrounded him, and which the encroaching gloom rendered even more ominous.

All these men advanced rifle on hip, and ready to fire at the slightest suspicious movement in the chaparral, which they attentively investigated. This distrust was justified by the state in which this wild country found itself, for the revolutionary opinions had made more progress here than anywhere else.

The travellers had reached the highest point of the track they were following, and were preparing to descend into the plain, but they involuntarily stopped for a moment to admire the magnificent landscape and grand panorama which were suddenly unrolled before their sight. From the lofty spot which the travellers had reached, they embraced a considerable extent of the loveliest country in the world,

rendered even more picturesque by the numerous diversities of the ground; an uninterrupted series of small hills rising one above the other, and covered with luxuriant verdure, were blended in the distant azure of the horizon, with the lofty mountains of which they formed the spurs, and supplied a splendid frame for the magnificent picture. An extensive lake, studded with small plots resembling bouquets, occupied nearly the entire centre of the plain to which the travellers were preparing to descend.

A deep calm brooded over the landscape, which the first gleams of dusk were beginning to tinge with varying hues. Nothing enlivened this deserted country, and the travellers were on the point of starting again, when one of the servants turned to his master, and pointed in the direction of a track that ran along the bank of the lake.

"Stay, mi amo," he said, "I know not if I am mistaken, but I fancy I can see down there, near that cactus clump, something resembling human forms. Unluckily, the gloom gathering in the valley prevents me being certain."

The master looked attentively for some minutes in the indicated direction, and then shook his head several times, as if annoyed.

"You are right, Viscachu," he said; "they are men, and I can distinguish their horses tied up a few yards from them; who can they be?"

"Travellers, like ourselves," remarked the peon, whom his master had called Viscachu.

"Hum!" the horseman said dubiously, "People do not travel in such times as these, unless they have very important motives. Those two persons, for there are two, as I can distinguish them perfectly now, are more probably spies sent to meet us, and find out the reason of our presence in these parts."

"With all the respect I owe you, mi amo," Viscachu, who seemed to be on rather familiar terms with his master, objected, "that does not seem very likely; if these strangers were spies, they would not expose themselves so, but, on the contrary, would be careful to keep out of sight. And then, again, they would not be ahead of us, but behind us."

"You are right, Viscachu; I did not reflect on all that; but we are compelled to display such prudence, that I yielded involuntarily to my first impulse."

"And it is often the right one," the peon observed, with a smile; "but this time I believe the proverb is false, and that these persons are simply travellers, whom business of some nature has brought across our path. However, it is an easy matter to make sure; there are only two of them, while we are six, well armed and resolute men. Let us push on boldly towards them, because it is probable that they have already perceived us, and our hesitation, which has no apparent cause, may seem to them suspicious."

"Yes, we have stopped here too long as it is, so let us continue our journey. Well, if they are enemies, they will have their work cut out, that's all. Hang such foolish terror! We can face a larger party than the one at present in front of us."

"Excellent, Don Aurelio, that is what I call talking," the peon said gaily; "so let us start without further delay."

Don Aurelio bent down to his servant, after looking round him anxiously—

"Be prudent!" he said, in a low voice.

“That is true,” the peon replied, with a slight smile. “I let myself be carried away involuntarily; but do not be alarmed, I will be more careful in future.”

Then, at a signal from the leader, the little party began descending the hill, though not till the peons had assured themselves that their muskets were in good state, and ready to do service if it came to a fight. The path followed by the Mexicans, like all those found on the side of a hill or mountain, formed a countless succession of turns, so that, although from the height, where they halted for a moment, it was easy for them to notice the strangers almost beneath them, owing to the constant turnings they were obliged to take they required a lengthened period to reach them, the more because the constantly increasing gloom compelled them to redouble their precautions in order to prevent their horses stumbling over pebbles, and rolling into the quebradas past which the track ran.

In the desert, man, being obliged to keep constantly on guard against the invisible enemies who incessantly watch him, grows accustomed not only to watch the bushes, grass, and rocks that surround him, but also to examine the air, water, and sky, as if he expected a foe to rise before him at any moment. The result is, that the physical qualities of the individual who is habituated to the normal life of the savannahs, acquire such perfection, that, by a species of a prophetic intuition, the wood rangers, who are so praised, and of whom so little is generally known, foresee the dangers that threaten them even before those dangers have become realized.

The strangers, perceived from the top of the hill by the Mexicans, had guessed the presence of the latter before they appeared, and their eyes had been eagerly fixed on the crest of the hill some moments before the newcomers crowned it. These two men had set up their night bivouac near a clump of cactuses, and they quietly continued to prepare their supper, apparently troubling themselves very little about the approaching travellers. Still, anyone able to examine them closely would have perceived that they had made all preparations for an obstinate defence, in the event of an attack. Hence their rifles lay ready cocked within arm’s length, and their horses were still saddled and bridled, so that they could be mounted immediately, should it prove necessary.

As for these two men—whose portraits we shall draw, as they play a very important part in our story—although they were in no way related, they bore an extraordinary likeness to each other, not so much in features, but in general appearance, that is to say, both were tall, thin, and powerfully built; they were light haired and had blue eyes, in a word, they displayed all the characteristic traits of the northern race,—we mean the true Norman, and not the Anglo-Saxon.

In truth, these men were Canadians. At the period of which we are writing, the United States of America had not attained that degree of factitious strength and daring confidence they eventually reached. The King of Spain reigned as lord and master of the colonies as much as of the Peninsula. No Anglo-American had up to this time dared to leap across the frontier and hunt in New Spain. The laws were strict and rigorously carried out; any foreigner surprised inside the frontier was regarded as a spy, and treated as such, that is to say, mercilessly shot. Several examples having been made, the Americans took the hint, and did not attempt to force their way in.

But times had changed; the Mexican insurrection, by rendering the inhabitants interested accomplices in infractions of the Spanish laws, favoured this immigration, the more so because the Mexicans, who had been kept by the Spaniards in utter ignorance of the use of firearms and of military discipline, wanted to obtain men capable of leading and teaching them how to conquer their oppressors. Hence the North Americans, who had hitherto been held in check by the severity of the Castilian laws, began to inundate the territory of New Spain from all sides.

The two men to whom we refer at this moment were hardy comrades, real wood rangers, who, reaching the Mexican border while hunting buffalo and deer, crossed it in the hope of picking up an honest fortune in a short time by fishing in the troubled waters of revolution. We must do them the justice of saying that, in their hearts, they cared but little for either of the parties quarrelling in Mexico, and were probably ready to sell their assistance to the one which offered the highest price and the most tangible hopes of a speedy fortune. Still they were good fellows, bold and experienced, caring as little for their life as for a leaf that fell from a tree, and resolved to risk it on a throw of the dice, if it offered them the hope of advantageous gain.

The first of these two men was called Oliver Clary.

The redskins among whom he had resided for a long time had christened him the Sumach, in consequence of his extraordinary strength and boldness; while his comrade had forgotten the name he originally bore, and only answered to that of Moonshine. These strange and significant names will save us the trouble of dwelling on the character of their bearers, the more so as the reader will be able to appreciate it in the course of the story.

Carelessly reclining on the grass by the side of the fire lit to cook their supper, they watched with one eye the leg of venison which, with some batatas, was to constitute their meal, and with the other attentively followed the march of the Mexicans. The latter, so soon as they left the track and entered the plain, affected a certain military air, which did not fail to appear formidable to the Canadians, the more so as the newcomers were well armed, and moreover seemed resolute and difficult to intimidate. The hunters waited till they came nearly within pistol shot, then rose cautiously, and placed themselves with shouldered rifles in the middle of the road.

Don Aurelio ordered his men to halt, while recommending them in a low voice to keep on their guard for fear of treachery, and ready to come to his assistance. Then, giving his horse a slight touch of the spur, he proceeded a few yards nearer the hunters, who still remained motionless in the middle of the road. Stopping his horse with one hand, with the other he raised his hat, while crying in a clear and well modulated voice, “Who goes there?”

“Men of peace,” Moonshine answered in excellent Spanish, though it was easy to recognize the foreigner from his accent.

“Which side do you belong to?” Don Aurelio continued.

Moonshine looked cunningly at his comrade.

“It is easy to ask, caballero,” he said, “on which side we are. Tell us first which side you are; we are only two against six, and the stronger party ought to give the first explanation.”

“Very good,” Don Aurelio replied, “we are for God and independence; and you?”

The two Canadians exchanged a second look as ironical as the first.

“By Jove, señor,” Moonshine said presently, as he rested the butt of his rifle on the ground, and crossed his hands confidently over the muzzle, “you ask us a question which we find it rather difficult to answer. My comrade and I are strangers, as you may easily recognize by our accent, and hence have no settled opinion upon the subject which divides your country. On the other hand, you can perceive from our garb that we are wood rangers, that is to say, men with whom liberty is a worship, almost an adoration; so that if we must have an opinion, we should rather be on the side of independence than of royalty.”

“And why do you not decide for one or the other?” said the horseman, who had drawn nearer, though the Canadian did not appear alarmed by the fact.

“For the reason I had the honour of giving you a moment ago,” Moonshine continued; “we are foreigners, that is to say, entirely disinterested in the question; and in case we decided to join either side, it would be the one which offered us the greatest advantages.”

“Excellently argued, and like true Yankees,” Don Aurelio remarked with a laugh.

“Pardon me, señor,” Moonshine objected seriously, “do not make any mistake; my friend and I are not Yankees, but Canadians, which, I must beg you to believe, is by no means the same thing.”

“Forgive me, señor,” Don Aurelio said civilly, “I did not at all intend to insult you.”

The hunter bowed, and the Mexican continued—

“My name is Don Aurelio Gutiérrez; it is late, and the spot where we now are is by no means suited for a serious conversation; if you will consent to accompany me to a hacienda about three leagues from here, I will guarantee to modify your opinions, and bring you over to my way of thinking.”

“I do not say no, Señor Gutiérrez; but I will propose something better. I suppose you are not in such a hurry that you could not delay your arrival at the hacienda to which you allude for a few hours?”

Don Aurelio exchanged a look with Viscachu, who, during this conversation, had drawn nearer, and was now standing by his side.

“No,” he at last answered; “so long as I reach the place I am going to by tomorrow morning, that will do.”

“Well,” the hunter continued, courteously, “as you remarked yourself, the night is dark; accept the hospitality we offer you, and bivouac with us; the supper is ready and we will eat together: a night in the open air need have no terrors for you; we will sleep side by side, and tomorrow when the sun appears on the horizon, my comrade and I will accompany you wherever you please. What do you say to that?”

Don Aurelio exchanged a second look with Viscachu, who gave him a sign of assent by nodding his head several times.

“On my honour,” he replied with a laugh, as he held out his hand to the hunter, “your proposition is too hearty for me to decline it. Done with you then, on one condition, however, that my people add a few provisions they carry with them to our meal.”

“You can add what you please; we will pass the night as good comrades; tomorrow it will be day, and we will see what is to be done. Of course it is understood that if your proposals do not suit us, we are at liberty to decline them.”

“Oh, of course.”

Don Aurelio ordered his men to come up, himself dismounted, and five minutes later, all our party, merrily seated round the fire, were doing justice to the hunters’ meal, which was considerably augmented through the provisions brought by Don Aurelio, and rendered almost sumptuous by a goat skin filled with excellent *refino de Cataluña*, a sort of very strong spirit, which put the guests in a thorough good humour.

Chapter II

A Night in the Woods.

American forests, when night sets in, assume a character of grandeur and majesty, of which our European forests cannot supply an idea. The aged trees, which grow more than one hundred feet in height, and whose tufted crests form splendid arches of foliage, the lianas which spread in every direction with the strangest parabolas, the moss, called Spaniard’s beard, which hangs in long festoons from all the branches, impart to these vast solitudes an aspect at once grand and mysterious, which leads the mind to reverie and fills it with religious and melancholy thoughts.

When the sun has disappeared and made way for darkness, when the night breeze murmurs in the foliage, and the hollow sound of some unknown rivulet coursing over the gravel, is blended with the myriad indistinct noises of the insects hidden in the crevices of the trees and rocks; when the wild beasts, awaking at nightfall, leave their secret dens to proceed to their watering places, uttering at intervals hoarse yells—the forests in the pale moonbeams, which filter timidly through the branches, really become to the man who ventures into them the grand laboratory in which nature likes to assay in gloom and mystery the most powerful and strangest of her productions.

There are accumulated, beneath the detritus piled up by centuries, the shapeless and yet imposing ruins of generations which have disappeared and left no sign; remnants of walls, pyramids, and obelisks rise at times before the startled eyes of the Indian or the hunter, as if to reveal to them that in times perhaps contemporary with the deluge, a powerful nation, now utterly effaced from the world, existed at this spot. Those who obstinately call America the New World, and deny the existence of the ruins with which this fertile soil is broadcast, have traversed this country like blind men, and have neither visited the splendid ruins of the Palenques, nor those which may be found at every step in the desert, by means of which some travellers have succeeded in settling the route followed by the migrations of the peoples that succeeded each other. The province of Coahuila in Mexico possesses several of these remains of great antiquity, which recall by

their shape, and the way in which they are constructed, the *dolmens* and *menhirs* of old America.

The travellers had established their camp in a vast clearing, in the centre of which was a gigantic monolith obelisk, so singularly placed on a block of stone that the slightest touch sufficed to give it a marked oscillating movement. This spot had a singular name, whose origin no one could have accounted for; the people of the country called it *Coatetl*, that is to say the home of the snake. This name, by the way, is found very frequently in Mexico, whose aborigines had a great respect for the snake, in consequence of their first legislator Quetzaltcoatl, that is to say, the "serpent covered with feathers."

The clearing, which Indians and peons avoided with a respect mingled with terror, was said to be haunted. An ancient tradition, greatly in favour with the people, declared that at certain periods of the year, at the new moon, and when any great event was about to be accomplished, the stone, raised at its base by some mysterious power, afforded passage to a monstrous snake, which, after sitting up there on its tail with an angry hiss, suddenly assumed the appearance and form of a female, dressed in a white winding sheet, who walked round the clearing till daylight, uttering shrieks and writhing her arms with all the marks of the most profound despair; then, as the moon became more deep on the horizon, the apparition gradually became less distinct, and entirely disappeared at daybreak. The stone then resumed its place, and all returned to its natural state. At times, but very rarely, the apparition spoke; but woe to the man whose ear the words reached; he would certainly die within the year, and his end was almost always miserable.

Probably the travellers bivouacked at this moment in the clearing were ignorant of this legend, or, if acquainted with it, their education or their strength of character protected them from such vulgar belief. Had it not been so, they would not have ventured to spend the night at a spot of such suspicious reputation. However this may be, the travellers whom chance had so singularly brought together did honour to the improvised repast, like men who, little accustomed to good dinners, recognized all their merits. When they had finished eating they turned their backs to the fire, so that the flames might not prevent their watching the neighbourhood, and lighting their pipes and cigarettes began smoking the Indian moriche, the only tobacco they had at their service at the moment. There was a lengthened silence, during which the guests enjoyed their smoke, and Don Aurelio was the first whose cigarette was consumed. As he rolled another he said to the two wood rangers—

"You are foreigners, I think you said?"

The Canadians nodded an affirmative, probably not considering that any other answer was required.

"And have not been long in Mexico?" Don Aurelio continued.

"No," the Sumach answered, laconically.

"Ah!" the Mexican continued, not allowing himself to be discouraged by the uninviting way in which the hunters answered him. "Ours is a famous country at present for brave men; it is easy to make a fortune without much outlay."

“Well,” Moonshine answered with a crafty look, “not quite so easy as you fancy. Here is my comrade, who is certainly a plucky fellow, and who perhaps knows his trade better than most people, and yet he has not found anything to suit him.”

“He probably applied to persons who did not understand him.”

“Perhaps so, perhaps not,” the Sumach said, shaking his head doubtfully; “or perhaps I asked too high a price.”

“What! Too high a price?” Don Aurelio exclaimed; “I do not understand.”

“What use is it wasting time in explaining it to you, as it is not likely we shall have a deal together?”

“Who knows? Tell me, at any rate. We are going to a meeting of very rich caballeros, and expect to join them in the morning. Let me know your demands, which I will lay before them; and if they are not too high, they may probably deal with you.”

“Nonsense, why tell them to you?” the adventurer continued carelessly. “It will be time enough tomorrow for us to have an explanation with the gentlemen to whom you refer.”

“As you please, I have no wish to force myself on your confidence.”

“I intend to do so; but listen to me. Give me your word of honour that if we do not come to terms I shall be at liberty to go wherever I please, without any fear for my safety or my life.”

“I pledge you my word of honour,” Don Aurelio said quickly; “you can trust to me.”

“I do so with the more confidence,” the adventurer remarked with a laugh; “because if a hair of my head fell, it would cost you much more dearly than you imagine.”

“What do you mean?”

“Enough that I know it,” the Sumach said with a crafty smile; “we have no need to enter into further details.”

“Why play fast and loose with this caballero?” Moonshine observed; “His intentions are good. I see no harm in your being frank with him.”

“Nonsense,” the adventurer said, with a shrug of his shoulders. “Let me alone, Moonshine; least said is soonest mended. In that way, we shall see if we can have confidence in the word of a Spaniard.”

“Of a Mexican you mean,” Don Aurelio interrupted him with some vivacity.

“Well, a Mexican; it is of little consequence, though the difference appears to me very slight.”

“That is possible, but to me it is enormous.”

“As you please,” the adventurer answered carelessly. “I have not the slightest wish to argue with you—the more so, that you must know more about the matter than I do.”

“In one word,” Don Aurelio continued, “do you accept the proposition I made you to accompany me tomorrow to the hacienda, where the leaders of the revolutionary party are going to assemble, and may I rely on your word?”

“Yes, if I may rely on yours.”

“I gave it to you. Here is my hand, you can take it without fear; it is that of a man of honour, and a friend.”

The two Canadians cordially pressed the hand so frankly offered.

“That is settled,” Moonshine said, as he shook the ashes of his pipe out on his thumb nail, and then passed the stem through his belt. “Now that is all arranged between us, if you will take my advice we will have a sleep. The night is getting on, and we must be mounted by sunrise.”

No one opposed this proposition, which, on the contrary, was unanimously accepted; for all of them being fatigued with riding for the whole day along impracticable roads, had great need of rest. Each wrapped himself carefully up in his zarapé, and lay down on the grass with his feet to the fire. Moonshine threw a few handfuls of dry wood into the flames, and resting his back against the base of the obelisk, placed his rifle between his legs, and prepared to guard the slumbers of his companions.

Don Aurelio had to oppose this, asserting that it was his duty to keep the first guard; but the Canadian insisted so strongly that the Mexican at length gave way, on the express condition of taking his place so soon as he felt sleep weighing his eyelids down. Moonshine, therefore, was soon the only person awake in the camp.

The night was calm and sultry; the atmosphere impregnated by the fragrant emanations from the ground, and refreshed by a wayward breeze which sported through the branches, and made them gently rustle, formed a light haze through which the white moonbeams capriciously filtered. The will-o’-the-wisps danced over the points of the grass, and a dull, continuous murmur which resembled the breathing of nature, and seemed to have no apparent cause, was mingled with the indistinct sounds of the solitude. The dark blue sky, studded with a profusion of dazzling stars, spread out like a diamond dome over this grand scenery, to which it imparted a fairylike aspect.

The hunter, leaning against the base of the obelisk, with his arms crossed on the barrel of his rifle which was resting between his legs, yielded to the pleasure which this splendid night caused him. With his eyes half closed, and assailed by a sleepiness which he only combated with difficulty, his ideas were beginning to lose their lucidity, his brain was growing confused, and the moment was at hand when sleep would definitively close his eyelids, which he could only succeed in keeping open by long and painful efforts.

How long he was plunged in this reverie, which has no name in any language, but which causes an infinite pleasure, he could not have said. All was confused before his half-closed eyes, and he could only perceive surrounding objects through a prism which transformed the landscape. Suddenly the hoarse croak of the owl was repeated several times with a force which made the hunter give a mighty start. He opened his eyes, shook off the lethargy that weighed upon him, and looked anxiously around him. All at once he started, rubbed his eyes as if to expel the last remains of sleep, and with a movement swift as thought, raised his rifle.

“Who goes there?” he shouted in a sharp though slightly trembling voice, owing to the inward emotion that agitated him.

The cry aroused the travellers from their sleep; they started up sharply and laid their hands on their weapons; but they let them fall again and remained motionless, with pallid cheeks and eyes fixed and dilated by terror. At fifty paces from them, on the skirt of the clearing, and fantastically illumined by a moonbeam which threw its light full upon her, stood straight and upright the vague form of a

woman, whose proportions appeared gigantic to the terrified travellers. Garments of a dazzling whiteness fell in folds round this undefinable being, who held in her right hand a long sword whose flashing blade emitted sinister reflections. Her beautiful and regular face was of a cadaverous hue, which formed a contrast with the raven hue of her hair, which fell in disorder on her shoulders, and descended lower than her girdle, which was a golden circlet two burning eyes lit up this face and gave it an expression rendered even more sinister by the heart-rending and despairing smile which slightly parted her lips.

This strange apparition, whether man, woman, or demon, fixed on the startled travellers a look in which sorrow and wrath were mingled. These brave men, whom no human peril could have terrified, underwent a moment of supreme hesitation—they were afraid!

The very horses, as if they understood what was going on, and instinctively shared the fear which overpowered their masters, left off eating their food. With ears laid back, legs apart, and head stretched out in the direction of this terrible apparition, they neighed and snorted violently. Moonshine, at length ashamed of the feeling of fear he experienced, moved forward a step and boldly cocked his rifle.

"Who goes there?" he shouted for the second time, in a voice rendered firmer by the assurance of being supported by his comrades, although the latter, growing more and more alarmed, did not appear at all disposed to help him. "Who's there? Speak, or, by Heaven, whether you are an angel or demon, I will lodge a bullet in your head, and I warn you that I never miss my mark."

Fear makes men talkers; the hunter only made so long a speech through the terror with which the incomprehensible being he was addressing inspired him, and whom his threats did not at all appear to disturb. The apparition stretched out its left arm to the hunter, and said in a loud though melodious voice—

"What use is it to threaten what you cannot perform? Have you such a stock of ammunition that you are not afraid of wasting it?"

By an instinctive movement, which was independent of his will, the Canadian lowered his weapon, and let the butt sink to the earth again.

"What are you doing here?" the fantastic being continued. "You are sleeping like brute beasts, when you ought to be galloping. Your enemies are on the watch to surprise you; if you remain any longer here, on reaching the meeting place tomorrow you will only find the corpses of your friends lying all bloody on the ruins of the hacienda, where they are expecting you. You have not a moment to lose: to horse! To horse! And you," she added, turning to the two Canadians, "do you follow them; and, as you say that you are flying from despotism and seeking liberty, fight for it!"

"Who are you? What faith can we place in your words?" asked Don Aurelio, who had overcome his first terror.

"What matter who I am," the apparition replied, forcibly, "if the advice I give you be good. I come, maybe from heaven, maybe from hell, who can say?" she added with a sarcastic laugh. "Perhaps, I am the spirit of this clearing. Obey the order I give you; then, when the task you have undertaken is accomplished, you may try to find me out, if you are still curious."

"Viva Dios! I will not be fobbed in this way!" the Mexican shouted. "I will know what this means, and who is the being that thus counsels me."

And before his comrades could oppose the execution of the plan he had formed, he rushed forward impetuously, with a pistol in each hand.

“Madman!” the apparition continued, “For wasting your time in trying to pursue a chimera, when an imperious duty summons you. Catch me if you can.”

“Aye, if I perish,” Don Aurelio shouted. But at the same instant his feet were entangled in a liana, which he had not noticed in his hurry, and he rolled full length on the ground, and both his pistols, whether accidentally or purposely, were discharged in his fall. The Mexican rose again with a savage imprecation, but the phantom had disappeared.

“Malediction!” he shouted, as he looked searchingly around him.

A long laugh responded to him, and then a voice, momentarily growing weaker, said three distinct times—

“To horse, to horse, to horse!”

The travellers were startled; all had been witness of this strange apparition, which had suddenly disappeared as if the earth had swallowed it up, and there was no chance of guessing whither it had gone; hence all these brave men trembled like leaves agitated by the wind, and exchanged silent glances of terror, without daring to make a movement.

Chapter III

The Succour.

The emotion caused by the strange apparition we described in the last chapter was gradually dissipated; minds regained their equilibrium, and ere long the travellers, reassured by each other’s presence, laughed and jested at the terror they had felt. Two of them, however, more obstinate, or more affected than the rest, wished to detect the meaning of this extraordinary adventure, and, as if by common accord, though they did not communicate to each other the result of their reflections, they fetched their horses, mounted, and rushed into the forest from two opposite points. These two men were Don Aurelio Gutiérrez and the Canadian adventurer, known as the Sumach.

Their absence was long, and their comrades impatiently awaited their return for several hours. At length they reappeared, each coming in a direction opposed to that in which he had set out. For a radius of four leagues round the clearing, they had explored the forest, clump by clump, bush by bush, but in vain; their researches had obtained no result; they had discovered no trace, and found no sign which might lead them to the truth. At one moment the adventurer fancied that he heard the distant gallop of a horse; but the sound was so remote, so indistinct, that it was impossible for him to form any opinion or acquire a certainty. As for Don Aurelio, the forest had been as silent to him as a tomb.

Both, therefore, rejoined their companions with hanging heads and minds occupied with this apparition, which seemed to them the stranger because their staunch hearts and straightforward minds could not accept it as a divine

intervention, and yet it could not be an hallucination. At the moment when they re-entered the clearing the night was nearly spent, the stars were growing pale, and expiring one after another. Wide tinted bands were beginning to appear athwart the horizon, the flowers and plants exhaled a sharper and more penetrating perfume, and the birds nestled beneath the leaves were already preluding with timid notes the melodious concert with which they each morning salute the break of day. The sun would make its appearance ere long.

The horses were saddled, and the travellers had only been awaiting the return of the two explorers to resume their journey. At the moment when Don Aurelio was about to give the signal to start, the Sumach walked up to him and laid his hand on the bridle of his horse.

"One moment," he said; "before we start I should wish to make a few remarks to you."

The Mexican regarded the adventurer closely, and read on his thoughtful face so serious an expression that he bowed to him deferentially.

"I am listening to you," he said.

The Sumach, as the surname he bore sufficiently proved, was a man endowed with that ferocious and blunt courage to which every contest is a holiday, and which overthrows any obstacles that rise before it, however great they may be. Deeds done by this man were related which displayed a boldness and temerity bordering on the prodigious. Fear was as unknown to him as was weakness. But he was a Canadian; that is to say, he belonged to that hardy Norman race, so superstitious and credulous, which trembles at night at the dashing of an owl's wing against a pane of glass, and for which apparitions and phantoms are almost articles of belief. In a word, this man, who would have been unmoved by the sight of twenty rifles pointed at his bosom, had an inward tremor at the thought of the past night's apparition. And yet, so peculiar is the human mind, the suspicious being who had so startled him had scarce disappeared ere he rushed in pursuit. The truth was that his indomitable courage had revolted at the thought of the involuntary panic, his heart palpitated with shame, and he tried to discover the truth or falsehood there might be in the occurrence.

The sterile hunt he had made in the forest had put the final touch on his mental confusion, conviction was forced upon him, and now he felt certain that a supernatural intervention had given them a warning which they would do very wrong in neglecting. This was the reason which made him oppose the immediate departure of the travellers and address Don Aurelio.

"Listen, caballero," he said to him, in a firm voice, "I am only an ignorant adventurer to whom books have hitherto been unknown things. There are few things in the world I fear, but I am a Christian and a Catholic; as such I cannot believe that God would disturb the order of nature without some powerful reason. What is your opinion in the matter?"

"I entirely share your opinion, my good fellow," Don Aurelio replied, who, a good Catholic himself, and sincerely attached to his religion, did not dream of disputing its dogmas and creeds.

"In that case," the adventurer continued, "trusting only to my own poor judgment, the being who appeared to us a few hours ago does not belong to this

world. Yourself fired two pistol shots almost point-blank without hitting, and though we started immediately in pursuit we found no signs or trace. Is that so?"

"I must allow, señor, that all this is not only perfectly true but strictly exact."

"Very good," the Sumach continued, evidently pleased with this answer. "Now, neither of us can affirm with certainty whether this being comes from heaven or the other place; but that is of but slight importance to me. What I consider as far more serious is the advice offered to us. Whether it be true or false we are unable to discover at this moment, but it is our duty not to neglect it. If a serious danger menaces your friends we are not numerous enough at this moment to offer them effectual help."

"That is just; but what is to be done?" the Mexican remarked, struck by the adventurer's logical reasoning.

"Patience," the latter said, with a smile full of meaning. "Did not my comrade, Moonshine, tell you last night that if you broke your engagement with me I should not fail of avengers."

"It is true," Don Aurelio exclaimed, eagerly.

"Well," the Canadian said, "what I did not care to tell you then I will confess now. I have some twenty comrades a few leagues from here, Canadians like myself, all resolute men and devoted to me. I was going to rejoin them last night when we met. I will place them at your orders, if you like, for this expedition, on the understanding that when the danger has passed—should there be any—if the conditions we offer do not please you, we shall be at liberty to withdraw in safety."

"Certainly," Viscachu exclaimed, yielding involuntarily to the joy he probably experienced; but, recognizing at once the fault he had committed, he humbly withdrew behind his master, muttering—

"Pardon me, Señor Caballero."

"I pledge you my word as a gentleman," Don Aurelio answered; "then you have at your disposal twenty bold comrades?"

"Yes, or nearly so," the adventurer said; "and I offer them to you."

"Unfortunately we are in a hurry, and you will not have time to warn them."

"Well, I did not think of that," the Canadian said, thoughtfully.

"Where are they at this moment?"

"I told you; about two leagues from here."

"But in what direction?" Don Aurelio pressed him.

"Hang it! As you belong to the country, you will know better than I; they are encamped at a place called the Giant's Peak, on the road running to the Hacienda del Barrio."

"What!" the Mexican exclaimed, in delight, "Why that is the very hacienda we are going to!"

"Can it be possible?" the adventurer asked, in amazement.

"Nothing is truer; my friends are going to assemble there."

"If that be the case, it is useless to lose any further valuable time; let us be off at once."

"Of course; I am most anxious to do so."

"By the way," said the Sumach, "I will go on ahead, so as to warn my comrades, in that way you will not be obliged to make a circuit to reach our camp, and when

you arrive opposite the Giant's Peak, you will find us on the road ready to follow you. Does that suit you?"

"Canarios! I should think so; you are a precious man, you think of everything, so be off at once."

The Canadian dug his spurs into his horse's flanks and started at full speed. The travellers followed him at once; their pace, though rapid, was however much more moderate than that of the adventurer, who appeared to devour space. Moonshine remained with the Mexicans, and galloped by the side of Don Aurelio.

"Why did you not tell me about your cuadrilla?" the latter asked him.

"Pardon me, señor," the Canadian said, "but your memory fails you at this moment; I was about to speak of it when my friend, the Sumach, forced me to be silent."

"That is true; I remember."

"Now," he continued, "I will take the liberty of remarking, that in speaking of my comrade's party you used the words your cuadrilla."

"Well," Don Aurelio observed, "have I unwittingly offended you by that qualification?"

"Not at all, señor; still I will inform you that I do not at all belong to this cuadrilla, as you call it; I am simply a buffalo hunter and beaver trapper. I do not say that when the opportunity offers to draw a bead on a redskin I refuse to do so; far from it—it is, in fact, an amusement in which I frequently indulge; but soldiering is not at all in my line."

"I thought you an intimate friend of your countryman," the Mexican remarked.

"You were not mistaken," the hunter answered, "we are indeed very old friends, though our avocations are diametrically opposed."

"And on the present occasion, would you refuse the support of your arm in defending the good cause?"

"I do not know what you call the good cause," the Canadian replied, simply, "and, as a foreigner, I care very little to learn what it is. Thanks to heaven your disputes do not concern me the least in the world; but I should consider myself a coward if I abandoned a man with whom I have eaten and drunk, and by whose side I have slept, when a serious danger seems to threaten him. Hence you can safely reckon on me."

"Thanks, caballero," the Mexican said, warmly; "you are a man whose heart is in the right place."

"I believe it is; but I do not see why you should take the trouble to thank me for so natural a thing as this."

Don Aurelio regarded him for a moment with repressed admiration.

"Let me shake your hand," he said to him.

"With pleasure," the hunter simply replied.

During the preceding conversation the sun had risen on the horizon, and beneath the influence of its hot and enlivening beams, which made the pebbles in the road glisten like diamonds, the scenery had lost that stern appearance which the darkness had imparted to it. A warm vapour rose from the ground and formed a species of; transparent fog, that refreshed the atmosphere which was already rendered sultry by the sun; the leaves damp with dew seemed greener, the birds twittered in rivalry, and at times an elk or antelope, startled by the thundering

echo of the horses' hoofs, leaped from beneath a bush, and dashed madly away with head thrown back and dilated eye; or the alligators raised their heavy heads from the mud in which they were imbedded, and after gazing at the travellers for a moment, plunged into the lake.

The Mexicans galloped on thus without the slightest incident for about two hours, conversing together about indifferent topics, and apparently as tranquil as if they were not going to meet a probable danger. They had left for some time the banks of the lake which they had hitherto been following, and, turning to the right, entered a narrow track, the bed of a dried-up torrent, encased between two hills over which mighty oaks formed a dense dome of verdure which the sunbeams could not penetrate.

"The Giant's Peak is only a league and a half to our left," Don Aurelio said to the Canadian.

"In that case," the latter quietly replied, "we shall soon come up with our friends; they must be waiting for us at the end of that canyon."

In fact, when the travellers passed through the species of defile in which they were, they saw, about fifty yards ahead of them, a party of horsemen drawn up in good order, at whose head Don Aurelio recognized, with a delight he did not attempt to conceal, the worthy adventurer. The two bands were soon commingled.

"Thanks," the Mexican said with a smile to the Canadian; "you are a man of your word."

"Did you doubt it?" the other remarked.

"Certainly not."

And they continued their journey at a gallop. They had at the most but two leagues to go ere they reached the hacienda. Moonshine spurred his horse, which soon carried him twenty yards ahead of the party.

"Where are you going?" Don Aurelio shouted to him.

"To scout," the hunter answered; "let me alone. We must not fall into a wasps' nest."

"Go on, my friend," said the Mexican.

The hunter went off; but a quarter of an hour had scarce elapsed ere his comrades saw him returning at full gallop, and making them signs to halt, which they obeyed.

"Oh, oh!" Moonshine exclaimed, so soon as he had rejoined them, "the warning was good: whether angel or demon, the person who gave it was well informed."

"Explain, explain," his hearers shouted.

"Silence," the hunter replied. "Listen!"

All did so; and then the distant detonation of firearms could be distinctly heard.

"What is happening?" Don Aurelio asked, a prey to the liveliest anxiety.

"A very simple thing," the hunter answered; "two or three hundred Indians, or at least men dressed in their garb, are furiously attacking the hacienda, the inhabitants of which are offering the most vigorous resistance."

"¡Caray! Comrades, we must hasten to their assistance," Don Aurelio exclaimed.

"That is also my opinion; but take my advice; let us not act rashly, but take our precautions, for these Indians appear to me suspicious; they manage their pieces too well, and take too good an aim to be real redskins, and Indians would never venture to attack in open daylight a fortress like the one before us."

“Then your opinion is—”

“That they are disguised Spaniards, viva Dios, and nought else.”

“We cannot hesitate,” said the Sumach. “Every minute is worth an age. Let us approach softly, so as not to reveal our presence prematurely, and when we are near enough to the demons, let us charge them vigorously.”

“Yes, we have nothing else to do. Forward!” Don Aurelio shouted.

“Forward!” the adventurers repeated.

The nearer they drew, the more distinct the sound became. With the shots were mingled ferocious yells and howls uttered by the assailants, and to which the defenders of the hacienda responded with equally ferocious cries. They soon came in sight of the fortress, and perceived the combatants. The engagement was of a serious nature. The Indians, or men looking like them, fought with incredible energy and contempt of death, trying, in spite of the fire of the besieged, to escalade the walls of the hacienda, the top of which several of them were on the point of reaching. In spite of the courage they evinced, the defenders were unfortunately too few to carry on the contest much longer with any prospect of victory.

All at once a formidable cry was raised, and the Indians, furiously attacked in the rear, were obliged to wheel round. It was the charge of the adventurers. At the same moment further succour arrived for the besieged, for a second band of strangers rushed forward like a manada of forest tigers, and taking the Indians on the flank, made a desperate attack. The latter bravely supported this double assault, which they resisted with the utmost bravery; but the defenders of the hacienda finding they were at liberty through this providential help, which they were far from anticipating, made a sortie, and proceeded to help their defenders. There it became no longer a fight, but a butchery. The Indians, after disputing the ground for some moments, recognized the madness of a longer contest. They turned their backs, and sought safety in flight.

The second band, which charged the Indians simultaneously with the Canadians, had also disappeared. Still the Sumach, with a surprise mingled with horror, fancied that he recognized at the head of this band the fantastic being who had appeared in the forest; hence, in his simple credulity, he was not far from supposing that these combatants who vanished so suddenly were demons. When the few wounded white men were picked up, the adventurers, and those who had given them such effectual assistance, entered the hacienda. The plain, so noisy a few moments previously, became silent and solitary once again; and the birds of prey, left masters of the obstinately disputed battlefield, began circling heavily above the corpses, with hoarse and sinister croaks of joy.

Chapter IV

Inside the Hacienda.

Although since the beginning of the civil war the Hacienda del Barrio had frequently served as headquarters for the insurgents of New Spain, and, for this reason, had sustained several regular sieges from the government troops, who twice took it by storm, still, in the interior at least, but slight changes had taken place since the time when we first introduced the reader to it.

Still this house, which at that time was almost a country mansion, had become a real fortress, a deep and wide fosse had been dug round that side of the walls which might be accessible, and the threatening muzzles of several heavy guns peeped out of the embrasures, to avoid a surprise and defend the approaches to the hacienda. The trees had been felled for a radius of nearly a mile all round, the scarped path which ran round the hill and led to the gateway had been dug up in several places so as to render the approach still more difficult, and the drawbridge had been placed in working order.

On entering the hacienda the adventurers and travellers were received by a caballero, who paid them the greatest attention. It was the proprietor of the hacienda, Don Aníbal de Saldibar. The eleven years which had elapsed since our prologue had produced but very slight effect on his vigorous organization. A few wrinkles had formed on the hacendero's wide forehead, here and there a few threads of silver were mingled with his black hair, but that was all. He was still upright, and his eye was bright as ever. He and Don Aurelio had been long acquainted, and appeared to feel a sincere friendship for each other.

"You and the gentlemen who accompany you are welcome," Don Aníbal exclaimed as he warmly pressed his friend's hand; "you could not have arrived more opportunely. Had it not been for you, I know not how matters would have ended."

"Well, I hope," Don Aurelio said, warmly returning the pressure; "are we the first at the meeting?"

"On my word, nearly so, there are very few persons here as yet. You know how difficult the communications are, and what a system of espionage Señor Apodaca, his Excellency the Viceroy of New Spain, has invented. It is a perfect inquisition. Every suspicious individual is immediately arrested, so that our friends are obliged to act with the greatest prudence."

"In fact, we have unhappily reached that point when one half the population plays the spy on the other."

"Well, enough on this head for the present. You and your friends must need rest. Allow me to conduct you myself to the cuartos which have been prepared for you by my orders."

"On my word, I confess to you that I accept your offer with the same frankness in which it is made."

Don Aníbal then led his guests to spacious and rather comfortable furnished apartments, where he left them at liberty to behave as they thought proper, informing them that refreshments would be brought them directly; then he left them, in order to receive other persons who arrived at the hacienda at the moment. In fact, scarce had Don Aníbal left, ere the door opened to make way for several footmen, loaded with trays covered with refreshments of every description. The Sumach, after bivouacking his adventurers in a corral, rejoined Don Aurelio,

with whom remained only one of his servants, namely, Viscachu, in whom he seemed to have the greatest confidence.

Our four friends, that is to say, Don Aurelio, Moonshine, the Sumach, and Viscachu, sat down to the table, and did honour to the refreshments sent by Don Aníbal, in a manner which would have assuredly pleased him, had he seen it. Viscachu, doubtless through humility, was seated a little away; he alone ate moderately, rather as a man who does not wish to be guilty of want of courtesy, than as a man who had just ridden ten leagues, and whose appetite must have been sharpened by recent and vigorous exercise. When the travellers' hunger was appeased, the conversation, which had, at, the outset, been languishing, became more animated, and naturally turned on the master of the house in which the guests were assembled. Moonshine, after lighting his pipe, addressed Don Aurelio.

"Will you allow me," he said to him, "to ask you a few questions with reference to our host?"

"I see no reason why you should not," the Mexican replied; "I shall be even pleased to give you all the information you wish about him that I am in a position to supply."

"These questions will be quite general," the Canadian continued. "My friend and I are strangers, and as it is probable that circumstances will oblige us to make a rather lengthened stay in this country, I confess to you that we should be glad to have certain information about persons with whom chance may bring us into contact, which will enable us to act toward them in such a way as will not hurt either their feelings or their interests."

"The fact is," Oliver Clary said in support, interrupting his words with numerous puffs of smoke, "the country is so extraordinary, all that goes on in it so far surpasses anything I have hitherto seen, that I am quite of my countryman and friend's opinion."

"As you please. To begin, I presume that you would like to know something about our host."

"You have hit it, caballero," both men said, with a polite bow.

"Nothing is easier, the more so because I am a distant relative of Don Aníbal, and am better able than most persons to give you the information you require."

"Excellent," the Sumach said, as he threw himself lazily back in his chair.

"I think nothing equal to a good story after a jolly breakfast," said Moonshine, as he rested his elbows on the table, and prepared to listen.

Don Aurelio delicately rolled a husk cigarette between his fingers, lit it, and then went on as follows:

"It is scarce midday," he said; "it is probable that we shall not be disturbed till four o'clock, for Don Aníbal is at this moment occupied in receiving the numerous visitors who are arriving from all parts of the province. We have four hours before us, which we cannot employ better; so listen to me."

After this sort of introduction, the Mexican summoned up his recollections for a few minutes, and then went on like a man prepared to tell a long story:—

"Don Aníbal Heredia Gómez de Alvarado y Saldibar is what we call in this country a *Cristiano viejo*, that is to say, his blood has never crossed, during ages, with that of the Indians; he is descended in a straight line from that famous Don Pedro de Alvarado to whom Don Hernando Cortés entrusted the government and

command of the city of Mexico, when he was compelled to proceed to Veracruz, to fight Don Pamfilo de Narváez, whom Don Diego Velasquez, Governor of Cuba, sent against him, and who passed with all his men under the flag of the conqueror. You will see from this rapid sketch that Don Aníbal comes from a good stock. When Hernando Cortés had completed the conquest of Mexico, he divided the vast territory among all his lieutenants. Don Pedro de Alvarado, owing to his fidelity to the Conquistador, was naturally the best provided for, and he soon found himself in possession of an enormous fortune. This fortune, being well managed, augmented in the course of time, and thus at the present day Don Aníbal is not only one of the richest landowners in New Spain, but in the whole world. This colossal fortune was further increased, some sixteen years back, by Don Aníbal's marriage with Doña Emilia de Aguilar, my cousin, sixth removed. Doña Emilia was at that period seventeen years of age, and one of the loveliest girls in the province."

Don Aurelio paused for a few seconds, and then continued—

"Here there is a grand gap, not in my recollection, but in the information I have been able to collect. At the period to which I allude some interesting business forced me to make a voyage to the Havana, so that I only heard on my return that Don Aníbal had drawn on himself the hatred of certain Indians established on his estates; that these Indians, expelled by him, had sworn to avenge themselves, which they tried several times, but unsuccessfully. While this was going on, Hidalgo, the curé of Dolores, raised the standard of revolt, and summoning the population under arms, began that long war of independence which is not yet terminated. Although of Spanish origin, Don Aníbal, whose whole fortune consists of land and mines, and whom the triumph of the revolution would irremediably ruin if he obstinately remained faithful to the Spanish government, either through interest or conviction, or through these motives united, joined the insurrection, and became one of its most devoted adherents. The house in which we are at this moment, perfectly situated, as you can see, and tolerably well fortified to resist a surprise, has several times served as headquarters for the insurgents. Once was Don Aníbal surprised suddenly by the Spaniards; the hacienda was so completely and rapidly invested that Don Aníbal had not the time, as he had intended, to send Doña Emilia and her child, who was then hardly eighteen months old, to Leona Vicario. Both, therefore, remained with him, and then a frightful affair, which has never been properly cleared up, took place. A snake was conveyed into the garden of the hacienda by an Indian, as was found by the trail discovered on the sand, and the bag of tapir hide he left behind. How this Indian contrived to elude the vigilance of the sentinels no one ever knew. Still it is a fact that this snake, without doing the slightest hurt to the infant, attacked the nurse, whose milk it sucked with a horrible frenzy. The wretched girl died almost immediately after in fearful convulsions, and Doña Emilia, who was a witness of the tragedy, not having the strength to endure it, went mad."

"Oh!" the hearers exclaimed, with a terror mingled with horror, "that is fearful."

"Is it not?" Don Aurelio said sadly.

"And what became of the unhappy mother?" Moonshine asked with interest.

"Did she remain mad?" the adventurer added.

"No," the Mexican continued, "the unfortunate lady recovered her reason, or, at least, after two years of assiduous care, she appeared to do so, for, since the scene

I have described to you, she has constantly suffered from terrible crises, which succeed each other with a strength and energy that continually grow greater."

"Poor woman!" Viscachu muttered.

"Oh, yes, poor woman!" Don Aurelio continued. "Don Aníbal, although he would not let it be seen, adored his wife. The misfortune which burst on him like a thunderclap, by revealing to him all the immensity of his passion, deprived him of the strength any longer to conceal it. All the time that Doña Emilia's madness lasted, the devotion and self-denial he displayed were sublime. When she at length recovered her senses, he ordered all his servants not to restrain her in any way, but to let her act as she pleased, without even questioning or troubling her. A strange change had taken place in Doña Emilia's character; this woman or girl—for she was hardly eighteen years of age when the misfortune happened—so kind, gentle, timid, and graceful, became a lioness thirsting for carnage, only dreaming of combats, and having one fixed idea, that of incessantly pursuing the redskins, and pitilessly destroying them wherever she met them. Employing the liberty her husband granted her, she frequently disappeared from the hacienda for whole weeks, taking her daughter with her, from whom she never parts, and whom she has trained in her own feelings of hatred and revenge; and both remained absent all this time, and no one was able to discover what became of them, or what they were doing; then the mother and daughter would return with smiling faces and tranquil demeanour, as if nothing extraordinary had occurred."

"And now?" Moonshine interrupted.

"I believe that the same thing goes on now," the Mexican continued, "and that Doña Emilia has not given up her wanderings. Don Aníbal, whom her absence terribly alarmed, has tried several times to prevent them, but he found that the precautions he took to keep his wife at home rendered her so unhappy that he preferred letting her act as she thought. However, for some reason unknown to me, the Indians feel such a superstitious terror of her that her mere appearance suffices to put them to flight, however numerous they may be, as has been witnessed on several occasions."

"It is extraordinary," Oliver Clary muttered.

"And the young lady?" Moonshine asked.

"She is now nearly fifteen years of age, and her name is Diana. She is an exquisite creature, light and graceful, fair-haired, and her eyes reflect the blue of heaven; but, beneath this delicate appearance she conceals an indomitable energy, and an incredible firmness of character. Educated by her mother, as I told you, she adores and only obeys her, although she has a deep and sincere friendship for her father, and evinces the greatest respect for him. Still, Don Aníbal, I feel persuaded, however energetic he may be, would not venture to contend with her, for he would be certain beforehand of defeat. The young lady is, therefore, quite her own mistress, and hence never leaves her mother; but the singular thing is that these two females, who understand each other so thoroughly, have admitted a third person to their friendship."

"A third," the Canadian said; "who is it?"

"That is the strangest thing of all; he is a tall, well-built, powerful young fellow of about two and twenty, whom Don Aníbal brought back some twelve or thirteen years ago from an expedition against the Indians, and there is every reason for

believing that he is a redskin himself. This person's name, or rather the name given him, is Melchior Díaz. Gifted with prodigious strength and unequalled activity and Excellency in all manly exercises, this young man is the darling of Don Aníbal, who sees with secret despair the approaching extinction of his name, for he has no son, and is, consequently, the last of his race. Hence he has bestowed on this young man, who, I must allow, is in every respect worthy of it, through the goodness of his heart and the rectitude of his mind, the affection he would feel for a real son; on the other hand, being forced to consent to leave his wife and daughter their liberty, he is glad to know they have such a devoted defender, for Melchior accompanies them in all their expeditions. Several times DonAníbal has tried to obtain from the young man some information as to their nature, but the latter has been impenetrable, intrenching himself behind the oath he says he has taken never to reveal anything that relates to Doña Emilia. Now, how is it that this lady, who has such an inveterate hatred for the Indians, has taken into her friendship this young man, who, I repeat, is assuredly a redskin, and is so attached to him that she will not let him leave her for a moment?"

"And what does Doña Diana think of this young man?" the hunter asked.

"Diana is a child knowing nothing of life; she believes that Melchior is her brother, for they were brought up together, and she feels a frank friendship for him."

"But the young man," Moonshine said searchingly, "does he know that he is not Doña Diana's brother?"

"I am not aware, but it is probable that Don Aníbal or Doña Emilia has informed him of his origin."

"Is he at the hacienda at this moment?" the Sumach asked.

"I cannot tell you. I have not been here for several months, and so do not know what is going on. But I hear a footstep in the corridor, and I doubt not but that we are going to be interrupted."

In truth, a light footstep was audible on the outside, coming nearer and nearer to the room in which the travellers were. At length the door opened, and a peon appeared.

"Pardon, señores," he said, after bowing ceremoniously, "Don Aníbal de Saldibar, my master, requests you to follow me to the grand hall, where all the caballeros are assembled."

"We are at Don Aníbal's orders," Don Aurelio said, as he rose.

His companions imitated him, and all four went out after the servant.

Chapter V

The Council.

While the travellers were listening with ever growing interest to the astonishing story told by Don Aurelio, other strangers, coming from all parts of the compass, flocked into the hacienda. They were principally rich landowners of the province,

or persons compromised in previous struggles through their ardent love of liberty, and who, justly objects of suspicion to the Spaniards, could only find security in a general uprising. Don Aníbal tried to offer all these visitors, the majority of whom were followed by a numerous and well-armed escort, a large and generous hospitality. Hence, the interior of the hacienda soon resembled a barrack, and though the dependencies of the mansion were large, they were crowded with men and horses, so that the latter were obliged to be placed in the courtyards and the gardens.

At four in the evening the number of strangers assembled at the hacienda amounted to upwards of four thousand, which formed an imposing force. Unfortunately, with the exception of a few experienced men who had fought during the first tentatives made by the Mexicans to regain their liberty, the rest were only poor peons who had never smelt powder, and were completely ignorant of war. Still, whatever their intrinsic value might be from a military point of view, all these men burned with an ardent desire for liberty. They were devoted to their masters, and if well led, it was plain that a good deal might be expected from them; and that when once trained and disciplined, they would become not only formidable through their numbers, but also through their courage and the revolutionary fanaticism that animated them. In the meanwhile they offered a most miserable and pitiable appearance; pale, haggard, thin, scarce covered by their dirty ragged clothes, and mostly armed with pikes, bows and arrows, they could only excite a pity blended with contempt in the well-fed, disciplined, and thoroughly-armed Spaniards.

However this may be, Don Aníbal de Saldibar saw them enter the hacienda with a joy which he did not attempt to conceal, and he augured favourably for the success of the plans he had formed, through the promptitude with which his friends replied to his summons. At length the moment arrived when it was impossible for another soul to enter the hacienda, and the last comers were obliged to establish themselves in an entrenched camp on the ground where in the morning so obstinate a fight had been waged with the Indians. At night the hacienda was surrounded as it were by a glittering halo, produced by the bivouac fires of the rebels who were encamped on the plain.

When all the persons Don Aníbal expected were assembled he gave orders for the hacienda gates to be shut, doubled the sentries, advised the utmost vigilance, and entered the reception hall, whither he had ordered his servants to conduct visitors of high rank. This hall, which was of large, almost grand proportions, was filled by some two hundred persons, who were collected in groups and conversing together in a low voice, but with great animation. The entrance of Don Aníbal was greeted with a prolonged “Ah!” which testified to the impatience of the visitors.

The hacendero, after gracefully inviting his guests to take the seats prepared for them, made his way through the groups, and approached a table covered with a green cloth, round which were already seated several strangers, among them being Don Aurelio Gutiérrez, the two Canadians, and Viscachu, who had contrived unnoticed to find his way among the select company. Don Aníbal waited until silence was established, then he bowed several times to the visitors, and asked to say a few words. Permission, was at once granted, for the company were pleased

in their hearts at thus seeing him take the initiative, and assume the responsibility of the events which were about to take place.

“Señores,” he said, in a firm, distinct voice, “permit me in the first place to thank you cordially, in the name of the country, for the eagerness you have kindly shown in accepting my invitation, in spite of the difficulties of every description that opposed, the journey you were about to undertake, and the perils you must meet with on the road. In spite of our continued defeats since the day when the generous Hidalgo first called us to arms, in spite of the triumphs of our haughty oppressors, the cause we have sworn to defend, instead of being destroyed, has, on the contrary, prospered, because the cause is a holy one, as we fight for liberty, that undoubted right of all nations. Before approaching the immediate subject of our meeting, let me describe in a few words the events accomplished during the last twelve years, in order that we may be able to judge our position healthily, perceive whether the insurrection we are preparing is opportune, and if its success is so certain as is asserted.”

“Pardon me, señor,” said Moonshine, as he rose to interrupt him, “I perceive that you are preparing to discuss matters which are perfectly indifferent to myself and my companions, as we are foreigners; we, therefore, ask your permission to withdraw before we have heard any of your secrets.”

At these words, uttered with that crafty carelessness characteristic of the French Canadian, the company rose tumultuously, and remarks were made violently from all parts of the hall. Some even shouted treachery. In a word, the confusion was tremendous. Don Aníbal and Don Aurelio exchanged anxious glances, and tried in vain to appease the agitation of their friends, and establish some degree of order in the meeting. At length, by exhortations and entreaties, they succeeded in producing a semi-silence, of which they hastened to take advantage.

“What!” Don Aurelio exclaimed, addressing Moonshine, “Are we not to reckon on you and your comrade?”

“For what reason should you do so?” the adventurer said, bluntly. “We have made no bargain; to my knowledge, you have made me no proposition I am able to accept. ¡Viva Dios! business is business. The honourable gentlemen I command have a right to ask me of an account of the blood they have sold me. I suppose that they do not fight for mere amusement.”

“You are perfectly in the right,” Don Aníbal said, prudently and politely. “Still, your noble and devoted conduct this morning lead us to suppose that you wished to defend our cause.”

“A mistake,” Moonshine replied, with a shake of his head. “My friend and myself only wished to give you a specimen of what these men can do—that was all. And then, again, could we honourably abandon travellers who trusted to our loyalty, and whom we had promised to defend?”

“Certainly not,” said the hacendero; “and in the name of these caballeros, as well as my own, I thank you for your brilliant conduct, and the valiant assistance you rendered them.”

The company were beginning to grow tired of this conversation which seemed to have no object. Shouts and threats were beginning to be heard again. Don Aníbal understood that he must come to an end as quickly as possible.

“Tell me, señores,” he said, “are you free from engagements?”

“Completely,” the adventurer replied.

“Do you feel disposed to fight for us?”

“Yes, if your terms suit us.”

“Very good. These are the terms. You, Caballero, are appointed colonel of a regiment of cavalry, which you will undertake to organize, and of which your men will form the nucleus. Your pay will begin from today; your engagement is for three months; and you will receive a month and a half in advance. Do these terms suit you?”

“I find them very fair,” the adventurer replied; “but how much will you give my comrades?”

“Two piastres a man. Is that enough?”

“Certainly, if you are not too exacting.”

“What do you mean?”

“If you will shut your eyes to certain things which take place after a battle or a siege.”

“Colonel, as your regiment is a free corps, it cannot be subjected to the strict discipline of regular troops.”

“Very good, I understand,” the Sumach said, with a wink of intense significance.

“Is that settled?”

“Yes; whatever may happen, I belong to you for three months.”

“Good. As for you, señor,” Don Aníbal continued, addressing Moonshine, “what are your wishes?”

“Although my rifle knows how to talk when there is an opportunity, I repeat that I am no soldier; I only ask to serve you as scout during the campaign at the rate of six ounces a month. You can take it or leave it.”

“I accept,” the hacendero said, quickly.

“All right. You can count on me as on my friend.”

Don Aníbal, pleased with having settled this affair to the general satisfaction, and ensured the insurrection the assistance of men of tried bravery and experience, received the congratulations of his friends, and prepared to continue his address. During this, Don Aurelio leant over to the adventurers.

“I was convinced that you would join us,” he said to them, in a low voice.

“What would you have?” they replied, in the same key; “We have no prejudices, and came to this country to take service with one or other of the two parties. You met us first, that is all.”

Don Aurelio could not restrain a smile of contempt, but made no answer. As for the Canadians, they were firmly convinced that their conduct was most honourable, and, as they were in a foreign country, they had the right of acting as they were doing; a reasoning which, by the way, was neither incorrect nor illogical.

“Señores,” the hacendero continued, “since the time of Hidalgo, who, carried away by his enthusiasm, believed that it was sufficient to wish to be free to become so, our enemies have taught us to conquer them; the battles of Tres Palos, Palmar, Acatita de Bajan, Cuautlo, Chilpancingo, and many others in which we defeated our ferocious adversaries, have proved that we were able to gain our liberty. Unhappily the death of Morelos, by delivering our enemies from their most formidable adversary, has plunged the nation into discouragement, and

occasioned that discord which has glided into our ranks and once again riveted our almost broken fetters. Three mournful dates are marked in our revolutionary annals: that of July 30, 1811, on which Hidalgo was shot; December 22, 1815, on which Morelos shared the same fate; and lastly, December 18, 1817, which saw the brave and generous Mina also fall beneath the murderous bullets of the Spaniards. Do not all these glorious dead who lie in their bloodstained tombs excite you to emulate them? Has their precious blood been uselessly shed? I do not think so; the glorious spark which is supposed to be extinguished is smouldering beneath the ashes, and one word, one cry from you will be sufficient to rekindle it. Will you hesitate at this supreme hour to rise and die, if need be, like those who so nobly preceded you in the arena?"

"No," Don Aurelio exclaimed enthusiastically, as he rose; "no, we will not hesitate, for at your summons, Don Aníbal, we flocked to you, ready to recommence the struggle, no matter what may happen."

"Yes," observed a hacendero, whose white hair, lofty stature, and imposing glances inspired respect, "we are ready to fight and die if necessary for that liberty which is so dear to us; but courage is nothing without discipline; who will command us, who is the chief we can select? The revolutionary martyrology is already long in our country, although the contest only began ten years ago. In addition to the three heroes you have mentioned, Don Aníbal, and whom the Spaniards cowardly assassinated, what has become of those heroes who are more obscure but equally worthy of mention, such as Matamoros, Galeana, Bravo, Mier y Terán, Victoria, and Guerrero? They are also dead or in flight. We do not lack soldiers but chiefs. What can we effect against the old Castilian generals, against that Viceroy Apodaca, who obtained from King Ferdinand the title of Count del Venadito for the assassination of Mina, and who, employing with diabolical skill the faults we have not ceased to commit, has almost succeeded in extinguishing that patriotic fire which emitted such dazzling flames but a few months back?"

"What!" Don Aníbal remarked vehemently, "Would you despond? Do you believe that chiefs will be wanting, and that Providence who has up to the present done so much for you, will abandon you?"

"Heaven forbid my entertaining such a thought," the old man replied; "for ten years I have furnished sufficient proof of my devotion to the cause of Independence for my opinions not to be suspected. As you said yourself, Don Aníbal, the struggle we are about to begin must be decisive, and the last hour of liberty or slavery will strike for us! I confess with sorrow that although I have looked carefully around, I see no person capable of taking on himself the perilous honour of commanding us, no one worthy of marching at our head, no one whose military talent can cope with that of the Spanish generals."

"Are you sure you are not mistaken? Are you quite convinced that your memory does not fail you at this moment, and that all the heroes who formerly led us are dead?" Don Aurelio exclaimed, with a marked accent of irony.

The old man started at being thus addressed, and his brow was contracted as if by the weight of a sorrowful remembrance.

"Alas, Don Aurelio," he replied sadly, "one man alone has hitherto escaped the death which all his comrades suffered in succession; but his fate is only the more sorrowful. Confined in one of the dungeons of the old Mexican Inquisition, he

drags on in despair the rest of a branded existence, which his torturers appear to have only left him through derision. That man, were he free, might claim the honour of commanding us, and we would gladly follow him. But, alas! What use is it opening such cruel wounds? He will never be free, he will never be allowed to see the sun again; he is compelled to die of misery in his foetid dungeon."

"Are you quite sure of that?" Don Aurelio exclaimed. "Do you really believe that heaven has so utterly abandoned us, and that the man to whom you allude cannot recover his liberty?"

"Unhappily, I am but too certain of it. During the two years which have elapsed since the Spaniards have treacherously seized him, no one knows what has become of him. Shall I add that no one is certain that he is still alive, and has not been strangled in his dungeon by the Viceroy's orders?"

"Do you remember this person's name, señores?" Don Aurelio asked in a loud voice.

"Don Pelagio," the company, shouted unanimously.

"No one has forgotten it; his name is inscribed on our hearts."

"If he were to reappear, what would you do?" Don Aníbal asked.

"It is impossible," the old man said, "he will not reappear; when the Spanish lion holds a victim beneath its powerful paw, it does not let him go, but rends him asunder."

"But tell me," Don Aníbal continued pressingly, "if Father Sandoval reappeared, what would you do? Answer me!"

"Since you insist on an answer," the old man said with an accent of supreme majesty, "I will give it you clearly and categorically, in the name of all present, for I am persuaded that no one will dream of contradicting me. If Father Pelagio were to appear suddenly in the midst of us, we would immediately take an oath to conquer or die with him."

"Do you swear it?" Don Aurelio asked again.

"Yes, we swear it!" all present exclaimed proudly.

Don Aníbal took a step forward, and approaching Viscachu, who had hitherto remained modestly concealed behind Don Aurelio, he bowed to him with marks of the deepest respect, and taking his hand, said—"Father, your Excellency can throw off your incognito without fear; there are none but true Mexicans here."

Chapter VI

General Fray Pelagio.

It is impossible to describe the enthusiasm which broke out among the patriots at this revelation which burst upon them like a thunderclap. In truth, it was really Father Pelagio Sandoval. The result obtained by this surprise, which was so thoroughly to the Mexican taste, was immense. For a moment the worthy priest literally ran a risk of being stifled, so lovingly did his partizans press round him; everyone wished to get near him, clasp his hand; or kiss some part of his

garments. For more than a quarter of an hour there was an indescribable tumult and disorder in the hall; everybody spoke at once; each exalted the remarkable qualities of the chief who had been so long lost, and who reappeared, as if by a miracle, at the moment when they least hoped to see him.

The two Canadians were dumb with surprise; the effervescence, however, gradually calmed, and silence was re-established. Before aught else, Father Pelagio was obliged to explain to his followers in what way he had succeeded, after two years of captivity, comparable with the Neapolitan carcere duro, in leaving his dungeon by the aid of a faithful friend, in spite of the vigilant watch and constant espionage the Spaniards had established around him. So soon as he had satisfied their curiosity to the best of his ability, Father Sandoval, understanding the value of time well employed, and not wishing to let the enthusiasm of his adherents cool, asked leave to speak.

A deep silence at once fell, as if by enchantment, upon the crowd a moment previously so turbulent and disorderly; each with body bent forward, and an attentive ear, prepared to listen to the words which a mouth, they had fancied closed for ever, was about to utter. Father Pelagio still retained the calm, benign, and intellectual appearance which illumined his face the first time when we introduced him to the reader; a few wrinkles more, furrowed by the terrible struggle he had carried on for so many years, marked his pale forehead; his eyes had acquired a greater magnetic force, and his face, pale and thinned by suffering, had assumed that appearance of asceticism which Zurbaran has so well depicted on immortal canvas.

In spite of his common dress, so soon as the priest had thrown far from him the broad-brimmed hat which partly covered his features, and, under the influence of the feelings that agitated him at the moment, drew himself up to his full height, his face changed so thoroughly, his demeanour all at once became so majestic, that all the spectators, when gazing on him, felt themselves filled with a respect for which they did not even attempt to account.

“Listen to me, brothers and friends,” he said in that melodious and sympathetic voice which gained him all hearts, “Don Aníbal said to you, only a moment ago, the time is ripe for our beloved country, the hour of liberty has struck for Mexico. If we really wish to break the yoke which has so long weighed on us, the moment for the final struggle has arrived; the salvation of our country depends on you, and all is prepared for the grand act which it is our mission to accomplish. Pay the greatest attention to my words, for the news you are about to hear is serious. You are ignorant, I suppose, of the name of the man who opened the door of the dungeon in which I was buried alive, without hope of ever leaving it; this man is Don Agustín de Iturbide, the same man who shot Matamoros, that stoical martyr of our liberty—Iturbide, that ferocious colonel of militia, who has hitherto proved himself the most obstinate enemy of the Mexican insurgents. Don Agustín de Iturbide, that skilful, active, enterprising, and ambitious chief, who learnt the art of war in the ranks of our enemies, has all at once left the false path on which he has hitherto marched in order to become one of our most zealous defenders. Great changes effected in the mother country by Riego’s pronunciamiento, have led to the establishment of the Cortés, and the abolition of the Inquisition throughout the Spanish possessions. As you see, the times are changed, the sun is beginning

to shine for us through the clouds, our most obstinate adversaries are becoming our warmest partizans. Lastly, the Count del Venadito has been recalled by the Spanish government and is no longer Viceroy, his place being taken by O'Donojú. Let us take advantage of this interregnum, let us make our last heroic effort, and if we like we shall be free; our fate depends on ourselves, is in our hands. Shall we hesitate to rend our fetters?"

At those words, warmly pronounced with a cheering accent and inspired face, the audience felt electrified; an indescribable enthusiasm seized on them, and, drawing their sabres and swords, which they brandished over their heads, they shouted, in a voice of thunder, "Liberty! Liberty!" The priest waited a few minutes, until the generous effervescence caused by his speech had slightly calmed; then, commanding silence by a gesture full of majesty, he continued—

"Iturbide is only waiting for our signal to declare himself for independence, and overthrow the metropolitan government; the southern provinces are already in a flame. Shall we remain behindhand? You are all witnesses of what took place here this very morning; the Spaniards, advised by their spies of the meeting which was to take place at this hacienda, and having no plausible excuse to break it up, assumed the Indian garb to attack us, in order to deceive us, and be able, in the case of a check, to disavow all participation in this unjustifiable act. Their ostensible motive, it is true, señores, was to break up our meeting; but their real motive, the important object they had in view, was to carry me off, and thus paralyze your attempts at insurrection. Caballeros, brothers, and countrymen, one last word, which contains our thought, and traces our duty for us—'To arms! Liberty or death!'"

The effect of these words, pronounced with feverish energy, was immense.

"To arms! Liberty or death!" all his hearers shouted.

At this moment the door opened, and a young man appeared; it was Don Melchior, the lad saved by Don Aníbal some fourteen years back, and brought up by him as his son. Don Aurelio had spoken the truth; Melchior was really a charming cavalier, tall and gracefully built, with regular, noble features, and soft black eyes. His dress, without being rich, was extremely neat, and held a middle place between that of the conspirators and of the desert hunters; a straight sabre, called a machete, unsheathed, and passed through an iron ring, hung from his left side, and the butts of two long pistols peered out of the faja, or red China crape girdle, fastened round his hips. Don Melchior, after looking curiously around him, glided through the groups and made his way up to Father Pelagio, in whose ear he whispered a few words; the priest started, and his face was slightly flushed, but, recovering himself immediately, he said, raising his voice so as to command attention—

"Señores, I have just heard something which neither you nor I anticipated. Count de Melgosa has just arrived at the hacienda, and insists on being shown in to you, as he says that he has matters of the utmost importance to communicate to us."

This news produced all the effect which the chief of the insurgents expected. All frowned angrily, and a menacing expression of dull irritation appeared on every face.

“What do you propose doing?” Don Aurelio asked. “If our friends give their consent,” Fray Pelagio replied, “I will receive him at once. What good is it any longer hiding ourselves? We have sufficient force to hold head against an enemy more dangerous than the count can be. Let us burn our vessels bravely, and make head against the storm. What matter whether our enemies learn two hours sooner or later, that we are recommencing the struggle?”

“Viva Dios, you are right,” Don Aníbal exclaimed impetuously; “let us confront the storm.”

“Let us show,” the old man supported him, who had already taken part in the discussion several times; “let us show these haughty Spaniards that we are not afraid of them.”

“That is talking like a man of heart,” Father Pelagio said with a smile. “Melchior, my child,” he added, as he turned to the young man, “be kind enough to introduce El Señor Conde de Melgosa. So great a person must not be kept waiting any longer in the anteroom of a poor Creole.”

The last words were uttered with an accent of pure raillery, which brought a smile to the lips of several of the hearers. Don Melchior, without replying, bowed to the priest and left the room. Father Pelagio then drew Don Aníbal and Don Aurelio on one side, and began an earnest conversation with them in a low voice. The door ere long again opened and Melchior appeared preceding another person, whom he introduced as Count de Melgosa. At the time when we bring him on the stage the count was about fifty-five years of age, although he seemed scarce forty, so greatly had his powerful constitution hitherto preserved him against the assaults of old age.

He was a tall and well proportioned man, with a cold and ceremonious manner. His angular features were stern and haughty, and the expression of his face ironical. His eyes, deep set beneath his brows, flashed a gloomy and concentrated fire. There was about his whole person something stiff and constrained, which prevented sympathy. He was dressed in a rich military uniform, and wore the insignia of a colonel in the Spanish army.

A profound silence greeted his entrance into the hall. Not appearing at all affected by this cold and significant reception he lightly raised his hand to his hat without deigning to uncover, and walked with a firm and deliberate step up to Don Aníbal de Saldibar, who, at a sign from Father Pelagio, came to meet him, moving aside the persons in his way so as to offer a free passage to a visitor who was so little desired. When the two men were opposite each other they bowed ceremoniously, and Don Aníbal, as master of the house, spoke first.

“What fortunate accident, my lord,” he said, “procures me the honour of the unexpected visit which you deign to pay me?”

The count smiled bitterly, and, looking ironically round the company, whose eyes were fixed on him with an ill restrained expression of hatred and anger, said—

“An unexpected visit, I can believe, caballero; and, doubtless, very little desired.”

“Why so?” Señor Conde, the hacendero continued with the most exquisite politeness; “Be assured that I shall be always highly honoured when you, the alcade mayor of the province, deign to visit my humble residence.”

“Are you speaking seriously, Señor Don Aníbal, and can I credit the words which it pleases you to address to me at this moment?”

“Why should it not be so, Señor Conde?” the hacendero said, with an almost imperceptible tinge of sarcasm.

“Why?” the count remarked with considerable vehemence; but at once checking himself he continued in that cold and lightly mocking tone natural to him, “A truce, if you please, to compliments and protestations in which neither of us believes, and let us come to facts.”

“Be it so, Señor Conde,” Don Aníbal replied, still obsequious. “Let us come to facts, I desire nothing more.”

There was a silence for two or three moments. At length the count continued—

“Caballero, I have come to visit you, not as alcade mayor of the province, a title I do not possess, and to which I have no claim, but merely as alcade of the town of Leona Vicario, in the territory of which your property is partly included, and from the jurisdiction of which you naturally append.”

“Naturally!” the hacendero repeated. “Ah! I depend from the jurisdiction of Leona Vicario. I thank you for the information, Señor Conde. I confess to you that I was completely ignorant of the fact, having, whether rightly or wrongly, a habit of recognizing no jurisdiction but my own in matters that occur on my estates.”

“As you see, caballero, you are wrong.”

“Be it so; but in my turn, Señor Conde, I will say, with your permission, enough of this. For I suppose that it is not with the purpose of giving me this most important information, for which I thank you, that you have ridden such a distance, and taken the trouble to come hither.”

“You are right, caballero, I had another motive in coming here.”

“And may I hope that you will deign to let me know it?”

“Without further delay, señor.”

“I am waiting with the most lively impatience, Señor Conde.”

“I have come, caballero,” the alcade mayor continued with a tinge of threatening hauteur, “to ask you by what right you have assembled at your hacienda so large a number of individuals who have all been long known as haters of the king’s government?”

Don Aníbal was preparing to answer this question in a manner at least quite as haughty as that in which it was asked, but Father Pelagio, who had hitherto seemed to attach but slight importance to the conversation, suddenly drew himself up, and seizing Don Aníbal by the arm gently thrust him on one side, and coldly said to the count—

“It is my place to answer this, Señor Alcade.”

At this interpellation, which he was far from expecting, the count looked with surprise at the man who was addressing him, and noticing his shabby clothes said disdainfully—

“Who are you, my good fellow, and by what right do you take the liberty of addressing me?”

“Ah, ah, it appears that my disguise is good, Señor Conde,” the priest said mockingly, “since you, to whom my features are so familiar, do not recognize me.”

“Can it be possible?” the count exclaimed in surprise, after examining the speaker more attentively. “What, you here! Oh, I am no longer astonished at the

ferments of revolt which are springing up again in all parts of the province. It is you, unworthy minister of a God of peace, who, forgetting your holy mission, are spreading discord and preaching insurrection to the masses."

"You are mistaken, count," the priest answered, "I preach a holy war: but, believe me, caballero, threats or insults are unadvisable between us; it would be neither prudent nor courteous on your part to offer them to me, and I warn you that I will not put up with them. You want to know what we are doing here? I will tell you. We are conspiring the overthrow of the government you serve, and at the moment when you arrived we were taking an oath to conquer or die in regaining our liberty. Is there anything else you desire to know? Speak, and I am ready to satisfy you."

The count smiled sorrowfully.

"No," he answered, "poor madmen, I have nothing more to learn. What can you tell me that I do not already know? Was not the long struggle you have sustained up to this day sufficient to prove to you the inutility of a mad resistance against a power too strongly established for your obstinate efforts to succeed even in shaking it? Listen to what I am instructed to say to you in the name of his Excellency the Viceroy."

"Speak," Fray Pelagio said, coldly, "and speak loud, Señor Conde, so that we may clearly hear the propositions you have to make to us."

"Propositions?" he replied haughtily. "I have none to make to you. I have orders to intimate, nothing else."

"Orders? That is very haughty language. Have you forgotten where you are, and who are the men surrounding you?"

"I have forgotten nothing I ought to remember, caballero, believe me. Renounce an impossible contest; withdraw peacefully, all of you, to your houses; and possibly the government, taking pity on you, will consent to close its eyes upon this insensate and purposeless attempt."

A frightful outburst of yells and threats greeted this contemptuous summons. The count, with a smile on his lips, a calm brow, and head aloft, remained unmoved by this general indignation.

"Silence," the Father shouted; "and you, Señor Conde," he added, addressing the alcade mayor, "how many lives have you to risk when you dare offer us such an insult? Do you think yourself in perfect safety? In your turn listen to our reply—it will be brief."

"I am listening," he said.

"The weapons we take up today we shall not lay down till the last Spaniard has quitted the soil of Mexico."

Frenzied applause and shouts of joy arose from all sides at these words.

"Be it so, señores," the count replied; "the blood shed will be on your own heads. In the name of the king I declare you infamous traitors, and, as such, outlaws. Farewell!"

And without condescending to bow to the company, the count, after looking defiantly around him, turned and left the hall with the same calm and measured step as when he entered it. Father Pelagio then bent down to Don Aníbal's ear.

“Follow him,” he said in a low voice, “and do not let him quit the hacienda till you know his instructions and the repressive measures the government intend to employ against us.”

“That will be difficult,” the hacendero observed.

“Not so much so as you suppose. The count is an old friend of yours. Take advantage of the late hour to oblige him to accept your hospitality, and remain here till tomorrow. In our present position, twenty-four hours gained may ensure the success of our plans. I reckon on your skill to decide him.”

“I will try,” Don Aníbal answered, shaking his head doubtfully; “but I am afraid I shall fail in this delicate mission.”

“Try impossibilities, my friend,” Fray Pelagio pressed him.

Don Aníbal bowed and left the hall.

Chapter VII

A Conversation.

Among the persons present at the meeting, was one to whom we have not alluded, although he is destined to play an important part in this story, and who perhaps listened with more interest than anyone else to what was said. This person, to whom we have now to turn our attention, was Sotavento, the Indian majordomo, so liked by Don Aníbal de Saldibar, and whose gloomy outline was described in our earlier chapters.

Sotavento had not altered; nearly a dozen years had passed over his head without leaving the slightest trace; his hair was still as black, his face as cold, and his person as upright. Indians have this peculiarity, that, whatever their age may be, they always seem young, and do not really begin to display any signs of decrepitude until they reach the last limits of old age.

We several times came across redskins who mentioned to us facts that occurred sixty years back, and yet they did not themselves look more than five and thirty. Moreover, it is impossible to fix with any certainty an Indian’s age, even when his features bear the stamp of senility, for the simple reason that the savages do not try by any ceremony to fix in their minds the precise date of their children’s birth, and limit themselves to recording, by the name they give them, at what spot, in what season, and under what physical or moral influence they are born; hence the names of plants, animals, rivers, mountains, etc., which nearly all the redskins bear.

Sotavento, during the twelve years that had elapsed, had not left his master. He had continued to serve him with such fidelity and devotion that the latter, in spite of his indomitable Castilian pride, had almost come to regard his majordomo more as a friend than a servant, and to treat him accordingly. The conduct of this man, although still stamped with a certain mystery, had constantly been loyal, apparently at least, and under two critical circumstances he had bravely exposed his life to save his master’s.

Still, in spite of the proofs of devotion which could not be disputed, this man inspired all those with whom chance brought him into contact (always excepting Don Aníbal) with a repugnance and antipathy which nothing could overcome; and, singular to say, the better he was known and the longer, the less people liked him, and the more they tried to avoid having anything to do with him. Still, his manners were gentle, polite, even affable; he liked to do services, and eagerly seized every opportunity to be agreeable, even to persons who must be quite indifferent to him.

Whence came this general repulsion for this man? No one could have said: it was instinctive; when people were near him they felt an emotion like that caused by the sight of a reptile. Don Aníbal alone shrugged his shoulders with a smile of contempt when any doubts or fears were expressed in his presence about the character of the man whom he had made his confidant. Was he wrong or right? The conclusion will probably show.

The majordomo stepped unnoticed out of the hall after his master, and leaving the latter to go in search of Count de Melgosa, who had already reached the patio, and was about giving his servants the necessary orders for departure, he quietly entered the inner apartments, went through several rooms, and reached an octagonal parlour of small size, whose windows looked out on the huerta, which at that moment was filled with horses and armed men who had formed a temporary bivouac there. On reaching it the Indian looked searchingly around him, then, going to the door, bent his body forward, and seemed to be listening.

“They are coming,” he said to himself, almost immediately after.

With one bound he reached the other end of the room, opened, with a key that hung from his neck by a thin steel chain, a door carefully concealed in the wall, took a final glance of singular meaning at the door of the room, and then disappeared, closing the panel, which moved noiselessly in a groove, at the very moment when Don Aníbal entered the room, accompanied by the count.

“Here,” the hacendero said, pointing to a butaca, “we can converse at our ease, without fear of being disturbed by intruders.”

“I assure you that I have nothing to say to you; still, if you desire to exchange a few words with me while my servants are saddling the horses, it will afford me great pleasure.”

While saying this, the count seated himself.

“Oh, oh!” the hacendero remarked, with a smile, “Is that your tone? I cannot believe that you really intend to go away so speedily; it cannot be so, for the honour of my house. My dear count, old friends as we are must separate with mutual satisfaction, and when all the duties of hospitality have been strictly fulfilled.”

“My dear Don Aníbal, at the present day,” the count said with reserve, “the duties of hospitality have become, I fear, very weak ties, and are not strong enough to retain anybody.”

“Do not believe that,” Don Aníbal exclaimed warmly; “friendship has its undeniable rights, and if fate has cast us into two opposite parties, we ought only to esteem each other the more for having followed our convictions.”

“Unfortunately, Don Aníbal, but few friendships resist political hatreds. However great the affection may be we feel for a man, however powerful the sympathy we

may have with him, when a community of thought no longer exists, when everything separates you, indifference inevitably succeeds friendship, and, as you know, from indifference to hatred is only a step."

"Which, I trust, you have not yet taken, my dear count, for our friendship is one of those which nothing can weaken, as it rests on too solid a basis—an oath of vengeance which we took together—and which we have as yet been unable to accomplish, in spite of all our efforts."

The count's brow was contracted by a painful thought.

"Yes," he murmured, "you are right, Don Aníbal; there is a vengeance we have sworn to take. Oh, whatever may happen, I will keep my oath."

"Perhaps," the hacendero continued, "the hour is nearer at hand than you suppose."

"Is that the truth, Don Aníbal?" he exclaimed, suddenly starting up. "Shall we at length reach the object for which we have so long been striving?"

"I hope so, Señor Conde; as I am more at liberty than you, and better situated to obtain information, I believe that I am at last on the track."

"Speak, speak! What do you know, my friend?"

"Speaking today would perhaps be imprudent. I do not wish to leave anything to chance; give me a few more days, and then—"

"But," the count interrupted him passionately, "the insult I have to avenge is more serious than yours; my murdered brother, my boy carried off, perhaps killed, whose blood is incessantly crying out after their cowardly and barbarous murderers."

"And I have my wife, my well-beloved wife, who was rendered mad by terror, and my daughter, who escaped by a miracle from the frightful sting of a snake. Oh, believe me, count, I suffer as much as you, for all my happiness has been for ever destroyed."

There was a moment of painful silence. The two gentlemen, lying back in their butacas, with their heads buried in their hands, remained plunged in gloomy and sorrowful thoughts. At length the hacendero spoke.

"Still," he said, "on reflection, I think that it will be better both for you and me to come to a thorough understanding about the steps we mean to take, and arrange so that failure cannot be possible. But the conversation will be a long one; I have much information to impart to you, and so, my dear count, whether you like it or not, you must defer your departure till tomorrow, and consent to pass the night beneath my roof."

"I am in a very exceptional position here, Don Aníbal. The persons assembled in the hacienda at this moment have a right to regard me as an enemy, perhaps a spy. I should not like—"

"That concerns me, my dear count. Thank heaven, the well-known honour of your character places you above all suspicion; and who knows, perhaps your stay here, however short it may be, will not prove useless to the cause you serve."

"What do you mean? Pray explain yourself, my friend, for I do not understand you."

"You will soon do so; but for the present I shall feel obliged by your not pressing the point."

“Very good; I will await a more propitious moment to obtain from you the double explanation you promise me.”

At this moment the door opened, and Don Melchior appeared. He bowed.

“Well, Don Melchior, what good wind has brought you here?” Don Aníbal asked with a smile.

“The Señor Conde’s horses are ready, father,” he replied; “his people are only awaiting his pleasure.”

“Be good enough, my dear boy,” the hacendero remarked, “to tell the criados to take his Excellency’s horses back to the stable, and to unload the mules. The count does not start tonight, but deigns to spend it under our humble roof.”

“Still—” the count objected.

“You have promised me,” Don Aníbal said quickly.

“Well, be it so,” said the count, with his eyes fixed on the young man, who was standing respectfully in the doorway.

At a sign from the hacendero, Melchior bowed, and left the room. The count remained pensive for some moments, and then turned to his host.

“Have you not your old majordomo?” he asked him.

“Certainly. Why do you ask the question?”

“I fancied that young man had taken his place.”

“Oh, no! That young man is not even one of my servants.”

“Ah!”

“He is an orphan I have brought up.”

“It is strange that I should have never seen him before.”

“I presume you never noticed him before now.”

“That is possible,” the count said, suppressing a sigh, “still, it seems to me, I know not why, that had I seen him before, his face would not have passed out of my memory; there is something about it which struck me. Have you had him long?”

“He was six years old, I believe, when Sotavento brought him to me. Since that time he has constantly been with me; he is, I think, of Indian origin, although his features are more marked than those of the redskins, and his complexion whiter; but that means nothing on the border, where crossings of breed are so frequent.”

“That is true,” the count murmured, as he passed his hand over his forehead, as if to drive away a painful thought; “forgive me, my friend, I do not know where my head was; the questions I asked you must have appeared to you most indiscreet.”

“Not at all; I am greatly attached to this young man, who deserves in every respect all that I have done for him. Hence I can only feel flattered when others beside myself take an interest in him, for it proves that I was not deceived with respect to him. Now, that it is arranged you will not start till tomorrow—”

“At sunrise,” the count interrupted.

“Very good,” the hacendero continued; “permit me to discharge a mission I have undertaken toward you.”

“A mission!” the count said with surprise.

“The word is perhaps very ambitious, but the matter is this—Father Pelagio wishes you to give him an interview for a few minutes in this room.”

“Did I not see him just now, and did we not have a conversation?”

“That is true; but at the moment he was among too many persons to be able to have an explanation with your Excellency, as he would have probably desired.”

“I do not know whether my instructions permit me to grant a confidential interview to the person to whom you allude; still, not to disoblige you, my dear Don Aníbal, and prove to you how anxious I am to maintain the public tranquillity, I consent to the interview Father Pelagio asks, on the condition, however, that you are present.”

“Your Excellency anticipates my wish,” the priest said as he entered the room.

“You were listening to us, señor,” the count remarked haughtily.

“Not at all, caballero; but, as I opened the door, I involuntary overheard your last sentence, and I did not think that I committed any indiscretion in proving to you that I heard it.”

“Very good, I am ready to listen to you; but pray be brief.”

“I have only a few words to say to you,” Father Pelagio replied with a bow.

“What is their nature?”

“I am about to have the honour of explaining. We regret, as much as you do, caballero, the continued wretchedness which has weighed on our unhappy country for so many years; far from wishing to recommence the war, we desire, on the contrary, to obtain a durable peace, if it be possible; but, in order to gain this result, which is the object we desire, we must have the means of transmitting to his Excellency the Viceroy our respectful entreaties.”

“Respectful?” the count interrupted ironically.

The priest bowed, and continued without seeming to notice the accent in which this word was uttered—

“We have, therefore, resolved on sending to the Viceroy one of our friends intrusted with a humble petition, if you will consent, Señor Conde, to pledge your honour that this petition shall reach his Excellency, and that whatever the Viceroy’s answer may be, our ambassador will have nothing to fear, and be at liberty to go whither he pleases, without being troubled, so soon as his mission is ended.”

The count reflected for a moment.

“Listen,” he said; “I know not whether rebels have the right to send ambassadors to the chiefs of the government they are combating. Still, as I sincerely desire peace, and as whatever may be the result of the contest, Spanish blood will flow on both sides, and as I wish, as far as depends on myself, to avoid a painful conflict, I pledge my honour, not to lead your envoy to his Excellency the Viceroy, as that is impossible, but to present him to the general commanding the province, who, for my sake, will treat him respectfully, and who, if your petition really contains quiet and respectful demands, will himself place it before his Excellency the Viceroy; such is the only thing I can undertake. If that suits you, very good; but it is impossible for me to do more.”

“Señor Conde, I expected no less from you, although what you offer does not quite come up to our expectations. Still, we eagerly accept your offer, as we desire to convince you of the frankness and loyalty of our intentions. Tomorrow our envoy will follow you.”

“That is settled, señor.”

Father Pelagio bowed respectfully to the count, and withdrew. When Don Aníbal found himself alone again with his friend, he begged him to follow him to the room which had been prepared for him, and both went out. The secret door gently opened, and Sotavento appeared, advancing cautiously, and looking anxiously around him. When he was certain that no one could surprise him, his eye flashed with a sinister gleam, and making a menacing gesture, he said in a hollow voice—

"We shall see!"

Chapter VIII

The Envoy.

After the count's somewhat precipitate retreat, and the mission intrusted to Don Aníbal to detain him at the hacienda, if only for a few hours, the Mexican insurgents continued discussing in the hall the most fitting measures to obtain a speedy and good result for the new uprising which was preparing. Father Pelagio then informed the conspirators that this time the leaders of the revolutionary party wished to deal a heavy blow, and finish, at all risks, with the Spanish government. The secret societies spread over the country, and the recently created Masonic lodges, had, in a general meeting, elected as commander-in-chief of the national army Colonel Iturbide, whose well-known military talents were a guarantee of success.

Colonel Iturbide, who was destined hereafter to proclaim himself emperor, under the name of Agustín I., and fall beneath the bullets of his own subjects, who condemned him and mercilessly shot him, when he tried to regain the power he had allowed to slip from his grasp; Iturbide, we say, is the sole truly skilful statesman Mexico has produced since the revolution. He had served with distinction in the Spanish army, and had on several occasions displayed a devotion to the government which bordered on cruelty. Now that he was gained over to the revolution, nothing would arrest him in attaining the object of his secret ambition.

This time the Mexicans wished to avoid a serious fault into which they had previously fallen, and which had not only fairly compromised their cause but almost ruined it. This was the circumstance: When, in 1814, the Spanish armies, beaten in every encounter, seemed on the point of giving up the game, and yielding to the revolutionary turmoil, whose triumphant principles seemed solidly established on the territory of new Spain, General Morelos, at that time the most influential chief of the liberal party, whose ideas secretly inclined to a republic, established on the same basis as that of the United States, thought that the hour had arrived to convene a national congress.

This congress, at first composed of only a dozen members, began its session at Chilpancingo, where it promulgated decree upon decree; but the discussing power had scarce been established by side of the armed and acting power, ere, instead of combining their efforts for the triumph of the cause they had sworn to defend,

they began contending together, each impeding the measures they should have taken in common, and by deplorable conflict destroyed their means of action. The congress tried to restrict the power of the general-in-chief, and prevented on every occasion his operations, so that the latter found it almost impossible to act.

These internal dissensions gave the Spaniards time to regain their courage. The Mexican republic was dead ere it lived, and the insurgents were obliged a second time to undergo the yoke from which they fancied themselves forever free.

As Colonel Iturbide and the chief of the liberal party were not yet quite ready to commence the insurrectionary movement, the great point was to wait and, before all, gain time; for this Fray Pelagio only saw one plan: to send to the general commanding the province a messenger-order to make him certain proposals, and bearing a respectful petition addressed to the Viceroy. During the absence of this ambassador, resistance would be quietly organized, and they would be ready to act when the signal for revolt was given by the chiefs. The conspirators enthusiastically applauded this proposal, which seemed to them fully to carry out the object proposed, namely cheating the Spaniards. Still, when it came to select the ambassador, serious difficulties arose.

Most of the persons present were rich hacenderos, long known to belong to the liberal party, and whom the government carefully watched; many of them had had to undergo numerous annoyances either in their estates or their persons from the Spaniards, and they were not at all anxious to surrender themselves to the mercy of enemies whose summary treatment they were acquainted with. In fact, the Spanish generals made no scruple about hanging or shooting the insurgents who fell into their hands, and there was no plausible reason for supposing that they would respect the person of an ambassador, sent by men whom they regarded as rebels, and with whom the law of nations and of war need not be followed. Consequently each found an excuse to escape the dangerous honour of being sent to the general.

The question became difficult of solution. Father Pelagio only saw around him long drawn faces, which foreboded no good for the execution of his plan; he was, therefore, considerably embarrassed and did not see how to escape the difficulty, when Don Aurelio suddenly came to his help at the moment when he least expected it.

“¡Canarios!” the Mexican exclaimed, “It must be allowed, caballeros, that we are pulling singular faces, and bear a strong likeness to the rats in Yriarte’s fable, that wished to bell the sleeping cat.”

In spite of the gravity of the situation, this sally was so true that it unwrinkled all the foreheads, and caused a general laugh.

“In truth,” Don Pelagio observed, “Dios me perdone, we look as if we did not know exactly what to resolve.”

“Yet I fancy that nothing is easier than the choice we propose making.”

“How so?” the priest asked.

“Whom do we want as ambassador? A true man; we are all so, I believe. Still this man must be through his position sufficiently free and independent to be able honourably to fulfil the important mission intrusted to him. Is it not so?”

“Yes, you are right,” Fray Pelagio answered, not knowing what the hacendero wished to arrive at.

All the company, puzzled in the highest degree, looked anxiously at Don Aurelio, unable to detect what the result would be. The latter continued quietly, as he laid his hands on the Sumach's shoulder, who, very indifferent to what was said, was carelessly listening to the discussion as he leant on his rifle.

"Well, the man you seek is here," he said: "our excellent colonel—he alone can worthily fulfil this great and glorious mission."

"What?" the adventurer exclaimed, starting as if a snake had stung him, "No jokes, if you please. If it be a joke, I warn you that I consider it a poor one."

"I am not joking at all, Colonel," the hacendero continued with a gracious smile, "on the contrary, I am speaking very seriously."

"Nonsense, my dear sir. Your idea may seem to you a good one, but, for my part, I consider it absurd and in every way impracticable. Hang it," he added, as he passed his hand round his neck, "I know the Spanish gentry, and am not at all anxious to go and thrust my head down the wolfs throat out of bravado."

Father Pelagio at once perceived what advantage this plan possessed for everybody, hence he resolved to carry it out, and convince the adventurer, who, in fact, was the only man who could risk, owing to his very insignificance, going to the Spanish authorities.

"You are mistaken, Colonel," he said to the Canadian. "Don Aurelio's idea is an excellent one, and I give you credit for such good sense that you will agree with me in a moment."

"I doubt it hugely, caballero. I confess that I am curious to know how you will set about proving to me that I must go and be hanged or shot for the greater benefit of your cause," he answered with an ironical smile.

"Oh, that is very easy, Colonel. Understand me thoroughly."

"Oh, I am all ears."

"You alone can carry out this difficult duty, for the following reasons: in the first place you are a foreigner, citizen of a country with which the Spanish government would think twice before seeking a quarrel; and then you are a colonel in our army. You may be sure that any insult offered to you will not be left unpunished, and that I, your general, will take an exemplary vengeance."

"All that is very fine," the adventurer answered with a grin. "I allow that the Spaniards will be unable to confiscate my property, for even if I possess any, it is, thank heaven, out of their reach. But they can imprison and even shoot me. That is of some importance, I suppose; and, once I am dead, will you restore me the life taken from me? What shall I care then for the more or less exemplary manner in which you avenge my death? I shall not be the less securely buried."

"I repeat to you that the Spaniards will not dare touch a hair of your head; moreover, you will not go alone; the noble count whom you saw here just now will pledge himself to protect and defend you, for he will introduce you to the person to whom I am about to send you."

"Hum!" the adventurer continued, "All this is not very clear; but how do you know that the count will assume this responsibility? You have not yet asked him the question."

"No; but while your colonel's commission is being made out, and two months' advance are paid you for your outfit, I will go and speak to the count, and obtain his word that you shall incur no danger from the Spanish authorities, and that

when your mission is completed, every security will be granted for your safe return."

The adventurer scratched his head as if very far from convinced. It was plain that, in spite of his general's explanations and the fine promises, he did not particularly care for the mission confided to him. Still, at the expiration of a moment, he drew himself up with a determined air, shook his head several times as if to drive away a troublesome idea, and said—

"Well, well, I see that madmen must always be madmen; so deuce take fear. The Spaniards, I suppose, are not more formidable than tigers; I shall not be sorry to have a nearer look at them, and so I accept your offer. When am I to start?"

"Tomorrow, with the count; he will escort you to the general."

"That is settled."

"Now, give your name to Don Aurelio Gutiérrez, in order that your commission may be filled up, and your letters of credit written."

"Good; my name is Oliver Clary, called the Sumach; this time I will not deny my name, for I believe that I shall see death pretty closely. I was born at Québec, and I am thirty-two years of age. Is that enough, or do you want any further information?"

"No, Señor Don Oliver, that is more than sufficient; now I will leave you for a few moments, and settle matters with the count."

"Do so, General, I trust to your promise."

"Depend on me."

And Father Pelagio left the room. The adventurer was at once surrounded by the conspirators, who warmly thanked him for his devotion to their cause, and the courage with which he was going to trace an imminent and terrible danger in order to serve it. The Canadian shrugged his shoulders, and quietly turned his back on them. So soon as his commission and letters of credit were ready, and he had received his money, he carefully placed all in his waist belt, and, making a sign to Moonshine, left the room with him.

We have already described in what way Father Pelagio obtained the count's assent; we will, therefore, not return to that subject, but merely state that the priest hastened to inform the Canadian, whom he met, of the success of his application, while warning him that he must be ready to start at sunrise of the next day.

"You know," he added, in a low voice, and with a smile, "that an ambassador must have eyes and ears; I trust to you to see and hear all that it may be useful for us to know."

"Good, good, leave me alone, I will prove to the Gachupinos that the Godos are not the only clever people, and that the Canadians are descended from the Normans; they will not catch a weasel asleep in me."

Father Pelagio exchanged a few more remarks with him, and then left, after wishing him success once again. The two Canadians then left the house and proceeded to the garden, where they sought the most secluded spot. On reaching one, where they did not fear being overheard, they stopped and sat down side by side on the ground.

"Friend Moonshine," the adventurer said, "I have brought you here because I wish to ask a service of you."

“I suspected it; speak, Oliver, you know that I am ready to do everything you wish.”

“I do not know how I let myself be humbugged into accepting this confounded embassy, in which there are ninety chances in a hundred that I shall lose my hide; but what is done cannot be undone. Listen to me: during my absence you will take the command of my men, and I will give them orders to obey you as myself.”

Moonshine gave a nod of assent.

“Now,” the adventurer continued, “take this belt; it contains not only the gold I have just received, but also some savings of my own.”

“What am I to do with it?”

“If I am killed by the Godos, I do not wish them to profit by my money. You will keep as much as you like, and send the rest to my old mother, you know where.”

“I will send it all; I shall not need money, for if those brigands of Spaniards assassinate you I must revenge your death, and money will be useless to me.”

“That is true; in that case you will send all. That is settled, thank you.”

“There is nothing to thank me for; what you ask of me is simple.”

“Yes, yes,” the other said, with a shake of his head; “but who knows what turn matters will take?”

“Well, up to the present we have no cause to grumble, I fancy.”

“It is true that we have succeeded in everything; my measures were so well taken that, without exciting the slightest suspicion, we managed to gain the very thing we aimed at; but we must wait for the end.”

“Nonsense; we shall succeed; set your mind at rest about that, Sumach. Besides, our project is most honourable, as we wish to render a service to people to whom we do not owe the slightest obligation, and whom we do not even know.”

“That is true. Well, let us trust to heaven. One last word.”

“Out with it.”

“Distrust that cunning-looking majordomo. I know not why, but he inspires me with an invincible repulsion.”

“All right; I will watch him.”

“Very good; now let us go to dinner.”

The two men rose and went back to the house as quiet and careless as if they had been conversing about indifferent matters. Immediately after dinner, the adventurer assembled his comrades, made them recognize Moonshine as their chief during his absence, and then all his affairs being thus settled, he wrapped himself in his zarapé, lay down on the ground, and almost immediately fell asleep.

Chapter IX

Don Melchior Díaz.

Don Melchior Díaz’s name has several times already slipped from our pen; the reader has been introduced to him, but up to the present we have not yet positively explained who he is or in what way he succeeded in gaining the position

he occupies in the Saldibar family. The moment has arrived to make this known, and acquaint the reader with certain events most important for a proper understanding of coming facts.

When Sotavento handed over to Don Aníbal de Saldibar the child saved from the general massacre of the Indian tribe, there was a fact which the majordomo passed over in silence. It was, that the lad whom he declared to have recovered from the Indians, had been simply confided to him by a white hunter, to whom he had scarce spoken, and who said to him at the same time as he handed him a bag of gold dust, which the majordomo did not think it necessary to mention either, as he doubtless preferred to appear thoroughly disinterested in his master's eyes—

"This child is born of white parents; one day he will be reclaimed; tell Don Aníbal to take the greatest care of him."

Sotavento scented a mystery under these hints, and in the prospect of some profit to be made at a later date, kept to himself the hunter's remarks, and told his master some sort of story, which the latter believed, through the slight importance he attached to it. The lad had, therefore, been unhesitatingly accepted by Don Aníbal, and brought up in the family for the first five years. The hacendero paid but little attention to him, amusing himself at times with his sallies, but taking very slight interest in him, and regarding him rather as a servant than as a member of the family destined to acquire considerable importance.

Don Aurelio, when he narrated to his companions the facts which caused Doña Emilia's insanity and the events that followed, had been unable to tell more than everybody knew, and comment on these events from his own point of sight. But a secret was kept in the inner circle of the family which Don Aníbal was more careful not to permit to transpire, and which, consequently, Don Aurelio was ignorant of. The secret was this: Doña Emilia was not cured; her madness still endured; still this madness had become, so to speak, intermittent, and only made its appearance at settled intervals; but then her attacks acquired such strength that they became irresistible, and any constraint placed at such a moment on the patient's volition would infallibly have caused her death.

Don Aníbal, as we have said, adored his wife. Several times he tried to calm her; he even went so far as to try and prevent her leaving the hacienda. But then such frightful scenes occurred; Doña Emilia fell into such horrible convulsions at the mere thought of not acting as she liked, that Don Aníbal was obliged to restore her liberty. Doña Emilia when these attacks came upon her became a lioness; she had but one thought, one purpose, to rush in pursuit of the Indians, and pitilessly massacre them. Singular anomaly of the human heart, especially in a mild, kind, timid woman, whom the slightest pain caused to faint, and who, in ordinary times, could not endure the sight of blood. Doña Emilia, whom, by the physician's express orders, Don Aníbal had not dared deprive of her daughter, had brought up her child in a hatred of the redskins, and seizing on her young imagination with that ascendency which mothers possess, had succeeded, if not in completely making her share her ideas, at least in obtaining from her a passive and absolute obedience.

Melchior, brought up, so to speak, haphazard at the hacienda, had, through the instinct of protecting innate in man, attached himself to Doña Diana, whom he saw sad, sickly, and suffering. Doña Diana, for her part, felt pity for the poor

orphan, and from this mutual sympathy sprang a friendship which years had only consolidated by rendering it warmer. Don Aníbal and Doña Emilia both saw with pleasure this affection spring up between the children, though from different motives. Don Aníbal, who would not for anything in the world have thwarted his wife's ideas, saw with delight this boy grow up who, at a given moment, might become her defender and safeguard in her mad expeditions against the Indians; while Doña Emilia, reasoning from an entirely different point of view, though she attained the same result, saw in him a devoted and most useful ally in these same expeditions.

The result of this tacit understanding between husband and wife was that the boy, at first abandoned to his instincts, was watched with greater care, brought up as he deserved to be, and at last gradually regarded as a member of the family. Let us hasten to add that Don Melchior was in every respect deserving of the kindness shown him. He was a thoughtful, earnest lad, with an honest heart and firm will, who could thoroughly appreciate all that was done for his future well-being.

When the boy became a man, he was taken naturally into Doña Emilia's intimacy, and associated in all her plans. Don Aníbal, delighted at this result, and trusting in the young man, whose good sentiments he had reason for believing he knew, felt relieved from a heavy burden; and when his wife, attacked by one of her fits, attempted one of her hazardous excursions, he saw her start with less terror, as he felt convinced that she had a devoted defender by her side. But a thing happened which neither husband nor wife had foreseen. The two young people, brought up side by side, living constantly together, accustomed to interchange their most secret thoughts and ideas, passed by an imperceptible incline, without either perceiving or suspecting it, from friendship to love. Love in these two young, ignorant hearts, which were pure from any wrong sentiment, must necessarily be deep, irresistible, and produce the effect of a thunderbolt.

This is what occurred: the two young people, instead of trying to resist the new feeling which was germinating in their hearts and growing so rapidly, yielded to it with that simple confidence which ignorance alone can give, and which converts love into a divine sentiment. Long before they had made a mutual avowal, they understood each other by a glance, and knew that they were henceforth attached to each other.

One day Doña Diana approached Melchior, who, with his shoulder leant against a sumach, was listlessly watching a flight of wild pigeons passing over his head. The young man was so absorbed in thought that he did not hear the maiden's light step, as her dainty feet made the sand of the walk she was following creak. It was only when her hand was laid on his shoulder that, recalled to earth from heaven, he started as if he had received an electric shock, turned suddenly, and fixed his eyes on Doña Diana. The young lady smiled.

"Were you dreaming?" she asked.

"Yes," he replied with a sigh; "I was dreaming, Niña."

She mechanically raised her eyes to the sky.

"Of those birds, doubtless? Did they bring you a hope or a regret?"

Melchior shook his head.

"Neither one nor the other," he said sorrowfully. "I have no regrets, and my sole hope is here."

The young lady looked down with a blush. There was a silence for some minutes, filled with ineffable melody for these young hearts; the lad was the first to speak.

"Alas!" he said, in a low and timid voice, "Regrets are hot made for me; what am I, save a lost child, whose colour is not even decided? Can I regret a family I do not know?"

"Yes, that is true," she answered, with a roguish smile; "but you have a hope."

"A mad hope, an insensate dream, which the reawakening of reason will utterly dispel," he said with feverish animation.

"You are deceived or wish to deceive me," she said, with some sternness in her voice; "that is not right, Melchior."

"Señorita—" he stammered.

The maiden walked softly up to him. "We were brought up together," she said to him in a gentle and penetrating voice, "we grew up together, ever equally sharing our joys and sorrows; is that true, Melchior?"

"It is," he murmured faintly.

"Why, then," she continued, "have you become so taciturn during the last few days? Why do you shun me? Why do you fly on my approach?"

"I?"

"You, brother, who ought to keep nothing hidden from me."

"Oh!"

"I repeat that you ought to keep nothing from me, for I am your oldest, perhaps your only friend."

"It is true, oh! It is true, Diana," he exclaimed, as he clasped his hands with passionate fervour, "you are my only friend."

"Why then keep a secret from me?"

"A secret!" he exclaimed, as he recoiled in horror.

"Yes, a secret; and I have discovered it, though you fancied you had locked it up in your heart."

The young man turned pale.

"Oh! Take care, Niña," he exclaimed, "this secret I dare not confess to myself."

"That is the very reason why I discovered it, Melchior," she answered, with an adorable expression.

"Oh! It is impossible, Diana; you cannot know—"

"That you love me!" she interrupted him with an outburst. "Why not, since I love you?"

And she gazed at him with the sublime confidence of a chaste and true love—that divine and fugitive beam which God, in his ineffable goodness, only allows to shine in innocent and candid hearts. The young lover tottered like a drunken man; for a moment he thought he must be dreaming, for so much happiness surpassed all that he had ever dared to hope.

"You love me, Diana!" he at length exclaimed.

"You love me! Oh! An eternity of suffering for this second of happiness!"

And he fell on his knees in front of the maiden. She looked at him for a moment with an expression of indescribable passion, and then offered him her hand, which he covered with burning kisses.

“Rise, Melchior,” she said to him, with considerable emotion. “Rise, my beloved. Let this holy love which binds us, and which we have mutually confessed, remain a secret from everybody. A day will come, and soon, I hope, when we shall be permitted to proclaim it openly; but till then let us hide our happiness.”

The young man rose.

“I love you, Diana,” he said. “I am your slave; order me, and I will obey.”

“Alas, my beloved,” she continued, with a sad shake of her head, “I can give you no orders, entreaty alone is permitted me.”

“Oh, speak, speak, Diana,” he exclaimed.

The maiden passed her arm through his with a sanguine, childish confidence.

“Come,” she said, “accompany me a few paces, and we will talk about my mother.”

Melchior shook his head sorrowfully, but said nothing.

“Poor mother!” Diana murmured.

“Oh, yes, most unhappy,” the young man remarked with a sigh.

“I think you love my mother, dearest?”

“Is it not to her that I am indebted for being what I am?”

“Listen to me, Melchior,” she said resolutely; “we love each other, and some day you will be my husband, for I swear to you that I will never have another. As you see, I speak frankly and boldly, more so perhaps than a girl of my age and position ought to do; but you are an honourable man, and will never abuse the confession I have made you.”

“Thanks,” he said, simply. “Speak, Diana, speak. Your words are engraved in letters of fire on my heart.”

“It is well, my friend. You, my mother, and my father occupy all my affections. It is a holy trinity, to which I will never break faith. You know in what a horrible position my mother finds herself, and what fearful hallucinations seize upon her.”

“Alas!”

“Well! Swear to me that whatever may occur, you will never fail in the mission I have taken on myself, and of which I confide to you one half from this day; swear to me that, under all circumstances, you will remain by her side to defend her, and die for her if it must be so. At this price, I repeat to you, Melchior, at this price my love is yours for ever; and no other man but yourself shall ever be my husband.”

The young man tried to interrupt her; but she imposed silence on him by a sudden and peremptory gesture, and continued—

“Oh! I know what a frightful sacrifice I impose on you, brother; but I, who am but a girl, still a child I may say, endure without complaining all the consequences of these ferocious acts of vengeance which I dare not qualify as madness. Alas, Melchior, the fearful disease to which my poor mother is condemned dates from the period of my birth. I am, so to speak, the innocent cause of it; hence it is my duty to sacrifice myself, whatever it may cost me, in order to try if possible to relieve her frightful sufferings, which, in the paroxysm of a horrible crisis, will perhaps entail my death and hers; for I do not conceal from myself, brother, that the day must arrive when the redskins will take their revenge for my mother’s implacable expeditions. But then, if I succumb, I shall at least fall with the

incomparable satisfaction of having done my duty by sacrificing myself for her to whom I owe my life."

"Dismiss such gloomy thoughts, Diana. Your mother is growing calmer with age. The expeditions, as you know, are more and more rare, the attacks less frequent, and soon, perhaps, we shall have the happiness of seeing them entirely disappear."

"I dare not flatter myself with that hope, my dear Melchior. No, no. Unless a miracle occurs, my mother will fall a victim to her monomania for vengeance on the redskins."

"My dear Diana, there are now two of us to devote ourselves to her. God is too just and good to desire the ruin of two innocent children who have never offended Him. You have my word, and my life belongs to you and to your mother; employ it as a thing that is your own. On the day when I lose it in serving you and saving you from sorrow, I shall be the happiest of men."

"Thanks, Melchior; I knew that I could reckon on you. Your generous words restore the courage which was fast deserting me. I will not break down in the task I have imposed on myself; henceforth we belong to one another, no matter what obstacles may arise."

From this day the compact was made between the young people—a sacred compact, which neither broke, and which was fated to have terrible consequences for them at a later date. But an invisible witness had overheard their conversation. This witness, whom they had not seen gliding like a snake through the shrubs, and listening to all their remarks with the greatest attention, was Pedro Sotavento, majordomo of the hacienda. What interest had this man in thus overhearing their conversation? He alone knew; for beneath an affable and inoffensive appearance, he concealed a deeply ulcerated heart, and evidently followed a plan resolved on long before, the realization of which would burst like a thunderclap upon those whose ruin he had so long meditated.

Sotavento kept to himself his knowledge of the love of the young people, which he had so treacherously surprised. He never ventured, in their presence, on the slightest allusion which might lead them to suspect that he was aware of it. On the contrary, he increased his politeness towards Melchior, and seemed trying, by overtures adroitly made each time an opportunity offered, to gain his confidence. This, however, let us hasten to add, he never succeeded in doing; for the young man felt for the worthy steward an instinctive and invincible aversion, which stopped in his throat a confession he was several times on the point of making to him.

Chapter X

Mother and Daughter.

We will now resume our story again at the point where we broke off. Don Melchior, after his short appearance in the saloon, hastily proceeded to a retired

suite of rooms in the right wing of the hacienda. We will precede him and go in a few minutes before him.

This suite only consisted of two rooms, furnished with that severe luxury which the Spaniards so well understand, and which is appropriate to their grave and melancholy character. The first room, serving as withdrawing room, was hung with stamped Cordovan leather. Oak chairs, which had grown black with time, and were also covered with leather, were drawn up against the walls. In the centre of the room was a table, over which a green cloth was thrown. A crucifix of yellow ivory, three feet high, before which stood a curiously carved oak prie-dieu, faced one of those enormous Louis XIII. clocks, whose case could easily have contained a man, and, in a corner, was a species of oratory, surmounted by a white marble statue of the Virgin of Suffering, whose brow was girt with a crown of white roses, while before it burned a silver lamp, shaped like a censer, and suspended from the ceiling by a chain.

In this room, which looked more like an oratory than a drawing room, and which opened on a bedroom, the furniture of which was extremely plain, two ladies were seated near a window, and conversing in a low voice, at the moment when the exigencies of our narrative compel us to join them. Of these two, one had passed the age of thirty—that critical period for Spanish women; but although her face was pale as marble, and her features were worn with sorrow, it was easy to perceive that she must have been very lovely once. The person who kept her company was a light-haired, graceful, pale, and delicate girl. She was endowed with the ideal and dreamy beauty which renders painters desperate and which German poets have alone been able to describe. In her calm, pensive features were found again the dreamy, restless, and chaste physiognomy of Goethe's Marguerite, and the intoxicating and impassioned smile of Schiller's pale creations.

These two ladies were mother and daughter. Doña Emilia de Saldibar and Doña Diana. Their dress, through its severe simplicity, harmonized perfectly with the expression of sorrow and melancholy spread over their whole persons. They wore long gowns of black velvet, without embroidery or ornaments, fastened round the waist by girdles of the same colour. A rebozo of black lace covered their neck and chest, and could, if necessary, be thrown over their heads, and hide their faces. They were conversing in a low voice, looking out now and then absently into the courtyard, in which were assembled the numerous peons of the hacenderos who had responded to Don Aníbal's summons.

"No," Doña Emilia said, "no, my child, it is better to remain silent, for this information is anything but positive."

"Still, mother," the young lady answered, "the man seemed thoroughly acquainted with the whole story; and it appears to me, on the contrary—"

"You are wrong, Diana," her mother interrupted, with some sternness in her voice. "I know better than you what should be done under the circumstances. Be careful, Niña. You take the affair too much to heart, and let yourself be carried away."

The girl blushed, and bit her lips.

"You know how I love you, my child," Doña Emilia continued directly; "so do not try to thwart what I do, as you are well aware I have but one object, your happiness, so let me act as I think proper."

“My dear mother!” the young lady said affectionately.

“Yes,” Doña Emilia replied with a cold smile, “I am your dear mother when I yield to your importunities.”

“Oh, do not say that, mother! You know what deep love I have for you.”

“Yes I know it, and I know too that I do not alone occupy your heart.”

Doña Diana turned her head away to hide the blush that suffused her face at this remark; but her mother did not notice this emotion, and continued, as if speaking to herself, instead of addressing her daughter—

“But why should I complain? Ought it not always to be so? Woman is born to love, as the bird is to fly in the air. Love, my poor, dear child; for love constitutes a woman’s entire life, for it enables her to learn joy and sorrow.”

Her voice gradually grew weaker, and these words were spoken indistinctly. There was a rather long silence, which the girl did not venture to disturb by an indiscreet question. Respecting the sorrowful reverie into which her mother had fallen, her eyes were fixed more attentively on the courtyard. All at once she started.

“Ah!” she said, at once glad and troubled, “Here is Don Melchior.”

“What did you say, Niña?” her mother asked, raising her head eagerly. “I think you mentioned the name of Don Melchior?”

“Yes, I did, mother,” she answered timidly.

“Well, what did you say about him?”

“Nothing, mother, except that I just saw him in the yard, and I think he is coming here.”

“He will be welcome, for I am anxiously expecting him. So soon as he comes in, Niña, you will be good enough to retire to your bedroom, and not come back till I call you. I have important matters to discuss with this young man, which it is unnecessary for you to hear.”

“You shall be obeyed, mother,” the young lady said as she rose. “I hear his footstep in the corridor, so I will withdraw, for he will be here directly.”

“Go, my child; I shall soon recall you.”

The girl bent over her mother, whose forehead she kissed, and ran away, light as a bird, at the moment when two raps on the door announced a visitor. Doña Emilia waited till the door of her daughter’s bedroom was closed, and then cried, “Come in!” The door swung back slowly on its hinges, and Melchior appeared. So soon as the young man entered the room he doffed his hat, and walked respectfully toward Doña Emilia, who, without leaving her seat by the window, half turned and made him a sign to approach.

“You did me the honour of sending for me, madam,” he said, as he stopped three or four yards from Doña Emilia.

“Yes, caballero,” she replied. “You know that I have been absent from the hacienda for several days, and only returned a few hours ago; consequently I am ignorant of all that is going on, and thought you could give me the information I desire.”

“You know, madam, that I am completely at your service for anything you may please to order.”

“I doubt neither your courtesy nor your devotion, Don Melchior, and I think I have given you sufficient proof of that.”

“Madam,” the young man answered warmly, “your kindness to me has known no bounds. I feel for you the veneration I should have for a mother, for you have acted as such to me.”

“I did what my religion commanded for an abandoned orphan. But enough on this head: tell me what there is new at the hacienda.”

“When you left the house without warning me, contrary to your habit, madam, to get ready to accompany you, I was at first very sad, for I was afraid that I had displeased you; then, on reflection, and after seeking in my mind what the motive could be that urged you to exile me from your presence, I supposed that I should be more useful to you here than if I followed you.”

“Quite right,” she answered, with a smile. “Go on; but first sit down here by my side,” she added, affectionately.

The young man bowed respectfully, and took the chair pointed out to him.

“I need not tell you, madam,” he continued, “what is the motive of this day’s meeting, or who the persons present are.”

“No, pass over that.”

“But among these persons there is one whose presence you are assuredly far from suspecting.”

“Who is it?”

“Father Sandoval.”

“Father Sandoval!” she exclaimed, with a start. “Impossible! He is a prisoner of the Spaniards.”

“It is he, madam.”

“That is strange. How is it that I have not been informed of his presence?”

“He arrived at the hacienda with Don Aurelio Gutiérrez.”

“But I was close to Don Aurelio: he only had with him Yankee or Canadian wood rangers and two Mexican peons.”

“Well, madam, one of those peons was no other than Father Sandoval. The reverend father thought it wise to assume this disguise in order, probably, more easily to escape the Spanish spies.”

“Yes, that must have been the reason; prudence commanded him to act so. Go on.”

“Father Sandoval has made himself known to all our adherents, and has been unanimously elected their chief.”

“In truth, he alone possesses sufficient influence over the haughty hacenderos to command them. And what measures have been adopted?”

“Pardon me, madam, but I must tell you of another person whose presence was neither expected nor desired, and who arrived suddenly.”

“The Count de Melgosa, I suppose. I was aware that he was coming. He was doubtless the bearer of some tremendous message. Has he gone again?”

“Not yet, madam; he will not leave the hacienda till sunrise tomorrow, accompanied by Colonel Don Oliver Clary, one of the Canadian adventurers brought by Don Aurelio, whom Father Sandoval has entrusted with his answer to the governor’s manifesto.”

“Very good, we have time before us; we will set out tonight. You will accompany us, Melchior; so be careful that everything is prepared for midnight, and our departure kept secret.”

“You shall be obeyed, madam.”

“And the majordomo?”

This question was asked in a tone which showed what importance Doña Emilia attached to it.

“Still impenetrable, madam,” he answered; “ever full of zeal and devotion. His conduct does not offer the slightest pretext to suspect him of treachery.”

“Strange,” she murmured; “still it is evident to me that this man is a traitor, and playing a double part. How can I unmask him? Oh, a proof, a proof, however slight it be. Still it cannot always be so; heaven will not permit it. Patience, patience! I thank you, Don Melchior, for the zeal you have displayed; continue to be faithful. Now you can withdraw.”

The young man rose.

“Madam,” he ventured, timidly, “will you allow me to ask you one question.”

“Speak.”

“I have not had the happiness,” he continued, with hesitation, “to see Doña Diana since her return. I trust that the fatigue she must have felt has not made her ill, and that her precious health is still good.”

Doña Emilia frowned, and a cloud of dissatisfaction spread over her face; but at once recovering herself, she replied, gently—

“Doña Diana is well, Melchior.”

“Oh, all the better, madam,” he said, with an outburst of passionate joy which he could not repress.

Then, bowing deeply to Doña Emilia, he fell back to leave the room.

“Poor boy!” Doña Emilia murmured, as she looked after him.

At the moment when he reached the door, she called him back.

“I forgot,” she said; “be kind enough to tell Father Sandoval that, if his occupations permit, I should like to speak with him for a few moments after oración this evening.”

“I will tell him, madam. Have you any further commands for me?”

“No, you can go.”

The young man bowed for the last time, and went out. Doña Emilia was hardly alone ere her daughter rushed from her bedroom, and ran up to her.

“Well,” she said, “what is the meaning of this, Niña? Why have you come without being called?”

“Oh, mother,” she answered, as she threw herself into her arms, “forgive me, but I was suffering too greatly.”

Doña Emilia recoiled, and looked her daughter in the face.

“What is the meaning of these words, señorita!” she said to her, sternly. “To what are you alluding?”

The girl, ashamed of the confession she had allowed to escape her, buried her head in her hands, and burst into tears.

“Diana, Diana!” her mother said, with ineffable sadness, as she drew her daughter gently to her heart, “You are preparing great suffering both for yourself and me.”

“Mother!” she murmured, with a sob.

“Silence, Niña!” Doña Emilia quickly interrupted, “Do not add a word which might, perhaps, cause, irreparable misfortunes. I know nothing, and wish to know

nothing. Dry those tears which burn my heart, and take your place again by my side."

"Yes, mother," she answered, in a voice choked by sobs and trying to obey.

"Diana!" Doña Emilia continued presently, in a firm voice, "Remember that we have a mission of vengeance to accomplish against the Indians, and that they are the cause of the terrible misfortunes which have overwhelmed us."

These words were uttered in a tone which admitted of no reply. The maiden shuddered and hung her head sadly with no strength to answer. Her mother regarded her for a moment with an expression of pity, love, and grief impossible to describe, and pointed to the statue of the Virgin placed in a corner of the room.

"Pray to her who has drunk to the dregs the bitter cup of sorrow; she will have pity on you and give you the necessary courage to endure the grief which overwhelms you."

The maiden rose slowly; she went to the chapel, and kneeling down piously before the statue, to which she raised her tear-laden eyes, she prayed fervently; then, at a sign from her mother, she withdrew to her bedroom. In the evening, Doña Emilia had a conversation with Father Sandoval, which was carried on far into the night. This conversation, doubtless, very important, but which we will not describe here, left a sweet and consoling impression on the mind of Doña Emilia, for her features grew calmer, and, before retiring to rest, she gave her daughter's pale forehead a kiss full of maternal tenderness, as she murmured in a low voice—

"Hope!"

The girl started in her sleep, and a faint smile played round her rosy lips.

Chapter XI

The Sortie.

In all the countries of Spanish America the heat is so stifling during midday, that the wise plan has been adopted of only travelling in the morning and evening; that is to say, from sunrise till about half past eleven, and from five in the afternoon till midnight. In this way travelling is rendered far more convenient and less fatiguing for travellers as well as for animals.

About ten o'clock at night, with the exception of the bivouac fires lighted by the peons congregated in the yards and gardens, all the lights were extinguished in turn in the hacienda, and a deep silence soon reigned in this house, which, however, contained a thousand persons, while a much larger number were temporarily quartered round it. All were asleep, or seemed to sleep, with the exception of a few sentries standing motionless on the walls, and who stood out distinctly in the bright moonlight. The night, which was calm and starlit, was only disturbed by that indistinct murmur which is never extinct, either in city or desert, and is the incessantly ascending flood of life. At times a distant growl, or a half stifled bark, showed that the wild beasts had left their hidden dens and were wandering about the forest in search of prey.

All at once, on the side where the walls were the highest and rose perpendicularly over the precipice, a door was cautiously opened. Through its position over the precipice, this door could not be seen by the sentries, and the three persons who stepped through it one after the other, ran no risk of being perceived. These persons, who seemed perfectly acquainted with the dangerous road they were entering on, carefully closed the gate after them, and clinging to some projections probably arranged to facilitate the descent, descended the cliff without any hesitation, stopping at times to draw breath, or look inquiringly around them. The descent was a long one, for it could not be performed directly, and the bold adventurers were compelled to keep to their left, and often to march parallel with the gulf; but at length they reached the bottom without accident, and took a few minutes' rest by the side of a stream which ran silently at their feet.

Nearly opposite the spot where the bold adventurers reached the bottom of the abyss, was the yawning mouth of a natural cavern. After taking a parting glance above their heads, as if to feel certain that no one had noticed their departure, and that the same tranquillity continued to prevail in the hacienda, they disappeared in the grotto. Then the person who marched last took off his zarapé, which he held before the opening, while one of his companions struck a light and lit a torch of ocote wood, a considerable pile of which was collected in a hole of the rock. By the glare of the torch, which suddenly cast a reddish tinge over the interior of the grotto, a spy would have easily recognized in these three persons, Doña Emilia, her daughter, and Don Melchior.

When Doña Emilia, who held the torch, had gone far enough to prevent the light from being seen from the outside, Don Melchior pulled down his zarapé, and went off in his turn. The grotto had such numerous and sudden turns, that any stranger whom chance conducted to it would have been infallibly lost, and Doña Emilia and her companions must have known it for a long time when they ventured to enter it. After walking for about ten minutes, our friends reached a species of hall, on to which six passages opened, which ran in diametrically opposite directions probably for a great distance. This hall formed a rather large room, in which were several clumsily made equipales, a rickety table, and a sort of rack fastened to the wall, and filled with weapons of every description, lances, daggers, machetes, pistols, and muskets, with bullet bags of tapir hide and buffalo horns full of powder.

Three horses with eyes full of fire were lying on thick litter, and vigorously munching their stock of alfalfa. On seeing their owners, they gave a neigh of pleasure, and got up as if impatient to leave their dark stable. Don Melchior fetched the saddles, which were carefully arranged on a bench, and after rubbing down the noble animals he began saddling them without a moment's delay. Five minutes later, each of them, holding their horse by the bridle, left the circular hall, and after some turnings reached the mouth of the grotto. This opening, perfectly concealed by shrubs, led to a rarely visited arm of the Río del Norte; the water flowed up to the very entrance of the cavern, which in the rainy season it penetrated, which rendered all investigation impossible on this side at least, and insured the secrecy of this hiding place.

After parting the branches, the horses were led through, and Don Melchior again concealed the fissure by which they passed out. The travellers mounted and

entered the river, following the watercourse till they reached a somewhat distant sandy point on which they landed. They found themselves in the heart of a dense forest, and all signs of cultivation had disappeared.

"Now," Doña Emilia said, with a peculiar smile, as she drew up her reins and leant over her horse's neck, "forward, and in Heaven's name!"

These were the first words uttered since leaving the hacienda; the horses started at a gallop and disappeared beneath the foliage. We will leave Doña Emilia for a season and return to the Hacienda del Barrio.

The two Canadians, as we have already stated, lay down on the ground, where they at once fell asleep. The Sumach could not have stated how long he had been slumbering, when he felt his shoulder slightly tapped. Adventurers and wood rangers, owing to the mode of life they lead, have an excessively light sleep; the adventurer at once opened his eyes and saw a man leaning over him with a finger laid on his lip as if urging silence on him.

"Quick," this person whispered; "get up and follow me."

"Well," the Canadian said to himself, "I know that where there is a mystery there are ounces to be gained; it is a fine time to assure one's self of the truth of the statement."

Without displaying the slightest surprise, the Sumach or Oliver, whichever the reader likes to call him, rose from his humble couch, carefully wrapped himself in his zarapé to guard against the night dew, and after making certain that his pistols were still in his girdle, and that his knife moved easily in its sheath, he followed his mysterious conductor without any hesitation. The latter, to whom the hacienda appeared familiar, led him through several passages and apartments feebly lighted by smoking candles fastened to the wall, into a room of small dimensions, completely devoid of furniture, with the exception of two equipales and a table. This stranger, who was wrapped up in a large cloak that completely concealed his features, opened a dark lantern, took a glance round the room, shut the door, placed the light on the table, sat down, and made the Canadian a sign to imitate him.

"Sit down and let us talk," he said.

The adventurer bowed; then, with the utmost coolness he laid his pistols on the table within reach, seated himself and rested his head on his hands, looking cunningly the while at the stranger.

"I am quite ready to talk."

"Why do you take this precaution?" the other said, pointing to the pistols.

"Hang it," he said, "for a very simple reason; it is that I may have an argument handy to convince you, should our conversation grow warm."

The stranger began laughing.

"You are prudent," he said.

"Prudence is the mother of safety," the Canadian answered, sententiously.

"I do not blame you," the stranger continued, still laughing. "I am free to confess, indeed, that I am delighted to see you behave thus."

"In that case, all is for the best."

"As for me, look," he said, as he opened his cloak. "I have not so much as a pin about me."

"That is easy to comprehend," said the adventurer, "for you are at home."

“What do you mean?” the stranger asked, in surprise. “What do you know about it?”

“I mean that you are in your own country, while I am a foreigner; that is all.”

“Ah, very good; but in order to reassure you completely, and prove to you that I wish to deal above-board with you, look at me,” he said, as he took off the broad-brimmed hat which concealed his face.

“Father Sandoval!” the Canadian exclaimed in surprise, recognizing the priest.

“Silence!” the latter said quickly. “Not so loud. Have you forgotten that our interview must be secret?”

The Canadian silently shook his head, and, uncocking his pistols, returned them to his belt.

“Why do you frown so?” the priest asked him after examining him attentively. “Are you vexed at recognizing me?”

“Oh no, it is not that,” he answered.

“What is it, then?”

“On my word, I confess that I am trying in vain to discover what you, a person I do not know, have so secret and important to say to me.”

“Are you sure of that.”

“How, sure of it?” he exclaimed, with surprise.

“Yes,” the priest remarked with a smile.

“Hang it,” he said, “unless I have seen you in a dream, I am ready to swear that we meet today for the first time.”

“Look at me closely, my friend,” he said. “Will you really swear that you never saw me before?”

The Canadian, more and more surprised at this pressing, leant over to the singular speaker, and, taking up the lantern, made a careful inspection of him, which Don Pelagio permitted with the best possible grace. At the expiration of a moment, the adventurer deposited the lantern on the table again, and scratched his head with an embarrassed air.

“It is strange,” he said. “I now fancy that you may be in the right. Certain of your features, to which I did not at first pay attention, are familiar to me, though it is perfectly impossible for me to recollect how or when chance brought us together, if, as you insist on assuring me, we have already met.”

“I do not say that we were positively acquainted, but we have met, and remained together for two hours.”

“Listen to me. I do not doubt your word, for I do not see what motive you could have in trying to make a fool of me. You appear to me too sober-minded a man for such jokes. Explain yourself frankly, for that will be the only way to settle the matter.”

“I see that I must do so. I should have liked to avoid it, because I shall now appear to be compelling you to carry out a promise, by asking of you what I wished to obtain solely from your honour and good heart.”

“My worthy father, you are becoming most mysterious, and I really do not know how all this will end.”

“One word will give you the clue.”

“Say it, then, at once, for deuce take me if I am not as curious as an old woman at this moment.”

“Have you forgotten the Beaver pond and the sumach to which the Pawnee Indians fastened you, after smearing you with honey?”

The adventurer smote his forehead violently, and, hurriedly rising, seized the priest’s hand.

“¡Viva Dios!” he exclaimed warmly. “Where could my brains be, that I should forget the features of the Christian who so generously saved me from a horrible death? My good father, forgive me; my eyes alone were guilty, for I have ever remembered you from the moment when you rendered me this immense service at the risk of your life.”

Father Sandoval cordially returned the adventurer’s squeeze, but he remained silent for a moment, with his eyes obstinately fixed on him, as if trying to read his most secret thoughts.

“What!” the Canadian said hotly, “Could you doubt me? I am only a poor devil of an adventurer, it is true, but I consider myself a man. We wood rangers, if we are rather quick at the use of the knife and in shooting an enemy, know better than town folk, perhaps, how to retain the recollection of an act of kindness. Speak, father, speak without fear. Whatever you bid me I will do. I belong to you, body and soul. I repeat that I am entirely yours; hence, do not be afraid about explaining yourself frankly, for I shall catch your meaning at a word.”

“Indeed!” the priest at length answered. “Why should I doubt you? You have given me no cause to suspect your loyalty. Moreover, what I wish to ask of you, Don Oliver, is only conditional. I merely desire to make sure of your assistance in case of need, that is all.”

“Speak, speak; have I not told you that you can count on me?”

“Well, so be it. This is what I expect of you. You are going to start in the morning. The mission I have intrusted to you is a dangerous one, though I have strong reasons for believing that you will get out of it safe and sound; but that is not the point at the present moment. You are about to start, I repeat; no one knows how long you may remain absent. For my part, I shall probably be obliged to push forward. Give me your word that, on whatever day or hour I need you, whatever you may be doing, when you receive a message from me summoning you, give me your word to abandon everything instantly, and run to my help, to aid me to the utmost of your power in the accomplishment of what I have resolved on, and without asking me for an explanation, however grave or terrible the matter in which I ask your support may be. Do you promise me this? Do not answer hastily; reflect before pledging your word, for the engagement you are going to make is serious, and may entail consequences which it is impossible to foresee.”

The Canadian listened to these words with visible impatience. When Father Sandoval ended, he shrugged his shoulders carelessly.

“Why so much beating about the bush?” he said. “I am yours. You ask for my word, and I give it. Now, may heaven grant me the opportunity of fulfilling my pledge.”

“Thanks! I trust, I repeat, that I may not be constrained to have recourse to you. Still, we are bound to take our precautions. In case of my being forced to send a messenger to you, take half this ring. The apparently most faithful man may, at a given moment, become a traitor; and I have learned the truth of that by sad experience. You will only follow the man who hands you the other half of this ring,

and says, 'The hour is come—the master waits.' You will ask this man no questions, for he will be unable to answer you, as he will know nothing. Have you thoroughly understood me? Is this arranged?"

"All right. I understand you," the Canadian replied, as he carefully stowed away the half ring the priest gave him. "Have you any further recommendations to give me?"

"No. We must part now. Follow me."

They rose and left the room. After some time the Canadian found himself again at the spot where Moonshine was lying. Father Sandoval gave the adventurer a parting sign to be discreet, and went away.

"Hum!" the Sumach said, as he examined the sky, "I have not much time to lose, if I want a little rest before starting."

After this reflection, he lay down again by the side of his comrade, who still slept, and almost directly fell himself into deep slumber.

Chapter XII

On the Road.

The brilliant gleams of dawn were already colouring the crests of the distant mountains; the warm beams of the rising sun, issuing from a mass of golden and purple clouds, dissipated the fog; the vapour rose like a curtain and revealed in all its majestic grandeur the splendid landscape of which the Hacienda del Barrio formed the centre. On the right extended the verdant valley through which the Río Grande del Norte forced its capricious windings. On the left, in the midst of a profusion of clumps of trees, rocks and hills, girt with a garland of verdure, extended a great lake, whose surface, slightly ruffled by the pure and refreshing morning breeze, sparkled in the sunbeams. Lofty mountains, scarped rocks, and banks, on which grew sumachs, mahoganies, and cork trees, framed in this magnificent sheet of water, and the harmonious rustling of the dew-laden leaves seemed to impart a sort of life to this calm scenery which the hand of man had not yet deformed, and which rose radiant beneath the powerful breath of the Creator.

The coming dawn had scarce begun to disperse the gloom ere all was in motion at the hacienda. The peons fetched the animals from the corrals while the cavaliers led their horses to the watering place, or went in search of dry wood to rekindle the bivouac fires and prepare the morning repast. Don Aníbal's numerous visitors gave their followers orders to load the mules and saddle the horses, so as to be ready to start at the first signal.

The Count de Melgosa quitted the apartment in which he had passed the night, and accompanied by the hacendero, who insisted on seeing him off, he proceeded to the first patio, where his people were already waiting, as was the Canadian adventurer, who, at the first beam of day, left without much regret the hard bed on which he had slumbered for only two or three hours.

“What!” Don Aníbal said with surprise, on seeing the count’s small escort, “Did you venture to come here so weakly escorted in this time of trouble and disorder?”

“Why not?” the count said, carelessly; “The six men you see are devoted to me; they are old soldiers, accustomed to fire. Moreover, what have I to fear?” he added with an ironical smile. “Are we not at peace?”

“Yes, for the present at any rate; but the long wars we have had to endure have, as you know, ruined and reduced many people to desperation; the country is infested with marauders, and this frontier especially, exposed to the continual incursions of the Indians, is anything but safe. I repeat, Señor Conde, that you committed a serious act of imprudence in bringing so few people with you, and, with your permission, I will give you an escort to protect you from all danger.”

“Do nothing of the sort, my friend,” the count answered, quickly; “although I sincerely thank you for the solicitude you display, I am convinced that your fears are exaggerated.”

“Still—” the hacendero continued.

“Not a word more on the subject, I beg; you would seriously annoy me by pressing it further. Moreover,” he said with a laugh, as he pointed to the Canadian, “my escort is augmented by an ally who, in case of need, I am persuaded, would not hesitate to come to my help. So, say no more about it, and good-bye. Excuse my leaving you so suddenly, but we have a long ride before us along roads which, you know as well as I do, are very bad, and it is time for me to start.”

“Since you insist, count, I can only wish you a prosperous journey, and take my leave of you.”

“Good-bye, my friend,” he said, as he affectionately pressed Don Aníbal’s hand. “I trust that we shall soon meet again, under circumstances more agreeable to you and me.”

“Whatever may happen, or whatever fate destiny reserves for us, be assured that nothing can alter the friendship I feel for you.”

“I know it, and thank you,” the count said, as he got into the saddle. “Are you ready to accompany me, señor?” he asked the Canadian.

“I have been waiting some time for you, señor,” the latter answered, in his usual rough way.

The count examined him for a moment, smiled slightly, shrugged his shoulders, but made no remark. After exchanging a few more affectionate remarks with the hacendero, he slightly raised his hat, gave the order to depart, and the little band left the hacienda at a sharp trot. The horsemen, splendidly armed, and rifle on thigh, traversed in good order the camp formed outside the hacienda, without replying to the sarcasms or jests of the Mexicans, who collected as they passed, and showered on them witticisms, which were at times offensive. The count rode gravely at the head of the little party, looking neither to the right nor left, apparently indifferent to the coarse jokes levelled upon him.

About a horse’s length behind him, the Canadian, whose indifference was not at all feigned, for all he heard concerned him very slightly, was reflecting on the way in which he should perform the singular commission so strangely entrusted to him, and though he was as yet only at the outset of the expedition, he was already

beginning to feel a lively desire to be freed from the company in which he found himself, and for which he felt no sympathy.

The other travellers, six in number, were, as the count had said to Don Aníbal, old soldiers, regardless of danger, entirely devoted to their master, and who, at a sign from him, would let themselves be bravely killed, without taking the trouble to discover the motive for the order given them. However, all these men, their master included, seemed to possess a considerable amount of gravity and pride, which did not conduce to confidence, and prevented any familiarity. The adventurer had judged his companions at the first glance, and bravely put up with the annoyance which they would cause him during the journey; hence he resolved to imitate them, and be equally reserved.

After traversing the camp, the small party turned to the left, and proceeded to the lake, whose umbrageous banks they intended to follow for several miles. As we have stated, the morning was magnificent, all nature was laughing, a multitude of birds of every description and colour, hidden beneath the foliage, were singing merrily; squirrels leapt from branch to branch, and splendid elks, terrified by the approach of the travellers, bounded away a few yards from them, while hideous alligators wallowed in the mud pell-mell with enormous frogs which uttered frightful croaks.

Our travellers rode thus for some two hours, and not a word had been spoken since the start, each seeming to be buried in thought, when suddenly a great movement was heard beneath the trees and shrubs around them. The birds suddenly became silent, and, leaving their nests, went to the foot of the trees, where they timidly concealed themselves in the grass, while the frogs croaking on the nymphæas dashed into the water. At the same moment the shadow of two mighty wings was visible on the sand; the Canadian mechanically raised his eyes, and he perceived a white-headed eagle soaring in the blue sky.

The eagle, after hovering in wide circles for some minutes almost over the head of the travellers, dropped with lightning speed into a copse, whence it emerged almost immediately, holding in its powerful claws a luckless parrot, which uttered pitiable cries of distress, and struggled vainly to escape from the deadly grasp of its implacable foe. The eagle rose with extraordinary rapidity, and soon attained an enormous elevation. The Canadian had anxiously followed the incidents of this drama, and perhaps instinctively cocked his rifle.

“All the worse,” he muttered, at the moment when the eagle, which only appeared like a black dot in the air, was about to become invisible. “I will save it.”

With a movement swift as thought he raised his rifle and pulled the trigger. The Spaniards halted, and looked in amazement at the adventurer; but the latter, whose eyes were obstinately fixed on the sky, did not seem to notice the attention of which he was the object. The eagle, suddenly arrested in its flight, fell with headlong speed, turning in space. Suddenly its claws relaxed, and the delivered victim, half wild with terror, though unwounded, fell perpendicularly for some seconds with its enemy; but, suddenly opening its wings, the poor parrot soared, and then resumed its flight with a long cry of delight, while the eagle writhed in its death throe at the hunter’s feet. The Canadian’s bullet had passed right through its body.

“Ah!” the wood ranger said, gladly; “Though a powder charge is precious in the desert, I do not repent this one.”

The Spaniards could not restrain a cry of admiration at this miraculous display of skill. The Canadian dismounted, and seizing his rifle by the barrel, advanced upon the eagle, which, with body thrown back and wings extended, looked undauntedly at him. With one blow of the butt, dealt with no ordinary strength, the adventurer settled the bird, which did not make the slightest effort to avoid the blow.

“Will you sell me that bird?” the count said, at the moment when the hunter stooped to pick up the royal bird.

“I will give it you if you like to accept it,” the Canadian replied.

“Very good,” the count said, making one of his men a sign to pick the bird up and place it on his horse.

The Canadian remounted, and they continued their silent march. At the end of an hour they reached the spot where the count proposed to stop and breakfast, and allow the great heat to pass before he started again. It was a rather large clearing, in the midst of which glistened a pool of water so clear and limpid that the sky was reflected in it, with all its lights and shadows. This pool discharged its overflow into the lake by means of a shallow stream, which ran murmuring over a bed of pebbles, half hidden by the numerous tufts of nymphæas which bordered it. Singular to say, not a bird, not an insect, peopled this solitude.

When the count had given orders to halt, all dismounted. Two men stationed themselves as sentries at either end of the path which ran through the clearing; two others took the horses by the bridle, and led them to drink from the lake, which was only one hundred yards distant; while the last two lit the fire and got breakfast ready, employing the water they carried in their leathern bottles to boil the frijoles, as they would sooner reduce their stock than take water from this pool—which, however, was so inviting, especially for men wearied by a long ride in the burning beams of a tropical sun, and whose throats were parched by thirst.

The fact was that this pond, apparently so inoffensive and pure, contained death in its waters—a frightful, inexorable, almost instantaneous death. In a word, this water, though no one was able to explain the cause, contained a violent poison, whose effects were so terrible, that the very animals, whose admirable instinct never deceives them, did not dare drink it, but shunned its vicinity as if it were impregnated with the poison it contained. This was the cause of the utter solitude which reigned in this clearing, which travellers, however, brought to these parts by accident, sought for its delicious coolness, and the security they enjoyed against the attacks of wild beasts.

The adventurer, after carefully rubbing his horse down, hobbling it, and giving it its ration of maize on his zarapé, lay down on the grass, and fumbling in his alforjas, produced a ship biscuit and a piece of goat’s milk cheese, which he was preparing to eat with good appetite, when the count, who had curiously watched the arrangements of this frugal meal, walked up and bowed courteously to him.

“Caballero,” he said, “will you do me the honour of sharing my breakfast?”

The Canadian raised his head, and looked at the speaker in surprise.

“Why do you make me this offer, señor?” he asked.

“Because,” the count answered frankly, “I wish to break the ice, and remove the coolness prevailing between us. What I have seen you do today,” he added, pointing to the eagle’s body, “proves to me that you are a man of heart. People of your stamp are rare, and I wish to have your esteem, if not your friendship.”

“What I did to save a wretched bird, caballero, I would not hesitate, under any circumstances, to do for a man; but permit me to remark that I see nothing in it but what is perfectly natural.”

“Perhaps so; but, unhappily, few men comprehend their duties in the same way.”

“I pity them, caballero, though I dare not blame them, for each man acts according to the instincts which God has implanted in his heart.”

“Do you accept the modest breakfast which I have had the honour of offering you?”

“Although I am naturally very sober, and usually content myself with the smallest thing, I should think I was offering you an insult by declining, señor. Hence, I gratefully accept your invitation.”

The two men sat down side by side, and a peon placed before them a few dishes, which, though far from delicate, were of a quality superior to the Canadian’s repast. The count felt, perhaps unconsciously, an interest in the Canadian, the cause of which he could not have explained, and was attracted by this blunt but frank man, with his short but always honest remarks. He divined beneath this rough husk a good nature and a strong heart, which aroused his sympathy and were a relief after the roguery and cowardly adulation of the men with whom he usually came in contact. While eating (the adventurer heartily, and the count scarce touching what was served up), they talked without the slightest restraint. Oliver related, without any boasting or pride, the incidents of his life as a wood ranger, his hunts and fights with the Indians, his adventurous excursions at the head of his bold comrades, who had unanimously elected him their chief, and the incessant joys and sorrows of this varied existence. The count listened with ever increasing interest. When the adventurer came to his enrolment among the Mexican insurgents, his hearer interrupted him—

“This time,” he said, “I think you have not acted consistently with your principles.”

“How so?” Oliver asked in surprise.

“Why,” the count continued, “it appears to me that you let yourself be led away by the pride of rank and hope of gain.”

“You are mistaken, señor, nothing would have induced me to join the Mexicans if I had not been convinced in my heart that their cause was a good one. This reason alone decided me, and besides,” he added in a low voice, as he took a sly glance at the other, “I had a personal motive.”

The count shook his head dubiously, but made no answer, and the conversation stopped at this point.

Four hours later, the Spaniards started again in the hope of reaching their journey’s end at eight in the evening. But the count and the adventurer now rode side by side conversing amicably together.

Chapter XIII

An Alarm.

The journey, begun under rather gloomy auspices, was continued more gaily, in spite of the pride and taciturnity of the Spanish soldiers. The latter, who took a pride in behaving exactly like their master, on seeing the count talking in a friendly way with the adventurer, broke, in their turn, the silence to which they had obstinately condemned themselves since the morning, and interchanged a few remarks, though extremely careful not to raise their voices above an indistinct murmur.

Several hours passed, and nothing interrupted the monotony of the journey. The Spaniards had left the banks of the lake and entered a country whose gloomy and desolate appearance was rendered even more sad by the approach of night. There were no lofty trees, no smiling savannahs. On all sides rose overthrown rocks, piled in a disorderly manner on each other, some covered with a velvety moss, others scarce allowing their black hue to be guessed beneath a cloak of brambles and cherfoil. In some spots, the water forced its way through crevices in the rock, and rolled through green strata, glistening with mica. A nameless stream with difficulty found a passage through the midst of this chaos, and occupied two-thirds of the canyon which the travellers were constrained to follow; at rare intervals, stunted trees were visible: still, as nature ever has her harmony, the breeze ever and anon entered the canyon. Then, as if by enchantment, the mysterious dialogues between the leaves and the wind, the nymphæas and the water, filled this desolate solitude with ineffable choruses.

The travellers yielded involuntarily to the depressing influences of the scenery they passed through, the conversation suddenly ceased, and each rode with his hand on his weapon, looking anxiously around and ready to fire at the slightest suspicious movement in the chaparral. The Sumach halted, and thoughtfully examined the gloomy landscape spread out in front of him.

“What is the matter?” the count asked him; “What are you thinking about at this moment, caballero?”

“I am thinking, señor,” the adventurer said, seriously, “that Don Aníbal spoke most sensibly to you this morning, and that you acted very wrong in neglecting his advice and refusing his offer.”

“Oh, oh,” the count replied with a forced smile; “this country has not a very encouraging look, I allow, still I dare not believe that you are afraid.”

The adventurer looked at him.

“And even if I were afraid,” he said a moment later, “do you think I should do my duty worse on that account, in a case of need? Fear is nothing but the instinct of self-preservation, a nervous movement independent of our will, which causes us to forebode danger, and thus helps us to conquer it by suggesting the means of avoiding it. Fear is nothing dishonouring; every man has been afraid several times in his life, and he who denies it is a brute. I never see a gun barrel pointed at my chest without feeling a sensation of internal cold which is simply fear.”

“The man who speaks so frankly of a feeling which everybody tries to hide must be brave,” said the count; “but let us break off this discussion for the present, which we will resume at a more favourable moment, and pray explain your ideas to me.”

“It will not take long, señor; my opinion is that no spot could be better chosen than this for an ambuscade.”

“Which means?”

“That, if we are to be attacked, it will be inevitably here.”

“The spot, it is true, has a bad reputation; but it is long since any attack of the sort has been heard of in the country, and nothing leads to the supposition that we have one to apprehend.”

The Canadian shook his head with a preoccupied air which alarmed the count.

“Come,” he said, “my friend, speak clearly; I am a man. Have we, yes or no, anything to fear?”

“Yes,” Oliver replied bluntly.

“Do you think so?”

“No; I am sure of it.”

“Still, up to the present, we have perceived nothing.”

“You, doubtless,” the adventurer interrupted, “whose senses have been blunted by a long residence in towns, have perceived nothing; but I, accustomed to desert life, have during the last ten minutes picked up proofs which do not permit me the least doubt on this head. I repeat that we shall be attacked within an hour perhaps, but assuredly at sunset.”

“Tell me what signs you have discovered.”

“What good will that do, señor? It is better to profit by the time left us to prepare to resist the attack that threatens us.”

“I wish to have the proof, not because I doubt your words or your sagacity, but because there is in all this something extraordinary which I wish to unravel.”

“Be satisfied, then,” the hunter said; “stoop down.”

The adventurer removed a few leaves, and displayed a footstep perfectly imprinted on the damp ground.

“What is this?” the count said, with a surprise mingled with terror.

“It is the mark of a war moccasin,” the hunter answered calmly. “Now, remain here without stirring, while I follow the track; within half an hour we shall know who the enemies are who are upon our trail, and their number.”

Without awaiting the count’s answer, the adventurer dismounted, slipped into the bushes, and disappeared, ere the other had entirely recovered from the amazement the discovery of this Indian sign caused him. As always happens under such circumstances, in the hour of danger, the Canadian adventurer, owing to his thorough acquaintance with Indian habits, instantaneously became the most important man of the party. The count and the soldiers composing his escort, though very brave in the presence of civilized enemies, had an instinctive terror of savages, which, in the probable event of a struggle, would inevitably entail their ruin, had they not had with them a man in whose experience and fidelity they placed entire confidence.

This confidence the adventurer, whom that same morning they had regarded not only as a stranger, but almost as an enemy, had managed to obtain in a few

hours; as for his experience, he had just furnished a proof, which removed any doubt. Hence the Spaniards were resolved to follow his advice, and obey without discussion the orders he thought proper to give them, as they were persuaded that their safety would depend solely on their docility, and the rapidity of their movements. The Canadian's absence was not longer than he had stated: he suddenly reappeared among the travellers before they had seen or heard him coming.

"Well," the count asked him eagerly, "what news? Were you mistaken?"

The adventurer burst into a mocking laugh.

"I mistaken! Hang me if that is possible," he said.

"Then, we are pursued by Indians?"

"Pursued and preceded; we are literally between two fires."

The Spaniards felt a shudder run over them on hearing this.

"Are they numerous?" the count continued.

"No, there are only a few warriors; the weakness of our party is known, and a large display of strength was considered useless."

"In that case, then, you think we have a chance?"

"Men have one always, when they do not give in," the Canadian replied sententiously.

"How many are there, at a guess?"

"I will give you their exact number, for I have counted them to the last man. The first detachment, the one ambushed behind us, has only twelve men."

"What," the count exclaimed, "do you not consider that large odds?"

"Hang it," the Canadian said simply, "you do not reflect that we are seven palefaces."

The count shook his head, feeling but little convinced by such reasoning.

"Go on," he said; "and the second detachment, the one ahead of us?"

"That is more numerous: it is composed of nineteen warriors, among whom I recognized several picked braves, from the wolf tails they wore on their heels."

"¡Caramba!" the count exclaimed with ill-disguised terror, "Thirty-one warriors in all, and yet you do not consider them too many for seven men!"

"I do not know whether thirty warriors are too many for seven men," the Canadian answered dryly; "all I can say is, that my friend Moonshine and myself have frequently fought a larger number of redskins in positions worse than our present one. Ah! if Moonshine were here, I promise you I should need nobody's help to free us from this vermin."

The Canadian's language produced an amazing effect on the minds of the Spaniards.

"Listen to me," he continued; "make haste and form some resolution; time presses, I warn you, and flight is impossible. As for me, do not trouble yourselves, for I can always manage to get out of a scrape. You have the choice of two things, defend yourselves bravely or surrender without a blow; in the former case, you have a chance of escape, or, at the most, of being killed; in the second, you will be inevitably attached to the war stake, and you know with what diabolical art the redskins torture white men who fall into their hands."

"Our choice is not doubtful," the count answered boldly; "we will defend ourselves."

“Good,” said the Canadian, “that is speaking like a man.”

“The only thing is, we do not know what we ought to do in order to sell our lives as dearly as possible.”

The Canadian appeared to reflect.

“Well,” he said, a moment later, “I must not conceal anything from you, your salvation depends, not only on your resolution, but also on the skill with which you fight your enemies. The redskins are cunning, and it is by cunning alone that you will be able to conquer them. Now, although your situation is critical, I do not consider it desperate; but there must be no hesitation or false steps, which would prove your ruin.”

“We, and I the first, place ourselves under your orders, señor,” said the count; “from this moment you are our chief, and whatever you command, we will do.”

“Is that really the case?” he said, gladly; “Well then, set your minds at rest. These red devils, clever as they are, have not got us yet, and with God’s help we will give them a tough job to get hold of our scalps.”

At no great distance from the spot where the travellers had halted, the stream to which we have alluded formed a rather sharp curve, in consequence of a mass of lofty rocks which almost completely barred its course. These rocks, though belonging to the mainland, advanced almost into the centre of the river bed, which they commanded for some forty yards, piled up irregularly on one another, doubtless through one of the earthquakes so frequent in this country. These rocks were sufficiently wide for twenty men to shelter themselves, and from this position command the narrow canyon. It was to this natural fortress that the Canadian led his comrades, observing to the count that in this position they had no fear of being surrounded, and could, to a certain extent, make up for absent help.

When they reached the line of rocks, an apparently insurmountable obstacle presented itself; this was to make the horses, which they would not part from, cross the line of surf separating them from the rocks. The Canadian dismounted and carefully examined the passage. Then he returned, and taking his horse by the bridle, led it with extreme care across this difficult passage. The animal laid back its ears, resisted, and snorted wildly; but its master, while speaking to it and patting it, managed to lead it to the centre of a small esplanade, where it was protected on all sides against the Indian bullets and arrows. The Spaniards imitated the hunter’s movements; so soon as the first horse had passed, the others, after some hesitation, followed it, and soon found themselves by the side of the Canadian’s.

“Good,” said the adventurer, rubbing his hands; “let the redskins come now and we will give them the reception they deserve.”

Still he did not consider himself sufficiently safe yet behind these natural defences, and, helped by his comrades, he actively began raising a barricade with trees and lumps of rock, so as to form a sort of parapeted wall behind which it was possible to fire without showing themselves.

“Now,” he said to the Spaniards, as he calculated the height of the sun, “it is five o’clock. The Indians, who although invisible, have not lost one of our movements, will not attack us before nightfall; that is to say, we have two hours before us to rest and eat our supper. Do not be afraid about lighting a fire; our enemies are perfectly acquainted with our position. Hence, we have no need to hide ourselves.

Still, two of you will carefully watch the bank, while two others collect dry wood and cut grass for the horses."

The order was immediately executed. The Canadian then sat down, quietly lit his pipe, and made the count a sign to follow his example.

"Now, señor," he said to him, "you see that every precaution has been made for a vigorous defence."

"Yes," the count kindly replied, "and with a skill and promptness which I cannot sufficiently admire."

"Nonsense, it is only habit. I suppose your soldiers are brave?"

"As lions."

"Very good. Are they good shots?"

"They are far from equalling you, still they possess considerable skill."

"In a word they will do their best, and we can expect no more from a man. But I have another and more serious question to ask you. Have you ammunition?"

"Hang it. That is the thing which annoys me. My men have only sixty rounds apiece."

"Come, come, we are richer than I believed; I have about one hundred charges."

"And I the same," the count interrupted.

"In that case, if we have provisions enough to hold out for two days, we are saved."

"As for food, the two mules are loaded with it."

"Bravo, señor," the Canadian shouted joyously; "we have nothing more to fear now, so banish all anxiety."

"I really do not know how to requite the devotion you display to a person who is a stranger to you, and who can inspire you with but very slight interest."

"Are you not a man?" the Canadian replied. "That is enough for me. On the desert we are all brothers. You have a claim to my protection, as I have to yours. And besides, must I not defend my scalp."

"Good, good," the count said with a smile, "the day may perhaps come for me to prove my gratitude to you."

"Not a word about that, if you wish to cause me pleasure. And stay. Supper is ready, let us eat, for we must recruit our strength for the job which awaits us tonight."

They rose and joined the soldiers who were seated round the fire and eating with good appetite. By this time the sun had descended behind the lofty mountains, and night was at hand; the cloudless sky was begemmed by an infinite number of stars which were reflected in the silvery mirror of the stream; the coming breeze soughed softly through the branches, bringing with it the penetrating odours of the plants and flowers.

"Lie down, all of you," the Canadian said in a tone that admitted of no reply, "and sleep, so that you may be fresh for work when the hour arrives. I will keep watch for all, as your eyes would see nothing in the gloom."

"I will watch with you," said the count, "I feel that it would be impossible for me to sleep."

"Very good, señor."

Both then stationed themselves in a natural embrasure formed by two rocks coming close together, and began their watch, during which the Canadian carefully surveyed the river bank.

Chapter XIV

The Redskins.

In the meanwhile the night had become more and more gloomy; the wind had risen in the north-east, driving before it heavy grey clouds, which intercepted the moonbeams, and collected over the canyon. The count, obliged to keep silent, and worn out by the fatigue of a long ride, felt his eyelids involuntarily droop. At first he resisted the lethargy that assailed him; but, as he could not change his position, he soon found it impossible to carry on the struggle. His head fell on his chest, his eyes closed, he let his rifle fall, and went fast asleep. The adventurer gazed at him for a moment with an expression of pity mingled with pride.

"A valiant soldier for all that," he muttered, "but incapable of withstanding the fatigue of a lengthened watch in the presence of the Indians; better for him to sleep in peace."

Then, with an anxiety which had something filial in its rough kindness, he took off his thick zarapé, of Indian manufacture, and carefully wrapped him up, the speaker saying in a whisper—

"The dew is heavy at this season of the year, and the nights are cold."

And he resumed his watch, looking around him carefully, in order to assure himself that, during the few seconds he had employed in doing this service to the count, no suspicious movement had occurred outside. Suddenly he started, and his eyes, obstinately fixed on an adjacent thicket, seemed trying to pierce the gloom. Gradually raising his rifle, whose barrel was browned, in order that the moonbeams might not be reflected from it, he cocked and raised it, but at the sound of the hammer a shadow emerged from the centre of the clump, and holding out its arms to the hunter, several times waved a buffalo robe.

At this signal of peace, which was familiar to him, the hunter, without lowering his rifle, so that he might be able to resist any attempted treachery, sharply asked the person standing motionless in front of him, who he was and what he wanted.

"My brother the Sumach is a great paleface brave," the stranger answered; "a chief wishes to sit at his fire, and smoke in council with him."

The hunter, on hearing the name of the Sumach, by which the Indians ordinarily designated him, understood that he was recognized; but he cared very little about it, for he was perfectly aware that the redskins knew the number of white men hidden by the rocks.

"You are drunk, redskin," he answered sharply. "Go and sleep off your mezcal and firewater. This is not the hour to try and enter a war encampment."

“The Sumach is wise,” the Indian continued. “His medicine is powerful. What does he fear from one man? The White Crow is a great chief in his nation, and his tongue is not forked.”

“If you are really White Crow,” the hunter answered, “your words are true; but what proof will you give me?”

“This,” the Indian said.

And hurriedly stooping, he set fire to a pile of dry leaves and dead wood, which he had probably collected for the purpose. In a second the wood crackled, and a brilliant flame rose skywards, illumining all surrounding objects, and especially the person of the Indian, who, with his arms crossed on his chest, and head erect, had placed himself so that not one of his features should escape the wood ranger’s searching glance.

“It is well, chief,” the Canadian said, as he rested his rifle butt on the ground, assured, apparently, at any rate, that the Indian was alone. “You can come and take your place by my fire.”

At the noise caused by this interview, the Spaniards had risen and seized their weapons, in order to be ready for any event.

“What is the matter?” the count asked anxiously.

“Nothing out of the common in the rules of Indian tactics,” the hunter answered; “a redskin chief desires, before attacking us, to make us probably unacceptable proposals.”

“Why receive him, then?” the count continued.

“Refusing to do so would lead him and the demons hidden in the bushes to suppose that we are afraid; it is better to let him come. The time he loses here in useless words will be so much gained by us.”

“That is true,” the count said with a smile; “and what part do you propose we should play in this farce?”

“None at all. Go to sleep again, or, if your anxiety renders that impossible, pretend to sleep. This security on our part will produce a greater effect on the chief’s mind than a ridiculous display of strength.”

“But suppose this man only comes to us for the purpose of laying a trap,” the count said earnestly.

“There is no fear of that; although Indians are regarded by white men as savages, they are civilized in their fashion, and have an honour of their own. Once they have pledged their word it may be trusted to in perfect security.”

“Very well, my friend. You know better than I how you should behave to men with whose habits you are conversant, and therefore in the best way possible for our general safety.”

“Trust to me for that, señor. I am as interested as yourself in the matter.”

The count and his comrades, upon this assurance of the hunter, resumed their places, and when the chief appeared at the entrance of the encampment, all led him to believe that they were asleep.

“My brother, White Crow, is welcome to my fire,” the Canadian said to him, “if he brings propositions of peace on behalf of his brothers.”

“The intentions of the chief are good. It entirely depends on my brother whether they remain so.”

The two men then bowed to each other with all the gravity demanded by Indian etiquette, and crouched down over the fire on which the Canadian had thrown some handfuls of dry wood to revive the flame. The chief then drew his pipe from his girdle, filled it with moriche, or sacred tobacco, lit it by the help of a twig, for fear lest his fingers should come in contact with the fire, and both men began smoking, silently passing the calumet to each other, from which they only drew three or four puffs at a time.

White Crow was a tall, well-built man, whose thin limbs, however, seemed tolerably strong. As far as it is possible to recognize an Indian's age, he did not seem to have passed middle life; his features were noble and marked, and his glance intelligent; the expression of his face was generally kindly. He was in full paint, and wore the war moccasins, which showed that he was on an expedition; excepting his scalping knife, which was passed through his belt of untanned deer hide, he was unarmed, at least apparently so.

When all the tobacco was consumed, the chief shook out the ashes on his thumbnail, passed the pipe again through his belt, and turned to the hunter, who was waiting, cold and impassive, till he thought proper to speak.

"The Comanches of the Lakes," he said, "are surprised at finding here a great brave like my brother the Sumach. Can he have become a friend of the Yoris, or have they taken him prisoner in some ambuscade, and made him their slave?"

"Neither one nor the other, chief; accident alone brought me into their company," the hunter sharply replied.

"The redskins have the eye of the eagle and the wisdom of the snake. They saw the Sumach enter the stone calli, which the whites call the Hacienda del Barrio, accompanied by white men, and leave it in the same fashion."

"What does that prove, chief? Besides it concerns you but little, I suppose, if I am a friend of the Yoris, as you call them."

"More than my brother the Sumach supposes. The Comanches of the Lakes love the great heart of the east, they have met him on the war trail; they know that the Sumach is a great brave, and do not wish to see him enveloped in the ruin of their enemies."

"I thank you and yours, chief," the Canadian said, still perfectly calm, "for the interest you are kind enough to show for me. I too love your brothers; I have never fought your tribe except against the grain, and I should be vexed to level my rifle at them."

"Wah! my brother speaks well; wisdom dwells in him. Let him follow the chief to his camp; his place is marked out at the council fire."

"I should be glad to do so, chief," the hunter said, with a sad shake of the head. "Heaven is my witness that I should like to avoid bloodshed between us. Unhappily, what you propose is impossible; honour forbids my acceptance. I have sworn to protect these men, and will die or escape with them."

The Indian reflected for some minutes. "My brother's intention is mad," he at length continued; "these Yoris must die."

"Why should it be so? Can they not ransom themselves? Why shed blood unnecessarily? The Yoris will pay a ransom, and the Comanches will allow them to continue their journey in peace."

The Indian, in his turn, shook his head sadly several times.

“No,” he said, “this is not the Mexican moon; the Comanches are not seeking booty, but want revenge. My brother must not press me further, but will abandon the Yoris. One of the great Comanche chiefs has been insulted, and the avenger of blood is behind the palefaces; they will die; I have spoken.”

The Canadian rose.

“Though I refuse to accept my brother’s offer,” he said, “I am not the less grateful for the step which he has uselessly taken, impelled by the interest he feels for me. Let him return to his men and repeat my words to them; they are those of a man whose heart is upright. Their enemies are my brothers, and I will defend them, whatever may happen; if they fall I shall fall with them; but, at any rate, I shall have the satisfaction of having done my duty, instead of committing a cowardly act unworthy of a warrior and a Christian.”

“My brother’s blood will fall on his own head,” the chief said, with an accent of sadness, which he was unable to conceal entirely.

Then after bowing ceremoniously to the hunter, who returned his salute, he withdrew slowly, and soon disappeared in the darkness.

“Up, comrades,” the Canadian said so soon as he was alone; “you will now have to prove yourselves brave men, for I predict that we shall be vigorously attacked within ten minutes.”

In an instant the Spaniards were armed and ambushed behind the rocks. The count walked up to the hunter and said, as he cordially pressed his hand—

“Señor Olivero, I heard all; you could save yourself by abandoning us, but refused to do so. I thank you.”

“Nonsense,” the adventurer replied laughingly; “did you not understand that the Indian was setting a clumsy trap for me, into which I was not so simple as to fall?”

“Why try to reduce the merit of your loyal conduct? I know perfectly well, and you know as well as I do, that this man spoke the truth.”

“That is possible. Would you not have done the same in my place?”

“That is a singular question. Do you imagine, pray, that everybody has your heroism?”

The Canadian began laughing, and the conversation broke off here for the present, for an immense belt of flame rose from the bank and dispelled the gloom as if by enchantment; the Indians were beginning their attack by firing the grass, so that they might see the enemy’s camp at their ease. At the same instant a cloud of arrows and a hailstorm of bullets hailed over the camp, though it was impossible for the Spaniards to distinguish a single enemy.

“Spare your ammunition,” the Canadian recommended his companions; “do not fire till you are certain; who knows how long this may last? Do not expose yourselves unless you wish to be traversed by an arrow or hit by a bullet; we are waging an Indian war, in which courage is most shown in prudence.”

The hunter, however, with his body bent forward, was attentively seeking an opportunity to fire, following the direction of the shots; but the redskins knew by experience the infallible precision of his aim, and were not at all anxious to serve as his target; hence they redoubled their precautions. Suddenly the Canadian fancied he saw a slight movement behind some logs collected on the bank and fired. At the same instant an Indian leapt up like a wounded buck, and then fell back; several warriors dashed forward to pick up his body, and four fresh shots

produced four more corpses. The Indians thereupon fled, abandoning their wounded, who writhed, in the last convulsions of death, and all fell back into such deep silence that had it not been for the sight of the corpses and the increasing conflagration, it might have been supposed that all had been a dream.

"Well," the count said, as he reloaded his gun, "it was a sharp skirmish, but the lesson was a good one, and I hope they will profit by it."

"Do not fancy that they will so easily give up getting hold of you. Have a little patience and you will see them return. Have we any wounded?"

"Not a soul."

"Heaven be blessed! Let us redouble our vigilance, for it is probable that they are at this moment inventing some diabolical stratagem to deceive us."

Nearly two hours elapsed, and the redskins did not make the slightest movement indicating their desire to attempt a fresh attack.

"I believe, my friend," the count said, "that you are mistaken, and that these demons have definitively given up the contest."

The Canadian shook his head, as he sought to distinguish what was going on upon the river bank by the expiring flames of the conflagration. Suddenly he burst into a passionate cry, "¡Viva Dios!" he shouted; "Look at those demons incarnate, they are rolling trunks of trees, behind which they are sheltered like cunning opossums; if we do not take care we shall have them upon us within a quarter of an hour."

The hunter had guessed correctly. The redskins, after cutting down a considerable number of trees, had formed them into a sort of flying barricade, behind which they advanced till they reached the river bank, and had but a few yards to go in order to arrive at the rocks. Once there, they would begin a hand to hand fight, in which their numerical superiority would infallibly gain them the advantage. The situation was growing critical for the besieged; each moment rendered it worse, for they were compelled to keep up an incessant fire on invisible enemies, who continued to advance without taking the trouble to reply, being protected by the bullets and arrows of several of their party, who remained behind, and skirmished with the Spaniards, whom they thus obliged to display great caution to avoid being hit, and in consequence could not fire with their usual skill. On reaching the spot where the belt of rocks began, the Indians rose all together and bounded forward like a pack of tigers, uttering horrible yells.

"We must die now," the Canadian exclaimed.

Seven guns were discharged together, and seven enemies fell. But the others pressed on; they leapt over the bodies and rushed at the Spaniards. Then began a struggle impossible to describe, of seven men against thirty; a gigantic struggle, heroically though hopelessly sustained by the white men, who, in spite of prodigious efforts, saw the moment rapidly approaching when they must succumb.

The count especially fought with admirable energy against the Indians, who pressed him closely and seemed anxious to seize his person. Several times, had it not been for the Canadian's devotion, he would have been carried off by the redskins. Several Spaniards lay dead or seriously wounded, a few moments more, a few seconds perhaps, and all would be over with the white men—when a strange event suddenly occurred. A horrible clamour began among the Indians, who, for

no apparent cause, were attacked by a panic and fled in all directions, crying with an accent of indescribable despair—

"Woe, woe! The Queen of the Savannah, the Queen of the Savannah!"

At the same instant three riders appeared in the canyon, driving before them the redskins, who did not attempt to resist, but fled in all directions. The Spaniards were saved at the very moment when they fancied themselves lost. Indeed, it was time for this help to arrive, for of eight, only three remained on their feet, the rest were dead!

The flight of the Indians gradually became converted into a thorough rout; the strange riders, at the head of whom it was easy to distinguish a female, passed the Spanish encampment like a tornado, and disappeared in the darkness, still obstinately pursuing the fugitives. The travellers, so miraculously saved, remained alone, suffering from great perplexity, not knowing whether they were really delivered, or had another attack to apprehend from their ferocious and implacable foes.

Chapter XV

Count de Melgosa.

The Spaniards remained on the defensive for some time longer; they could not believe in their marvellous deliverance, and expected the redskins to return at every moment and attack them again. The entire night however passed without the deep silence of the desert being disturbed otherwise than by the ferocious howling of the jaguars, and the snapping bark of the coyotes, which were proceeding in packs to the watering places. At sunrise they perceived that the canyon was entirely deserted, and that their savage enemies had given up all attempts to carry their encampment by storm. After returning thanks to heaven for the unexpected help sent them in their distress, they busily set to work burying the dead, in order that they might be able to start as soon as possible.

Their loss during the obstinate fight with the Indians was serious. Four of the count's brave soldiers had fallen, the two others were wounded, and himself and the Canadian had only escaped by a miracle. The hunter was forced to allow that for the fifteen years he had been traversing the prairie, in all the engagements he had fought with the redskins, he never saw them proceed with so much method, and display such obstinacy in their attack. The Spaniards, certain of having nothing more to fear, left their entrenchments and proceeded to the mainland in order to bury their dead.

At length, when they had paid the last rites to their comrades, and had rolled heavy stones upon the graves to prevent the bodies being profaned by wild beasts, the hunters hastily took their morning meal, saddled their horses, and set out again, saddened by the mournful incident which had interrupted their journey so painfully. All smiled around them. The day announced itself under magnificent auspices, the birds saluted with their merry songs the apparition of the day star,

the leaves glistened with dew, a thick mist rose from the ground, a perfumed breeze rustled the branches. In a word, all breathed calm joy and pure happiness in this desert which, but a few hours previously, had been witness of a horrid scene of carnage.

As on the previous day, the count and the adventurer rode side by side, absorbed in gloomy thoughts, and looking round them absently and carelessly. At length the Canadian drew himself up, shook his head several times as if to dismiss a troublesome thought, and turning to the count said, as if he were completing aloud an internal thought—

"Stuff, a little sooner or a little later, a man must die after all."

"Yes," the count said with a sad smile, "dying is indeed the common law. But dying thus, far from one's friends, beneath the bullets of unworthy foes, without benefit to humanity—that is truly frightful, and what heaven ought not to permit."

"Do not murmur against Providence, señor. These men have fallen, it is true; but their death was not so useless as you seem to think, because it enabled you to await the help which delivered you."

"That is true, and I am wrong; still I cannot help pitying the fate of devoted servants, whose death I indirectly caused."

"It was a glorious fight, vigorously carried on upon both sides. Still it was time for our liberators to arrive. Had they not, it is more than probable that we should now be also lying lifeless on the ground. But," he added, after a moment's reflection, "why did our saviours go off in that way? I fancy they might have joined us, if not to receive our congratulations and thanks, at least to inquire into our state."

"What good would that do? The Queen of the Savannah heard our muskets, that was sufficient to prove to her that we were still alive and able to fight."

"That is possible," the Canadian continued thoughtfully; "but however great may be the obligation I have contracted towards the extraordinary woman you call by that name, I shall not be satisfied till I shall have been close to her."

"Why so? With what have you to reproach her? Why obstinately try to disturb the secrets of a person who must be an object of indifference to you?"

"You are mistaken on that head, señor. This woman, this strange being, has already interfered twice in my affairs at a very short interval of time. A man like myself, señor, does not contract serious obligations, unless he knows that he will be able someday to repay to the person who forces such protection upon him."

The count burst into a laugh.

"Caballero, caballero," he said, "you are punctilious, and difficult to satisfy. Anyone in your place would readily put up with the affront, and not be at all anxious to know to whom he owes so great an obligation."

"Everybody, señor, looks at matters from his own point of sight; for my part I repeat that the way in which the woman to whom we are alluding has twice interfered in my affairs has excited in me, I will not say a curiosity, but such a lively interest, that I swear to you I mean to learn something about her at all risks so soon as I am at liberty again."

"Take my advice, Don Oliver, do not try to discover the matter, for there is a sad story beneath it."

"You know her, then?"

“Perhaps so. I can only form conjectures, for the persons directly interested in that woman’s actions insist on maintaining the deepest silence.”

“Why, wait a minute,” the Canadian said, hitting his forehead like a man who suddenly remembers something he had quite forgotten, “I believe now that Don Aurelio Gutiérrez told us at the Hacienda del Barrio certain facts connected with this person.”

“To what are you alluding, señor?”

“Good gracious! I attached but slight importance to the narrative at the time, so that what I heard is very confused in my head. Still I think it referred to the extermination of an Indian tribe encamped on Don Aníbal de Saldibar’s estates, and atrocious revenge on the part of the redskins, in consequence of which the hacendero’s wife became insane.”

“Yes, all that you say is true. When Doña Emilia regained her reason she vowed an implacable hatred against the Indians, and since that period, if what is said be true, she has constantly pursued them without truce or mercy, hunting them down, and massacring them like wild beasts.”

“That is indeed extraordinary.”

“The redskins, tracked by this lady, whom they believe to be protected by a charm, as she has constantly foiled their snares and escaped unwounded from all their attacks, have conceived such a superstitious fear for her that her name alone, as you saw last night, is sufficient to cause them a wild terror and set them to flight, and as if rendering homage to the terror with which she has continued to inspire them, they have given her the name you heard repeated during the fight.”

“The Queen of the Savannah?”

“Yes.”

“I have often heard the Indians speak of this strange creature, whom they imagine to be a species of malevolent genius, and about whom they recount the most fantastic and improbable stories; but I confess I was far from suspecting that the Queen of the Savannah and Doña Emilia de Saldibar were one and the same person.”

“I do not say that they are, and I affirm nothing; I merely repeat to you what is said.”

“How is it that you, a friend of Don Aníbal, are not better informed about the affair?”

“Because, I repeat once again, Don Aníbal maintains an obstinate silence on the subject; and if by any chance this mysterious being is alluded to in his presence he at once turns the conversation, so that no one exactly knows what to believe, and is forced to make conjectures more or less probable.”

“Very good,” the hunter answered, “I thank you for your information, caballero. But, *viva Dios!* I swear to you that I will force Don Aníbal to tell me how matters really are; or, if he will not, I shall not hesitate to question his wife.”

“I doubt greatly whether you will be able to obtain even the shortest interview with her. She is constantly shut up in her apartments with her daughter. No one sees her, and several of her domestics even do not know her.”

“You excite my curiosity the more, señor.”

“All the worse for you, caballero,” the count continued; “for admitting that you succeeded in seeing Doña Emilia, I am convinced that she would not consent to answer any of the questions you thought proper to ask her.”

“Oh, oh! That appears to me rather too strong; but no matter, I will not recognize defeat, and I pledge you my word that so soon as I return to the hacienda, I will try, by all the means in my power, to obtain the clue of the enigma.”

“As you please, caballero. I have warned you, and have no right to check or encourage you in what you intend doing. Still, if I may be allowed to offer my advice in so serious a matter, I would invite you to refrain. It is not always prudent to try and interfere in people’s business against their will, especially when it does not concern you in any way.”

“I thank you for your advice, caballero, though it is not in my power to follow it. But,” he said, as he stopped his horse, and laid his hand over his forehead to keep off the sunlight, “who is that coming down there?”

“Where?” the count asked, imitating the hunter.

“There, in front of us; a horseman is coming up at full speed.”

“It is true,” the count said; “I can just distinguish him in the cloud of dust raised by his horse’s hoofs.”

“Hum!” the Canadian said, as he cocked his rifle; “If he be alone, we can easily settle him; but when a thing is doubtful, it is always as well to take one’s precautions.”

“What are you about?”

“As you can see, I am preparing to receive the coming visitor.”

In the meanwhile, the horseman rapidly approached the Spaniards, and it was soon easy to see, by his dress and horse harness, that he was a Mexican. While galloping, this man made signs as if wishing to attract the attention of the travellers, and induce them to advance.

“I was not mistaken,” the count said all at once; “uncock your rifle, caballero; you have nothing to fear, for that individual is one of my peons. What motive could have induced the countess to send off a courier?”

“We are going to learn,” the Canadian replied, as he laid his rifle across the saddlebow again, “for he will have joined us in five minutes.”

In fact, the horseman shortly after accosted them. He was a sturdy peon, with sun burnt face and powerful limbs; he was well armed, and rode one of those prairie horses which European steeds can never equal. On coming up to his master, he stopped his horse so short that its four feet seemed to be suddenly welded to the ground, and, bowing respectfully to the count, he took from the China crape faja, tightly fastened around his hips, a bag of opossum skin, from which he drew a letter, and handed it to his master. The count opened the letter, but before reading it looked at the peon with ill-disguised anxiety, and said to him—

“Has anything new occurred at the hacienda, Diego López?”

“Nothing, mi amo, that I know of at least.”

“The señora is not indisposed?”

“No, Excellency; but on learning from the lancero, whom you sent to Leona Vicario, that you would probably pass the hacienda on your return without stopping, she gave me this letter, and bade me make all speed.”

“Is that really all? You are telling the truth, Diego López?”

“By my share of Paradise, Excellency, I have told you all exactly as it happened.”

“Very good—wait.”

And, turning to the Canadian, he said—

“Will you permit me?”

“A letter which has arrived in this way, señor, must be of importance, so read it without further delay.”

The count at once began reading, but he had only got through a few lines ere his face was covered with a deadly pallor.

“What is the matter, señor?” the hunter asked anxiously; “Are you ill, or has the letter really brought bad news?”

“Neither, caballero,” the count answered, making a violent effort to regain his coolness; “I thank you, but this letter reminds me of a date which I had not forgotten, alas!” he said with a sigh, “For that is impossible, but which I might have allowed to pass, owing to present circumstances. Instead of conducting you straight to Leona Vicario, as I originally intended, I am compelled to stop at my hacienda. Are you disposed to accept the poor rustic hospitality I can offer you, or will you continue your journey to the ciudad, under the guidance of Diego López?”

“I am entirely at your disposal, señor, and will do what you think proper, as I am in no hurry; you shall decide my movements.”

“As you are so accommodating, we will proceed to the hacienda. Diego López, ride on ahead, and inform your mistress of our speedy arrival.”

The peon bowed, bent over his horse’s neck, dug his spurs into its sides, and started at a gallop.

“We need not hurry,” the count said, “for we are only two leagues at the most from the hacienda.”

“I will ride at your pace,” the hunter replied; “besides, the sun is still high.”

“The hospitality we have to offer will be sad, señor; family grief has, unfortunately, banished joy for ever from my hearth. I ask you, therefore, to excuse any formality which may be visible in the countess’s reception of you.”

The Canadian bowed politely, and they went on. In about an hour, they perceived the lofty and thick walls of a vast hacienda, built on the top of a scarped rock.

“Oh, oh!” the hunter said, admiring the strength of this majestic building, “That is an admirable fortress.”

“It is the hacienda to which I am taking you, señor, and of which I am the owner.”

“Viva Dios! I regret that a citadel like that is not in the possession of the party I have joined.”

“Yes,” the count said, with a sigh, “its position is well chosen.”

“Admirably. With a good garrison, it would be possible to hold out for a long time against an army.”

“Alas! There was one ill-omened day on which these strong walls, defended by a garrison of brave and devoted men, could not save it from being taken by storm, and plundered by the Comanches.”

The count heaved a deep sigh as he uttered these words. The hunter, afraid of saddening his host by dwelling on a subject which seemed so painful to him, tried to turn the conversation.

“Good gracious!” he said, “I did not notice before that the hacienda is entirely surrounded by water.”

“Yes, the river has been turned so as to form a belt round it. Our ancestors, compelled continually to contend against the insurrections of the natives, who only assumed the yoke with great reluctance, built perfect citadels, and took their precautions against an attack. But here we are on the river bank; you must dismount, and enter the boat; it is the only way of passing to the other side.”

“I suspect,” the hunter said with a laugh, “that there is another—a ford, for instance; but you do not care to show it to me.”

“Perhaps so,” the count answered, with a smile; “suppose there were, would you think me wrong?”

“On my word, no,” said the Canadian; “war is a game like any other, in which the cleverer player has the best chance of winning.”

While talking, they had dismounted, and handed their horses to the soldiers. At this moment the boat, pulled by two sturdy peons, came up to them; they got in, and in a few minutes found themselves on a sort of small quay, ten yards wide at the most.

“Come,” the count said.

The hunter followed his host, and entered a narrow rugged path which ran round the hill, and which foot travellers could alone follow, as it was kept up so badly, perhaps purposely. At length, after ascending in this way for about a quarter of an hour—not without halting several times to take breath, so rapid and abrupt was the incline—the two men reached the top of the hill, and found themselves in front of the hacienda, from which they were only separated by an abyss some twenty feet wide. A drawbridge, formed of two narrow planks thrown across the precipice, supplied them with a rather precarious passage, and they at length found themselves inside the fortress.

“Well, well,” the hunter muttered, as he looked searchingly around him; “the persons inhabiting this house do not seem to me persuaded that peace will be durable.”

Chapter XVI

Diego López.

The count did not give the hunter time to make many observations.

“Excuse me,” he said, “if my behaviour does not appear exactly in accordance with the claims of courtesy; but war may break out at any moment between the

Spanish government and the Mexican patriots, and an ambassador, if he understands his profession, is always more or less a spy."

"That is true," the hunter said with a smile.

"You understand, I suppose, that I am not desirous to let you examine in detail fortifications which you may be ordered to attack within a few days."

"Quite true, señor. I did not think of that; your prudence is legitimate."

"However," the count continued, "be assured, señor, that, with the exception of the care I am compelled to take in hiding from you our resources and defensive measures, you will have no cause to complain of the manner in which you will be treated here."

"I am convinced of that beforehand, señor."

"Be kind enough, then, to follow me. I wish to introduce you to the countess."

"Do you consider that absolutely necessary?" the hunter asked, as he looked at his shabby clothes which displayed marks of long and hard wear.

The count looked at him in surprise. "What do you mean?"

"As you are aware, señor," the Canadian answered, good humouredly, "I am only an ignorant hunter; of use perhaps to give a companion a helping hand in a difficult situation, but quite out of my place in a drawing room, especially in the presence of a great lady like the countess."

"Nonsense, you are jesting, my friend. A man like you is nowhere out of place. The countess, I am convinced, will be delighted to know you; and I assure you that you will cause me great vexation by refusing to be introduced to her."

"Very good; as you insist, I have no more to say."

He followed the count who, after crossing two spacious courtyards, led him through a labyrinth of sumptuous apartments, at the end of which he showed him into a large drawing room furnished with all the luxurious comfort of old Europe. In this room, seated on a sofa near a window whence a magnificent view was enjoyed, was a lady of a certain age, with a gentle and pleasing face, which must have been very lovely in youth. This lady, who was dressed in mourning, was the Countess de Melgosa.

"My dear Doña Carmencita," the count said, "permit me to present to you a friend of one day's standing who has saved my life."

"He is welcome to our sad abode," the lady said, as she rose with a peaceful and calm smile. "We will try, since he deigns to accept our hospitality, to render his stay in this isolated hacienda as little wearisome as we can."

"Madam," the Canadian answered, as he bowed with that natural courtesy which men in whom a false education has not destroyed nature possess to so eminent a degree, "I am only a poor man, unworthy of the gracious reception you deign to offer me. If accident furnished me with the opportunity to do your husband a slight service, I am more than rewarded by the kind remarks you have addressed to me. Unfortunately, I shall not be able to enjoy your exquisite hospitality for long."

"You will surely remain a few days, señor; it would disoblige me if you answered by a refusal."

"Alas! Madam, I am in despair. I should be delighted to forget here, for some time, the fatigue and dangers of a desert life; unfortunately, serious reasons

independent of my will compel my presence at Leona Vicario as early as possible. The Señor Conde knows that we must start tomorrow at sunrise."

The countess displayed signs of great astonishment.

"Can it be true, Don Fadrique?" she said to the count, while looking inquiringly at him.

"Indeed," he answered, "Señor Clary is in such haste to get to Leona, that if we had not been found by your messenger a few leagues from here, we should have continued our journey without calling at the hacienda."

"It is impossible!" the countess exclaimed, her face suffused with a hectic flush.

"Why so?" he continued.

The countess heaved a heavy sigh.

"Have you forgotten, then, Don Fadrique," she at length said, in a low and trembling voice, "that tomorrow is the anniversary of the fatal day?"

"Ah!" the count exclaimed, as he sorrowfully smote his brow, "Forgive me, Doña Carmencita. In truth I cannot leave the hacienda tomorrow—oh no! Not even if it were a question of life and death."

The hunter, who was greatly embarrassed, listened, without understanding a word, to this conversation in which he did not dare to take part, as he feared, if he spoke, he might make some mistake; but the count freed him from his embarrassment by turning and saying to him—

"I am sure you will excuse me, Señor Clary. Reasons of the deepest gravity demand my presence tomorrow at the hacienda; hence it will be impossible for me to accompany you to the governor and introduce you to him. But, though I cannot go myself, I give you in my place a person in whom you can place entire confidence, and I will join you at the ciudad the day after tomorrow. It is in reality, therefore, only a trifling delay of four and twenty hours, which will in no way injure you."

"You know better than I do, señor, what it is best to do, hence do not put yourself out of the way for me; it will be all right if I am permitted to continue my journey tomorrow."

"You can be sure of it."

"But," the countess said, ringing a bell, "after the fatigues to which you have been exposed for two days, you must require a few hours' rest, señor; forgive me for not having thought of it sooner. Be kind enough to follow this peon, who will conduct you to the room prepared for you, and we shall meet again at dinner."

The hunter comprehended that the countess desired to remain alone with her husband. Although he did not feel the slightest need of rest, he bowed respectfully to the lady, and followed the servant. The latter led him in silence to a vast room, in which he invited him to enter, saying that he had three hours before him, which he could pass either in sleeping or smoking. In fact, a hammock of cocoa fibre was suspended in the room, and a mountain of cigars and cigarettes placed on a table. The servant merely told the hunter that he had better not leave his room, as he might lose his way. This was clearly saying to the Canadian that he was regarded as a prisoner, or something very like it; at least he understood it so. He shrugged his shoulders disdainfully, and made the peon a sign to leave him alone, which the other at once obeyed.

“By Jove!” the hunter said, as he lay down in the hammock, and lit a cigar, “It must be confessed that this Don Fadrique, this Count de Melgosa, is a somewhat mysterious being, and guards himself with as much care as if he had a kingdom to defend; but what do I care? Thank heaven! I have not to stay here long, and have no intention of carrying his wigwam by storm.”

He looked round and saw that not only had cigars been brought for him, but that refreshments had been added in the shape of several *botas*, containing pulque, mezcal, and Catalonian refino.

“Come,” he said, “I was prejudiced against my host. He is decidedly a famous fellow.”

After this consoling reflection the hunter rose and went to the table, doubtless with the intention of tasting the liquors upon it, and spending in the most agreeable way possible the hours at his disposal.

The dinner was rather gloomy. The countess was not present, but sent her apologies to the hunter, who was not broken hearted at her absence; for, in spite of the old lady’s gracious manners, he felt constrained in her presence. When the dinner was ended the count repeated that it was impossible for him to accompany him on the morrow, but would give him a sure guide. He handed him a letter of recommendation for the governor, and, after renewing to the Canadian his promise of joining him on the following day, he took leave of him for the night, and retired.

The adventurer was not sorry to be alone. In spite of the count’s attention he retained in his manner toward him a certain aristocratic hauteur, which hurt him, although it was impossible for him to display the dissatisfaction he felt. The same silent domestic who had already served him led Oliver to his room, and took leave of him after bidding him good night. The hunter, wearied more by the inactivity to which he was condemned for some hours than by his morning’s ride, threw himself on the leather-covered frame which serves as a bed in all Mexican houses, shut his eyes, and speedily fell asleep.

At sunrise he woke. At the same moment the peon who seemed appointed to wait on him entered his room and announced that if he were ready all the preparations were made. Oliver asked to take leave of the master and mistress of the house; but, on being told that they could not receive anybody, he followed his guide without asking him any further questions. The latter led him through several yards, took passages different from those by which the hunter had entered the hacienda, and took him out on the opposite side to the one by which he had come in. After crossing the drawbridge the hunter turned as if to say good-bye to the guide, but the latter told him that he had orders to accompany him to the spot where the horses were, and they descended the hill by a track quite as rough as the one by which the Canadian had ascended on the previous day. On the opposite bank of the river, three horsemen, armed with long lances, one of whom held the hunter’s horse by the bridle, were waiting motionless, ready to start at the first signal. In the leader of this little party the Canadian recognized with some degree of pleasure Diego López, who was relatively an old acquaintance. When they had crossed the moat, López came to meet them.

“Here is the man,” said the peon.

“Very good,” Diego López answered laconically.

“You know what you have to do?”

“I do.”

“In that case, good-bye.”

And he then turned to the hunter, who had mounted by this time.

“A pleasant journey, Señor Forastero,” he said, with a mocking accent most offensive to the Canadian.

“Shall we start, señor?” Diego asked the hunter.

“Whenever you please,” said the latter, as he drew up by the side of his guide.

They started at a gallop, and remained silent for a long time.

“Are we very far from Leona Vicario?” the hunter at length asked, feeling wearied of this silence and disposed to talk with his comrade.

“No!” the latter answered.

“Well, you are no great talker, my friend,” the Canadian continued.

“What is the good of talking when you have nothing to say, especially when in the company of a heretic?”

“A heretic!” the adventurer said, “Hang me if that is true.”

“Are you not an Englishman?”

“I? Not a bit of it.”

“All strangers are Englishmen,” Diego López, said, sententiously.

“How famously you fellows are taught. It is curious enough.”

“And all Englishmen are heretics,” the peon continued, calmly.

“Be kind enough to tell me,” the hunter said, with a grin, “who teaches you all these pretty things?”

“Why should I tell you?”

“For two reasons. In the first place, for my personal satisfaction; and next, for my instruction.”

“It is our priests.”

“Ah! Very good. I thank you. Why, my friend, if it cause you any pleasure, learn first that I am not an Englishman but a Canadian, which is not at all the same thing; next, not only that I am no heretic, but at the least quite as good a Catholic as yourself, I flatter myself.”

“Is what you are saying true?” Diego López asked, as he drew close to the hunter.

“Why should I tell a falsehood?”

“Well! Why did you not tell that to El Señor Conde?”

“Tell him what?”

“That you are a Catholic.”

“Hang it, for the very simple reason that he did not ask me.”

“That is true; but no matter, it is a misfortune.”

“Why so?”

“Because you would have been present at the anniversary service.”

“What anniversary?”

“The one held every year at the hacienda in remembrance of the assassination of the brother of the Señor Conde, who was treacherously killed by the redskins.”

“I am really vexed that I did not know that sooner, for I should have made a point of attending that service. Stay, in order that you may not have the slightest doubt about me,” he added, as he took out of his bosom a small silver cross, hanging round his neck by a steel chain, “look at this. Is it a heretic plaything?”

“Good,” the peon said, with evident satisfaction. “I see that you are a worthy man, and not a dog of an Englishman. Do you love the English?”

“I cannot bear them.”

“Our priests say that they will all be condemned.”

“I hope so,” the Canadian said, with a laugh.

“They deserve it, for they are gringos.”

“So we are friends?”

“Yes; and to prove it, I will give you a piece of advice, if you like.”

“Out with it; it is always worth having.”

“Must you absolutely see the governor directly you arrive?”

“Yes.”

“That is vexatious.”

“Why so?”

“Well!” Diego López said, looking at him with some hesitation, “Do you know the name the people give the governor?”

“No, I do not; but tell it to me; I shall be glad to learn it.”

“Well! They call him the Shark.”

“Ah! An ugly name, especially if deserved.”

“Oh, yes, it is deserved,” the peon said, with an involuntary shudder.

The hunter reflected for a moment.

“Hang it,” he muttered, “what a wasps’ nest I have got into!”

Then he said aloud—

“And, now, what is the advice you wish to give me?”

“You will be dumb?”

“As a fish; go on.”

“Well, if you will believe me, in spite of the letter my master gave you for the governor, you will wait to present it to him till the count has rejoined you.”

“Confusion! Then you suspect that I am incurring some danger?”

“A terrible one.”

“Hang it, hang it, that is not reassuring.”

“I will lead you to a cousin of mine who is an arriero. You will remain concealed at his house till tomorrow, and so soon as my master arrives I will warn you.”

“My friend,” the adventurer replied seriously, “I thank you for your advice. I see that the interest you feel in me induces you to give it me, but, unluckily, it is impossible for me to profit by it. I must present myself without delay to the governor, in spite of all the peril to which I may be exposed. But as a warned man is worth two, I shall take my precautions accordingly. But I fancy that is the town we can see.”

“Yes,” said the peon,

“I shall feel obliged by your leading me straight to the governor’s palace.”

Diego López looked at him for a moment with an air of amazement, and then shook his head several times.

“As you insist on it, I will lead you there,” he said.

Chapter XVII

Leona Vicario.

El Saltillo, also called Leona Vicario, is situated about 600 miles to the north of Mexico, in a fine and well cultivated plain. This town which is now rich, and has a population of about 20,000, was considerable at the period of the Spanish authority, and enjoyed some reputation through the salubrity of its climate. But we will say nothing about the Saltillo of today, which does not concern us; we will merely try to give a sketch of the town at the time when our story took place.

Like all the towns founded by the Spaniards, it is crammed with churches, several of which are very handsome and rich. The streets are wide, clean, and bordered by houses built of stone, a very rare thing in Mexico, where a continued apprehension of earthquakes is felt. Owing to the numerous springs that burst out of the ground in most of the streets, the ground, which without that would be dry and sterile, enjoys a certain reputation for fertility. Saltillo was at that period the general entrepôt of the Spanish trade with the redskins, who went there to make exchanges, and supply themselves with the various articles they needed. The population was divided into two classes: the Spaniards, or persons who called themselves such, though the majority of them had not probably one-eighth of European blood in their veins; and the Tzascaltec Indians, the sole really intelligent and industrious inhabitants of the town.

On the day when accident led the adventurer to Saltillo, the town festival was being celebrated. In the morning after mass the clergy had fetched with great pomp the image of the Virgin from the cathedral, carried it through all the streets with hymns and music, and then put it to rest in a theatre built by the side of the acho, or circus in which the bullfights are held. After the siesta, several bullfights came off to the sound of bands stationed on either side the statue of the Virgin, then the procession continued its promenade, and finally restored the statue to the cathedral. Immediately afterwards, an open fair for the sale of cakes, sugarplums, and for gambling began, which was to last a week. The governor, who generally resided at Coahuila, the capital of the Intendancy, had come to Saltillo expressly to witness this festival, whose reputation was great throughout the land, and which attracted a crowd of strangers.

Our travellers entered the town about two hours after the fair had been opened, and suddenly found themselves in a crowd of promenaders and idlers who encumbered the streets and at some points impeded the circulation. The little party only advanced with great difficulty through the mob, which pressed round them on all sides, laughing, shouting, letting off fireworks, and throwing squibs in every direction. Naturally the further the travellers got into the heart of the city, the greater the difficulties became, and the less easy was it for them to advance; at last the crowd grew so compact around the travellers, that they found it utterly impossible to advance another step.

“The deuce take the asses with their festival,” the Canadian muttered, as he looked angrily at the living wall that stood before him; “we cannot remain here, though, till nightfall.”

“There is a way of arriving at the governor’s house, if you like.”

“What is it?” the other asked.

“It is to turn, back, take a side street, leave our horses at amesón, and then return on foot to mingle with the crowd. What is impossible for a horseman in such a throng is not so to a pedestrian, who, if he is strong, can force a passage with his elbows and shoulders. It is true that we shall run the risk of a knife thrust; but omelettes cannot be made without breaking the eggs, and if you really wish to arrive, I fancy you have no other method to employ.”

“Viva Dios! You are right this time, gossip, even if you were the greatest liar in the whole of New Spain,” the Canadian exclaimed joyously, “and I will immediately follow your advice.”

But this was not so easy to perform as the adventurer imagined. The forced stoppage they had been constrained to make had rendered the crowd thicker around them, so that they were literally held in a vice by the pedestrians. Still they must deliver themselves at all risks from this pressure, which was momentarily becoming more tremendous. At an order from Diego López, the two peons in the rear began gently backing their horses—for it was impossible to turn them—a movement immediately imitated by the Canadian and his comrade, whose steeds wheeled to the right and left with an almost imperceptible movement, which, however, gradually enlarged the circle round them. But then, a frightful concert of yells, oaths, and threats, began around the hapless travellers, who in vain apologized to the people whom they struck or crushed against the walls.

The tumult gradually attained tremendous proportions. Already could be seen flashing in the sun the bluish blades of the long knives which Mexicans always carry in the right boot. As Diego López predicted, knife thrusts would soon be liberally dispensed. The position of the travellers was becoming difficult, when suddenly a lepero, one of those scamps such as are always to be found in a crowd, for whom an accident of any nature is a rejoicing, unsuspectingly and probably involuntarily freed them from their dilemma. This worthy youth had about him a stock of squibs and crackers, which he took a delight in letting off between the legs of women, or in the pockets of men, whom their evil star brought within his reach. At the moment when the popular fury attained its paroxysm, the lepero thought it a famous joke to light a squib, and let it phizz under the nostrils of the Canadian’s horse.

The animal, already terrified by the shouts which deafened it, and the blows craftily dealt it, and now rendered mad by the fire that burned its nostrils, reared with a snort of pain, laid back its ears, and, in spite of the desperate efforts its rider made to hold it in, dashed into the very thickest of the crowd, throwing down everything in its path, and opening with its chest a wide gap, through which the other horsemen, who were not at all desirous of being made responsible for broken heads and women and children injured, galloped at their hardest.

There was for a moment a fearful medley. We must do the lepero the justice to say that the effort surpassed his expectations, and that he literally writhed with laughter, so delighted was he with the success of his invention. He would probably

have laughed much longer, had not the horse of one of the peons, in the midst of his delight, given him a kick which hurled him to the ground, with cloven skull and chest trampled in.

Still, Clary was too thorough a horseman to feel afraid of being thrown; unable to master his horse entirely, and wishing to cause the least possible misfortune, he contented himself with turning it down a side street, the entrance to which was about a pistol shot off. He was lucky enough to succeed, and soon, thanks to the headlong speed of their horses, the four riders, after whom the mob had begun to run with yells of fury, found themselves safe from pursuit in a completely deserted street. So soon as the horses were no longer excited, they checked their speed, and soon fell into a moderate pace.

"¡Sangre de Cristo!" the adventurer exclaimed, so soon as he found time to breathe, "That was sharp work; I fancied we should not get out of it."

"Well!" said Diego López, "Your body and mine were within an ace of becoming knife sheaths. Oh!" he added, with a shudder of retrospective terror, "I can still feel the goose flesh."

"In truth, our position was for a moment extremely critical. Confound the incarnate demon who dared to burn my horse's nostrils. I only hope we have not smashed twenty of those wretches; I shall never forgive myself if we have."

"No," the peon answered, "thank heaven, they are more frightened than hurt. Luckily the house doors were open, and they were able to find shelter in them; two or three at the most were injured."

"Heaven grant that the mischief is no greater; but what are we to do now?"

"Proceed to the nearest mesón to get rid of our horses."

"I ask for nothing better; lead me there directly."

"Where are we, in the first place?" the peon said, as he looked round to discover his whereabouts. "¡Viva Dios!" he continued at the expiration of a moment, "We are in luck; there is a mesón a few yards from here; come on."

They started again, and soon reached the mesón Diego López had spoken of. Mexican hostelries are all alike, and when you know one, you know a thousand. Travellers who bring with them their beds, provisions, and forage for their horses are alone certain of being well served, and wanting for nothing; those who neglect these essential precautions run a great risk of lying on the bare ground and dying of hunger. The landlords only supply water and a roof, and it is useless to ask them for anything beyond that: not even a cigarette could be obtained for any money. It is true that Mexican landlords possess one precious quality, or, to speak more logically, four. They are thievish, insolent, obstinate as mules, and only lodge travellers who have the good luck to please them.

Fortunate it was that Diego López had long been acquainted with the landlord to whose house he led his comrades. Had it not been so, they would have run a great risk of not finding a shelter for the night. But, thanks to the peon's omnipotent intervention, the landlord consented to receive the travellers, and allowed them to lead their horses to the corral. When the horses had been unsaddled, and a good stock of alfalfa and maize had been laid before them, the Canadian wrapped himself up in his zarapé, and prepared to go out.

"Where are you going?" Diego asked him.

"You know very well," he answered; "I am going to the palace."

“You are quite determined, in spite of what I said to you?”

“More than ever.”

“In that case wait for me.”

“What to do?”

“Caray! To accompany you. How do you expect to find your way through a town you have entered today for the first time in your life?”

“That is true, and thank you.”

The peon, after giving his companions orders to await his return, and bowing courteously to the landlord, who deigned to return his salute with a protecting air, left the mesón, accompanied by the Canadian. To do full justice to Oliver Clary, we will allow that he was anything but reassured as to the probable results of the step he was about to take, and the words of the peon buzzed in his ears. He did not make the slightest mistake as to his position, and in spite of the assurances the count had given him, he was perfectly well aware that he ran a risk of being hung, if the man before whom he was about to appear were such as he had been represented.

But the adventurer was one of those men who never play fast and loose with what they consider a duty, and who, once they have formed a resolution, push on to the end, careless of what the consequences may be. Hence, when Diego López, who, since he had learned that his companion was a Catholic, felt sincerely attached to him, tried to return to what he had told him, and counsel himself once again to defer his visit until his master’s arrival, the hunter immediately bade him be silent, while perfectly understanding the correctness of his reasoning, and obliged him to talk about indifferent matters.

In spite of the ever increasing crowd in the street, the two men had no serious difficulty in making their way. It is true that they were men who created a certain amount of respect by their muscular appearance. Although they were obliged to advance very slowly, still in a comparatively short period they reached the Plaza Mayor, where, owing to its vast dimensions, they were enabled to walk more freely.

We have said that Leona Vicario was a large town, that its squares were spacious and its streets wide. The Plaza Mayor, the largest of all, had really a grand aspect. Two sides were lined with portales in the shape of cloisters, lined with shops where goods of every description were sold; of the two other sides, one was occupied by the cathedral, the other by the Cabildo, or Town Hall. In the centre of the square rose a monumental fountain, from which burst a clear and limpid stream of water. This fountain was surrounded by posts, fastened together by bronze chains of rather curious workmanship. Attracted by the fair, a multitude of peddlers had installed themselves in the square, vending all sorts of rubbish to the mob which pressed around them.

The two men who entered the square by the Calle de la Merced, were obliged to go to the further extremity in order to reach the cabildo, which was the temporary residence of the governor general of the intendancy. The cabildo was at this period (I do not know if it be still in existence) a building in a heavy and paltry style, built of stone, and having tall, straight, narrow windows, defended by heavy iron bars. Two lancers were walking with a most weary air in front of the principal gate, which was thrown wide open, and gave access to the interior by a flight of five steps.

“We have arrived,” said Diego López, as he stopped in front of the ugly building we have just described.

“At last!” the adventurer answered, as he looked curiously about him. “Caray! I was beginning to fancy that we should never reach our journey’s end.”

“Here we are; as you insisted on my leading you hither, I have done so.”

“And I thank you for doing it, gossip; now that you have honourably performed the far from agreeable task entrusted to you, leave me to my own business, and go and amuse yourself at the fair.”

“Hang me if I do anything of the sort,” the peon answered; “I am too sorrowful.”

“Nonsense! Why bother yourself so? All will finish, I feel convinced, much better than you have supposed.”

“That is possible, and I wish it may be so, but I confess that I do not expect it; I will not attempt to dissuade you anymore; a fool cannot be prevented from committing folly.”

“Thank you,” the adventurer said with a laugh. The other shook his head mournfully.

“I am going to watch for my master,” he continued; “he has great influence over the governor, and, if you are not hanged, I hope he will save you.”

“I hope too that I shall not be hanged.”

“*Quién sabe?*“ the peon muttered.

The Canadian, who was not particularly pleased by these ill-omened prognostics, hastened to take leave of his croaking companion. The latter looked after him until he disappeared in the cabildo, after exchanging a few words with the sentry; then he returned very thoughtfully to the mesón, muttering—

“I don’t care; I will not start till I know whether he is hung; it is surely the least I can do for a good Catholic like him.”

Chapter XVIII

The Interview.

Oliver Clary had entered the cabildo. From this moment he could not recoil, but must push on. The brave and careless Canadian took a last and sorrowful glance at the square in which a merry crowd, whose cries reached his ears, was assembled; he gave a sigh of regret, and hung his head on his chest for a moment; but almost immediately subduing this sadness, which was unworthy of him, he effaced every trace of emotion from his face, drew himself up proudly, and with a calm step entered a hall in which were standing ushers, easily to be recognized by the silver chain round their neck. So soon as he appeared, one of these ushers left the group, and walked up to him with a slow and solemn step.

“Who are you? What do you want?” he asked, impudently.

“Who I am?” he answered drily, “That does not concern you, my master. What I want? To speak to His Excellency Don Garcia López de Cárdenas, General commanding the Intendancy.”

“Oh, oh!” the usher said, as he looked impudently at the adventurer’s modest and more than careless dress; “You come like that, without the slightest ceremony, to demand an audience of his Excellency! Come, my good fellow, follow good advice and begone; the mezcal is disturbing your head; go to sleep, keep your feet warm, and do not trouble yourself any further with such nonsense.”

Not letting himself be disconcerted the least in the world by this tolerably coarse apostrophe, the adventurer looked for an instant at the speaker with such an expression that the latter turned his head away in embarrassment; then he seized him by a button of his coat.

“Listen to me, Señor Scamp,” he said, in a low and menacing voice; “in any other place but the one where we now are, the words you have just uttered would cost you dearly; but I despise you too much to be insulted by them. I pardon you, but only on one condition—that you will immediately announce to his Excellency, Señor Don Olivero Clary, and hand him at the same time this letter from his seigneury, the Count de Melgosa. Begone!”

He let go the usher’s button, and the latter, quite abashed, turned round two or three times, and, without saying a word, quitted the hall. The Canadian folded his arms on his chest, and waited for his return, while looking disdainfully at the other servants, who bent on him curious and almost startled glances. The usher’s absence was short. He appeared almost immediately, and throwing both doors wide open, he said, as he bowed ironically to the Canadian—

“His Excellency General Don Garcia López de Cárdenas requests Señor Don Olivero Clary to have the condescension to enter.”

The adventurer understood that the critical moment had arrived. Without displaying the slightest hesitation he entered the room, the doors of which had so suddenly been opened to him. But, when he had crossed the threshold, he felt that species of confusion and timidity which attacks the bravest men when they are violently thrown out of the medium in which they are accustomed to live. It is plain that the adventurer would have preferred finding himself face to face with a whole tribe of ferocious redskins, instead of entering this brilliantly gilded room, and a crowd of smart officers, whose eyes he felt, instinctively, were fixed upon him. A feverish flush covered his face, a cold perspiration beaded on his temples, and his heart beat as if it would burst from his chest. It was not fear he felt, it was not shame he experienced, nor was it weakness; but it was a mixture of all those feelings which filled his bosom, and made his temples beat.

Still, through a prodigious effort of his will, he succeeded not only in almost entirely concealing this strange emotion, but also so completely surmounted it that he was able to walk with a firm step toward the general, whom he saw standing at the other end of the saloon, in the midst of a group of field officers; and who, with his hand on his sword belt, bent on him a glance such as rattlesnakes are said to employ in fascinating their victims.

General de Cárdenas was a man not more than forty years of age, of tall and imposing stature; his face was harsh, dark, and cruel; he had a mocking lip and cynical glance; his low forehead, his eyes close to his long hooked nose, and his prominent cheekbones, veined with violet lines, gave him a certain resemblance to the feline race. He was dressed in the splendid uniform of a general, glistening with gold lace. At this moment he was biting his greyish moustache, and clanking

the wheels of his spurs on the ground—a sign by which his intimate friends knew that he was suffering from intense passion.

Don López de Cárdenas belonged to the highest Spanish nobility, and was a caballero cubierto; he had gone through, with some distinction, the whole of the Peninsular war; but, in spite of his thorough bravery, and his undeniable talent, he had let himself be led away by his evil nature to behave so ferociously to the enemy during the retreat of the French, that the King of Spain, who did not feel at all secure on a throne which he owed rather to chance than his personal ability, was constrained to dismiss him, as he did not dare to brave the public protest against favours he might have granted such a person. Mexico, which was then in full revolt, seemed to the king the only place to which he could send General de Cárdenas, without appearing to exile him.

The general, aware of the hatred with which he was regarded, was not sorry, temporarily, to quit the scene of his dark deeds. Another reason made him accept, almost joyfully, the post confided to him: his fortune, compromised during the long Peninsular war, was no longer adapted to the demands of his pride and the position to which his birth gave him the right of aspiring. He thought that it would be easy for him, in a country distracted by revolutions, to fish in troubled waters, and get together in a few years a fortune larger than the one he had lost. His beginning in New Mexico did not contradict his past: it was such as might be expected from a man like him, and gave the Mexicans, whom, for their misfortune, he was chosen to govern, an exact measure of the justice they had to expect from him. Hence, he had resided scarce a year in Mexico ere the people, who are rarely mistaken in their appreciation, branded him with the name of the Shark—a characteristic name, were there ever one; for, like the shark, he was rapacious and cruel. Only one person had a precarious and often contested influence over this man: it was Count de Melgosa, to whom he was attached by family ties.

It was face to face with this human-faced tiger that chance placed the adventurer. The situation was not at all pleasant; still he did not let himself be disconcerted. On coming within a few paces of the general he stopped, bowed respectfully and waited till the other should address him, in a posture which, without evidencing the slightest arrogance, showed that he was not the man to let himself be domineered over, and that he would bravely enter on the coming struggle. The general looked at him fixedly for a few moments, and then said, in a hoarse and menacing voice—

“Who are you, in the fiend’s name?” he asked.

“The letter I had the honour of delivering to your Excellency must have already informed you,” the Canadian answered.

“Do you fancy, scoundrel,” the general continued furiously, “that I have nothing better to do than read the absurd letters sent me from all sides?”

These few words, exchanged with the terrible officer, had given the adventurer time to resume all his calm and reckless bravery. He advanced a step, bowed profoundly, and said briefly, although his accent was respectful—

“I have the honour of drawing your Excellency’s attention to the fact that I am no scoundrel, but a man of honour; that I have come here, entrusted with an important mission; and that Count de Melgosa, whose reputation for loyalty

cannot be doubted, of his own accord became my guarantee to your Excellency. These are two reasons why I have a right to be treated with due consideration."

"You crow very loudly for a young cock; take care lest I should have a fancy to cut that comb which you raise so daringly," the general answered with a mocking smile.

"I do not know what your Excellency means. If you do not think proper to hear what I have to say, I venture to hope that you will allow me to retire."

After uttering these words in the same firm tone he had maintained since the beginning of this singular interview, the adventurer made a move to leave the hall.

"Stop, I order you," the general said suddenly; "you please me—so speak without fear. Who are you? Now don't tell any lies, for, perhaps, I know more about you than you suppose."

"I care very little what your Excellency may have learnt about me. I am an honest wood ranger—a Canadian by birth, and at the present moment colonel in the service of the Mexican patriots, commanded by Father Don Pelagio Sandoval."

"Ah, ah," the general muttered in the same mocking way; "go on, my lad, you have forgotten to tell me your name."

"I have several; my real one is Oliver Clary the redskins have christened me the Sumach, and the white men of the prairie generally call me 'Death in the face.'"

"Death in the face?" the general repeated with a grin, "Perhaps we shall soon see whether you really deserve that name."

"No man should praise himself; still, I believe that there are few dangers I am not capable of confronting," he answered resolutely.

"We shall see, we shall see, gossip. Now give me a report of the mission with which you have been entrusted by the honourable scoundrels of whom you have so foolishly made yourself the scapegoat."

The Canadian shrugged his shoulders.

"It is easy to threaten a defenceless man," he muttered in a voice loud enough to be heard by the general.

"Make haste," the latter continued.

Clary, without any hurry, felt in a pocket of the coat he wore under the zarapé, took out the despatches Father Sandoval had entrusted to him, and presented them to the general with a bow.

"The Mexican patriots," he said, "hope that your Excellency will deign to lay before the governor this humble petition, which contains the enunciation of their grievances, and the concessions they wish to obtain from his justice."

The general took the letter, crumpled it in his hand, and threw it on a table, without reading. There was a moment of mournful silence; the officers, who knew the general's violent and implacable character, awaited a tragical finale, and were especially alarmed by the unusual patience which their chief had displayed. The latter did not leave them long in doubt.

"Now, scoundrel," he continued in a rough voice, "you have said all, I think?"

"Yes, all, Excellency."

"And I have listened to the end without interruption?"

"Yes, Excellency."

"I am accustomed," he continued, "to be patient with people who are about to die."

“What!” the Canadian exclaimed, as he hurriedly fell back a pace.

“Did you suppose that, had it been otherwise, I should so long have listened to your impudent chatter; let him be strung up.”

“Take care what you are going to do,” the adventurer shouted, seizing the brace of pistols hidden beneath his zarapé, “I will defend my life to the last breath.”

“It is your right,” the general said with a laugh; “I will make use of it, be assured. Tomorrow you will have to account for my death to Count de Melgosa, whom you will have dishonoured by despising his safe conduct.”

These words, uttered somewhat haphazard by the Canadian, and rather in the hope of gaining time than for any other reason, produced greater effect than he had expected on his hearers. The latter, who, up to this moment, had seemed to take very slight interest in the scene, and had gone on talking together in a low voice, suddenly broke off; several of them walked up to the general, to whom they appeared to make representations, which he listened to with a haughty smile.

“I will remark to your Excellency,” said an old gray-bearded officer, “that Count de Melgosa is alcade mayor of the town, that his honour is dear to us all, and that it will, perhaps, be as well to await his arrival before hanging this poor man.”

“Nonsense, caballero,” the general answered ironically, “do you really believe in this safe conduct? Do you suppose that if the count really took an interest in this scoundrel he would not have accompanied him?”

“Your Excellency is doubtless in the right, but it is not long till tomorrow, and, perhaps, it will be as well to wait till then.”

“The more so,” another added, “because the count will, in all probability, arrive at an early hour.”

“Well, as you insist,” the general said, with visible repugnance, “be it as you wish. Throw down your pistols, villain,” he added, addressing the adventurer, who still stood on the defensive, “no hurt will be done you.”

“That is possible,” the latter said, shaking his head doubtfully; “but what has happened up to the present gives me no security for the future, and simple though I am, I am not quite so simple as to give up my weapons before I am certain that no trap is being laid for me.”

“You will remain in prison till the count’s arrival. If you have lied you will be hung; if not, you can go to the deuce. Are you satisfied?”

“Not excessively so. Still, I desire to prove to you of what an honest man is capable. I do not value life, and care precious little about supporting a good cause. There are my weapons,” he added, throwing them on the floor, “do you what you please with me; I am now defenceless, and I leave the shame of my death to you.”

The general himself seemed touched by this proof of confidence.

“¡Viva Dios!” he exclaimed, “you are really a brave fellow. We will try and save you from the gallows, if it be possible. Lead him away, but do him no harm.”

Several officers, who probably would not have ventured to approach the athletic Canadian while he still held his pistols, now stepped forward to seize him.

“No one must lay hands on me,” he said, “I have surrendered, and do not intend to resist: go on. I will follow.”

“He is right,” the general said with a laugh; “do not collar him, but leave him the use of his limbs. He is a thorough fighting cock; he has pledged his word and will keep it.”

“Thanks for that remark, Excellency,” the adventurer said; “I see that you are a connoisseur in the matter of men; go on, señores, I am ready to follow you.”

A party of officers at once surrounded him, and he quitted the room. At the door he perceived the usher, who looked at him impertinently, but he merely shrugged his shoulders in contempt. His escort, without leaving the cabildo, led him through a labyrinth of passages, which would have been puzzling to anyone unacquainted with the gloomy building.

“Where the deuce are you leading me, my masters?” the prisoner asked; “Does this palace also contain cells?”

“Cells and dungeons,” one of the officers replied; “it communicates with the Tribunal of the Holy Inquisition.”

“Come,” the Canadian said, with a laugh, “that is very convenient; in that way his Excellency the General can lay hands on his prisoners whenever he thinks proper.”

This sally made the officers laugh. A moment after they informed the prisoner that they had arrived. They halted, and one of them, who bore a large bunch of keys, selected one, and opened a low and apparently very substantial door; a puff of hot foetid air at once issued from the opening. The Canadian gave an involuntary shudder, but his guardians allowed him no time for reflection; they thrust him unceremoniously into the dungeon, bolted the door upon him, and the prisoner suddenly found himself in complete darkness.

“Well,” he muttered, so soon as he was alone, “I believe that Diego López was right, and that I acted like an ass in not following his advice.”

Unfortunately for him, this sensible reflection came too late.

Chapter XIX

The Dungeon.

However brave a man may be it is not without a feeling of instinctive terror that he finds himself suddenly cut off from society and shut up far from the company of other men, deprived of light and almost of the vital air necessary for the due play of the lungs. Darkness brings with it sad and despairing thoughts; and however powerfully a man’s character may be tempered the first moments he passes in a dungeon, whatever may be the cause that has led him there, are crushing; but, fortunately, hope is the last feeling that breaks down in a man’s heart. His thoughts, constantly directed to the future, promptly recall to his heart the courage which had deserted it, and in a few hours, growing accustomed to his dungeon, he shakes off the prostration which had seized upon him, regards the position calmly, and only dreams of the means by which to regain the liberty he has lost, for that is the sole object of his thoughts, desires, and efforts.

The adventurer experienced all the feelings we have attempted to describe; but as he was an energetic man, accustomed for many years to a life of struggle, mixed up with strange episodes, he did not allow himself to be overcome by the horror of

his situation, but, on the contrary, regarded it with considerable calmness and philosophy. When he had succeeded in restoring some order in his ideas, which had been upset by such rapidly succeeding events, he prepared to inspect his dungeon, which did not appear so dark as when he entered. In fact, on leaving the daylight his eyes had been at first blinded by the darkness, but they gradually grew accustomed to the obscurity, and now, though he could not see clearly, he was able to distinguish objects sufficiently to walk about without groping his way.

"Well," he said, talking to himself, after the fashion of men accustomed to live alone, "thanks to my good idea of not letting myself be touched, I have not been stripped of anything I possessed, and, spite of throwing the pistols on the ground, I could in case of need defend myself bravely with the weapons which I still possess. Let me reflect a little on what I had better do; and in the first place, according to the Indian fashion, I will smoke a pipe, for there is nothing like tobacco to clear the brain."

The Canadian's position was far from being desperate, and he saw this now that he was cool. In the matter of arms he still possessed a brace of pistols, and a knife with a long, sharp blade, a powder flask, a bullet bag, tobacco, and everything requisite for striking a light, if he wanted it. These different articles, hidden beneath the wide folds of his zarapé, which fell from his shoulders to his knees, had escaped the notice of his guards, who, moreover, acting in conformity with the orders the general had himself given, had not attempted to approach the prisoner.

As he had resolved, the Canadian seated himself as comfortably as he could, with his back against the wall, lit his pipe, and fell into a deep reverie. He smoked thus for a few minutes with all the beatitude of an Indian sachem, when he gave a start of surprise, almost of terror, on hearing a sarcastic voice say, two paces from him—

"Ah, ah! The paleface escaped the redskins, but his own brothers have seized him."

"Is there another prisoner in this dungeon?" the hunter asked.

"Yes," the stranger said, laconically.

"Who may you be, comrade; and why do you seem to rejoice so greatly at my misfortune?"

"Running Water is a chief," the voice answered. "His heart is glad when he sees a paleface suffer."

"Much good may it do you, chief; but I don't exactly see what profit you can derive from my sufferings."

"Running Water is an enemy of the Yoris."

"In the first place, redskin, let us settle facts; I am not a Yori, but a Canadian hunter, which I take some pride in informing you is by no means the same thing."

"Does my brother speak truly? Is he really a great heart of the east?"

"I fancy that you can recognize that fact from my way of speaking Spanish. But where the deuce are you stowed away, chief, for I cannot see you?"

"I am close to my brother, seated on his right hand."

The hunter looked carefully in the direction which the strange speaker indicated, and at length distinguished a human form crouched in a corner of the wall.

“On my word,” he continued, “I am not sorry to have someone to talk to, for time passes more quickly. Tell me, chief, what have you done to be here?”

“Are not the Indians hunted like wild beasts by the Yoris?” he answered, bitterly. “Is a pretext wanted to kill a redskin?”

“That is true, chief. You are right. It is unhappily but too true. And have you been a prisoner long?”

“Running Water fell into the trap he set for others. The sun was level with the lowest branches at the moment when his enemies threw him into this hole like an unclean beast.”

“That is a sad thing for you, chief; the more so, as in all probability you will only leave it to march to your death.”

“It will be welcome,” the Indian said in a hollow voice, “since Running Water’s vengeance has escaped him.”

There was a silence, during which the two men reflected.—

“If you succeeded in getting out of this hole, as you term it so correctly,” the Canadian presently continued, “and your liberty were restored you, would you be grateful to the man who did you so great a service?”

“My life would belong to him,” the Indian exclaimed eagerly; but quickly recovering himself, he added, “Why should I believe such words? All the palefaces have crooked tongues; moreover, is not my brother a prisoner also?”

“That is true; but I may possibly find means to aid your escape. I have my plan; although my detention ought to be short, I have but very slight confidence in the word of a man who, contrary to the law of nations, put me here; and, perhaps, instead of waiting for a problematical tomorrow, I shall attempt to escape with you tonight. I am not at all anxious to dance at the end of a rope.”

The greater part of this explanation was thrown away on the redskin, who did not understand it in spite of the great attention he paid to the hunter.

“Hence,” the latter continued, “if you will let me act in my own way, we shall probably go away together, the more so because I have no reason to owe you a grudge, as you never did me any harm.”

“Running Water is a chief,” the redskin replied emphatically; “he will not lie to save his life.”

“Good. I know the principles of you Indians, and that when you believe yourself at death’s door you seem to forget your system of dissimulation, so explain yourself. I shall put faith in your words whatever you may say.”

“Let my brother listen. He was attacked two nights ago by the redskins.”

“True, chief. It would be droll had you been among the Indians who attacked us.”

“Running Water was there, but was ignorant of my brother’s presence. He only attacked the Yoris.”

“What you say seems to me tolerably probable. Still, White Crow came to my camp and I had a rather long interview with him.”

“My brother’s words are true, but at that time the attack was resolved on.”

“In that case, I have nothing more to say. It was all right, for war has its laws. Still, listen to me, chief, your words have caused me to reflect.”

“Ah!” the Indian said bitterly, “Has the paleface changed his opinion now?”

“Not positively, chief. Still, I confess frankly to you that, after the avowal you have made, I feel a certain repulsion to joining my fortunes to yours.”

“What do the palefaces care for an Indian’s life? He is not a man.”

“You wrong me, chief; but I know that misfortune makes men unjust, and I forgive you.”

“My brother is generous,” the chief remarked ironically.

“More so than you imagine; if you will be pleased to listen without interruption you shall have a proof of it.”

“My brother can speak, my ears are open.”

“I repeat that for certain present reasons I prefer remaining here, and running the risk of what may happen to trying to escape with you; but, for all that, I will not desert you, and, on the contrary, give you the means to attempt a flight.”

“Good, what are the means?”

The Canadian drew his knife from the sheath.

“It is probable,” he continued, “that a gaoler will soon come to bring us food, for I do not suppose that they intend us to die of hunger. Take this knife; notice, by the by, that it is a most valuable weapon for a prisoner, and that I give up mine for your sake. When the man to whom I refer appears, you will see what you have to do. Still, avoid killing him if you can, for we must never kill even an enemy unnecessarily.”

The Indian seized the knife which the Canadian handed him, brandished it round his head with a laugh of savage joy, and then passed it through his belt.

“Thanks, paleface,” he said with an accent of profound gratitude. “You have done more for me than I ever could have expected from a man of your colour. To you I shall owe my escape from death, liberty, and the accomplishment of the vengeance I have so long been pursuing. My life belongs to you, henceforth you are the master of it. Remember that you have a brother among the Comanches; the redskins never forget an insult, and always retain the memory of a kindness. Now, I am certain that you are not a Yori. May the Wacondah protect and be ever favourable to you. You have caused my heart a sensation of happiness such as it has not felt for many years.”

After uttering these words with all the emphasis natural to his race, the Indian chief crouched down facing the door, and awaited with feverish impatience the arrival of the gaoler. The Canadian laughed inwardly at the trick he was about to play the general. In his opinion, what he had done was quite fair; he had no consideration to maintain for individuals who had disregarded the law of nations in their treatment of him, and after threatening to hang him, cast him like a dog into a filthy dungeon. Besides, he had for the Indians generally that instinctive pity which strong men feel for those whom they believe intellectually inferior to them. And then, was not the Indian a prisoner like himself? He, therefore, regarded him as an ally, and in favouring his flight, he secured himself a valuable friend for the future in the event of his falling into the hands of the redskins.

The two men remained silent, for they had nothing more to say to each other. Several hours elapsed in this way. The redskin, calm, cold, and motionless, was watching for the arrival of the gaoler, as the jaguar of his forests does the prey that nourishes it, and the hunter, careless of what was going on around him, had wrapped himself in his zarapé, and was leaning half asleep against the wall.

Probably, in the confusion of the festival, the man ordered to supply the prisoners with food let the hour pass, for the sun had long set, although the denizens of the dungeon could not perceive the fact, and nothing led to the supposition that they would be fed.

"The deuce," the Canadian at length said, shaking himself ill-temperedly, "do these gabachos of Spaniards intend to keep us without supper? I am dying of hunger, caray! And you, chief, do you not feel the want of some food, were it only a lump of hard bread?"

"The redskins are not greedy squaws. They can endure hunger without complaining."

"All that is very fine, but I am not an Indian, and when I have nothing to eat, deuce take me if I do not become ferocious."

"Silence," the Indian said as he listened attentively, "my brother will soon eat. I hear footsteps approaching."

The adventurer held his tongue. For a moment he forgot his hunger to witness the scene that was about to take place. A considerable period of time elapsed ere the noise which had struck the practised ear of the savage was perceptible to the hunter. At length he heard the sound of footsteps, which grew louder and louder. A key turned in the lock, the bolts were drawn, the door swung back on its rusty hinges, and a man entered, holding a lantern in one hand and a basket in the other.

At the moment when this individual appeared in the doorway, the Indian leapt on him with a tiger's bound, threw him down and seized him by the throat; before the poor fellow so unexpectedly attacked had time to utter a cry or make the slightest effort in his defence, he was bound and gagged. The Comanche, leaping over his body, ran down the passage and disappeared with extraordinary rapidity. All this took place so hurriedly, that the hunter guessed rather than saw what had occurred. The gaoler still lay motionless, with half his body inside, the other half outside, the dungeon. When the Indian had disappeared, the hunter rose and went up to the gaoler.

"What the deuce are you doing there?" he said, as he bent over him and freed him with studied slowness from the bonds and the gag which the chief had driven in so conscientiously that he almost choked his man. When the gaoler was liberated, and put on his legs again by his prisoner, he looked around him in alarm, breathed forcibly two or three times, and then, uttering an exclamation of rage, he dashed down the passage with shouts and oaths, forgetting in his hurry to lock the cell door.

"Seek him," the hunter muttered with a cunning look, "you will be very clever if you catch him. I know not what will come of all this; but the general will be furious, and that is the main point."

And, without dreaming of imitating the chief's example, he picked up the lantern, which by a singular chance had not been extinguished, took the basket, returned to the cell, sat down on the ground with the light in front of him, and began eating with philosophic ease, growling from time to time at the parsimony of the Spaniards, who had hardly given him enough to appease his outrageous hunger. The Canadian was in the thick of this agreeable operation, when he suddenly heard in the passage a tremendous tumult of shouts and hurried

footsteps, mingled with the clang of arms. A few minutes after, twenty officers and soldiers dashed like a whirlwind into the dungeon, among them being the gaoler, who alone gesticulated and shouted more than all the rest. On seeing the hunter quietly engaged in eating, they stopped in amazement, so convinced were they that he would have escaped too. When the agitation and tumult were slightly appeased, and it became possible to hear anything, one of the officers at length addressed the hunter.

"What," he asked him, "have you not gone?"

"I?" he replied, looking up stupidly, "Why should I do so, as I shall be free tomorrow?"

"You helped your companion's flight," the gaoler said, shaking his fist at him.

"You are an idiot, my friend; the man could not be my companion, as he is an Indian," he said, with the greatest calmness.

This remark so agreed with the ideas of his hearers, who, in their Castilian pride, did not admit that an Indian was a man like another, that the conversation broke off abruptly here; the more so, because nobody could suppose that a man who had favoured the flight of another, would not have escaped himself. Hence, instead of reproaching the hunter, the Spaniards apologized to him, and went away, astonished at the philosophy of this man, who, when an opportunity for freedom presented itself, preferred remaining a prisoner. When the door closed on him again, the Canadian burst into an Homeric laugh, and made his arrangements to pass the night in the least discomfort possible.

Chapter XX

Sotavento Makes a Move.

We will now go back a little way, and return to one of our characters, whose part has hitherto been secondary, but whom events suddenly place almost in the first rank. In one of the preceding chapters we recounted how Sotavento, concealed in a closet, overheard Count de Melgosa's conversation with Don Aníbal, and then with Father Pelagio Sandoval. When these three gentlemen had left the room, the worthy majordomo left his hiding place, revolving in his brain projects whose result we shall soon witness.

Sotavento enjoyed his master's entire confidence. His employment as majordomo frequently compelled his absence from the house at all hours of the day and night, hence, instead of hiding his departure, it was an easy matter for him to leave the hacienda openly, and he often remained absent for days, while nobody dreamed of asking him to account for his conduct.

At the haciendas, the majordomo is generally entrusted with the inspection of the capatases and caporales, who govern the peons guarding the horses and cattle on the vast dependencies of the estate; we say vast, because they frequently extend for a radius of five and twenty or thirty leagues round the hacienda. This surveillance is the more necessary because the vaqueros, left almost entirely to

themselves, do not scruple to kill the oxen for the sake of selling the hides, or allow travellers to carry off the best horses in the manada for a trifling sum; all which, as may be supposed, is highly prejudicial to the interests of the owner.

Sotavento, after leaving the closet, went to the corral, lassoed his horse, saddled and led it into the patio. At the moment when he was about leaving the hacienda, he found himself face to face with his master, who, after leading his guest to the apartment prepared for him, was returning to take part in the conference of the conspirators.

"Are you going out, Sotavento?"

"Yes, mi amo," the latter answered; "I was informed this morning that several tigers have been seen in the Bajio de los Pinos, and that they have already caused great ravages among the ganado. I am going myself to see that the tigreros are about, and why they have not yet freed the country from these ferocious brutes, which are the more formidable because shearing time and the matanza del ganado are close at hand."

"That is true. I cannot understand the negligence of our tigreros, and yet, I think, they are paid handsomely for each jaguar skin?"

"Fifteen piastres, Excellency."

"Pray, Sotavento, do not spare the rascals, but treat them as they deserve. It is really scandalous that, being paid so well, they display such negligence in the performance of their duty."

"Your Excellency can trust to me."

"I know, my friend," the hacendero answered kindly, "how thoroughly you are devoted to me. When do you intend to return, for we shall want you here?"

"I know that, Excellency, and hence I shall make haste. Still, as I must pass by the Cerro Azul, on my homeward route, to have a look at the large wood felling you have ordered, I cannot be back till tomorrow night, or the next morning at the latest."

"Well, my friend, act for the best. I trust entirely to you."

Sotavento bowed to his master, who entered the house, and immediately quitted the hacienda. The day was nearly spent, the declining sun only emitted oblique rays, which were almost devoid of heat. The majordomo followed for some time and at a moderate pace the route to the Bajio de los Pinos, but when the hacienda had disappeared behind a thick belt of trees, and the horseman no longer feared being watched by any curious person who had remained on the walls to notice his movements, he stopped, looked suspiciously around to make sure that he was really alone, bent over his horse's neck to catch the slightest sound that might strike his ear, and remained motionless for several minutes.

It is especially in the great American forests that our European proverb, with a slight modification, is perfectly applicable. We may say that the trees have ears, and the leaves eyes. The wood rangers are well aware of this; hence, unless they are at an entirely open spot, they generally speak low in monosyllables, or substitute signs for language. As for the mode of travelling in the forests, we have described it too often to require to dwell on it here.

This time Sotavento was alone. He saw nothing suspicious, and no extraordinary sound reached his ear. We purposely employ the expression "extraordinary sound," because, to a man accustomed to a forest life, all sounds

have a meaning which he thoroughly knows, and about which he is never mistaken. Thus he can recognize the sighing of the wind among the leaves, the motion of the branch touched by a bird, the murmur of invisible water over pebbles, the rustling of a bush, or the undulation of the tall grass owing to the passage of wild beast; the buzzing of the mosquitoes over a pool, as well as many other sounds too numerous to mention here, such as the rolling of a stone detached from a mountain, or the footstep of a man on the dry leaves. This science, which it is difficult to learn thoroughly, requires sustained attention, lengthened experience, and, above all, well-tried patience, qualities only possessed by the redskins and white men who have given up civilized life to lead a desert existence.

The majordomo, certain that he had no espionage to dread, drew himself up, settled down on his saddle, and whispered to his horse the one word “Santiago,” which, in the Spanish language, serves to excite a steed. He started at full speed, holding slightly to his right and insensibly approaching the river, whose yellow waters ran a short distance off between two low and sandy banks. On reaching the bank, the majordomo rode along it for two or three leagues, examining the ground with the most scrupulous attention, and apparently seeking some sign which he was unable to discover. At length he halted, and, after a momentary hesitation, entered the river and crossed it obliquely, having the water only up to his horse’s chest in the deepest part. What the majordomo so long sought, and at length found, was a ford. Under other circumstances it is probable that Sotavento would not have hesitated to make his horse swim the river, but this time he had a long distance to go, and wished to save the animal’s strength.

So soon as he reached the opposite bank, he started again at a gallop, continuing to follow the river, and rapidly proceeding toward a forest which stood out on the horizon. On crossing the river, Sotavento had entered the territory of the independent Indians, which fact, however, did not appear at all to trouble him; on the contrary, his demeanour became bolder, and his eye was lit up with a savage gleam. The sun disappeared in a gold and purple mist at the moment when Sotavento reached the forest, which he entered without checking his horse’s pace.

At length, after a ride which went on thus at a tremendous pace for at least four hours, the majordomo reached the foot of a rock covered with lichen and green moss, which stood alone in the centre of a considerable clearing, probably made by the redskins during their hunting excursions, in order to procure game more rapidly. This burning must have been recent, for the earth retained a black hue, and traces of fire were still visible all around.

Sotavento halted. Nothing checked the view for three or four leagues round, but all was bare and gloomy. Still the majordomo had no intention of stopping at this place, for, after allowing his horse to breathe for ten minutes, he whistled to it and started again at a gallop. This time he did not ride for more than three hours, but his horse was worn out and stumbled at every step. It was covered with perspiration, a thick steam escaped from its nostrils which dilated convulsively, and it panted fearfully. The majordomo was as cool and calm as when he left the hacienda. This man was of iron; neither fatigue nor heat had any power over him. For about an hour he had been riding in the darkness along scarcely traced paths, on which he guided himself as easily as if walking about the streets of a town in

broad daylight. He at last reached a spacious clearing, where he halted and dismounted. His horse was scarce able to stand on its trembling limbs. The majordomo gave it a glance of pity.

"Poor Negro!" he muttered, as he patted it gently, "You are almost foundered."

He took off the bridle and raised the stirrups, but, before he left the horse at liberty to seek its forage, he carefully rubbed it down, and then gave it a gentle blow, saying—

"Go and rest, my good beast."

The animal rubbed its intelligent head against its master's shoulder, gave a glad neigh, and bounded off. The majordomo remained pensive for a moment, then crossing the clearing, he entered the forest with a rapid step, but at the same time so light that the most practised ear could not have caught the sound he produced in treading the ground. After walking in this way for a few minutes, the majordomo entered a thicket, and raising two fingers of each hand to his mouth, he thrice imitated the cry of the owl with such perfection, that the birds perched above his head fled away in terror. Almost immediately a similar cry answered him a short distance off. Sotavento, without waiting any longer, quitted the thicket that sheltered him. A man rose before him. This man, as far as was possible to distinguish in the darkness, was an Indian. Sotavento was not at all surprised by this sudden apparition, which he probably expected. The Indian stood gloomy, and silent before him.

"Does not my brother bid me welcome?" Sotavento said to him in the Comanche dialect.

"The Stag knows," the Indian answered, "that his brothers are delighted to see him. Why, then say useless things?"

"Where is the tribe encamped at this moment?"

"Does not my brother see the yellow leaves falling? The Red Buffaloes have withdrawn to their winter village."

"I thought so; that is why I pushed on here, instead of halting at the burnt clearing."

"My brother acted wisely."

"Are not the chiefs upon an expedition?"

"No, all the warriors and braves are assembled at the village."

"Good."

"Will not my brother accompany me to the chiefs?"

"I will follow my brother."

"The Stag can come then."

Without waiting for the majordomo's answer, the Indian turned away, and began walking at such a pace that any man but the one who accompanied him would doubtless have had great difficulty in keeping up with him. Sotavento soon saw the village watch fires gleaming through the trees, and a few minutes later found himself with his guide among the irregular rows of huts. On seeing him, the women and children flocked up to him with cries of joy, and gave him unequivocal signs of sincere friendship. The majordomo briefly returned the congratulations offered him, and, followed by the crowd, proceeded to the council lodge, where the chiefs were still assembled, in spite of the lateness of the hour.

On setting foot in the village, Sotavento, so to speak, underwent a complete metamorphosis, all in him suddenly changed; and had it not been for his clothing, nobody would have taken him for a Mexican. He walked up to the entrance of the council lodge, where he stood respectfully waiting till he was addressed. The chiefs were smoking, gravely seated round a fire, whose flame played on their faces, and lit them up with fantastic reflections. The Indian who had acted as guide to the majordomo entered the lodge, and said a few words in a low voice.

"The Stag is the cherished son of the tribe," a grave voice replied; "the omnipotent Wacondah protects him; his presence among us is always hailed with joy. We heard the cries of the squaws and children who bade him welcome. Let him take the seat reserved for him at the council fire. What do my brothers, the sachems, say?"

The other chiefs bowed their heads in the affirmative, and Sotavento walked in, sat down, crossed his arms on his chest, and waited silently till his turn arrived to take part in the discussion.

"My brother White Crow will proceed," the chief who had already spoken said.

"Yes," White Crow said, doubtless concluding a speech which had been interrupted by Sotavento's arrival, "the information obtained by our hunters is positive; the Pawnee Loups have made a great expedition, and carried off many horses. We are in want of horses. The Pawnees are encamped two suns' distance at the most from our village; why should we not go and take from them the horses we require? I have spoken; let my brothers reflect."

Another chief said—

"Our young men require to be trained; few warriors of our tribe are reported good horse thieves. White Crow's medicine is good; his expeditions always succeed. Let him choose among our young men those whom he considers worthy to accompany him, and carry off the horses of the Pawnees, which we shall soon need for our great buffalo hunts. I have spoken."

"What is the opinion of the chiefs?" the sachem continued.

"Let Running Water give his first," White Crow said, "for he is the oldest sachem of the tribe."

Running Water rose.

"Be it so," he said, "I will speak. The news brought by White Crow is good; we really want horses for our great winter hunts. At any other moment I should have said, go and seize the Pawnee horses; ten minutes ago I should have expressed that opinion, but now I cannot possibly do so. My brothers do not reflect that my son, the Stag, has just arrived at the village; the distance is great from the stone lodge of the white men to the villages of the Red Buffaloes; my son would not undertake so long a journey without serious motives. Let us suspend our discussion for a few moments; defer the decision as to the advisability of the projected expedition; smoke the grand sacred calumet filled with moriche, and listen to the words of my son. His tongue is not forked, and, perhaps, he has important news to give us. I have spoken."

The chiefs bowed in silence, and White Crow, answering for all, said that the sachem's advice was good, and that, before coming to a decision about the expedition against the Pawnees, the council would listen to the news which the Stag doubtless had to communicate. The great sacred calumet was then, brought

in with all the usual ceremonies on such occasions; it was filled with sacred tobacco, and lit by the help of a medicine rod. When it had gone the round, Running Water turned to Sotavento—

"The ears of the chiefs of the tribe are open," he said to him; "the Stag can speak."

Chapter XXI

The Council of the Red Buffaloes.

The night was dark; there was not a star in the heavens; at lengthened intervals; however, the moon emerged from behind the clouds, and shed for a few minutes a trembling and uncertain light, which, when it disappeared, rendered the darkness more dense; the wind whistled mournfully through the denuded trees, which clashed together with dull moanings, mingling their sad harmony with the ill-omened roars of the wild beasts, which prowled starving about the forest. The entrance of the lodge in which the chiefs were assembled in council glistened in the darkness like the mouth of the infernal regions. With the exception of the sachems, everybody was asleep in the village; the very dogs had ceased their sharp barking, and were lying by the half extinguished fires, which, smouldering beneath the ashes, spread no light.

Sotavento, or the Stag, by whichever name the reader likes to call him, had risen, and all the chiefs fixed on him eyes displaying the liveliest curiosity; in fact, as Running Water had remarked, the majordomo must have most important news to communicate to the chiefs of his nation, to have thus suddenly undertaken so long and dangerous a ride.

"Sachems and braves of the invincible tribe of Red Buffalo," he said, "it is only when I am able to see you that the skin which covers my heart is suddenly removed, and the words which issues from my chest are really inspired by the Wacondah. To obey the orders of the sages of my nation, I consented with regret to leave the callis of my fathers, and pretend to adopt the customs of the cowardly palefaces whose ruin we have sworn. Very often, this burthen, too heavy for my weak shoulders, has nearly crushed me; very often I have felt my courage on the point of abandoning me in this incessant struggle and the false existence which has become mine. But you ordered, sachems, and I was obliged to bow my head and obey; I had ever present before my mind the numberless insults and horrible sufferings which our tyrants had made us endure. This thought constantly burning in my heart like a sharp arrow, by reviving my hatred, gave me the necessary strength to accomplish my heavy task. I believe, fathers and sachems of my nation, that I have never up to the present incurred reproaches from you on account of lukewarmness or negligence."

The chiefs bowed in evidence of their satisfaction, and Running Water replied—

"What does my son say? Why does he thus praise himself," he remarked in a sonorous voice, "for having done his duty? Does he not know that every man was

placed in this world by the Wacondah to fulfil an often rough and painful task? Happy those whose task is the most arduous! The Wacondah loves them and regards them with a favourable eye, and for them he reserves after death the most productive territory in the happy hunting grounds. Of what does my son complain? In devoting him to live among the palefaces, I made him the saviour of my people and the avenger of their insults. All the braves, all the warriors of my tribe envy his lot; he alone complains like a cowardly Yori. He finds the task which has been allotted to him too heavy; be it so, let him retire, let him give up the post of honour which the chiefs consented to confide to him, for the sake of us; let him return to the desert, but he must shun the calli of his fathers; he will not find brothers, relatives, or friends in his country; all will reject him and compel him to take refuge among the wild beasts that are less cruel and cowardly than he."

The majordomo listened to this severe reprimand with drooping head, but without daring to interrupt it. When the old chief ceased, he drew himself up—

"My father," he replied in a humble voice, with an accent of the greatest deference, "your words are severe; they fall upon my heart like red-hot coals. I do not deserve these reproaches; the Wacondah is my witness that my thoughts have ever been with my tribe, and that avenging the insults offered you has been the sole object for which I have striven. My abode among the palefaces has, perhaps, unconsciously, given my words a strange turn that has led you into error. Be not wroth with me, father, for I am worthy of your esteem, if not of your praise. If I complained it was because my heart suffers at being absent from you, and that I long for the moment when I shall be allowed to throw far from me this borrowed garb, to resume the free, glorious, independent life of the Comanches, that noble nation, without an equal on the prairie, beloved by the Wacondah, respected by all the redskins, and feared by the ferocious palefaces, who have never succeeded in bowing them beneath the shameful yoke which they have imposed on all the other Indians."

The old chief shook his head several times, while a smile of undefinable meaning played round the corners of his thin lips.

"My son has learned much among the palefaces," he said; "his mind has opened to thoughts strange to his countrymen; his horizon has expanded and his tongue is gilded. May the Wacondah grant that it has not become forked, and that his heart has remained firm. I believe his words, and am glad to think that he does not deceive the fathers of his tribe. He can forget any severity in my words; the friendship I bear him, and the fear I have of seeing him break his word, could alone have made me utter them. Now, let my son explain to us, without further delay, the motive for his coming among us. The owl has already hooted twice, and we must be in a position before sunrise to take those measures which the news he brings us will doubtless necessitate."

The majordomo bowed respectfully, and at once continued—

"Thanks, father, for the justice you do me; your hopes shall not be deceived. Now, without further preface, this is my news, which I think will be agreeable to you, as it will give you the means to seize one of your most obstinate foes. The man whom the Yoris call Count de Melgosa is at this moment at the hacienda with an escort composed of but *sixtamarindos*. Tomorrow at sunrise he will set out to

return to his house; nothing will be easier than for you to seize him as he passes through the canyon, if your arrangements are properly made."

"Ah!" said the sachem, "That is really excellent news, and we will be careful to follow your advice, my son; but have you nothing else to tell us?"

"Yes, this: the Yoris are preparing once again to dig up the hatchet against their masters, the Gachupinos. A great meeting of all the Yori chiefs has taken place at the Hacienda del Barrio, and war is resolved."

"Good," the chief answered; "perhaps, this time, the Wacondah will deliver our enemies to us."

"I believe I hold the power of soon delivering them to you," the Stag said in a hollow voice.

"Speak, son of my best beloved *Ciuatl!*" the chief exclaimed with a vivacity unusual in an Indian; "Your words fall on my heart like a refreshing dew; they rejoice me, and restore me the hope of vengeance."

"I cannot explain myself, father; my plan is one of those which only the man who has conceived them can carry out by keeping in his heart the secret of the means he intends to employ, but also the object he purposes to attain. Who knows whether the bird flying over our head may not go and reveal our secrets to the enemy? To you, but to you alone, my father, I will reveal so much of my plans as I can; but the chiefs of my nation must place the most entire confidence in me, and let me act as I please; if not, it will be impossible for me to succeed. I say that the chiefs of the nation must place full and entire confidence in me, because I require their aid in carrying out the plan I have formed. That is to say, I ask for the command of twenty of our most renowned warriors, who will obey me solely, and that, perhaps, for a whole moon. I have spoken, let my fathers reflect and take those measures with which their wisdom inspires them."

After uttering these words, the majordomo sat down, folded his arms on his chest, and fell into profound thought, remaining, apparently at least, a complete stranger to what was said round him, although, after the request he had made of the council, he was personally interested in the discussion which took place. Like all Indian debates the present one was calm and grave, each orator speaking in his turn and developing his ideas, without fearing the interruption so common and so offensive among ourselves. Nearly three hours were spent ere all had spoken, and opinions seemed agreed.

"These are the resolutions of the council," Running Water said as he rose; "let my brothers open their ears, for a chief is about to speak."

All eyes were immediately turned to the old Sachem; the Stag himself seemed to wake up, for he raised his head and listened to the chief's words with the deepest attention. Although the majordomo's face was impassive, and all his features retained the rigidity of Florentine bronze, a fearful storm was raging in his heart; for on what he was about to hear depended the success of a plan he had formed for a long time as the realization of his dearest hopes.

"The chiefs and sachems assembled round the council fire in the medicine lodge, after hearing the important news brought by the Stag, one of their most renowned chiefs, and after thoroughly deliberating on this news, have formed the following resolutions, which will be executed with the aid of the Wacondah, who alone is powerful, and without whose protection nothing is possible."

“The chiefs thank the Stag for the tried devotion he has not ceased to prove to the tribe in the dangerous post intrusted to him. In order to testify to the Stag the unbounded confidence which they have in his character, they grant his request under the sole stipulation that he will reveal to his father, Running Water, all he possibly can without injuring the success of the expedition he is undertaking. The Stag will choose twenty braves of his tribe, and assume their command, to lead them wherever he thinks proper, no one having the right to make any observation to him. He will have over these braves all the prerogatives of the most renowned chiefs of the tribe; this command, whose duration is unlimited by the council, will only cease at the Stag’s desire. The sachems have thus decided, in order to give Running Water and his son a proof of their sincere friendship and the gratitude they feel for all the services which these two chiefs have rendered them.”

“Running Water and White Crow will place themselves at the head of detachments of warriors they consider numerous enough to seize the Yori chief called Count de Melgosa, and so soon as that implacable enemy of our tribe is in their hands, they will lead him to our winter village, in order that the council of the nation may treat him as they think proper for the general welfare. I have spoken: have I said well, powerful men?”

All the chiefs bowed, merely uttering one word, *Aschest* (it is well), the formula which generally closes the councils of the sachems.

At this moment the darkness began to be dispelled, and though the sun had not yet risen above the horizon, large bands of russet which tinged the sky, and covered it with extreme rapidity, proved that day would soon break. The Stag rose, bowed respectfully to the members of the council, and left the lodge. Hastily crossing the village square, on which some squaws were already to be seen, he entered the calli of his father, Running Water, and let the frame of intertwined lianas, lined with a buffalo hide, which served as a door, fall behind him. A few moments after and the Stag reappeared.

Assuredly, in this Indian, armed and painted for war, no one would have recognized Sotavento, the majordomo, the man in whom Don Aníbal de Saldibar placed such unbounded confidence, and on whose devotion he thought he had such reasons to count. The Stag had entirely doffed his European clothing, and put on the grand war dress of the Comanche chiefs. In his left hand he held a long, sharp pointed javelin, and his gun in his right. He went up to the ark of the first man, a species of enclosure of planks, of a conical shape, situated in the centre of the square, before which stood a sumach, whose faded leaves were already beginning to fall.

After walking thrice round the sumach the chief stopped, bowed twice to the rising sun, and balancing his javelin, while he raised his gun above his head, he commenced a characteristic dance round the tree, accompanied by a song, of which he doubtless improvised the words, and whose slow and monotonous rhythm marked the measure of the dance. At the end of each strophe the Stag struck the tree with his javelin without stopping.

Several Indians had left their callis and assembled round the chief, who continued his song. In a moment an Indian started after him, dancing and singing behind him. After him came another and then another, so that, at the end of half an hour, twenty warriors were dancing behind the Stag, and repeating after him

the words he continued to improvise. As each Indian faced the circle of dancers, a woman left the group of spectators, and went to fetch his weapons from the calli. In the meanwhile the dance, which had begun to a slow and monotonous rhythm, had grown animated. The Indians, bathed in perspiration, twirled round the tree, to which they dealt repeated blows, while uttering hoarse, inarticulate cries, and brandishing their weapons furiously. The squaws and children, collected round the braves, mingled their cries and yells with theirs, and added by their imprecations and disorderly gestures to the sinister horror of this scene, to which was imparted all the savage majesty of the Indian war dance.

The tree, struck by the axes, sagaies, knives, and lances of the Indians, lost its branches, and was completely stripped of its bark, which was piled on the ground; but the ardour of the warriors, far from being checked, seemed, on the contrary, momentarily to increase. Suddenly the Stag gave a signal. All halted, as if by magic, and a deep silence instantaneously succeeded the deafening concert performed by all these men who had reached a paroxysm of fury. The chief gazed with satisfaction at the young, powerful, and haughty men who surrounded him.

"Will twenty warriors follow the Stag on the war trail?" he asked.

"Yes, they will follow him!" the redskins replied unanimously.

"Good; they are great braves! The Stag knows them. The warriors will put on their war moccasins, take their weapons, and choose their best horses. When the sun is level with the topmost branches of the trees, the Stag will be at the foot of the ark of the first man, mounted and waiting for his brothers. Now the Comanche squaws will proceed to cut down the sumach; no trace of the enemies of the Red Buffaloes must remain. The warriors kill their foes, but women torture them. I have spoken."

The warriors dispersed. The squaws, following the permission granted them, at once rushed yelling on the unhappy tree, the last fragments of which disappeared within ten minutes beneath the blows of these savage Megæras. The Stag returned to his father's lodge, where the latter soon joined him. They had a confidential conversation together, which lasted more than two hours, at the end of which Running Water retired, apparently much satisfied with the explanation his son had given him. At the hour appointed by the Stag to depart, all the warriors were drawn up in front of the ark of the first man, impatient to set out and begin their mysterious expedition.

Chapter XXII

The War Trail.

The principal sachems of the tribe, collected at the entrance of the medicine lodge, were present at the departure of the warriors. Two bands, each composed of twenty braves, were drawn up side by side. At the head of the first stood the Stag, haughtily bestriding his horse, which was painted and accoutred in the Comanche fashion, so that it was quite as difficult to recognize as its rider. An ill-restrained

delight glistened in the chief's fierce eyes. At the head of the second troop, composed of more aged and calm warriors, were Running Water and White Crow.

The women, children, and warriors who were to remain at home crowded the square. A deep silence, apparently caused by the expectation of an important event, prevailed among them. At the end of an instant the sachems assembled before the medicine lodge moved on one side, and made way for a man dressed in garments of strange shape, in which the most startling and discordant colours were brought together. This man was the sorcerer, or medicine man, of the tribe.

His step was imposing and haughty; his expressive face displayed enthusiasm and faith. In one hand he held a clumsy vessel, in which a tuft of wormwood was soaking; in the other he brandished a scalping knife. On reaching the centre of the square he stopped at an equal distance from the two troops, in front of a fire lighted expressly for the occasion. He stood for a moment motionless, with his head drooping on his chest, murmuring a few words in a low and indistinct voice; then he took out the wormwood, and sprinkled the four cardinal points, exclaiming, as he did so—

"Wacondah! Thou seest these warriors; be favourable to them, blind their enemies, and remove any snares from their path!"

After uttering these words, he deposited the vessel on the ground, felt in the parchment bag that hung by his side, and drew out a handful of moriche, which he dropped slowly into the fire, saying—

"Receive this offering, Wacondah! And let us know thy designs."

And, still continuing to drop the tobacco, he began dancing round the fire, brandishing his knife, and making strange contortions and grimaces. By degrees, his features altered, a white foam issued from the corners of his mouth, his hair stood on end, his eyes seemed ready to spring from their sockets, and he shouted in a hoarse and panting voice—

"I see them! I see them!"

"What does my father see?" the Stag asked, with ill-disguised anxiety; for, in spite of his Mexican education, or, perhaps, owing to it, he was like all his countrymen, and, perhaps, more than they, accessible to superstitious terrors.

"I see them," the sorcerer continued; "the combat is obstinate; the women roll on the ground; they fall into the power of my sons; they rise again. Why these signs? What mean these demonstrations? Oh, I hear them!"

"What does my father hear?" the chief asked.

"I hear cries, but the Comanches are implacable. Kill, kill, kill, I say. Why do you hesitate?" All at once he burst into a convulsive laugh, "Ah, ah, ah! Yes, that is better," he said, with a shriek, "in that way the vengeance will be more perfect."

In spite of themselves, the hearers felt terrified by this Satanic laugh, which echoed in their ears like a funeral knell.

"Do not go," the sorcerer continued; "death is there. Leave that enemy alone, for it is not he but you who will succumb. But no; go, for you must; why, Wacondah, why?"

While uttering these words, the sorcerer suddenly stopped; his voice grew low and unintelligible; he seemed to listen for a moment, uttered a loud cry, turned round twice or thrice with headlong speed, and fell all his length on the ground, where he writhed for several moments in frightful convulsions. The Indians were

struck with terror at this strange scene; the sorcerer's gloomy prediction filled them with horror, they did not dare communicate their thoughts to one another, but remained uncertain and alarmed, while watching the man who writhed before them. At length Running Water broke the charm which held all these impressionable men enthralled, for he felt the discredit which would attach to the two expeditions, if the warriors were allowed time to think.

"Like all the predictions of the medicine man," he said, with a slight tinge of irony, "this contains both good and bad; still I fancy I noticed that good prevailed, and that, if we have the misfortune to lose one or two of our comrades, we shall at least return loaded with booty, and dragging prisoners after us."

"I believe I understood that too," White Crow said, to back him up; "the warriors who fall in an expedition are fortunate. The happy hunting grounds are opened to them, and they are led to them by the Wacondah."

"Yes," said the Stag, "the prediction is a good one; it announces success."

The versatile mind of the Indians immediately followed the impulse the chiefs gave it, and soon all the redskins were persuaded that the medicine man's predictions were really excellent, and that the two expeditions started under the most favourable auspices. As for the poor sorcerer, he lay on the ground in a state of perfect insensibility, and none of the persons present dreamed of helping him. Then the two bands started to leave the village, followed by the whole tribe, who made vows for the success of the expedition, and urged them to show no mercy to the enemies they were about to fight; the women were especially distinguished by their ferocious cries and repulsive gestures.

For nearly an hour the two bands rode side by side, the three chiefs conversing together in a low voice, and the warriors laughing and smoking, for they were well aware that they had not yet reached the spot where they would really enter on the war trail and that any precautions they now took would be useless. At about two p.m., on a sign from their chief, they halted in a narrow valley, by the side of a stream, whose banks were overshadowed by small clumps of sumachs, larches, and Peru trees. The riders dismounted and carelessly lay down on the ground, leaving to the chiefs the trouble of watching over the common safety, if they considered it necessary. The latter had lighted their pipes, and were holding council. After a moment's silence, Running Water said, in his grave and calm voice—

"We have reached the ford of the Antelope, and it is here that we shall part. I will go down the river with my braves, while the Stag reenters the forest with his warriors. Has my son anything further to say to Running Water and White Crow? They are listening."

"I have nothing more to say to my father Running Water, or to my brother White Crow, than what they now already know; the expedition we are attempting is perilous, and must be carried out with prudence, not so much, perhaps, on account of our enemies themselves, as of the superstitious terrors with which they inspire our warriors."

"I understand the words of my son," the old chief replied; "they are serious. Running Water is renowned for his courage among his brothers; still he would not dare to attack the enemies whom the genius of evil protects and renders invincible."

The Stag concealed with difficulty a contemptuous smile, which was checked on his lips by the respect with which his father inspired him.

"Our own weakness partly forms the strength of our enemies," he replied, shaking his head sorrowfully; "the redskins are brave, but they are children who put faith in absurd things."

"My son," the old man said, sternly, "contact with the palefaces has injured you more than you suppose; without suspecting it, you have come to discuss the belief of your fathers, and turn it into ridicule. Take care, I repeat, my son; the road you are entering on is a bad one—it leads to a precipice; it is better to believe in an absurdity than fall into the contrary excess, and deny all belief. I will not lead my warriors against the persons whom you so obstinately insist on attacking."

"I do not ask it of you, father," the Stag replied, biting his lips in spite; "merely do what we agreed on, and that will be sufficient. I am willing to assume all the risks and perils of this expedition."

"The Stag is right," White Crow observed; "what danger do we incur in doing what he asks? Besides, even if we tried to prevent it, our warriors would not stand before them, but fly. Leave your son to act, Running Water; if on certain points contact with the whites has been injurious to him, it is evident that it will prove very useful to him for many others. He knows better than we do what is best to be done under the circumstances, and since he consents to assume all the responsibility, let him act as he pleases."

The old man shook his head several times, as if still far from being convinced.

"Be it so," he at length said, "since he fancies he has more wisdom beneath his black scalp than those whose hair has grown white at the council fire; let him act as he thinks proper. His father will henceforth be dumb, and will not cast the ice of his experience upon the fire of his ardent youth. Alas! Old customs are dying out. The Comanches are no longer worthy of their ancestors! The poison of the palefaces has penetrated to their villages. May the Wacondah grant that I have not lived too long, and that I may not see at an early day the ruin of my nation, as I have witnessed the ruin of its old laws and wise and simple customs."

While speaking thus, the old chief rose pensively, and walked slowly toward his horse, which a warrior was holding by the bridle. White Crow waited till the sachem was out of earshot, and then bent down to the Stag's ear.

"Brother," he said to him, as he seized his arm, "do not be uneasy. I only know your plans very imperfectly through the few hints you have dropped in my presence; but, if I am not mistaken, they are of great importance. Carry them out, therefore, without fear; if your father hesitates to support you, I will oblige him not to break the promise he has made you."

"Thanks, chief," he answered with emotion, "among all our brothers you alone understand me. Oh, be assured that I shall succeed."

"Yes, I understand you," White Crow said sadly, "perhaps only too well; but the Wacondah's will be done! He alone can read hearts and distinguish good from evil. Still, before we part, let me give you one counsel."

"I will receive it gladly, chief."

"Perhaps so; still I think it my duty to give it you, whether you like it or not. Here it is, and you can act as you please. The man who wishes to attain a high position among his people must be careful not to substitute private or personal

interests for the public interests intrusted to him. You are too intelligent to fail to understand me. Trust to me. Farewell for the present."

And after discharging this Parthian arrow, the chief went off, apparently not noticing the Stag's confusion. The latter stood for a moment as if stunned by this clear-sighted apostrophe.

"Voto a brios!" he muttered in Spanish, "Have I been so maladroit as to let these crafty men read my secret thoughts? Oh, it is impossible! Still—nonsense," he added, as he haughtily raised his head, and looked defiantly around him, "what do I care after all? If I succeed, each will acknowledge me to be right. Does not success justify the most desperate enterprises, and this is far from being one."

These reflections seemed to restore him all the confidence and audacity which his father's remarks and White Crow's malice had momentarily shaken, and he walked with a calm look and careless demeanour toward the two chiefs, who were mounting at the moment, as he wished to take leave of them before starting. The compliments were short and cold on both sides, for these three men were eager to separate. Brought up in a different medium, and in ideas diametrically opposed, the Stag and his two comrades could not understand each other, and the sachems even involuntarily felt an antipathy for their young colleague.

Running Water was right in the remonstrance which he addressed to his son. Paternal love on one side, on the other his hatred of the Mexicans, rendered him clear-sighted. A man, however firm his character may be, does not adopt with impunity the customs and habits of men in a more advanced stage of civilization than himself, and pass his childhood and youth in the midst of the comfort and luxury ignored in savage life, which, while freeing man from physical apprehensions, enlarge his ideas, by giving him the leisure to think and live, no longer through the senses, but through the heart.

The Stag, destined by his father to serve as the instrument of the revenge which he wished to take on Don Aníbal de Saldibar and his family, had been so well trained by Running Water, that his entrance to the hacienda met with no difficulty. The boy had begun by playing a long studied part, then, by degrees, without knowing how or why it took place, the fiction was converted into a reality, and the Comanche grew to regard almost with terror the moment when he would be compelled to return to the independent life of the prairies, and resume the nomadic existence of his tribe. This repugnance for the customs of his fathers emanated neither from any gratitude he felt for Don Aníbal's constant kindness to him, nor from friendship he felt for those who brought him up.

Sotavento was naturally ungrateful, moreover he cordially hated white men generally, and his benefactor particularly; but he had quickly grown accustomed to the life he led; it seemed to him a real paradise in comparison with what awaited him in the desert. By degrees the faith of his tribe was effaced in his heart, to make room for another that was wider, and more in accordance with his instincts and appetites; and he regarded the mission with which he had been intrusted as a heavy burden from which he would be delighted to be delivered. No man is perfect; however strong he may be, he cannot continually have the same idea of pursuing the same object.

His father's implacable hatred of the white men, which was comprehensible in the medium in which the chief lived, was not so for his son; it was only at

intervals, when he witnessed an insult dealt to a man of colour, that his Indian blood was revealed in him, and his hatred was re-kindled. Sotavento was vexed at this indifference; he tried to overcome it by all means, and when he was among his own people, his protestations were made in good faith, for he then believed what he said, so much did he desire in his heart that it should be true. Unfortunately for him, he had scarce returned to the hacienda, ere his ideas completely changed, his resolutions evaporated, and he felt himself beneath a far more powerful influence, an influence whose strength was gradually revealed in him, and eventually overpowered whatever efforts he might attempt to escape from it.

Under the pressure of the new feeling which mastered him, the Indian felt all the ferocious instincts of the race to which he belonged aroused in him; from this moment, forgetting all other interests, he had but one thought—it was to employ, in carrying out successfully the daring plan he had formed, the confidence he enjoyed among the chiefs and the forces of which he could dispose at a given moment. The hour which the Indian had selected for the realization of his project and the execution of his bold plans had arrived, and he audaciously set to work, without hesitation or without scruple, caring little about marching over corpses, provided that these corpses were so many steps of a ladder enabling him to attain the extraordinary result he desired.

Chapter XXIII

The Snare.

Running Water and White Crow placed themselves at the head of their warriors, who marched in Indian file, and forded the river. The redskins who remained in the valley watched them cross and disappear in the windings of the track they were following. The Stag remained for nearly an hour at the spot where his band had halted, and it was not until the sun had begun to descend on the horizon that he gave orders to mount. The warriors at once quitted the protecting shade which had sheltered them for several hours, and in a twinkling were ready to start.

Among the warriors who accompanied the Stag were six with whom he was very intimate; they several times entered the Mexican territory under different disguises, and had even got as far as the Hacienda del Barrio, where the majordomo received and sheltered them without exciting the slightest suspicion, so cleverly did they play the part of Indios mansos. Of these six warriors four had been employed for several months as vaqueros to guard the ganado.

The Stag had stipulated that this should be so, because, as he remarked at the council, a day might come when it would be well for him to have men ready at hand who were sufficiently acquainted with the customs of the redskins, to aid the tribe in carrying out the revenge which had so long been preparing. The council assented to the proposition, and the majordomo neglected nothing that his friends might make rapid progress in their knowledge of Mexican customs.

Sotavento had an object, but it was very different from the one which he suggested to the Comanches. Success had not only crowned the Indian's efforts, but exceeded all his expectations, and his six warriors assumed in a very short time the manners of Mexican peons. Everybody knows the aptitude of redskins for doing or imitating what they please when they suppose they can derive any eventual profit by it, so what we state here will not arouse any surprise.

After recommencing his march, the Stag called up to him these six warriors, and began giving them confidential instructions in so low a voice that they had a difficulty in catching and understanding his remarks. It appeared as if the revelations he made to these men were serious, for, in spite of the mask of stoicism with which Indians habitually cover their face, their features suddenly displayed a surprise which soon assumed a distinct character of horror. But the Stag did not give way; on the contrary, he redoubled his efforts, heaped promise on promise, flattery on flattery; in short, he managed so cleverly, that he ended by convincing them, or at least it seemed so, for, after a lengthened hesitation, they gave a nod of assent. The chief shook his head.

"Wah!" he said in a louder voice. "My brothers are men of loyal hearts and iron arms. I believe in their word, but they have not sworn by the sacred totem of the tribe, and as they have not promised by word of mouth, it is possible that the Wacondah may not remember their promise."

The warriors began laughing.

"The opossum is very crafty," one of the Indians said, "but the Stag joins to the cunning of the opossum that of the guanaco."

"Wah!" said another, "The palefaces have taught the Stag all the cleverness of the Yoris."

"Well," he answered laughingly, "that of the Comanches is greater still; for is not the Comanche nation the Queen of the Prairies? Who would dare, without leave, to traverse our hunting grounds. Will my brothers swear by the totem?"

"We will," said the one who spoke first, "because we love our brother, and know that his intentions are good."

"Yes, that is true; we believe in you, chief."

At these words the seven men stopped, and let their comrades pass them. When the latter had disappeared in the windings of the track, and were so far that they could neither see nor hear what was taking place, the Stag made a sign, and the six warriors formed a circle round him. Then the chief drew his scalping knife from his belt, opened his hunting shirt, and placing the point of the blade against his heart, on which was drawn in red the totem, or emblem of his tribe, that is to say, a buffalo, he raised his right hand to the setting sun, and uttered the words of the oath, the only one, perhaps, sacred to the Indians, as there is no instance known of it having been broken.

"I, a great man of the Comanche nation, a son of the Red Buffalo tribe, swear, in the presence of the sun, the visible representative of the invisible Wacondah, the powerful master of life, to accomplish without hesitation everything which my master, the Stag, may demand of me, consenting that the blade of my hunting knife, the point of which is at this moment resting on the image of the totem of my tribe, may be buried to the hilt in my heart, were I to break my oath which I now voluntarily take. I also consent to submit to the most terrible punishment the

powerful Wacondah, the master of life, may deign to inflict on me. Hence, may the Wacondah remember my oath, in order to reward or punish me, according to my conduct."

The six warriors, following their chief's example, drew their scalping knives, put the point on their heart, and repeated after him in a solemn voice, and an accent of conviction, the words he pronounced.

"I thank my brothers," he said, "they are truly great braves; the tails of red wolves which hang from their heels do not speak falsehood."

The Indians bowed, and he continued—

"My brothers will leave me here, and go straight to the Elk's cavern; they have just time to get there, and prepare to carry out my orders: have my brothers thoroughly understood?"

"We have understood," they answered.

"In that case, my brothers will make their mustangs feel the whip; the sun is rapidly descending, it is nearly level with the grass, and it will soon be night."

The warriors took leave of their chief, and turning to the right, vigorously lashed their horses, and disappeared in a whirlwind of dust. The Stag looked after them pensively; when he lost them out of sight, he whistled to his horse, and rejoined at a gallop his warriors, who, during the scene we have just described had continued their march, and were some considerable distance ahead.

We will leave the Comanche warriors for a while, and let them glide like snakes through the prairie grass, and cross the Río Grande del Norte to enter Mexican territory. We will take up our narrative again a few hours later, at the moment when Doña Emilia, her daughter, and Don Melchior, attracted by the firing of Running Water's warriors, rushed into the canyon, and by their mere presence caused the Indians that inconceivable panic which made them fly in every direction, and abandon their coveted prey when they were on the point of grasping it. After pursuing for some time the fugitives, to whom terror seemed to give wings, Doña Emilia prepared to return to the count and his comrades, when all at once she fancied she heard desperate cries in a wood a little distance off, which she had passed unnoticed in the heat of the pursuit.

"What is the meaning of that?" Doña Emilia asked, as she checked her steed. "Can there be any unhappy white men engaged with these demons on this side?"

At the same moment the wind bore down to them the sound of several shots.

"It appears like a serious action," Don Melchior answered. "Still I cannot understand the cause, for, with the exception of the count, there are not, to my knowledge, any white men travelling at present on this border."

"You must be mistaken, my friend, and hark, the noise is increasing; forward, forward; who knows whether we may not have the good fortune to save the life of some poor wretch. Those red demons fled so rapidly that we could not catch up a single one."

"Mother," Doña Diana timidly observed, "would it not be better, before venturing again among the savages, to make certain with whom we have to deal, and the number of foes we may have to confront?"

"What good will that do, daughter?" Doña Emilia answered drily; "Those men are savages, I think that we do not require to know more."

“Permit me to insist, mother; I know not why, but for some days past, sad forebodings involuntarily pursue me; I fear that we have traitors about us, and that they are watching us. I am afraid! Alas! Is it fitting for women,” she murmured feebly, “to wage war thus?”

Doña Emilia gave the maiden an angry glance. “Pigeon heart,” she said with feverish energy, “who keeps you here? return to the hacienda; I will be sufficient.”

“I fear a snare, mother.”

“A snare? Do you forget the terror with which my presence inspires these Pagans? You have long had a proof of it,” she continued with a contemptuous smile; “but come, daughter, accompany me this time, and I swear that I will not again force you to serve my hatred.”

The young lady let her head drop but said nothing, and the three riders started at full gallop in the direction of the shots, which became more frequent the nearer they approached. They were soon close enough to distinguish all the details of the drama which was being performed but a few paces from them. At the top of a small mound, several Europeans, who could be easily recognized by their dress, ambuscaded behind their horses, whose throats they had cut to form them into a barricade, were defending themselves like lions against twenty Indian warriors, who surrounded and tried to capture them.

“Well?” Doña Emilia asked her daughter, as she pointed to this fight, whose incidents were growing more and more striking, “Is that a snare?”

“I am wrong, mother, I see,” the young lady murmured; “and yet, I repeat, I am afraid.”

“Forward!” Doña Emilia cried.

The three riders passed like a hurricane through the midst of the redskins, throwing down and trampling on all who tried to oppose their passage. But then a strange and terrible thing took place. Several shots, doubtless badly aimed and fired from the top of the mound where the Europeans were entrenched, struck in the head the horses of Doña Emilia and her daughter, who rolled on the ground unable to rise; at the same moment an Indian warrior dashed at Don Melchior, brandishing his lasso over his head. All at once the young man felt a frightful shock, was lifted from the saddle by an irresistible force, and dragged along the ground. Don Melchior had been lassoed. In spite of the horrible suffering he endured, though half strangled by the slip knot which squeezed his throat, though wounded by roots and stones over which his pitiless conqueror dragged him, the young man did not lose his presence of mind; by an extraordinary and superhuman effort, which only the certainty of a horrible death would give him the courage to attempt, Don Melchior clutched the fatal lasso with one hand, and with the other seizing the sharp knife which every Mexican carries in his boot, as a last resource, he succeeded in drawing it out, and, after two fruitless attempts, collecting all his strength for a final effort, he managed to cut the lasso; then, without calculating the consequences of his deed, but preferring to run the chances of an immediate death, however terrible it might be, to falling alive into the hands of his ferocious enemies, he recommended his soul to heaven in a mental prayer, and rolled down the incline of a precipice which yawned a couple of yards from him.

At the moment when the energetic and courageous young man, who risked this desperate chance, probably in the hopes of escaping to save his companions, disappeared down the abyss, the Indian warrior who had dragged him from his horse, perceiving that he had contrived to cut the lasso, galloped up at full speed in order to prevent his flight. The Indian, who was no other than the Stag, fell into an indescribable passion on seeing his foe escape him. He bent over the abyss, trying to sound the darkness, and listening to the noises which rose from the bottom of the precipice; then, after a moment's hesitation, he resolutely dismounted, abandoned his horse, and clinging with feet and hands to branches and roots, he descended the quebrada in his turn.

The Stag understood of what importance the capture of Don Melchior was to him. The consequences of his flight might be immense, and make him lose the fruits of the bold stroke he had attempted; hence, without reflecting further, he rushed in pursuit of him. After a considerable loss of time and unheard of efforts, he at length reached the bottom of the precipice. He then began seeking for his enemy with the tenacity and skill of a wild beast, not leaving a single bush uninspected.

But all was in vain; he found no trace of Don Melchior. The Indian had one hope; it was that the Mexican, dragged down by the rapidity of his descent, had rolled into the deep, though narrow stream, which ran through the bottom of the quebrada, and had been drowned, ere he sufficiently regained his senses and strength to avoid this mortal fall. But if nothing contradicted this hope, nothing, on the other hand, corroborated it, and the Comanche chief was constrained to quit the spot, suffering from a doubt a thousand times more terrible than the most frightful certainty. After exploring the canyon for some time with that wild beast's instinct which redskins possess so thoroughly, the chief succeeded in discovering a narrow path made by antelopes, which wound round the sides of the precipice. He hastily ascended it, feeling anxious about what had occurred among his warriors during his absence.

Let us now return to Doña Emilia and her daughter, whom we left in an extremely critical situation. The two ladies had been hurled to the ground in such a way that it was impossible for them to rise without assistance. Their horses had been scarce shot ere the fight, which appeared so obstinate between the white men and redskins, suddenly ceased as if by enchantment, and friends and foes on the best possible terms approached the two prisoners, for they may be regarded as such. The first Indians who arrived near enough to Doña Emilia to recognize her features, stopped in horror and fell back a few paces, saying to their comrades, "The Queen of the Savannah! It is the Queen of the Savannah!"

A very decided retrograde movement then began among the Indians; they stopped and formed a wide circle about twenty yards from the two ladies; it was probable that not one of them was anxious to venture within reach of a woman whom all regarded as the evil genius of their nation. The white men, or at least those who wore that dress, were alone bold enough to approach her, which they did not do, however, without very marked hesitation.

At last, after exchanging a few words in a low voice, two of the bravest of them ventured to assist the unhappy ladies, while the others, who stopped a few yards off, kept their finger on the trigger, ready to fire at the slightest suspicious

movement on the part of the prisoners. But they had nothing to fear from them; their fall had crushed them; they were nearly fainting, and could scarce keep up.

"If you are Christians," Doña Emilia murmured, in a faint voice, "help my daughter, my poor child; she is dying."

They made no reply, but after raising the two ladies with a species of sorrowful pity, they transported them to the top of the hill, and laid them on furs near a fire, which the Indians had lit while they were being brought up. Doña Diana then noticed that the horses lying on the ground, behind which the defenders of the mound had sheltered themselves, were not killed, as her mother had supposed, but merely bound so that they could not stir.

"Oh, my presentiments!" she murmured feebly, as she raised her eyes to heaven.

And she fainted, succumbing as much to the grief that filled her heart, as to the physical suffering she experienced.

Chapter XXIV

Oliver Clary.

As we have seen, Running Water and his comrades attacked Count de Melgosa after White Crow had summoned him to surrender. The unexpected arrival of Doña Emilia had not only foiled the plans of the Comanche chiefs, but also caused such a panic among their warriors that, in spite of the efforts of the sachems to rally them, they were even really themselves carried off and constrained to seek safety in a hurried flight. In a retreat so precipitate as that effected by the redskins, the feeling of terror so rules over all other feelings, that the voice of the chiefs are despised, their orders are unlistened to, and each man running off at a venture, seeks his own safety without troubling himself about the rest. After a mad ride through bush and briar, and not following any settled direction, Running Water, who was involuntarily affected by the general terror, stopped, quite out of breath, and fell at the foot of a Peru tree, which rose alone in the centre of a spacious plain.

The night was still dark and a leaden silence brooded over the desert. The chief, far as his eye could see, did not notice one of his comrades; he was alone, and, as he conjectured from the perfect tranquillity and calmness that reigned around him, in safety for the present. Then he began reflecting; his thoughts were sad, for nothing settled at the council had been carried out; the count had escaped, and the warriors were dispersed, so that it was useless to attempt to rally them in order to give the young chief, his son, the support which the latter had asked for. The sachem was greatly embarrassed, not through the position in which he found himself—alone, without support, and almost unarmed—a position which to any other than an Indian accustomed to desert life would have appeared extremely precarious, the more so because the sachem had ridden far into the Mexican territory, and was consequently a long way from his village; but Running Water

did not think of that. What tortured his mind was the insult offered to his indomitable pride in the disgraceful flight of his comrades at the mere sight of a woman, and the honour of himself and the tribe compromised in an expedition which had cost the lives of several men without producing any advantage.

The sachem had been plunged in these gloomy thoughts for a long time, when he fancied that he could hear a slight sound near him. The Indian raised his head, stifled a cry of surprise, and with one bound was on his feet, knife in hand—this was the only weapon he had retained. While he had been yielding to his bitter thoughts, several Spanish lanceros, taking advantage of the darkness, had dismounted and completely surrounded him; this surprise had been executed with such skill and so silently, that the Indian did not perceive the presence of his enemies till it was not possible for him to avoid them. Upon the movement he made, the barrels of nearly fifty carbines were pointed at the sachem.

"Come, surrender, demon!" a rough voice said to him, "Unless you prefer being killed like the accursed dog you are."

Without replying, the sachem looked at the Spaniards who surrounded him; perceiving that any resistance would be useless, he let his knife drop at his feet, folded his arms on his chest, and waited.

"Bind him securely, but do not injure him," the voice already heard said. "Put him on a horse, and let us start."

This order was carried out in less time than it has taken us to write it. When the sachem was brought up, the Spanish officer examined him attentively.

"Why!" he said, "Heaven pardon me my mistake, I believed that I had only to do with a marauder; but the capture is more important than I fancied. This dog is no less than an Indian brave, and a chief into the bargain, as is clearly indicated by the feather he wears so proudly over his right ear. Would these demons dare to cross our border?"

We must do the Spanish government the justice of stating that, at the period of its domination, the Indian border was thoroughly guarded by posts established at regular distances, by presidios with strong garrisons composed of veteran troops, and by patrols which traversed the country day and night, watching over the common safety, and vigorously repulsing any attempt at plunder on the part of the Indians. Hence those incursions and invasions of the redskins which now devastate this unhappy country did not occur at that time. The Indians instead of attacking, had quite enough to do in defending themselves, for the Spanish policy tended continually to drive them back further into their impenetrable deserts.

At the present day all this has changed. The Indians have become conquerors in their turn, and, profiting by the intestine wars which constantly rend the old Spanish colonies, they have leapt over the border marked out for them, and have advanced so far into the interior of the civilized country, that they are encamped before towns and villages which were formerly prosperous but are now in ruins. Mines worked long ago by the Spaniards have again become the property of the Indians, and they have carried so far their contempt of the Mexicans, whose cowardice, by the by, is proverbial among them, that the Comanches and Apaches disdaining to take unnecessary precautions in invading the territory of their foes, have fallen into the habit of making their incursions at a regular period of the year, which they call the "Mexican moon." Even more incredible than the

impudent boldness with which these expeditions are carried out, is the stupid patience and cowardly resignation of the white men, whose houses are burnt, crops destroyed, and cattle carried off annually, but who, so soon as the Indians have retired, begin building and sowing again just as if nothing had occurred, although they are perfectly well aware that their labour will be lost, and that the Indians will return to destroy it all at a given day and hour. It was one of the patrols to which we have referred that surprised and seized the sachem.

"Who are you?" the officer asked. "To what tribe do you belong?"

Running Water gave him an ironical glance, shrugged his shoulders contemptuously, but made no answer.

"Very well, as you please, my fine fellow," the officer, an old soldier accustomed to Indian warfare, answered mockingly. "We know how to loosen the tongues of men like you. Come, my men, mount, and let us be off."

The patrol resumed its march, and shortly before sunrise reached Leona Vicario. The sachem was immediately taken to prison, the general putting off his interrogation till after the festivities, which at this moment interrupted the course of justice. Accident, a few hours later, led the brave Canadian hunter to the same dungeon, as we have seen. We have described what took place between them above. After the flight of his comrade, the adventurer coolly remained in prison, to the great amazement of his keepers, who could not understand how a man could remain a prisoner of his own choice, when he had a chance of escaping.

The adventurer, without seeming to notice the sarcasms the Spaniards levelled at him, settled as comfortably as he could in a corner of his cell, and, placing his weapons within reach, in the event of any attempt to do him an ill turn during his sleep, as he had heard say sometimes occurred, slept as calmly as if reposing in the middle of the desert. The Canadian's apprehensions were entirely unfounded, for he was safe under the protection of Castilian honour; but he judged the Spaniards with his American prejudices, and from the calumnies he had heard repeated by the Yankees, who thus sought to revenge their exclusion from the Spanish colonies. In the morning, when he awoke, the Canadian was at first surprised to find himself in prison, but he soon remembered, and waited immediately till some decision was arrived at about him. It was long, however, before the gaoler appeared, bringing his breakfast.

"Hilloh!" the adventurer said in surprise.

"Why bring me food, instead of opening the doors and letting me be off?"

"It is not a holiday every day," the gaoler answered mockingly. "The door does not open so easily as that. Besides, what have you to complain of? It seems as if you like being in prison, as you had an opportunity to leave it, and did not take advantage of it."

Clary shrugged his shoulders, and turned away, thinking it beneath him to argue with a scoundrel of this sort. The other grinned, placed the provisions on the ground, went out, carefully locked the door, and the Canadian found himself again alone.

"Hang it all," he muttered, "the affair is beginning to look ugly. Well! We shall see; but now to eat, for it is bad arguing on an empty stomach."

And after this consoling reflection, he began attacking the provisions, deferring the formation of any resolution till after the meal. But time was not allowed him

for this. He had scarce finished the last mouthful ere he heard the sound of footsteps and the clang of arms in the passage. The door opened, and an officer entered.

"Follow me!" he said.

"Where are you taking me?" the Canadian asked.

"Come, come," the officer said sharply, "you will soon learn."

"Very good," he said, and walked out.

An escort consisting of ten soldiers was waiting for him at the door.

"Hang it," he said, "I appear to be treated like a man of importance."

And, without waiting for orders, he placed himself in the midst of the soldiers, who at once closed up round him. He was led to the room into which he had been introduced the previous day. The general was there alone. The officer, after thrusting the Canadian into the room, withdrew, and closed the door after him. The adventurer went two or three paces forward, bowed respectfully to the general, and waited till the latter addressed him. The general was in full dress; he had his hat on his head; his arms were crossed on his back, and he was walking up and down the room with hanging head and a dark frown.

"Hum! This worthy officer does not seem in a very sweet temper this morning," the Canadian thought. "Rude though he was, I liked him better yesterday afternoon."

After some moments of silence, the general walked up to the adventurer, and stopped before him with a menacing look.

"Ah, ah," he said, "then you are here, Señor Pícaro?"

Instead of answering, the Canadian looked around him in surprise.

"What are you looking for?" the general asked him sharply.

"I am looking, Excellency," he replied placidly, "for the person to whom you are addressing that language."

"Ah, ah," he replied, "you are facetious. We shall soon see how long you keep up that part."

"Excellency," the adventurer said seriously, "I am playing no part. I will have the honour of observing to you that the man who, holding the power in his hands, amuses himself like a cat with a mouse, as you are doing with me, commits, no matter who he is, a bad action, for he knows that he is addressing a man who is unable to answer him."

The general resumed his hurried walk up and down the room, but almost immediately returned to the Canadian.

"Listen," he said to him sharply. "You produced a good impression on me when I first saw you. Your refusal to escape, when you had no other prospect but the gallows, proves to me that you are brave. I want men of your sort. Are you willing to serve me? You will have no cause to repent it."

The Canadian drew himself up.

"Is your Excellency," he asked, "really doing me the honour of speaking seriously to me?"

"Yes, and I am waiting for your answer."

"Well, Excellency, the answer is this: I did not escape yesterday, because only guilty persons do that, and I am not guilty. Placed arbitrarily and in a manner contrary to the law of nations in prison by you, during a moment of ill temper, I

expect that justice will be done me, and that those who put me in a dungeon will take me out of it again. I enabled my comrade to escape, as I wished to prove to you that, had I liked, nothing would have been more easy than for me to go with him. You have told me that I am brave; it is true, and the reason is simple. I have nothing to lose, and consequently to regret; and, in my opinion, life is not so very jolly that we should be afraid of giving it up. You have offered to take me into your service. I refuse."

"Ah!" the general said, biting his lips.

"Yes, and for two reasons."

"Let me have them."

"You shall. The first is, that I have engaged myself for a certain time to your enemies, and when an honest man has once pledged his word, he cannot recall it. The second reason is perhaps more serious; still, I am bound to say that, were I free, I would not serve you, not through any personal dislike to your Excellency, but because the cause you defend is that of absolutism, and I am naturally a fanatic partizan of liberty."

"Very good, you are a philosopher. Do you know what the moral of all this is?"

"No, Excellency, I do not."

"That you will be hung directly."

"Do you think so?" the Canadian replied, taking a step forward.

"You will soon have the proof," the general said, with a grin.

And he walked up to a table to ring a hand bell, but before he could accomplish his design, the Canadian leapt on him like a tiger, hurled him to the ground, and ere the general, so suddenly attacked, had time to regain his coolness to call out or attempt to defend himself, he was securely bound and carefully gagged. With a presence of mind which he could only have obtained through the adventurous life he had hitherto led, the Canadian, so soon as he had secured his prisoner, ran to the door and bolted it, to avoid a surprise. Thus certain that he would not be disturbed for some time, the Canadian collected several bundles of papers scattered over the table, put them in his pocket, seized a brace of richly embossed pistols, carefully examined them, to see whether they were loaded, and thrust them in his belt. Then he returned to the general, who had anxiously watched all his movements.

"Now for us two, Excellency," he said, as he drew his knife and tried the point on his thumbnail, "pledge me your word of honour as a gentleman that you will not cry out, and I will at once remove your gag. Moreover, I may remind you that the door is locked, and before your soldiers or servants could break it open, I should have killed you. Well, what do you say to my proposition?"

The general nodded his compliance of the terms and, in accordance with his promise, the Canadian at once removed the gag. He did even more; raising him in his arms, he carried him to an easy chair, in which he seated him comfortably.

"There," he said, "now we can talk. You see, Excellency, that you were not mistaken about me, and that I am, to employ your own expression, a bold scoundrel."

"Yes," the general answered, with concentrated passion, "I let myself be caught like a fool. What do you demand of me, now that you have me in your power?"

"I demand nothing, Excellency. I merely desire my liberty."

The general reflected for a moment.

"No," he at length said, with a start of passion, "I will not give it you. Kill me, if you like, villain!"

"Very good. You are a brave fellow. No, Excellency, I will not kill you. I am no assassin. I merely wished to give you a simple lesson and teach you not to violate the law of nations. Now, I am going to cut your bonds."

"You will not dare do so," the general said bluntly.

"Why not?" the Canadian asked.

"Because you know very well that once I am free—"

"When you are free, Excellency, you will do what you think proper. I care little what, for did I not tell you that I did not cling to life?"

The general looked at him.

"Carry out your promise," he then said.

"Directly, Excellency."

With the utmost coolness the Canadian removed the bonds which he had so carefully rolled round the general's body.

"Ah!" said the latter, springing up like a tiger, "Now we shall see."

"Wait a moment, Excellency," the Canadian said tranquilly, "the door is not yet unbolted."

This mad and reckless rashness confounded the general; for the first time in his life, perhaps, this man felt his heart softened by a feeling which had hitherto been strange to him.

"Very good," he said, "open it."

The adventurer did not let the order be repeated, but drew the bolts with the same tranquil air which he had retained during the whole scene. The general rang.

"Have a horse saddled at once," he said to the usher who entered; then he added, turning to Clary, "Begone, without looking behind you. Make haste, before I recall the order I have given; for I shall probably soon repent my clemency."

"I think so, Excellency," the Canadian answered with a singular smile.

And, after bowing respectfully, he left the room. The general remained pensive for a moment.

"What a strange character," he muttered, and he fell back into an easy chair, in order to restore a little regularity in his ideas, which had been upset by these extraordinary events. All at once his eyes turned accidentally to the table.

"Oh," he exclaimed, rising furiously, "my papers."

But it was in vain that he gave orders to pursue the adventurer. The latter had followed the general's advice exactly, and, burying his spurs in his horse's flanks, had started at a gallop.

Chapter XXV

The Wounded Man.

However eccentric the means employed by the Canadian to regain his liberty may appear to the reader at the first blush, they had been carefully meditated. The adventurer had judged the man with whom he had to deal; he felt convinced that if he allowed him to give the order for hanging, it would not be revoked. The game he played in attacking the general was a bold one; but there are in the world many perverse beings with whom any reasoning is impossible, and with whom knockdown arguments must be employed. The adventurer calculated on the surprise, fear, and perhaps admiration of his enemy to secure his own escape. He was not deceived in his calculations, for a good deal of these three feelings was mixed up with the general's extraordinary clemency: and then too, possibly, after the specimen which Don López had had of the Canadian's resolution and reckless daring, he was not anxious to put him to a fresh trial, as he knew that he was armed, and convinced that he would blow out his brains without hesitation. For our part, we believe that the general was for an instant completely dominated by the ascendency which the Canadian's character exerted over him, and that he had acted solely under the influence of this feeling.

However this may be, Oliver Clary did not deceive himself for a moment, and spurred his horse, which galloped at headlong speed. After about an hour's ride, he thought that he had placed a sufficient distance between himself and any person who might feel tempted to pursue him, and he checked the pace of his steed, which was beginning to display signs of fatigue, and he did not wish to kill it unnecessarily. It was about ten a.m., and the day was magnificent. The Canadian, who had been imprisoned for nearly four and twenty hours, inhaled the fresh air and looked around him in delight, so happy did he feel at being free and seeing once again water and trees.

He rode along thus, careless and satisfied, laughing at the capital trick he had played the general, and glad to have got out of the scrape so well, when he suddenly perceived a small party of horsemen coming toward him at full speed. In the first moment, the Canadian felt a lively anxiety; but, upon reflection, he reassured himself by the fact that it was impossible these horsemen had been sent in pursuit of him, from the direction in which they were coming. He, therefore, continued to push on without checking or hurrying his steed, for fear of arousing in the minds of the newcomers suspicions which might be unfavourable to him, and, owing to their number, cause him an embarrassment which he desired to avoid at any price. But, after riding thus for some ten minutes, he uttered a cry of pleasure and galloped toward the newcomers. He had recognized in the two persons heading the party, Count de Melgosa and Diego López.

"Thank heaven!" the count exclaimed on seeing him, "I was afraid I should arrive too late."

"That would probably have been the case," the Canadian replied, "had I not managed to get out of the hobble by myself. But how is it that I meet you here?"

"Did I not promise to join you today at Leona?"

"Ah, now I understand,"

"No, you do not, for I had not intended to start till this evening, so as to avoid the great heat, had not Diego López arrived this morning at sunrise like a madman at the hacienda, telling everybody who could hear it that General Cárdenas put you in prison yesterday, with orders that you should be hung today. I now see that

this ass of a Diego has let himself be taken in by falsehoods spread through the town for some motive I am ignorant of, and I am delighted at it, for I should never have consoled myself had you died."

"Señor Conde," the Canadian replied, as he affectionately pressed the peon's hand, "Diego López was not deceived by false reports. All he told you was most strictly true."

"Ah!" the count exclaimed, with a start of passion, "That man must really be a wild beast."

"Morally, I am prepared to swear he is," the Canadian replied, with an air of conviction.

"It surpasses all belief. Never was such contempt of the law of nations known. But how is it that I now find you at liberty, and, apparently at least, without the slightest wound?"

"That is another story," the adventurer said, with a meaning smile, "and one which is somewhat interesting, I assure you, count."

"Who delivered you?"

"Myself."

"Alone?"

"Indeed, yes. When I saw that no one came to my assistance, I tried to manage it by myself, and you see how I succeeded."

"Oh!" the count said, with an accent of painful conviction. "A cause defended by such men is a lost cause. Pray, caballero, tell me in their fullest details all the events that have occurred. I want to know them in order to see whether my honour permits me still to give the aid of my sword to a government which employs such savage measures."

"Señor Conde," the Canadian said frankly, "since you insist, I will tell you all, though I know that the story will grieve you. Still, before I begin, must say that, during all the time I have been ranging the desert, and the annals of an adventurous career have brought me into relations with the most ferocious Indian nations, I never found with one of them such a profound contempt for what all men respect. For that I had to become acquainted with a Spanish general."

"Señor," the count said sorrowfully, "do not render a whole nation responsible for the fault of an individual. Do not judge us incapable of generous feelings and recognizing virtue when it presents itself to us. Thank heaven! The Spanish people have established their reputation for honour and loyalty for centuries. There are, believe me, among other nations as well as ours, coldly ferocious beings insensible of all feeling of honour. These men belong to no nation. They are monsters whom humanity brands and rejects with horror from its bosom."

"I will not discuss so grave a matter with you, señor. I am but a poor man, ignorant of the laws of the world, and I do not at all intend to pass judgment on things which exceed the range of the weak intellect with which it has pleased nature to endow me. It is evident that men are all born with different instincts. Whether civilization modifies these instincts for better or worse I cannot say, any more than I would venture to assert that all the men of your nation are as thoroughly bad as the general, the more so as you are an evident proof of the contrary."

“A compliment is not an answer, señor. But do not let us dwell any longer on this painful subject, and return to the story you promised to tell me.”

“I ask nothing better than to do so, caballero; but the narrative will occupy some time, and, for reasons you will speedily learn, I am not particularly anxious to remain so short a distance from Leona Vicario.”

“Very good, señor,” the count answered. “Tell me where you wish to go, and I will accompany you for some leagues with the greater pleasure at the thought that, in the event of your being pursued—which, I presume, is the cause of your anxiety—my escort and presence would prove of some use to you.”

“Certainly, caballero, and I accept your gracious offer with the greatest pleasure. I am returning to the Hacienda del Barrio, to give a report of the mission confided to me, and which nearly cost me so dear. I suppose that no serious reason prevents your accompanying me on that road?”

“None; especially as I shall only go so far as I can with safety.”

“As that is the case, let us start, for I am anxious to get away.”

The count ordered his troopers to wheel, and the little party started again at a gallop.

“Why,” the count said suddenly, as he looked at the adventurer’s steed, “if I am not greatly mistaken, that horse comes out of the stables of General de Cárdenas.”

“Quite right; it does.”

“How do you happen to be riding it?”

“That is part of the story.”

“Begin it, then, in heaven’s name, for I am dying of impatience to hear it.”

“In that case, listen to me, Señor Conde. But be kind enough to let my comrade Diego López remain near us. He behaved too well to me, during the short time we were together, for me to begrudge him this slight satisfaction.”

The count granted the Canadian’s request with pleasure, and made a sign to Diego, who eagerly ranged his horse by the side of Oliver Clary’s. The Canadian then began his narrative, relating with the utmost frankness events as they occurred, from the moment when he quitted the count at the hacienda up to that when he found him galloping again on the road to Leona. The count listened to the Canadian’s lengthy story with the most earnest attention, at times letting the feelings be seen on his stern face which the facts the adventurer related aroused in him. When the latter ceased speaking, he shook his head several times.

“You were more lucky than clever,” he said, “and the way in which you gained your liberty almost trenches on the marvellous. The general deserved worse treatment than that for the way in which he behaved to you, and the contempt he displayed for the safe conduct I had given you. Alas! We live in hapless times, when honour and good faith are mere words devoid of meaning.”

“Not to everybody,” the Canadian exclaimed, quickly.

“Certainly not, and I am pleased to allow it; of all the things you have related to me, there is only one of which I do not approve.”

“Which is that, Señor Conde?”

“The help you gave the redskin imprisoned with you. These Indians are a real scourge to us dwellers on the border; letting one escape when caught is like setting a ferocious brute at liberty.”

“That is true, señor; but what would you have? I have lived for many years among the redskins; I have frequently fought them, and at times killed them without the slightest scruple; but I cannot allow that they should be deprived of their sole property—liberty. Besides, he was an old acquaintance, in this sense, that the tribe to which he belongs has done me great services on several occasions. As I had a chance to repay them, I did so.”

“Yes, you are right, and you are bound to reason thus after the life you have led. I will not dwell on this subject further, therefore; but what you have said has produced a powerful impression on me. I require a few moments’ reflection, in order to regulate my thoughts; so kindly excuse me if I am silent for a few minutes; after which we will converse again. I intend to ride two or three leagues further with you.”

The adventurer bowed, and turning to Diego López, he thanked him warmly for what he had tried to do for him, and assured him that, although he had not profited by his advice, he was not the less grateful for it. While talking and galloping, they passed through the canyon where they had been attacked a few days previously by the Indians, and were about to enter a rather large chaparral, which they were obliged to cross to reach the banks of the lake, when the Canadian’s piercing eye perceived, some distance ahead, the body of a man lying at the foot of an enormous sumach, beneath which he seemed to be seeking a shelter from the sun.

“There is a man,” said the adventurer, “who knows but little about the desert.”

“What man are you talking of?” Diego López asked, who had not yet looked in that direction.

“Look there,” the adventurer said, stretching out his arm, “that individual has placed himself by the roadside, within reach of the first passerby who may feel inclined to kill him in order to seize the little he possesses. I know countries in Apacheria where he would not lie in that way, without being really scalped by some Indian prowler.”

“It is singular,” Diego López continued, “he has no horse, and that is extraordinary in a country where the poorest peon has one.”

“That is true,” the Canadian said, and added a moment later, “I am very much afraid that our fancied sleeper is simply a dead man.”

“Do you think so?” the peon said.

“Hang it, I do not know exactly, but he has not made the slightest movement since we first perceived him. If he be not dead, as I expect, he must be a very sound sleeper not to have heard the sound of our horses.”

“I will inform the Señor Conde,” the peon replied, as he turned back and rejoined his master.

The latter listened to his servant’s report with, some surprise, for no assassination had occurred for a long time on this road, which was greatly frequented by travellers of every description. He spurred his horse, and joined the adventurer, who had pulled up to wait for him.

“What do you think about it?” he asked him.

“Nothing good,” the latter replied; “still I think that we had better make sure. With your permission I will push on, and find out what it all means.”

“We will all go,” the count answered; “if the pretended corpse concealed a trap, there would be enough of us to foil it.”

“Let us push on then,” the Canadian said, as he slacked his rein, and his horse started with the speed of lightning.

The others followed him, and they soon reached the sumach; the man had not stirred. The count and the adventurer dismounted, and walked up to the body, which still lay motionless, and bent over it.

“It is a white man,” said the Canadian.

“Yes,” the count added, after a moment of attentive examination; “I know him. His name is Don Melchior. I saw him at the Hacienda del Barrio during my last visit. Don Aníbal de Saldibar is sincerely attached to him. How is it that he is here, and in such a hapless condition?”

“That is a question which himself alone could answer, and for the moment I fear that it is impossible for him to do so. Let us first make sure whether he be dead or alive.”

Like all the wood rangers, who, through the chances of their adventurous life, run a risk of being wounded at any moment, the Canadian, though no great doctor, possessed some practical knowledge of medicine, or, to speak more correctly, of surgery. He bent over the young man, raised him with one hand, and held him up in a sitting position, while he held to his mouth the bright blade of his knife. A moment later he looked at it; it was slightly tarnished.

“Thank heaven!” he said, “He is not dead, though not much better off; he has fainted.”

“The poor boy appears to me very ill,” the count remarked, sorrowfully.

“That is true; but he is young and strong, and so long as the soul clings to the body there is a chance.”

“How can we help him? We must not leave him in this pitiable state.”

“Of course not, for that would be certain death. Diego López, give me your flask if there is any liquor in it.”

“It is quite full,” the peon said, handing it to him.

The Canadian mixed a little mezcal with water in a leaf he bent up, and then rubbed the temples, wrists, and stomach of the wounded man with it; after which, thrusting the knife blade between his teeth, he opened his mouth by main force, and made him swallow a few drops, while Diego López continued the friction, and the count, kneeling behind the young man, kept him in a sitting posture. For nearly a quarter of an hour their efforts seemed to produce no effect on the wounded man; still the Canadian, far from giving in, redoubled his exertions, and ere long had cause to congratulate himself on his perseverance when he saw the young man make a slight movement.

“Heaven be thanked!” the count said, joyfully, “He is regaining his senses.”

“Indeed is he,” said the Canadian, “look at him waking up.”

In fact, Don Melchior, after making a few convulsive efforts, feebly opened his eyes, but, blinded by the sunbeams, closed them again.

“Courage,” the Canadian said to him, “courage, comrade, you have friends near you.”

The young man, at the sound of this voice, seemed to return to his senses completely, his pale cheeks were tinged with a hectic flush; he opened his eyes,

looked round him in amazement, and, making an effort to speak, he murmured in a weak, almost indistinct voice—

"The Indians—the Indians—save Doña Diana—save—save—Doña Emilia!"

And, worn by the effort he had made, he fell back inanimate in the count's arms; the latter laid him gently on the ground, and rose eagerly.

"Diego López," he said, "make a litter as speedily as possible, this young man must be conveyed to my house."

"Why not to the Hacienda del Barrio?" the Canadian remarked.

"No," the count answered, with a shake of his head, "there is a mystery in this affair. Let us not act inconsiderately, and perhaps cause great pain to a man who has already suffered severely. You will accompany us, I suppose, señor?"

"Certainly, if you desire it."

"I ask it as a favour, caballero."

Chapter XXVI

Doña Emilia.

As we have said, the Stag, after diligent search, discovered a path traced by the antelopes which ran from the foot of the precipice in a zigzag to the top. The Indian chief ascended this path the more hastily because, now that he was cool, and reflected on what had happened, he in his heart cursed the madness which had led him to descend the abyss in search of a foe he could not find, instead of remaining with his warriors, in order to support and encourage them, and combat the superstitious terrors they felt on the subject of the two prisoners, and especially of Doña Emilia, whom they imagined to belong to a race different from their own, and to be an omnipotent being whose wrath was extremely formidable for them.

As he approached the spot where his warriors were, he heard, more and more distinctly, cries which increased his anxiety, and made him hurry on, at the risk of making a false step and rolling to the foot of the precipice. In fact, he had scarce reached the prairie when two of his confidants who were seeking him, rushed toward him with shouts of delight.

"Come, come," they said to him; "if not, all is lost." The Stag, without losing any time in questioning them, followed them to the top of the hill. This is what had occurred during his absence. The two ladies had been carried up the hill, and carefully laid on mats in front of the fire. Doña Emilia, though greatly shaken by the fall, speedily regained entire consciousness. Owing to the exaltation of her mind, instead of being crushed, she had derived fresh courage from the misfortunes which had suddenly burst over her. Her first care was to look round her and attentively examine the persons who surrounded her, in order to discover, were it possible, into what hands she had fallen.

At the first moment, deceived by the European dress of some of her assailants, she imagined she had to deal with a party of those ruffians who come to the

surface in revolutionary times—the scum of the population—who regard political questions entirely as a matter of plunder, and who had for some years infested Mexico, recognizing no other flag but their own, and waging war on their own account, serving both parties indifferently, or rather injuring both by their cowardice, barbarity, and instinct of rapine. At times, the villains, not being numerous enough to attempt a bold stroke, allied themselves with the Indians, and ravaged the country with them. The patriots and Spaniards had both tried to put a stop to the depredations of these bandits by mercilessly shooting and hanging all they caught, but it was of no avail. Instead of diminishing their number seemed to increase, and latterly they had grown really formidable, and their audacity knew no bounds.

But a second and quieter glance made Doña Emilia understand that she was in error, and that the persons she at first took for Europeans were Indians in disguise. This discovery augmented her courage. She believed herself certain of the influence she exerted over these men, and she thought she would be able to terrify them sufficiently not to have anything to fear from them. Moreover, the conduct of the Indians towards her justified her expectations. It was only with a tremor that they dared to approach her. A glance was sufficient to keep them back. Even those who had associated with white men, and whom the Stag had ordered to assume European attire, kept at a respectful distance from the two ladies, and were apparently not desirous to be on more intimate terms with them.

Doña Emilia rose, no one making any attempt to prevent her. She went up to her daughter, sat down by her side, and raising her beautiful head, laid it gently on her knees. She gazed at her tenderly for a moment, then, after removing the long curls of light hair which veiled her face, she covered it with kisses, murmuring in a soft voice, but with an accent of ineffable tenderness—

"Poor, dear soul, her heart did not deceive her, her presentiments were true. Alas! Why did I not put faith in her words? Oh, my adored daughter! I alone am the cause of this frightful misfortune. Forgive me, forgive me!"

And two burning tears, which the feeling of her position had been unable to draw from her, fell on the girl's forehead. The latter feebly opened her eyes.

"Mother," she murmured, in her childish voice. "Oh, mother, how I am suffering!"

"Alas, poor darling!" Doña Emilia replied, "I am suffering too; but what should I care for pain if I knew you were in safety? I am accustomed to suffer, while you, alas!—"

She ceased, and a sigh burst from her bosom. The maiden continued—

"Courage, mother; perhaps all is not lost yet, and one hope is left us."

"A hope, poor child! Yes," she replied, bitterly, "that the men who hold us prisoners may take pity on us, and kill us at once, instead of torturing us."

"But," Doña Diana said, whose strength was gradually returning, and who felt her courage coming back, "Don Melchior is not a prisoner. He has escaped."

"I saw Don Melchior fall by our side, beneath the blows of one of the ferocious men who captured us."

"He is dead!" she exclaimed, with a shriek of terror and despair.

"No, no," her mother objected eagerly, terrified by this grief, "I hope not. Perhaps he has succeeded in escaping."

“Oh, no, I do not believe you, mother. He must be dead, since he is not by our side. Don Melchior would never have consented to fly and abandon us.”

“It is probable, my child, that he has fled, in order to fetch assistance. What could he have done, alone, against these men? Nothing. He would have fallen without any advantage for us or himself. His flight, on the contrary—and I really believe that he has succeeded in escaping—leaves us a hope.”

The girl shook her head doubtfully.

“You wish to restore my courage, thank you, mother,” she answered, “but it is not necessary. I am strong, and shall be able to endure without a murmur the sufferings which fate has in store for me.”

“Very good, daughter. I am pleased to hear you speak in that way. Rise, my child, these men only respect the stoical courage of the condemned wretch who laughs amid his tortures; so we will not give them the spectacle of our weakness. By haughty behaviour we may succeed in inspiring these men with respect, if not with commiseration.”

The girl rose with passive obedience.

“Alas!” she murmured, “I am not like you, mother; I feel that my strength is not equal to my courage.”

“Let me speak to these ferocious men; the fear with which I have so long inspired them is not yet extinct; perhaps the step I am about to take will prove successful.”

“Heaven grant it!” the maiden murmured, as she clasped her hands fervently, and raised her eyes to heaven.

Doña Emilia walked towards the Indians, who, collected at a respectful distance, watched her movements with ill-disguised anxiety. A singular scene then took place. In proportion as Doña Emilia advanced towards them, the Indians fell back, though without breaking the circle they formed; at length one of them, bolder than the rest, stopped, and placing the butt of his gun on the ground, said, in bad Spanish, to the lady who was still advancing—

“What does the paleface squaw want? Why does she not remain by the fire? The night is cold; it will be better for the stranger to remain where the warriors placed her.”

“Who are you, dressed in the garb of civilized men, although your features are those of a ferocious redskin?” she answered haughtily. “By what right do you address me before I spoke to you? If you have any influence over the men who surround, us, order them to retire and let me pass, before my patience is exhausted.”

“The warriors must not let the paleface squaw pass until the return of the chief.”

Doña Emilia smiled disdainfully.

“Do you not know who I am?” she said. “The Wacondah is with me; he inspires the words I utter. Tremble, lest you arouse my anger.”

“The Wacondah loves the Indians,” the redskin replied timidly; “he would not wish to do them harm.”

The warriors listened to this conversation with interest, although they did not dare to take part in it. Doña Emilia made her daughter a signal to join her; the latter obeyed, and tottered up to her mother’s side.

“Courage!” the latter said.

Then she drew herself up, her features assumed an expression of indescribable haughtiness, and her eyes seemed to flash fire, as she said—

“I order you to let me pass; you must obey me.”

She moved a few steps forward. The Indians fell back without breaking line.

“Do you refuse?” she asked, as she looked imperiously at them.

No one answered.

“Good,” she said, with a strange expression. “Recognize the power of the Queen of the Savannah.”

With a movement rapid as thought, she drew a vial from her bosom, and threw a portion of the contents upon the Indian who was standing motionless a couple of yards from her. The redskin uttered a terrible yell, raised his hands to his face, and, falling to the ground, writhed in fearful agony. The Comanches were alarmed. Although they had seen Doña Emilia’s motion, the vial she held in her hand was too small for them to notice it. Not knowing to what they should attribute their comrade’s fall, all their superstitious terrors returned to them. They rushed towards the wounded man; his face was horribly burnt. They uttered a cry of horror, and fled in all directions, having but one thought, that of escaping as rapidly as possible from the glances of this strange creature, who by a mere gesture could produce death.

“Come, come, my daughter,” Doña Emilia said; and dragging Doña Diana, who mechanically followed her, she ran off to the spot where the horses of the Indians were hobbled. The miracle performed by Doña Emilia was very simple. Being incessantly exposed to fall into the hands of the redskins, she always carried about her a vial of sulphuric acid—probably intended to destroy her own life, in the event of the Indians resolving to torture her, after their wont, if she fell into their power. The desire of saving her daughter suggested to her this way of displaying her power, and inspiring these stupid men with a terror of which she would take advantage. The experiment was perfectly successful.

The two ladies hurried down the hill, leaving behind them the unhappy man, who was uttering atrocious yells, and reached the spot where the horses were tied up. With a decision which could only be expected from an exalted character like that of Doña Emilia, she cut the thongs of two horses, lifted her daughter on one, and herself leapt on the back of the other.

“Thank heaven,” she exclaimed, with an outburst of delight, “we are saved!”

“Not yet,” a voice, gloomy as a death-knell, replied.

Several men dashed out of the chaparral, caught the horses’ bridles, and stopped them dead, at the moment when Doña Emilia was about to start. These men, who appeared so suddenly, and so unfortunately for the two fugitives, were the Stag and the warriors who had set out in search of him. Falling at once from a paroxysm of joy into the last stage of despair, Doña Emilia and her daughter endured frightful suffering, and in a second passed through all the agonies of despair.

But the haughty Spanish woman, struggling against her grief, overcame by a stoical effort the suffering which seared her heart like a red-hot iron; comprehending that she was overcome, that any attempt at flight had become futile, if not impossible, she disdained to continue the struggle, and giving her foes

a glance filled with all the hatred boiling in her breast, she resolutely dismounted, and going up to her daughter, who lay motionless before her, she raised her in her arms, and went up the hill again with a slow and measured step. What we have related had passed so rapidly, Doña Emilia had acted with such resolution, that the Indians stood stupefied, still holding in their hands the bridles, and unable to utter a word or make a noise. At length the Stag regained his coolness and presence of mind. Leaving the horses to be taken care of by his comrades, he ran towards the two ladies, who were already some ten yards distant.

"Stop!" he shouted to them, "Stop!"

They obeyed without a word.

"It is useless for you to ascend the hill again," he said, "for we are going to set out."

"I do not ask you for any explanation," Doña Emilia said drily; "you are the stronger, so act as you please."

"That is what I intend doing," the Stag replied, with an expression of dark fury.

"Oh, mother," the girl whispered in Doña Emilia's ear, "do not irritate this man, for we are in his power."

"He is a dog!" Doña Emilia replied contemptuously; "I despise his anger and brave his hatred; he can do nothing to me."

The Indian broke into an ill-omened screech, without replying otherwise to this dire insult. He pointed to the foot of a tree, intimating to his captives that they were to sit down there; then he went away, followed by his two comrades, and the ladies remained alone. Doña Emilia was too conversant with Indian habits to commit the fault which any less experienced person would doubtless have done. Sitting by her daughter's side, whose head rested on her shoulder, and whose hands she held firmly clasped in hers, she made no second attempt at flight, as she was well aware that the Indians never watch a prisoner so carefully as when they pretend to leave him alone. The Spanish lady looked sorrowfully around her, let her head fall on her bosom, and fell into gloomy and despairing thoughts.

The cause of the Stag's sudden departure was simple. Informed by the warriors who met him of the events which had occurred during his absence, his first care was to go to the Indian whom Doña Emilia had disfigured. The unhappy man was in a pitiable state; he was writhing in fearful agony, and uttering heart-rending cries.

"Is my brother suffering greatly?" the chief asked him.

"Yes," the injured man howled. "I am suffering horrible pain. That woman is most certainly the evil genius of our nation."

"Yes, but her hour has arrived; her punishment will soon begin."

"Oh, I should like torture resembling mine to be inflicted on her."

"She shall suffer a hundredfold more. My brother's tortures are as nothing compared with those I reserve for her. Is my brother satisfied?"

"Yes, I am glad to know that I shall be avenged."

"Is my brother still suffering greatly?"

"More than ever. If honour did not forbid a warrior killing himself, I should have already buried my knife in my heart."

"Good! What my brother cannot do I can, to render him a service."

"Will the chief consent to do me that service?" the Indian asked doubtfully.

“Yes, to be agreeable to my brother, whom I love, I would consent.”

“Oh! In that case the chief must not delay, for my agony is becoming more and more unendurable.”

“Be it so; let my brother prepare.”

“Stay,” the Indian remarked, “help me to rise. A Comanche warrior must die standing.”

“That is true,” the chief answered.

He bent over the warrior, seized his arm, and helped him to get on his feet. By an extraordinary effort of will the Indian succeeded in overcoming his pain. He drew himself up proudly, and turned to the chief.

“Strike,” he said in a firm voice, “and may the Wacondah protect you for the service you are doing me at this moment.”

The Stag drew his knife, and plunged it into the warrior’s heart. The blow was dealt with such certainty and skill that the redskin fell dead at his chief’s feet without a sigh.

“Poor wretch!” the latter muttered sadly, as he wiped his knife blade on a tuft of grass, and returned it to his belt. “I could not refuse him this service.” After this melancholy funeral speech the Stag began digging a hole, in which to lay his comrade’s body, as he did not wish to leave it exposed to the insults of wild beasts. The last duty accomplished, he went down the hill to rejoin his captives.

In the meanwhile the Indians had fled in all directions, suffering from a panic produced by Doña Emilia’s energetic action, but the two warriors sent by the Stag in pursuit of them soon caught them up. It took considerable time, however, before they succeeded in making them consent to turn back, and enter again the presence of a woman whom they regarded as an evil genius. It required all the diplomatic skill of the chief’s emissaries to convince them, combined with the influence which the son of Running Water, the most revered sachem of the tribe, had over them. When the young chief joined the captives, the warriors were already mounted, and drawn up a short distance off, only awaiting his return. The latter saluted them with a wave of the hand, and then ordered the bridles of the two horses to be removed, after which he went up to Doña Emilia, and pointed to the animals.

“Mount,” was all he said.

This order must be obeyed.

“My daughter and I will ride the same horse,” she remarked. “My daughter is weak, and I will support her.”

“Be it so,” said the chief.

Doña Emilia mounted, placed her daughter in front of her, and holding her tightly to her bosom, made her horse start without awaiting the chief’s signal. The Comanche smiled, and followed her with his detachment. Doña Emilia, though a captive, seemed still to command these men, who regarded her with superstitious terror.

Chapter XXVII

The Chief's Proposal.

Ordinarily Indians do not travel by night, and it required circumstances imperious as the present for the chief to resolve thus to infringe the customs of the redskins. In truth, Don Melchior's flight caused him great anxiety about the success of his expedition, and he was anxious to cross the Indian border, as he felt persuaded that once he had passed the river which served as the limit of the Spanish possessions, and trod his native heath in a country all whose hiding places were familiar to him, he would be comparatively safe from the pursuit which would not fail to be begun so soon as the abduction of the two ladies was known, and that would not be long first if, as he feared, Don Melchior had succeeded in escaping.

The Indians galloped the whole night through in the direction of the river, whose yellow waters at length became visible at sunrise. Without even stopping to breathe the horses, tired by so long a gallop along difficult and scarcely marked tracks, the chief ordered his warriors to ford the river immediately.

During the whole of the sad night, which seemed as if it would never end, Doña Emilia held to her bosom the head of her daughter, who was crushed by so much emotion and terror. Not for an instant did the courage of this extraordinary woman and true mother fail her. Not for a second did her noble character break down. She remained ever calm and impassive, not uttering a word of complaint, or showing the fatigue that overpowered her. The very Indians, who are such connoisseurs of courage, could not refrain from secretly admiring this firmness of mind and perfect self-denial.

Although the river was very wide at the spot where the redskins forded it, it was crossed without accident, and the Comanches at length found themselves on Indian territory. The detachment, however, did not halt; for the distance that separated them from the white men was not yet sufficiently great for the Stag. He led his warriors to a forest about four or five leagues off, whose tall trees formed a belt of foliage on the horizon. During the whole journey the chief constantly galloped at the head of the detachment, not appearing to trouble himself in any way about his prisoners, though the deep wrinkles that furrowed his brow and his constant frown might have led to the supposition that this indifference was feigned, and that he was thinking out some bold plan.

At about two in the afternoon the little band reached the outskirts of the forest, and boldly rode beneath its covert. The journey then became more difficult, and, before all, more fatiguing, through the roots, shrubs, and lianas which at each instant barred the passage, and which the horses could only clear with the utmost difficulty.

The Stag, however, without neglecting entirely the precautions employed by the Indians when they are on the war trail, in order to throw out their enemies, felt so certain, however, that the white men would not venture into the formidable solitudes of Apacheria, owing to the innumerable obstacles which would rise at each step before them, and, above all, through their ignorance of the topography of this country, the last lurking place of the Indian braves, that he wasted but little time in masking his trail, and continued to advance almost in a straight line.

After marching thus for about two hours, crossing ravines and scaling hills, they reached a completely unwooded spot, over which were scattered shapeless ruins, proving that at a doubtless extremely remote period the place had been inhabited. These ruins, spread over a very considerable space, preserved a certain degree of symmetry; the walls, still standing, showed by their thickness and the care with which they were built, as well as materials employed, that an important town must have stood here once on a time. In the centre stood a teocali which time had respected, on the top of which were the ruins of a temple, whose vast and massive proportions testified to its ancient splendour, which was now eternally fled. There was something at once gloomy and majestic in the sight of these ruins suddenly rising in the midst of a virgin forest. They were the last traces of a forgotten world, whose memory the present inhabitants of the country have lost, and trample on their dust with a careless foot.

The Stag had selected these ruins to camp in. The warriors therefore established themselves in this city, probably founded by the Chichimecs at the period when, compelled by the hand of God, they performed their great migration, building in the course of their mysterious halts those formidable cities whose imposing ruins are still visible in different parts of New Spain. The Comanches during their vagabond rambles about the desert had many times camped at this solitary spot, whose strong position offered them a shelter against the attacks of their numerous enemies, men and wild beasts, that incessantly prowl about in search of a facile prey. It was at the summit of the teocali, in the ruins of the temple, which had heard the death cries of many victims offered as a holocaust to the implacable and sanguinary Hiutzilopochtli, the god of war, that the chief resolved to establish his camp.

When the horses had been hobbled in an excavation at the foot of the teocali, the warriors placed the prisoners in their midst, scaled the bramble and cactus covered steps that led to the top of the artificial hill, and on reaching the temple, after lighting several fires to prepare their meal, they cut down a quantity of branches, which they intertwined so as to form a species of roof over one of the halls of the temple. There, at a signal from the chief, the two ladies were installed, who, however precarious this shelter might be, were glad to take refuge in it, and escape for awhile from the stern glances of their ferocious conquerors, and recover from the terrible shock they had endured.

Doña Emilia's first care so soon as she was alone with her daughter, whose weakness was extreme, was to lay her on a pile of furs which the chief, doubtless through a feeling of compassion, had ordered to be placed by the fire. The state in which the young lady was, was really alarming. The prostration which had fallen on her after the snare to which she had fallen victim, was succeeded by a violent fever mingled with delirious and nervous attacks, which not only threatened her reason, but caused apprehensions for her life; at any rate there was reason to fear that her health would never entirely recover from the shock given to her system by the terror she had felt, and the extraordinary fatigue she had endured during nearly twenty hours; in spite of the sort of brutal gallantry with which the chief had tried to come to her help by ordering his men not to hurry, and by trying not only to pay the captives the attentions of which his rough character was capable,

but by giving them all the relief he was able to offer them under the circumstances.

Doña Emilia did not know what means she should employ to calm her daughter's terrifying nervous excitement. Alone among savages, whom she justly regarded as implacable foes, wanting the remedies which were necessary for her poor child, she could only groan and hold her to her heart to prevent her dashing her head against the wall in one of these nervous attacks. Doña Emilia passed the whole night without sleep, constantly watching over the girl whose madness had assumed a startling character, and who no longer recognizing her mother, and unconscious of the place where she was, made the strangest remarks to her, and asked her the most singular questions with that volubility which fever produces.

Toward the close of night, at the moment when the stars began to disappear, the girl's frenzy gradually diminished; she closed her eyes and fell into a sleep which restored her poor mother a little hope and courage. At sunrise an Indian came in, placed provisions on the ground, laid a packet of simples by Doña Emilia's side, and withdrew without uttering a word. Several hours elapsed in this way; the redskins, while attentively watching their captives, left them constantly alone, supplying them all they required with a species of affectionate eagerness, but not troubling them with indiscreet questions or disagreeable intrusions into the refuge given them. Since their arrival at the teocali the chief had not presented himself to them, but seemed, on the contrary, desirous to remain invisible, while paying them attentions which revealed an assiduous care on his part.

Doña Diana's condition had visibly improved, nature, youth, and her powerful constitution had, after a trying struggle, eventually triumphed over the disease. Nursed by her mother with attentive tenderness, she at length became convalescent; but with health sorrow re-entered her mind, and the frightful position in which fatality had placed her appeared in all its horrible reality. She did not dare reflect on the future, for, alas, that was perhaps a terrible death amid torture, or dishonour a hundredfold worse than death. Hence a gloomy sorrow took possession of the maiden. She spent her days leaning over the wall, and with her eyes fixed on the imposing landscape that surrounded her looked despairingly around her, while burning tears, which she did not even think of drying, coursed slowly down her pale, thinned cheeks.

Mother and daughter remained thus side by side, not daring to confide to each other their terrible thoughts, awaiting the coming catastrophe which it was impossible for them to foresee or avoid. Days thus succeeded days without producing any change in their position; nothing had revealed to them the fate which the Comanches reserved for them, when on the morning of the tenth day after their arrival at the teocali, the Indian who seemed specially told off to watch them and supply them with food, informed them that the chief had arrived on the previous evening at the teocali, on his return from a distant expedition he had been obliged to make, and asked permission to speak to them after breakfast. On hearing this request, which was, however, made very politely, Doña Diana turned pale and shuddered with horror; she understood that her fate would depend on this interview, and spite of herself she trembled. Doña Emilia smiled ironically.

“Why pretend such great courtesy to captives?” she replied bitterly. “Is not your chief our master? As far as I am aware a master does not require to announce his coming to his slaves.”

“The sachem ordered his warrior to speak as he has done,” the Indian made answer. “The warrior has obeyed; my mother must not be angry with him.”

“I am not angry with you, Indian,” she said, less rudely, desiring not to alienate this man, who, ever since he served them, had displayed a species of rough pity. “I do not at all think of making you responsible for orders which you must neither discuss nor hesitate to carry out; still I will remark to you that as we are the prisoners of your sachem, as you term him, we have no means to avoid the interview he requests, and that, consequently, it is unnecessary for him to ask a permission which he can very well do without.”

“Good! My mother speaks well; hence the sachem may come after breakfast?”

“He can come when he thinks proper. We will receive him, as he desires it.”

The Indian went out, and the two ladies were left alone. “We are going to know our fate at last,” Doña Emilia said, with a feigned indifference she was far from feeling.

“Yes,” her daughter replied sorrowfully. “Heaven grant that a feeling of pity may still reside in the heart of this savage, and that the propositions he makes us may not be of such a nature that we must decline them.”

“Heaven grant it, indeed, my daughter! Alas, who knows what fate reserves for us! Perhaps you will regret that you did not die during your illness.” The girl remained silent for a moment, and then a gloomy smile played round her pale lips.

“Mother,” she asked, “have you kept your vial?”

“Yes,” Doña Emilia answered; “it still contains enough to kill us both.”

“In that case rejoice, mother,” the maiden answered, almost gaily, “we have nothing more to fear! Whatever proposition this crafty chief may make to us, we are always certain of getting out of his clutches, and finding refuge in death.”

“It is well, daughter!” Doña Emilia replied, as she took Diana in her arms, and pressed her passionately to her heart.

So great is the effect that a powerful resolution always produces, that the two ladies awaited the chief’s coming more calmly than they had hoped. They had scarce finished breakfast ere he appeared. The majordomo had, for this interview, doffed his Indian dress, and resumed that of the Mexican campesinos. This change denoted a resolution formed that he would allow no consideration to stop him. On recognizing him the two ladies uttered a cry, of surprise on the part of Diana, but of terror on that of her mother. She had discovered what she long suspected, that is to say, that her husband’s majordomo was a traitor. On entering, he bowed to the ladies with ironical politeness; his face was smiling, his manner firm, and his voice coaxing.

“I venture to hope, señoras,” he said, “that you will pardon a poor Indian.”

“Oh,” Doña Emilia said bitterly, “what a viper we have cherished!”

“Alas! Madam,” he answered lightly, “why employ such ugly epithets? Everybody in this world is obliged to bow before necessity. It was not, be assured, of my own accord that I have so long remained a stranger to you.”

“You are, then, really the chief of the men who carried us off, and it was you probably who prepared the odious snare into which we fell?”

“I will not attempt to deny it, madam,” he said.

“What harm have I done you, who have been, living for more than twenty years beneath my roof, where you were taken in through charity; you whom my husband loves and places entire confidence in?”

“A confidence which I still possess, madam. But why lose our time in vain discussions? The open step I have taken must prove to you that my mind is irrevocably made up, and that I shall not hesitate or recoil in the execution of the plan I have formed.”

“What you are doing is horrible; you requite with the blackest ingratitude the kindness with which my family has overwhelmed you.”

“That is the very word, madam,” he said, with a bitter smile; “but in order to cut short useless recriminations, and lay down the question distinctly, let me make a confession which will establish our position to each other.”

“Speak, speak! What frightful revelation have you to make to me?”

“I, madam,” he replied, drawing himself up majestically, and fixing on her a fiendish glance, “am the son of Running Water, the Chief of the tribe of Red Buffaloes, whom your family so cowardly and obstinately hunted down. Do you now understand why I hate you, and why you are here?”

“Oh!” she shrieked, clasping her hands in despair, “We are lost.”

Doña Diana was annihilated; she fancied it was all a fearful dream.

“No, madam,” he replied in his calm and metallic voice, “your safety is in your own hands.”

“My safety?” she asked ironically.

“Yes, madam, your safety. You are really conscious of the situation in which you are, I assume? You are thoroughly convinced that you are in my power, and that no human help can save you?”

“Yes, but God remains—God, who sees, and will save us,” she exclaimed fervently, “God who will foil your odious machinations!”

“God!” he said, with a hoarse laugh. “You forget, madam, that I am a Comanche, and that your God is not mine. Bow your head before the fatality that crushes you. Your God, if He exist, is powerless against me. I deride his power!”

“Silence, blasphemer! The God you dare to defy can, if He pleases, crush you in a moment.”

“Let Him do so then, and I will believe in Him.” And he raised his head and looked up defiantly at the heavens. “But, no,” he added a moment after, “all these things are falsehoods invented by the priests to hold men in awe. You are here in my power, I repeat, and no power, human or divine, will liberate you; but, as I said, it is easy for you to leave this place in freedom within an hour, if you please.”

“After insult, mockery, that is the right way,” she said contemptuously.

“I am no more mocking you now than I insulted you before; I am speaking frankly, and offering you an honourable bargain, which you can accept or refuse as you please.”

“A bargain,” she murmured in a hollow voice.

“Yes,” he continued, “a bargain; and why not? Listen to me. I hate your family, madam, with all the hatred that a human heart can hold; but you personally never offended me, and I have, therefore, no reason to wish you harm. Then, there is

another thing which pleads in your favour; why should I conceal it any longer? I love your daughter."

"Villain!" Doña Emilia exclaimed, as she rose and walked toward him.

Doña Diana threw herself wildly into her mother's arms, and buried her face in her hands, crying desperately.

"Mother, mother, save me!"

"Fear nothing, daughter," she replied; "this man can insult us, but he will never succeed in humiliating us to his own level."

The Indian listened to these words without a muscle of his face quivering.

"I expected this outburst," he said calmly; "but you will reflect; I repeat that I love your daughter, and intend her to be mine."

"Never," the two ladies exclaimed desperately.

"At that price alone," he continued stoically, "you will be free; if not, prepare for death."

"Yes, yes," Doña Emilia burst forth passionately, "yes, we will die, but both by our own will. Ah! You feel very certain of the success of your odious plot, but you have calculated badly, villain; the death with which you threaten us, we invoke as the supreme refuge left us. You are masters of our life, but not of our death. We defy you."

The Indian burst into a laugh.

"Look at your vial," he said, in his calm, cutting tone, "it no longer contains any acid. Yesterday some harmless soporifics were mixed with your food, and, during your sleep, you were robbed of the formidable weapon in which you had trusted rather too prematurely. Believe me, madam, you had better yield. I give you eight days to reflect; it would be easy for me to carry off your daughter, but I prefer receiving her voluntarily from you."

He accompanied these remarks with a mocking laugh, and left the room, without waiting for an answer, which the two unhappy women could not have given him, so annihilated were they by the frightful revelation which had just been made to them.

Chapter XXVIII

Preparations for a Rescue.

We will now leave the Comanche camp for a season, and return to the Hacienda del Río, belonging to Count de Melgosa, whither we have before taken the reader, and to which the count ordered the wounded man to be conveyed. When they approached the hacienda, the Canadian remarked to the count that perhaps Don Melchior, owing to his weakness, could not be able to stand crossing the stream, and the ascent of the hill, which was rendered more fatiguing by the steepness of the path that led to the front gate. The count began laughing.

"What is it that amuses your Excellency?" the Canadian asked.

"Well," the count answered, "I am laughing at your simplicity, my friend."

“My simplicity!”

“Yes; I fancied you better acquainted with strategics.”

“What do you mean?”

“Hang it all! You ought to know that a good general never lets himself be besieged without having the means to break the blockade when he thinks proper.”

“Ah, ah!” the hunter said with a smile, “I suspected it; but no matter. Go on, Excellency.”

“Does it interest you?”

“Enormously.”

“Ah!” he said, giving him an inquiring glance.

“Oh, simply from an artistic point of view.”

“Very good; well, I wish to prove to you what value I set on you, and what faith I have in your honour.”

“You were wrong to doubt it, Excellency.”

“I believe so. Then I will show you what no living being has ever yet seen.”

“By Jove, Excellency, permit me to remark to you that what you are doing is most imprudent.”

“With anyone else it would certainly be so; but are you not my friend?”

“I hope so, Excellency.”

“In that case, it is no longer imprudent, but merely a mark of confidence. Diego López,” he added, turning to the peon, “go to the right.”

“Excellency,” the latter said respectfully, “if we go to the right after passing that clump of larches, sumachs, and floripondios, we shall come to an impassable belt of rocks which border the river on that side.”

“Nonsense,” the count continued with a smile; “never mind; go on.”

Diego López bowed, and at once went in the direction ordered. The road had to be cut with the axe, and they only advanced step by step. After about an hour of extremely fatiguing toil, the band reached, as Diego López had predicted, the foot of an enormous and irregular mass of rocks heaped on each other to a great height. They were forced to halt, owing to the material impossibility of going any further.

“You see, Excellency,” Diego López said, with the satisfaction of a servant who believes he has got the best of his master.

“Yes, yes, I see,” the count replied, as he attentively examined the rocks; “be kind enough, Señor Clary, to hold my horse for a moment.”

He dismounted, threw the bridle to the Canadian, and said to the peon—

“Come hither, Diego.”

The latter followed him without a word, vainly torturing his brain to guess what his master intended to do. The count walked straight up to the rocks; on reaching a certain spot he stooped, and after a moment’s reflection, said—

“Thrust your gun barrel into that crack, and press.”

The peon obeyed with the passive resignation of a good servant, and after a few efforts a rather large block started and fell to the ground.

“Very good,” the count said; “go on; now this one.” A second stone, larger than the first, fell, and revealed the entrance of a cave.

“Now,” the count continued, “enlarge the passage.”

“By heavens!” the Canadian exclaimed, “That is prodigious, and we can pass through, horses and all.”

“Of course. Do you not know that all the haciendas of any size in this country were built by the first conquistadors of the country, who, being daily exposed to the attacks of the Indians, were obliged to dig passages of this nature, which allowed them, in the event of a siege, to procure provisions, or call in the aid of their friends and allies?”

“And you are not afraid to show this passage to me?“ the Canadian said, in wonderment.

“Why should I be afraid? I repeat, that you are a friend, and that I have faith in you.”

“That is true,” the Canadian replied; “but, no matter,” he added, with a shake of his head, “you have run a tremendous risk.”

“Nonsense,” the count continued, with a careless shrug of the shoulder. “With you?”

While they were conversing, Diego López and his comrades had worked so well that the entrance was now wide enough for the little band to pass.

“Come,” said the count.

They went in, and when the last peon had passed through, the count continued—

“Now, Diego López, put the stones back in their place as well as you can, for it is useless to show other people the road we have taken.”

The peons set to work, and in less than half an hour the entrance was once more hermetically closed, and so skilfully, that no one could have detected it from the outside. The passage in which the Spaniards found themselves was probably lighted by a multitude of imperceptible fissures, which at the same time renewed the stock of air; for although the entrance had been stopped up, it was not dark, and it was perfectly easy to breathe. Cut in the rock, the roof of this passage was lofty enough for a man to pass through comfortably on horseback—it was arched; the ground was dry and covered with a fine sand of a golden-yellow.

The count placed himself at the head of the little party and gave a signal to start. At first the passage descended rather abruptly, and from the noise the travellers heard over their heads, they understood that they were passing beneath the bed of the river; but gradually the ground rose gently, and the passage ascended with innumerable windings, opening out every now and then into long galleries, which showed that the first owners of this hacienda, as prudent people, retained several issues. At regular distances, they came to massive iron doors, which the count opened by touching a hidden spring, and which closed again after the travellers.

At length, after marching for about three-quarters of an hour in this inextricable labyrinth, the count stopped before a massive oak door, entirely covered with thick plates of iron.

“We have arrived,” he said.

“What do you mean?” the Canadian remarked, “Not at the hacienda, I suppose?”

“Yes, we are at the hacienda; and, more than that, we are at the entrance of the court leading to the corral.”

“That is impossible,” said the Canadian.

The count smiled and touched a spring. The door opened, and the Canadian repressed a cry of surprise as the count informed him they were really in an inner court of the hacienda, which was at this moment empty. The travellers entered, and then the gate was closed so hermetically, and so thoroughly formed a part of the wall through the stones with which it was covered, that in spite of the attention with which the adventurer examined it, it was impossible for him to discover its exact position.

"It is prodigious!" he muttered.

"Not at all," the count replied, gently; "it is, on the contrary, a very ordinary affair, only due to the skill of the workman who was intrusted with the job. But let us lose no more time here; Diego López, convey the wounded man to the green room. Do not trouble yourself about your horse, Señor Clary, it will be taken care of; come."

"Hang it, the beast is valuable; and were it only for the sake of the person from whom I obtained it, I should not like any accident to happen to it."

"As for that, be at your ease; your horse will be as well taken care of as if it belonged to me."

Completely reassured by this promise, the Canadian dismounted and accompanied his host into the house. The count's unexpected arrival and the mysterious way in which he entered the hacienda caused some surprise to his people, who did not understand how he could have got in unseen by any of the sentries in a so carefully guarded fortress. The reception the countess gave the adventurer was not merely polite, but even affectionate, and very different from the somewhat dry manner in which she greeted him on the first occasion. Don Melchior was put to bed; and when the count and the Canadian entered the green room, the doctor of the hacienda was attending to him. The young man was asleep.

"Well," the count asked, presently, "what do you think about your patient, doctor?"

The doctor, or, to speak more correctly, the barber, who undertook that duty, drew himself up, pursed his eyebrows, and replied gravely—

"This young man is as well as his state allows him to be. I have bled him copiously, which, I believe, will produce a favourable result; in two days, if no serious accident occur, I can promise you that he will feel but little of the numerous contusions he has received."

"Thanks, doctor, for your good prognostics; attend to this young man as you would to myself; I have the greatest wish to hear him talk as soon as possible, even if he cannot get about."

"I will give you that satisfaction this very evening, Excellency," the doctor answered. "When the patient awakes, his strength will have returned sufficiently to allow him to answer any questions you may think proper to ask him."

The count and the adventurer exchanged a glance of satisfaction on hearing this. The doctor's prediction was realized, for shortly before sunset Don Melchior opened his eyes. At first he was somewhat astonished to find himself lying in bed and attended by a doctor; but when the latter had told him in a few words how, on being found half dead, he was transported to the spot where he now was, his memory at once returned, and he earnestly begged the doctor to inform the count

that as he was refreshed by the bleeding and rested by the sleep which had resulted from it, he earnestly requested to see his saviour in order to thank him for the service he had done him, and to ask him to let him return as soon as possible to the Hacienda del Barrio, where matters of the greatest importance summoned him. The count and the Canadian proceeded straight to the young man, and after congratulating him on the fortunate change which had taken place in him in so short a time, pressed him to tell them all that had happened.

Don Melchior, on recognizing the count, who during his visit to the hacienda had displayed much interest in him, had no difficulty in recounting what had happened in the fullest detail, the more so because knowing the count to be on very intimate terms with Don Aníbal Saldibar, he hoped that the Spanish gentleman might help him in the plan he meditated. The count was overwhelmed with grief on hearing the misfortune which had happened to Doña Emilia, and immediately suspected that the daring abduction to which she had been a victim was the revenge of the Red Buffaloes, those constant foes of Don Aníbal. But there was some mystery about this skilfully arranged and boldly executed expedition. He suspected treachery, though it was impossible to rest those suspicions on one person more than another. His anxiety was the greater because it was probable that the ravishers, after their snare was successful, had returned to the impenetrable deserts which served them as refuge, and where it was impossible to pursue them, especially owing to the state of confusion into which the country was thrown by the decisive pronunciamiento of which Don Aníbal was one of the principal chiefs, and was stripped of any hope of cooperation from the Spaniards. The situation was serious, and the count did not know how to escape from it.

“Listen to me,” said the Canadian, who during the young man’s recital had not made the slightest remark. “The affair of which you are talking, is beyond the pale of the common law. Spanish troops will be of no more use to you than Mexican. You have to deal with redskins, do not overlook that fact.”

“We know it perfectly well,” the count interrupted; “but how does that advance us?”

“Pardon me, Excellency, but I am acquainted with Indian habits. During the fifteen years I have been traversing the desert in all directions I have had time to study them, hence I believe myself in a position to give you good advice.”

“Speak, my friend, speak,” the count exclaimed.

“Explain yourself, caballero,” the young man said imploringly.

“One of two things will happen,” the Canadian continued. “Either the redskins have seized Doña Emilia and her daughter in order to massacre them, or they have carried them off for the purpose of obtaining a ransom. In the first place they will not kill them for a week, because if it be a revenge, as you say, they desire to take on their enemies, they will sacrifice their victims in the presence of the whole nation assembled for a species of holiday, which will necessitate a great loss of time in convening the scattered tribes. In the second case, you have nothing to fear for the life of the ladies; and tomorrow, possibly today, they will send to the hacienda a messenger to settle the amount of ransom.”

“Hum! What you do us the honour of telling us is doubtless very sensible,” the count remarked; “but I do not yet see the nature of the advice you wish to give us.”

“Patience,” the Canadian continued with a shake of his head, “my advice is this. Tomorrow, at sunrise, I will start for the Hacienda del Barrio. If no Indian has appeared, after reporting the result of my embassy, and warning Don Aníbal of what has happened, I will have a talk with my friend Moonshine. He knows the Indians as well as I do, perhaps better. Well, if he shares my opinion, we will both start on the trail of the redskins, and they will be very cunning, I swear, if we do not discover them. That is my advice.”

“Yes,” the count answered, “your reasoning is excellent, and the plan you propose is the only one feasible; but what can two men do alone against several hundreds? You will be killed without any advantage.”

“Well, if you can hit on a better scheme, I shall not oppose it.”

“I do not say that I can. I merely believe that your idea, good in principle, is bad in its mode of execution; that is to say, where two men would perish, ten or fifteen would infallibly succeed.”

“But where will you find that number of men to volunteer running such risks?”

“I will be the first,” Don Melchior said warmly.

“And I the second,” the count said more calmly.

“You?” the Canadian remarked, with surprise.

“Yes, I, my friend,” he continued. “I have an old account to settle with the redskins generally, and the Red Buffaloes particularly. They are my enemies also. The marks of their claws have been for a long time imprinted on my flesh. Who knows whether I shall not avenge myself, while fancying that I am only avenging a friend?”

“Hence,” said Don Melchior, “we will start tomorrow at sunrise.”

“I alone,” the Canadian answered; “your presence at the hacienda would be more injurious than useful. Allow Don Aníbal’s grief time to calm before presenting yourself to him.”

The young man felt the force of the adventurer’s reasoning, and hung his head sadly, though without offering any objection.

“I will accompany you, señor,” said the count. “I trust that my intervention with Don Aníbal will not prove in vain.”

“What are you thinking of, Excellency? In the present state of affairs, do you not fear being regarded as an enemy?”

“Politics have nothing to do with the step I propose taking in your company, señor. Moreover, do you not remember that I have sworn never more to serve the Spanish government? I am, therefore, free to act as I please.”

“I have no remarks to make to you on that subject, Excellency; perhaps it is better that it should be so; besides, you know better than I do what line of conduct you ought to hold.”

“Believe me, my friend, that the one I am adopting is the best.”

“Then,” Don Melchior remarked, sadly, “you condemn me to remain here?”

“Yes, till you receive fresh orders, my friend,” the Canadian said good-humouredly; “but do not feel vexed, young gentleman; get well again as quickly as you can, and you shall enter on the campaign against the redskins in our company.”

“Do you promise me that?” the young man asked, with a start of joy.

“I swear it, on the faith of Oliver Clary. You are too brave to be left behind.”

The young man thanked him warmly, and feeling easier in his mind, he fell back on his bed, and was soon fast asleep. On the morrow at sunrise the count and the Canadian entered the chamber of the wounded man to take leave of him, but they found him dressed and ready to start.

"You know very well that you are not to accompany us."

"It is not my intention either," he answered.

"Still you are preparing to leave the hacienda."

"Yes, and probably at the same time as yourself."

"Hum!" said the Canadian, as he took a side glance at the young man, whose handsome masculine face, pale with suffering, had an expression of energetic will. "You seem quite resolved," he said.

"Whatever may happen, yes."

There was a silence.

"Very good," the Canadian continued; "wait for me here for six hours."

"What are you going to do?" Don Melchior exclaimed.

"On my return I will tell you: do you pledge me your word?"

"I do."

"Very good."

Without adding a word, Oliver went out, making the count a sign to follow him.

Chapter XXIX

The Revolution.

We will now return to the Hacienda del Barrio, in order to explain to the reader certain important events which had occurred, the knowledge of which is indispensable to understand coming facts. The conspirators, after the departure of Count de Melgosa, whose unexpected visit had so disagreeably surprised them, had immediately separated, not through any fear of the consequences which this visit might have for them, but, on the contrary, to arm their peons and adherents, and put themselves as quickly as possible in a position to resist any attempted aggression on the part of the Spanish government.

The Mexicans, instructed and hardened to war by ten years' fighting and their numerous defeats, were no longer the half-savage men who marched without order or discipline, impelled solely by religious fanaticism or the ardent love of liberty, and let themselves be bravely slaughtered by the old Spanish bands on the plains of Calderón. Hidalgo and Morelos, those sublime champions of liberty, had lost their lives in their generous attempts at emancipation; but their blood had not in vain bedewed that Mexican soil which the Spaniards fancied enslaved forever. Other chiefs, electrified by the heroic devotion of their predecessors, had risen in their turn, and, profiting by past errors, organized the revolt, and gradually, by their skilful and incessant guidance, the insurrection, at first timid and retired, extended, and eventually became a revolution.

The knell of Spain had rung: her power, ruined on all sides, crumbled away in hands too feeble to hold it. The Viceroys of New Spain, incessantly pressed, were involuntarily forced to try concessions—a fatal resolve for tyranny, which it is impossible to check, for no sooner is one difficulty smoothed than another larger and more formidable rises up. The supreme struggle began. The proclamation of Iguala, published by General Iturbide—that is to say, the independence of New Spain, union between the Spanish and Mexican races, and the exclusive maintenance of the Catholic religion—gave the signal for revolt. It was general; insurgent bands were organized on all sides.

Don Pelagio Sandoval summoned all the hacenderos of the province, and two days after the conference we have described, the insurgent forces, amounting to more than ten thousand well-armed men, infantry and cavalry, and having a battery of six mountain guns, quitted the Hacienda del Barrio, where their chief only left a weak garrison to hold the Indians in check, and advanced by forced marches on Coahuila. This capital of the province was a town of nine or ten thousand souls, built on an affluent of the Río Sabina, surrounded by walls, and; owing to the arrangements made long before by General Cárdenas, it was perfectly defended from a surprise. The progress of the insurrectionary army was truly a triumphant march. At each step reinforcements reached it, and the Mexicans everywhere took up arms. Leona Vicario, Castanuello, Parras, Nueva Bilbao, and Santa Rosa expelled the Spaniards, and proclaimed their independence by hoisting the green, white, and red flag, the emblem of the three guarantees of the treaty of Iguala, independence, union, and religion.

Don Pelagio Sandoval, not wishing to leave any enemy in his rear, suddenly attacked the Presidio of the Río Grande as well as the forts of the Agua Verde and Bahia, built on the Río del Norte, in order to protect the border against Indian forays, and after a vigorous resistance, carried them by storm. The insurgent general, in order not to embarrass his army with prisoners, contented himself with disarming the Spanish garrisons, and left them free to retire wherever they pleased. This merciful policy formed too great a contrast with the rigorous system hitherto adopted by the government, not to produce a good result, whose effect was immediately felt; many officers and soldiers, natives of New Spain, offered their swords to the insurrection, and passed into the ranks of the Mexican army. One town alone still resisted the general movement and remained faithful to Spain; this town was Coahuila.

General Don López de Cárdenas, at the first insurrectionary movement, called in all the Spanish garrisons scattered through the other towns, which he despaired of defending effectually against the formidable forces of the insurgents, and shut himself up in Coahuila, resolved to bury himself beneath the smoking ashes sooner than open the gates to men whom he regarded as miserable rebels, deceived and seduced by a fanatic priest. After proclaiming independence in all the towns of the province, and establishing the national government, Don Pelagio led on Coahuila the forces at his disposal, which, as we said, had been largely augmented by the contingents constantly supplied by the liberals, and now rose to the really formidable number of 25,000 men.

The Mexicans reached the town after meeting with no further obstacle than a considerable cavalry corps, probably sent to reconnoitre, and which, after

exchanging a few carbine shots with the vanguard, declined a contest and fell back. The town was immediately invested. General Cárdenas was not only an old soldier, but also a skilful strategist; in the prevision of a revolt, he had abundance of arms and ammunition at Coahuila, and so soon as he was shut up in the town, he had earth breastworks thrown up, and wide ditches dug. Hence a regular siege was about to begin against an enemy who was too well aware of the hatred he had aroused not to offer a vigorous resistance. The priest's first care was to trace a parallel, and throw up entrenchments. The flag of independence was haughtily hoisted on the jacal, which served as headquarters, and Don Pelagio summoned the town to surrender. On hearing the Mexican bugles, General Cárdenas appeared on the ramparts, surrounded by a large party of Spanish officers, smart as gold lace could make them.

"Who are you and what do you want?" he said in a haughty voice, addressing the officer who commanded the Spanish detachment.

This officer was Don Aníbal de Saldibar, whom General Sandoval had made his first aide-de-camp and major-general. Don Aníbal held in his hand his drawn sword, to the blade of which a white scarf was fastened.

"Who are you?" he answered; "I have orders only to address Don López de Cárdenas, commanding the town."

"And governor of the province," the general interrupted sarcastically.

"The province no longer recognizes the power of the Spanish government."

"Indeed," he said; "and pray what do you want with General Cárdenas?"

"I can only tell that to himself."

"Well, speak without further delay, for he is listening to you."

Don Aníbal bowed.

"I have orders," he said, "to summon you to surrender the town immediately to General Don Pelagio Sandoval, commander-in-chief of the Mexican forces of the province of Coahuila."

"Ah, ah!" said the general, biting his moustache.

"General Sandoval," Don Aníbal continued, "invites you to arrange an interview with him in order to discuss the terms of the capitulation."

General Cárdenas could not stand this any longer; the demands of the insurgents seemed to him so absurd, that he burst into a laugh, in which his officers joined. Don Aníbal was not at all affected by this unseasonable hilarity; he stood coldly with folded arms, waiting till the general thought proper to become serious again.

"Well, my good fellow," the latter said presently; "are you still there?"

"Certainly, General, and shall remain till you are pleased to answer me."

"Diablos, your pretensions are too exaggerated. Learn that I know no other army in New Spain but the Spanish. As for the cuadrilla of bandits surrounding the town at this moment, and the cabecilla who commands it, to whom you dare give the title of general, listen carefully to this: I do not treat with rebels, wretched slaves who have revolted against their masters. I consented to listen to you to the end, and not have you shot at once, but do not try my patience too far. Retire and be careful not to be the bearer of such messages in future, for a misfortune would happen to you; that is the only answer I can and will give you. Now, make haste to be off, if you do not wish me to give the order to treat you as you deserve."

“Take care, General,” Don Aníbal answered intrepidly, “the struggle you are hurrying on is an impious one, the cause you defend is a lost one. Through humanity, if not through conviction, spare the useless shedding of innocent blood, which will fall on your head.”

“Send a couple of bullets at that chatterer,” the general said with a shrug of his shoulders, as he turned to the troops present at this interview.

The soldiers obeyed, and several bullets, badly aimed, perhaps purposely so, whistled portentously past the ears of the brave hacendero. The latter, who had fully heard the order given by the general, did not attempt to avoid them, but merely removed the white scarf from his sword and threw it from him.

“Of what use is a flag of truce,” he said, “when you have to deal with hangmen who despise the law of nations. Farewell, General Cárdenas; I had forgotten the name which the inhabitants of this province have branded you with; you have just reminded me of it.” After bowing ironically to the Spaniards, he made a sign to his escort to follow him, and retired with a slow, calm step, as if he had nothing to fear from the man whom he thus outraged. The general had raised his head and opened his mouth, probably to give some terrible order; but he succeeded in restraining himself. He smiled cunningly as he looked after the flag of truce who had so audaciously braved him, and, as he left the ramparts, said—

“Come, caballeros, we will return to the cabildo. The bark of those scoundrels is worse than their bite. I trust before long to prove to them that they were right to christen me ‘the Shark.’”

Don Aníbal returned to the jacal, where Father Sandoval was waiting for him, surrounded by his staff. The general of the insurgents knew perfectly well that the summons he sent his enemy would remain unanswered, or, if he deigned to give one, that it would be of an insulting nature; but he thought himself bound to take this step, in order to have right entirely on his side, by forcing General Cárdenas, with whose character he was thoroughly acquainted, to commit one of those bloodthirsty acts to which he was accustomed. Such a deed would permit him to make every effort to carry the town and capture the general, of whom he purposed to make an example. Father Sandoval’s calculations were perfectly correct. General Cárdenas had not hesitated to give orders to fire on a flag of truce. He had done even more, as the Mexican officers soon learned from the formidable clamour that ran along the whole army.

During the skirmish which took place a short distance from the town, the Spaniards took six or seven prisoners—poor peons, not so well mounted as their comrades, and who had not been able to rejoin the army so speedily as they might have liked. These prisoners were taken into the town, and as ill luck would have it the general perceived them as he entered the cabildo. On seeing them he could not restrain his fury, but ordered that they should at once be led to the ramparts, and hung in the sight of the Mexican army. In vain did the officers try to dissuade him. The general was inexorable, and the poor fellows were hung without any trial. They heaved their last sigh at the very moment when Don Aníbal de Saldibar entered the jacal, and the army burst into a fearful clamour, which caused the Mexican general and his officers to shudder with horror and passion.

The siege consequently began under mournful auspices. Every insurgent who fell into the hands of the Spaniards was hung on the ramparts. General Cárdenas

had sworn to make a wall of corpses round the town. On their side, the Mexicans mercilessly massacred the hapless Spaniards whom the chances of war delivered into their hands. It was in vain that Padre Sandoval implored his comrades to spare their enemies. The exasperation of the Mexicans was at its height, and they remained deaf to the prayers and orders of their chief. At the same time the Spanish general defended himself like a lion. Every patch of ground gained by the insurgents was disputed inch by inch, and cost streams of blood.

The town had been invested for seven days, and as yet there was no prospect that it would be soon captured. On the eighth day, Father Sandoval received a copy of the treaty signed by General Iturbide and the Viceroy O'Donojú. This treaty stated substantially that Mexico was declared independent, on the condition of establishing a constitutional and representative monarchy, of which a member of the family of the Spanish Bourbons should be nominated King. The Viceroy understood the critical position in which the interests of the home country were placed, and despairing completely to preserve to Spain the possession of this rich colony, he skilfully turned the question, so as to save as much as he could.

This treaty terminated the war; but Father Sandoval did not know how to communicate the fact to General Cárdenas. After the menaces made by that general, and the summary executions that followed them, no one cared to go to him. Don Aníbal, ever ready to sacrifice himself for the common welfare, offered to proceed to the general. The latter, contrary to expectation, let the flag of truce enter the town, and even received him with a certain amount of courtesy, which surprised Don Aníbal himself, especially after the manner in which the first interview he had with him ended.

The hacendero handed the general a copy of the treaty, adding that he hoped this document would put a stop to the bloodshed. The general took the paper, which he read attentively twice, as if weighing all its clauses. While he was perusing it, Don Aníbal tried in vain to follow on his face the effect it produced; but the general's features seemed carved in marble, and no emotion was visible on them.

"My answer will be brief, caballero," he said, in a dry voice, but with an accent of gloomy resolution. "In my opinion, the Viceroy O'Donojú has no power to settle so serious a question as the independence of New Spain. The king, my master and his, delegated him, not to throw away this colony, but to keep it for him at all risks. This deed is therefore null, so long as the King of Spain and the Indies has not ratified it. As for me, caballero, I shall not resign the authority entrusted to me. A royal order alone will make me return my sword to the scabbard from which I have drawn it. Whatever the consequences of this resolution may be to me, I shall wait for that order. Good day."

The general bowed slightly to the flag of truce, and turned away as if to make him understand that his audience was over. Don Aníbal withdrew, and was conducted to the advanced posts with bandaged eyes, although treated with the utmost respect by the soldiers told off as his escort. The chief of the Liberals was most anxiously awaiting the return of his emissary, as he feared, with some show of reason, that the general, despising, as usual, the law of nations, had made him undergo unworthy treatment. Hence it was with extreme pleasure that he saw Don Aníbal return. Unhappily, the reply brought by the hacendero did not leave the

slightest hope of peace. Father Sandoval, though recognizing in his heart the wisdom of his enemy's conduct, resolved with a sigh of regret to deal a heavy blow, and made his preparations accordingly.

Chapter XXX

On the Trail.

Oliver Clary left Don Melchior's room in a very thoughtful state; the count followed him, not venturing to address him, as he seemed so preoccupied. On reaching the patio, where peons were holding two horses for them, the adventurer stopped, struck his forehead, and then turning to the count, said—

"You cannot come with me."

"Why not?" the count asked; "Where are you going?"

"How do I know? That young man's calm and resigned grief crushes my heart, and I am going to seek some consolation for him at all hazards."

"You are kind."

"No, I have suffered. I know grief, and pity the unhappy; that is all. Remain here; you will not be of the slightest use to me in what I am about to attempt; your presence, on the contrary, might be injurious to me and to yourself. You had better wait for me here. Watch that young man carefully and show him the greatest kindness. Perhaps, on my return I shall tell you more; I have a doubt on my mind which I am anxious to clear up. Heaven grant that I may meet the man in search of whom I am going. One word more: if I do not return at the hour settled, use your influence over Don Melchior to keep him patient. Farewell, I am about to attempt impossibilities."

And leaving the count amazed, and not at all understanding these mysterious and apparently unconnected remarks, the adventurer leapt on his horse, and galloped down the steep hill at the risk of breaking his neck twenty times. So soon as he had crossed the stream and found himself in the open country, the Canadian checked his horse's pace, turned its head in the direction of the Río Grande del Norte, and put on his considering cap.

The worthy Canadian, with the reckless temerity characteristic of the wood rangers, had formed the plan of setting out in search of a village or encampment of Indios bravos, as he felt convinced, after what had occurred a few days previously, that there must be one in the neighbourhood. By joining the redskins he would have no difficulty, thanks to his thorough knowledge of Indian manners, in obtaining information about the fate of the ladies, which would enable him afterwards to attempt one of those daring strokes to which he was accustomed, and which had so often proved successful.

The idea was good, but the execution offered extraordinary difficulties. A trail is a very awkward thing to follow in a desert or in a savage country, where there are no other tracks but those made by wild beasts. Still, a good wood ranger, when he has once discovered the beginning of a trail, however confused it may be, always

succeeds in reaching the other end. But the trail must exist, that is to say, some sign, however fugitive or slight, must warn the hunter in what direction the people he is pursuing have gone. But, under the present circumstances, that was not the Canadian's situation; the trail he proposed to follow he must, to a certain extent, invent, as he was entering the desert without any settled purpose, and entirely trusting to chance, that great performer of miracles.

The adventurer did not conceal from himself the difficulties of his enterprise, hence, he tried, as far as possible, to get chance over to his side. When he had forded the river and found himself on Indian territory, the hunter carefully inspected his weapons, in the probable event of his being obliged to use them; then, after riding for about a mile straight ahead, he threw the bridle on his horse's neck and let it follow its own impulses, and that infallible instinct which animals possess, and which puts human reason to shame. After a few moments' hesitation, the noble animal shook its head several times, stretched out its neck, and suddenly seeming to form a determination, started in a direction exactly opposite to that which its master had hitherto compelled it to follow.

"Good," the Canadian said, "I'll bet two jaguar skins to a muskrat's that we shall soon have some news."

And he let his horse go on, contenting himself with carefully examining the thick scrub he passed and the tall grass through which he rode with great difficulty, in order not to let himself be attacked unawares by an invisible foe. It was about nine in the morning, the hour most pleasant for travelling in these torrid latitudes. For about an hour the Canadian thus advanced haphazard, when suddenly a bullet whizzed past his ear.

"Who is the clumsy scoundrel turning me into a target?" the hunter said, coolly, as he halted and looked around; "Devil take the animal for missing me so stupidly."

A slight smoke, which rose a short distance off, from the grass, soon indicated to him the spot whence the shot was fired; without hesitation, he dug his spurs into his horse's flanks, and dashed in that direction, resolved to take a prompt revenge for this unfair attack. But almost immediately a hurried motion commenced in the tall grass; it parted under the pressure of a vigorous hand, and an Indian appeared. It was Running Water, holding in his hand the gun he had just used, the barrel of which was still smoking.

"Hang it, chief," the Canadian said gaily, "it must be confessed that you have a strange way of putting your question."

"My brother must pardon me; it is not my fault," the Indian answered.

"That you missed me," the Canadian interrupted him laughingly. "By Jove, I am convinced of that, for the bullet almost passed through my hair."

"My brother will not understand me. I did not recognize him. Had I done so, I should not have fired on the man to whom I owe my life."

"Nonsense! On the prairie that is of no consequence, chief; but, excepting the rather rough way in which you bade me welcome, I am delighted at having met you."

"My brother is now the friend of a chief; he is in safety on our hunting grounds."

"So it seems," the adventurer replied mockingly.

Running Water's face assumed an expression of sorrow.

“My brother, then, will not pardon an unhappy mistake, at which he sees his friend broken-hearted.”

“Come, come, chief, let us say no more about it; there was more noise than hurt. I am glad to see you at liberty again, and, according to appearances, in good case. You have not taken long to procure weapons.”

“The chief is on his own territory,” the Indian answered, with a flash of pride.

“Very good, I admit that, although I fancy you venture rather close to the Spanish border.”

“I am not alone.”

“That is probable. I do not wish to know the motives that bring you to these parts; that is your business, although I suspect a hearty Indian revenge behind it.”

An evil smile played round the chief’s thin lips.

“Vengeance is the virtue of the red men,” he answered in a hollow voice; “they never forget kindness and never pardon wrong.”

“I am aware of that, chief, and I cannot blame you, for every man acts according to his instincts.”

“Is my brother on the hunting trail?”

“I am on no trail, chief, I am rambling about for amusement.”

Running Water gave a distrustful look, for Indians never allow that anyone does anything without a motive.

“Then my brother is not going anywhere?” he continued.

“Indeed no, I am letting my horse guide me.”

“Wah! My brother is very merry.”

“It is the case, I assure you; and the proof is that so soon as I leave you I shall turn back.”

The Indian reflected for a moment.

“Will my brother consent to smoke the calumet at the fire of a chief?”

“I do not see any obstacle. Indian hospitality is great; and my ride has given me an appetite which I shall not be sorry to appease.”

“Good; my brother will have no cause to complain of his friend. Let him follow, and he will soon be able to satisfy his hunger.”

“Go on then, chief, and I will walk in your footsteps.”

The Indian turned away, and re-entered the tall grass, where the hunter followed him without hesitation. Their march lasted but a few minutes, and they reached the camp of the Comanches, which was so well concealed among trees and bushes, that the Canadian might have passed close by and not noticed it. The Indians display extraordinary skill in the choice of their temporary encampments on the prairie; the most skilful hunter cannot compete with them in the cleverness with which they hide their presence, however large their numbers may be. Hence the camp which the Canadian now reached was composed of upwards of two hundred Indians, and yet nothing led him to suspect that he was so near them.

A thing that greatly surprised the hunter was, that he noticed a considerable number of women and children in camp. The redskins rarely travel with their families, unless they are going to change their abode. The periods of these migrations is indicated beforehand, and the year was not sufficiently advanced for the Comanches to leave their winter village, or dare to venture so near the Spanish border. Still, as a good diplomatist, the Canadian, in spite of the suspicions that

began to spring up in his mind, seemed to attach no importance to this unusual circumstance, and did not make the slightest allusion to a subject which would doubtless arouse the distrust of his suspicious hosts.

The reception which the Comanches gave him was most cordial; Running Water especially, by all sorts of attentions, sought to make Clary forget the rather rough manner in which he had accosted him. The latter met the chief's advances halfway, and the most frank cordiality continued to preside over their chance meeting. When the breakfast, simple, like all Indian meals, and entirely composed of venison, was ended, the guests lit their pipes, and each began talking upon indifferent matters.

Still the Canadian did not let out of sight the motive which had urged him to enter the prairie; and while smoking, he thought over the means of quietly veering the conversation round to the point he desired, although he did not dare ask the chief any direct question, for he was aware of his craft. The pretext which the hunter vainly sought, Running Water very naturally supplied, in the following way. As usually happens between men accustomed to a desert life, the conversation gradually settled upon hunting, an always interesting and inexhaustible subject between Indians and wood rangers.

"My brother knows that the moon of the wild oats will soon begin," said the chief, "and that it is the period when the buffalo chase is most productive."

"I do," the Canadian replied.

"Will my brother hunt the buffalo?"

"I should like to do so, but unluckily I am very slightly acquainted with this country. The buffalo is an animal only found in herds, and a single man could not hunt it advantageously. My companions have left me, and I am alone, hence I shall be obliged to set traps during the coming season."

"A poor trade for a brave man," the chief remarked.

"You are right, but what can I do? No man can be expected to perform impossibilities. I regret more than I can tell you the loss of this season; but I am compelled to put up with it."

"The Comanches are the first hunters of the prairie," the chief said with emphasis; "the tribe of the Red Buffaloes is renowned; their totem is a buffalo."

"I have heard the skill and courage of the warriors of your tribe highly spoken of, chief."

The sachem smiled proudly.

"The buffaloes are our cousins," he said; "when we hunt them they know that it is because we have need of their meat and skins, and they allow us to capture them in order to do us a service."

The Canadian gave a silent nod of assent. He was aware of the redskin superstition, which makes them believe that each of their tribes is descended from some animal, and he considered it unnecessary to open a discussion, which could have no satisfactory result, on the point.

The chief continued—

"Why will not my brother the Sumach hunt in company with the Red Buffaloes?"

The Canadian shook his head, although he felt great pleasure at this unexpected overture, for the Indians are very jealous of their hunting grounds,

and the greatest proof of friendship they can give a man is to make him such an offer.

"For several reasons, chief," he answered; "my ammunition is nearly exhausted, I must procure more, and the road is long to the first town where I can obtain good powder. Moreover, you seem to be travelling at this moment. Who knows whether I shall be able to find you on my return?"

"Wah, my brother is a skilful paleface hunter; it is easy for him to follow a friend's trail."

"Yes, if it is not old, and a fresh one has not crossed it."

Running Water reflected for a moment, during which the Canadian anxiously awaited the result of his meditation.

"Let my brother listen," the sachem at last went on, "the hunt will not begin till the ninth sun from this; that is more time than he requires to fetch his powder and return."

"I grant it."

"Good! The Red Buffaloes are not travelling; they are going to a grand assembly of their nations to witness a sacrifice of prisoners."

"Ah!" the hunter said with capitally feigned surprise, "I did not know that the Comanches had made an expedition against the Apache dogs?"

"The Apaches are cowardly knaves," the chief answered; "they have buried the hatchet so deep that they would be unable to find it, and lift it against the Comanches. The prisoners are palefaces."

While uttering these words, the sachem fixed a searching glance on the hunter, but the latter did not blench.

"That is of no concern of mine, chief," he replied carelessly, "especially if the prisoners are Spaniards."

"My brother does not love the Spaniards?"

"I should think not, the chief must remember the place where he met me a short time back."

"That is true; my brother has not a deceitful tongue, he is the friend of the redskins."

"I think I have proved that to you."

"Good! Running Water is one of the first sachems of his nation, his word is good; let my brother go and fetch his ammunition, he will find the chief at the gathering place appointed for the tribe."

"Very good, but where is it?"

"All the hunters know it; it is the teocali of Zoltepec; will my brother come?"

"I will try, chief; but, as you know, men are subject to the will of the master of life. If I missed the appointment you so graciously make with me, you must not be angry."

"The chase will not begin before the eighth sun of the coming moon. The chief will wait for his brother the Sumach until the second sun before the hunt."

"Oh, in that case," the hunter answered, not wishing to press the point further for fear of offending the chief, "you can count on me, I have more time than I require to settle my affairs, and be punctual at the meeting."

Matters thus arranged, the conversation took another turn. The Canadian remained for nearly an hour longer at the Comanche encampment, and then took

his leave; the sachem repeated his invitation, and the two men separated, after many protestations of friendship, really well satisfied with each other. Running Water was delighted at having found an opportunity to pay the debt of gratitude he had contracted with the man who saved his life. As for the hunter, he was still better pleased, for he believed that he had obtained positive information as to the spot where the two unhappy captives were and the fate reserved for them. After leaving the Comanches, the Canadian started at a gallop for the hacienda, which he reached an hour before the time he had himself considered as the probable duration of his absence. The count, and especially Don Melchior, were awaiting his return impatiently. Clary, without loss of time, informed them of what he had done, and told them in the fullest details all he had picked up from Running Water.

"Now," he said, in conclusion, "I believe we have no other alternative than to return to our old plan; it is the wisest, and only one that offers a chance of success. Moonshine, with a dozen of his comrades, will get on the trail of the Indians, and—"

"But you?" the count interrupted.

"I have contracted obligations to the chief of the Red Buffaloes, which prevent my doing anything against them."

"That is true," the count remarked.

"So," the hunter added, "remain here, Don Melchior; within two days you will have a reinforcement enabling you to attempt the deliverance of the two most unhappy ladies; by acting otherwise you will only ruin yourself and them."

"Thanks," the young man replied, in a hollow voice, and burying his head in his hands, he took no further part in the conversation. An hour later the count and the hunter mounted, and started in the direction of the Hacienda del Barrio.

"The poor boy is very sad," the count remarked.

"I am afraid he will commit some folly," the hunter replied, with a shake of the head.

Chapter XXXI

The Jacal.

The night was dark; the rain, driven by the wind lashed furiously; the Río Sabina, swollen by the storm, rolled along its yellow, muddy waters, which were filled with trunks of trees and fragments of every description, with a lugubrious murmur. The town and camp were plunged in gloomy silence, only interrupted at long intervals by the mournful cry, "Sentinela, alerta," with which the sentries on the ramparts and in the intrenchments called to each other. At times a vivid flash, immediately followed by a deafening peal of thunder, lit up the horizon with a fantastic and transient gleam; then all fell again into deeper silence and more complete obscurity.

In a miserable jacal, built in the centre of the camp, which every gust threatened to blow away, two men, seated in equipales, in front of a table covered with maps and plans, were conversing by the light of a smoking candle. The jacal was the headquarters of the Mexican army, while the men were Padre Sandoval and Don Aníbal de Saldibar. Outside, two sentries, wrapped up in their zarapés, were walking up and down in front of the door, cursing the wind and rain in a low voice, while several horses, saddled and fastened to pickets, were champing their feet and pawing up the ground impatiently.

"You see, my friend," Don Pelagio was saying at the moment we introduce the reader into the jacal, "everything favours us. Heaven is with us."

"Yes," the hacendero answered; "but, General Cárdenas is an old soldier, accustomed to European warfare. I doubt whether he will let himself be caught in this trap."

"You are a perfect St. Thomas, my friend," Don Pelagio continued, "and doubt is your essence. The ruse I have invented is too simple for the general not to be caught in it. For the last two days my spies have prepared him by clever reports to fall into the trap we are setting for him; and, moreover, I count upon an omnipotent ally."

"An ally?" Don Aníbal asked, curiously. "Who is he?"

"The general's immense pride," the priest replied with a smile. "You cannot imagine how this haughty man suffers at being held at bay like a wild beast in its den by enemies whom he despises; be certain that he will eagerly seize the opportunity to chastise us."

"Hum!" the hacendero said, but slightly convinced.

"Come," the other continued gaily; "there you are again with your monstrous doubt. If pride fails us, my friend, we have ambition."

"What do you mean?"

"The general only came to America to regain his ruined fortunes and compromised reputation. The treaty signed between General Iturbide and the Viceroy—a treaty which, between ourselves, will not be ratified by the cabinet of the Escurial—offers him a splendid chance. A battle would restore hope to the Spaniards; momentarily re-establish the affairs of Ferdinand VII.; will make the king regard General Cárdenas as an indispensable man; will permit him to aspire to the highest dignities, and perhaps succeed O'Donojú. Do you now understand me?"

"Yes, yes. You have thoroughly studied human passions, and nothing escapes your infallible glance; but, perhaps, you have let yourself be carried too far."

"¿Quién sabe?" Don Pelagio said gently; then he suddenly changed the conversation. "You have received no news from Barrio?"

"None; which leads me to hope that all is well; were it otherwise, Don Melchior or Sotavento would have come to warn me."

"You know, my friend, that I have several times remarked to you that you place too great confidence in that man."

"I have ever found him faithful and devoted."

"You think so; but take care. You know that I am rarely deceived in my appreciations. Now, I am convinced this man deceives, and is playing a long studied part."

“My dear friend, several persons have said to me what you are now stating. I have watched the man with the greatest care, and never has anything suspicious in his conduct justified the unjust doubts entertained about him.”

“Heaven grant that he may always be so, my friend; and that you may not be aroused, at the moment when you least expect it, from your imprudent slumber by a thunderclap.”

At the same instant a dazzling flash shot athwart the sky, and the thunder burst forth furiously. The two men, involuntarily struck by this strange coincidence, remained for a moment dumb and amazed, listening to the alarm cries of the sentries as they challenged each other in the darkness, and feeling their hearts contracted by an undefinable sadness.

“It is, perchance, a warning from heaven,” Don Pelagio muttered in a low voice.

“Oh! I cannot believe it,” the hacendero replied, as he passed his hand over his damp forehead.

The general rose.

“Come,” he said, as he looked out, “that thunderclap is the last effort of the tempest, and the sky seems growing clearer. We shall have a splendid day tomorrow.”

“At what hour do you intend starting, General?” the hacendero asked him.

Don Pelagio looked at his watch.

“It is half past ten,” he said; “the camp will not be completely evacuated till midnight. We will set out at two o’clock, with the few men I have selected.”

“In that case, with your permission, I will retire and sleep till the hour for departure.”

“Do so, my friend; but mind and be here again at half past one.”

“That is settled, General.”

The two gentlemen shook hands affectionately, and Don Aníbal walked towards the door of the jacal. Just as he was going, the noise of several horses could be heard.

“*Quién vive?*“ the sentry challenged.

“*Méjico e independencia*,“ a voice replied, which Don Aníbal fancied he recognized.

“*Qué gente?*“ the soldier continued.

“El Coronel Don Aurelio Gutiérrez.”

“Let him come in, let him come in,” the general shouted.

“*Pase Vd: adelante*,“ the sentry said.

“Stay here,” Don Pelagio said to the hacendero. “This unexpected visitor doubtless brings us valuable news.”

The horsemen dismounted; their heavy spurs could be heard clanking on the saturated ground, and five men entered the jacal. Four remained at the door, half hidden by the darkness, and the fifth alone walked up to the general. It was Don Aurelio.

“How comes it, Colonel,” the general asked him quickly, without leaving him time to speak, “that you are here, instead of remaining at the post I assigned you?”

Don Aurelio bowed respectfully to his chief.

“General,” he replied, “I have strictly obeyed the orders you were pleased to give me. The division you placed under my command is at its post; but I thought it my

duty myself to lead to you these four persons, who came to my main guard, and requested to be immediately brought into your presence."

"Ah!" the general continued, taking an inquiring glance at the strangers, whom the darkness prevented him from recognizing. "Who are they?"

"They will tell you themselves, General. Now that my task is accomplished, permit me to retire and return to my post."

"Go, señor. Perhaps it would have been better had you not left it."

The colonel made no reply, but bowed and went out. Almost immediately after he could be heard riding away at a gallop. There was a momentary silence, during which Don Pelagio carefully examined the four persons still standing motionless. At length he decided on addressing them.

"Come hither, señores," he said, "and be good enough to tell me who you are."

Only two advanced. When they reached the lighted portion of the jacal, they dropped the corner of the zarapé which covered the lower part of their faces, and at the same moment doffed their vicuña hats, the broad brims of which fell over their eyes.

"The Canadian!" Don Aníbal exclaimed, with a start of surprise.

"Count de Melgosa?" Don Pelagio said, no less astonished.

The newcomers were really Oliver Clary and the count.

"It seems as if you did not expect us, General," the Canadian said gaily.

"On my word I did not," Don Pelagio replied, as he held out his hand to both. "I did not expect either of you; but you are not the less welcome."

"Thanks," said the count.

"Why, I thought you were dead, Señor Clary," the priest continued.

"Well," the Canadian said, "it was touch and go. You simply sent me to a wild beast. But, no matter; I managed to get out of his clutches."

"All the better. But you must require rest. Who are the persons accompanying you?"

"One is a confidential peon of mine; the other a prisoner whom Señor Don Olivero took," the count answered.

"Yes, yes," said the hunter; "we will talk about that scamp presently."

"To what fortunate accident may I attribute your presence here, Señor Conde?"

"A wish to see you, caballero."

"Ah, ah!" the general said, with a piercing glance, "Has grace fallen on you at last?—will you at length consent to join us? It would be a great pleasure to us, Señor Conde."

"You are nearer the truth than you suppose, Señor Padre," the count replied with a smile. "I am not on your side, as you pretend to suppose; but, on the other hand, I am no longer opposed to you; I have sent in my resignation, and, in one word, am neutral for the present."

"That is a bad position, Conde."

"Perhaps so, señor; but, for the present, I wish to keep it. Moreover, to be frank, I will confess that I have come more especially to see Don Aníbal."

"Me?" the hacendero exclaimed, as he stepped forward.

"Yes, my friend; but before I explain to you the cause of my coming, allow Señor Don Olivero to report to your chief the way in which he carried out the mission confided to him."

“Very good,” the hacendero answered, as he fell back a step.

“Come, speak, Colonel,” Father Sandoval said.

“Am I still a colonel?” the hunter asked.

“Hang it, as you are not dead, I see no reason why you should not be, especially as I am extremely pleased with your lieutenant, Moonshine, and your cuadrilla has done me eminent services.”

“In that case, all is well,” the hunter said joyfully, as he snapped his fingers, and coquettishly twisted his light moustache.

After this outburst of joy, the hunter began his narrative, to which the general listened with the deepest attention. When he came to the carrying off the papers, Don Pelagio interrupted him.

“Have you those papers with you?” he asked eagerly.

“Here they are,” the hunter answered, as he drew them from the pocket into which he had stuffed them, and laid them on the table.

The general seized them, and going up to the candle, carefully perused them.

“Oh!” he exclaimed, with a sudden outburst, “I was not mistaken; all is really as I foresaw; now I have him, and he will not escape me. Colonel, you performed your mission as a man of heart and intellect. I shall remember it at the first opportunity. Now go on,” he added, as he carefully placed the papers in his bosom.

“Well,” the hunter gaily remarked, “it seems that I made a better haul than I supposed.”

“You could not be more lucky.”

“All the better then. What you say to me, General, causes me the greater pleasure, because I shall probably have to ask a favour of you ere long.”

“It is granted beforehand, if it depends on me.”

“On you absolutely, General; moreover, it is a service I wish to render Don Aníbal de Saldibar, your friend.”

“Render me?” the hacendero exclaimed, in surprise.

“Yes, you, señor.”

The count laid a finger on his lip, to recommend silence to Don Aníbal. The latter, surprised at his friend’s gesture, was silent, as if involuntarily; but he suffered from a secret anxiety caused by this mystery, an explanation of which he racked his brains in vain to find. The hunter continued his narrative.

“As I had the honour of telling you, General, we left the Hacienda del Río in the morning. Our horses, fatigued by a long ride, only advanced with difficulty, and we were ourselves exhausted by the heat; moreover, it was already late, and the hour for the halt had arrived. At this moment I noticed a cave close by, and proposed to the count that we should rest in it, to which he assented. I entered this grotto, and after exploring it thoroughly, made my comrades a sign to join me. This cave, which was very large, formed several galleries. Forgive me, General, for entering into these details, which may appear to you prolix, but they are indispensable.”

“Go on, Colonel; I am listening with the most lively interest,” the general answered, though in his heart he wished the Canadian at the deuce.

“We consequently established ourselves as best we could, with our horses, in one of the most retired galleries. My comrades and the Señor Conde himself yielded to sleep, and I confess that I was about to follow their example, when suddenly the sound of footsteps very near the spot where we were cachéed, made

me prick up my ears, and drove away my sleep. I lay down on the ground, and crawled cautiously in the direction of the noise I had heard. I was not mistaken; we were no longer alone in the cavern; a man had entered it, and that man was an Indian. I recognized this fact by his dress, for he had his back turned to me. After placing on the ground a rather large bundle, this Indian looked cautiously around him. I held my breath for fear of being discovered, so greatly did this man puzzle me. At length, feeling convinced that he was quite alone, and no one could see him, he took all his clothes off, and darted out of the cavern like a startled deer. I could not comprehend it at all, and was not far from taking the man for a lunatic; but, when I saw him return, his paint had disappeared; he had merely plunged into the river to wash himself. When he was dry, he dressed himself again, but not in the same clothes, but in others he took out of the bundle he had laid on the ground when he came in. But then a singular thing occurred—my Indian of just now was metamorphosed into a Mexican!"

"What?" the general and the hacendero exclaimed in surprise, "A Mexican?"

"A Mexican," the hunter continued calmly; "and more extraordinary still, this Mexican I recognized so well that I could not restrain a cry of surprise. He heard me, and turned round with a start. Doubt was no longer possible. This Indian was Señor Don Aníbal's majordomo."

"Sotavento!" the hacendero exclaimed.

"Ah, ah!" said the general, "Go on, my friend. What did you do then?"

"On my word, General, seeing that I was discovered, I bounded upon him. I am free to confess that he did not seem at all anxious to be taken, for he offered a desperate resistance; but, thank goodness, I am tolerably strong, and in spite of all his efforts, I succeeded in mastering him, and brought him here, because his conduct appeared to me extremely suspicious, and the Señor Conde and myself wished to clear up certain suspicions which had occurred to us with reference to him. That is all I have to say to you, General."

The hunter ceased, apparently very pleased at having got so well through so long and difficult a narrative.

Chapter XXXII

The Prisoner.

When the hunter finished his narrative a gloomy silence prevailed for some minutes in the jacal. Outside the wind blew fiercely, and the rain fell in torrents. The smoky flame of the candle, flickering in the gusts, only spread an uncertain gleam over the pale faces of these men, who felt their hearts contracted by a sinister presentiment. The hacendero was the first to overcome the emotion he felt. With head erect, frowning brows, and features contracted by a supreme resolution, he walked rapidly up to the prisoner, and, pulling down roughly the zarapé that covered the lower part of his face, he gazed at him for a moment with an expression of grief and passion impossible to render.

“It is true, then,” he at length muttered, in a dull voice, “this man I believed so devoted to me is a traitor. I alone was blind when everybody around me accused him. Speak, villain, what have you done?”

“It is my place to answer that question,” the count said, as he walked forward and laid his hand on Don Aníbal’s arm.

The hacendero looked at him in amazement.

“You, Señor Conde?” he said.

“Yes, I, Don Aníbal. I, who have only come here to tell you a frightful secret, and am compelled to bring a terrible accusation against this man.”

Don Aníbal felt as if his heart would break.

“Oh!” he exclaimed, “What are you going to tell me, great God?”

Don Pelagio, who had hitherto leant his elbow on the table, and remained motionless and thoughtful, placed himself between the two gentlemen, and looked at them, in turn, with an expression of sorrowful compassion.

“Stay,” he said, in a loud voice. “In the name of heaven—in the name of our country—I command it! However terrible the revelation you have to make, Señor Conde, may be; however great your impatience, Don Aníbal, to know the full extent of your misfortunes, this is neither the place nor the hour for such an explanation; honour bids you both defer it for some hours. We must start immediately, for the hour has arrived. If we delayed for a few moments the fruit of all our labour and efforts would be lost. What do you apprehend? This man is in your power, and will not escape. You will soon be able to inflict on him the punishment which he doubtless deserves.”

“Oh!” the hacendero exclaimed, sorrowfully, “Suppose this villain escaped our vengeance, my friend; I feel a foreboding of some frightful misfortune.”

The count and the hunter looked down sadly. Father Sandoval gently laid his hand on the shoulder of the hacendero, who had fallen into an equipal, and buried his face in his hands.

“Courage, friend,” he said to him, softly. “God is watching. His justice never sleeps. Remember the precept written on the heart of every man of honour, ‘Do your duty, no matter what may happen.’”

The hacendero replied with a choking sob.

“You no longer belong to yourself,” the priest continued, more warmly; “your head and your arm are claimed by your country. Be a man, however great the sorrow that awaits you; draw yourself up, and become strong for the coming contest. Every man in the world has his cup which he drains to the dregs. Go, my friend, go where duty calls you; tomorrow you can think of yourself, but today belongs to your country.”

The hacendero, overpowered by this manly appeal, rose mechanically, pulled his hat over his eyes, and went off without uttering a word. The priest looked after him, tenderly.

“Oh!” he muttered, “How that man of iron must suffer to be thus crushed!”

Then he turned to the count.

“Señor Conde,” he added, laughingly, “you are my prisoner for four and twenty hours.”

“I shall not leave you till the business for which I have come is ended,” the count replied with a polite bow.

“Hilloh, my worthy lad,” the priest continued, addressing Diego López, who throughout the interview had remained motionless in his corner, with his eyes constantly fixed on the prisoner, “my provost marshal will save you the trouble of guarding that man.”

“That will be a great relief for me, Excellency.”

“Good. Go and tell him to come here immediately. The prisoner is securely bound, I presume?”

“Señor Clary himself made the knot, Excellency.”

“In that case, my mind is at rest. Go.”

“The more so, because I undertake to watch the villain in the meanwhile,” Oliver said, as he cocked a pistol.

“Good,” Diego López remarked, and went out.

“Are your horses fit for a long ride, caballeros?”

“Well, hardly,” the Canadian answered.

“Very well; you will choose among mine. Colonel Clary, your regiment, which you will find complete, is on escort tonight.”

“Are we going away?” the count asked.

“This very instant.”

The Mexican general clapped his hands, and an officer came in.

“Order your men to mount noiselessly, Captain. Are the horses shod with felt, as I ordered?”

“Yes, Excellency.”

“Good; we shall start in ten minutes. You can go.”

“Are we bound on an expedition?” the Canadian asked.

“Yes,” the general replied, laconically.

“¡Caray!” the hunter exclaimed, as he rubbed his hands merrily, “That is what I call being in luck’s way, arriving just in time for an expedition.”

“Which will probably be serious,” the general resumed.

“All the better; there will be something to gain in that case.”

At this moment the provost marshal appeared at the door of the jacal, accompanied by a dozen soldiers.

“Caballero,” the general said to him, “I confide this prisoner to you, for whom I hold you responsible. Do you understand?”

“Perfectly, General,” the provost answered respectfully. “Come, my men, seize the fellow.”

The majordomo was led away by the soldiers. During the whole time the Indian had remained in the jacal, he had been cold and stoical, as if what was going on around him did not affect him in the least. As he went out he gave a sarcastic glance at the company and smiled contemptuously.

“I must watch that villain,” the hunter said to himself, “he is surely meditating some Indian devilry.”

A noise of men and horses, followed by the clang of arms, informed the general that his orders had been carried out.

“Let us be off, señores,” he said.

They left the jacal. When the general and his escort had mounted, Father Sandoval placed himself at the head of the column.

“Forward, caballeros,” he said, in a loud, firm voice, “and may heaven be gracious to us!”

The horsemen started a gallop, passing silently and rapidly through the darkness, like the wild horseman in the German ballad. While they were crossing the camp, one thing greatly surprised the hunter, though he did not dare ask for an explanation. On all sides burnt bivouac fires, sending myriads of sparks up into the air, but he could not notice a single sentry. The most perfect silence reigned; men, horses, guns and baggage had become invisible; the camp was or seemed to be entirely deserted. The entrenchments were abandoned; no sentry shouted, “Who goes there?” no vidette arrested the detachment. In a word, the entire Mexican army seemed to have faded away in smoke.

The escort left the camp, and then the pace, already rapid, increased in velocity. They proceeded toward the mountains which rose gloomy and frowning on the horizon in the first gleams of daylight. A little in the rear of the regiment of lancers, of which it formed as it were a second rearguard, came a detachment of fifty soldiers. They were the provost marshal’s guard. In the midst of them was the majordomo, fastened with a strap upon a horse behind its rider. Sotavento, or the Stag, whichever the reader likes to call him, appeared to have lost none of his assurance or courage; his face was calm, and his eyes alone flashed at intervals, like those of a wild beast. On his right and left two troopers, carbine on thigh, carefully watched him.

They galloped on thus for nearly three hours; the sky grew less gloomy, and the outlines of the hills began to stand out upon the horizon. The detachment halted for a short time, on reaching one of those countless streams which intersect the desert, and which it was necessary to ford. On the other bank could be seen the last squadrons of lancers, entering at a gallop a canyon whose scarped and almost perpendicular sides were only covered with a stunted and sparse vegetation. With his arms fastened down on his chest, and his body attached by a strap, it seemed an impossibility for Sotavento to escape; hence his guardians who, as we said, did not let him out of sight, considered it unnecessary to tie his legs under the horse’s belly.

The majordomo, however, far from yielding to a despair unworthy of him, seriously thought of escaping, and coolly calculated in his mind all the chances of success left him. We must confess that they were very small. Still, the Indian was determined to fly at all risks; he knew very well that the grave suspicions would soon be converted into a certainty, and that when this certainty was once acquired, his death would immediately ensue. Death did not terrify the Indian; he had seen it too often and under too many shapes to fear it; but, if he died, what would become of his vengeance, which he had followed up for so many years with feline patience, and which he was now on the point of seeing satiated?

Hence, ever since the moment he was led into the jacal, all his thoughts were directed to one object—flight. Crouched up like a tiger on the watch, his eyes incessantly sounded the darkness, seeking the opportunity which did not offer itself, and which he did not mean to lose when it presented itself. This long expected opportunity he believed had at length arrived, and he made all his preparations to take advantage of it.

Although night was passing away and the first gleams of dawn were already beginning to spread across the horizon large pearly bands, which gradually assumed all the colours of the rainbow, the darkness was still so great that it was difficult to make objects out distinctly, even at a short distance. During the whole of the journey Sotavento had remained gloomy and silent, with his head hanging over his chest, and careful not to give the soldiers who watched him the slightest pretext to redouble their vigilance; but for all that he was not idle, and his pretended immobility had an incessant and obstinate labour. The Indian was quietly nibbling with his teeth, which were as sharp as those of a wild beast, the leathern straps which bound his hands. When the detachment reached the riverbank the thongs were bitten through, although his hands were still secured.

The provost, after sending a trooper to examine the ford, went across with one half of his men. Excepting at the spot where the soldiers traversed the stream, the banks were scarped and abrupt, and consisted of rocks piled irregularly on each other, and rising to a considerable height above the water. The order was given to bring the prisoner across, and the soldier, behind whom he was fastened, trotted up to the riverbank. The ford was too narrow for three riders to pass abreast, and hence only one of the guards accompanied the prisoner. The latter prepared for action. He understood that, if he did not profit by the opportunity chance now afforded him, he would not find another.

The horses entered the river, and were soon up to their girths in water. The soldier behind whom Sotavento was fastened, had quite enough to do in keeping his horse in the line of the ford, and, at the same time, raising his weapons, so that they should not be wetted; hence he paid but slight attention to his prisoner. All at once, at the moment he reached the middle of the stream, the soldier received a terrible shock, and was unsaddled and hurled into the river before he had time even to utter a cry. Sotavento had boldly leapt into the water, dragging the trooper after him. A terrible struggle went on for a few seconds between the two men; but the soldier, feeling himself lost, and clinging eagerly to life, undid the strap that attached him to the prisoner, and rose to the surface in order to breathe.

“Look out! Look out!” the other trooper exclaimed as he halted; “The prisoner is escaping.”

This shout produced disorder among the party, who at once galloped in all directions with their eyes fixed on the stream in the hope of pursuing the prisoner. But then a terrible thing occurred. The soldier who had been the first to give the alarm, felt himself suddenly dragged off his horse into the water, struggling vainly in the furious clutch of the majordomo, who had seized him by the throat and was pitilessly strangling him. With the rapidity of a wild beast, the Indian seized the knife which the soldier wore in his boot, brandished it over his enemy’s head and scalped him; then, casting the dying man from him, he bestrode his horse, waved the scalp with a triumphant cry, and making the animal quit the ford, in which the couple had struggled up to their waist in water, he went down the current amid a shower of bullets which dashed up the spray all around him.

The horse, held by a firm hand, swam vigorously down with the current, still keeping to the centre of the stream. On both banks horsemen were galloping, shouting to each other, and trying in vain to approach the river, which was

defended by impassable masses of rock. Still, if the scarped banks offered an obstacle to his pursuers, they equally prevented the majordomo from reaching land. His horse was beginning to pant, its strength was nearly exhausted, and it swam feebly. The Indian looked round him anxiously, caring little for the soldiers, but seeing with terror that the further he went the more difficult it became to land on either side.

In spite of the provost's repeated orders, the soldiers, despairing to catch up the fugitive, and perceiving the futility of their efforts, gave up the pursuit. The Indian was consequently alone; still, in spite of the certainty of having thrown out his foes, he feared that he had but changed his manner of death. At the moment when his horse was beginning to sink and beat the water with its forelegs, the chief uttered a shout of joy. In the very centre of the river was an islet easy of approach, and not more than sixty yards from him.

The Indian did not hesitate; removing his horse's bit, which was troublesome to it, he dived and swam vigorously toward the islet. The animal, freed from its rider's weight, seemed to regain its old strength, and, impelled by instinct, also proceeded in the same direction. A quarter of an hour after, man and horse walked together up the sandy bank of the island. They were saved!

Chapter XXXIII

Moonshine.

It was about four in the morning; the night storm had completely swept the sky, which was of a deep azure; day would speedily appear. General Cárdenas, leaning sadly over the battlements of the town wall, was reflecting, while his eye wandered over the plain and the camp of the Mexicans, whose bivouac fires were beginning to die out. A little distance behind him, aides-de-camp and orderly officers carelessly leaning on their sabres were waiting with ill-disguised impatience till their chief thought proper to leave the ramparts and return to the cabildo.

The general, we said, was reflecting. His thoughts were sad and gloomy. Provisions and ammunition, squandered by the officers ordered to serve them out, were running short; the garrison, tired of being shut up within the walls, were beginning to mutter, and would ere long complain loudly. Coahuila had been so completely invested by the Mexican army that, from the day the siege began, no one had been able to enter or leave the town. The general, consequently, was as much deprived of news as if he were five hundred leagues away from Mexico. The soldiers, accustomed since the beginning of the insurrection to live at the expense of the country people, plunder, and ill-treat them, did not like the confined diet to which they were constrained. Unpleasant rumours circulated among them, although it was impossible to trace them to their source. The officers themselves were discouraged, and desired the end of this state of things, which every day that passed rendered worse. The general, therefore, saw with terror the moment at hand when all would fail him at once, and he would be forced to throw himself on

the mercy of enemies whom he had supposed so contemptible, and whom he had taken a delight in exasperating by unlooked-for and objectless cruelty. Hurled thus from his high estate into a bottomless abyss, the general was suffering from one of those cold and concentrated attacks of fury which are the more terrible because they can find no outlet.

All at once the general fancied he could distinguished the shadowy outline of a man, who was approaching the ramparts with the utmost caution. Still this man appeared to care very little about being seen from the town, and only tried to conceal himself from the sentries, who might have noticed him in the camp. Some considerable time elapsed ere this man, who advanced looking back anxiously every moment, arrived within pistol shot of the ramparts. The general rose, and, making an officer a sign to approach, whispered a few words in his ear. The officer went off, and the general returned to his post of observation.

The stranger still advanced, apparently growing bolder the nearer he drew to the ramparts. All at once several men dashed out of a postern gate, and ere the stranger had time to attempt a useless resistance, he was thrown down, bound, and carried into the town by the men who had so cleverly seized him. Still, we are bound to mention that the soldiers experienced no difficulty in dragging their prisoner along; on the contrary, he affected to follow them with the most perfect readiness. The general, while waiting for the prisoner, walked up and down the ramparts; when he was brought up to him, he looked at him for a moment in silence. The stranger was a young man, with an intelligent and sarcastic face, tall and powerfully built.

“Who are you, scamp?” the general asked him roughly, “And how is it that you dare to prowl so near the walls of a besieged town?”

“Hang it all,” the stranger replied, in excellent Spanish, though with a marked foreign accent, “I was not prowling round the walls.”

“What were you doing, then?”

“I was merely trying to get into the town.”

“This is an impudent scoundrel,” the general said to himself, “but at least he is frank. And, why, pray, did you want to enter Coahuila?”

“If you do not mind, General, giving orders that I should be freed from these cords, which annoy me, I shall answer you with greater ease.”

“Very good; but I warn you that, at the slightest suspicious movement, I shall have your brains blown out.”

“That is your business, General,” the stranger replied carelessly.

At a signal from the general the stranger was unfastened; he gave a sigh of relief on feeling himself at liberty.

“There,” he said, “now a man can talk.”

“Are you disposed to answer me?”

“Ask me a question.”

“What is your name?”

“Moonshine.”

“A capital name for a night bird.”

“It is mine.”

“What are you?”

“Canadian, and wood ranger; but, look ye, General, if we go on this way we shall never come to an end. I prefer coming straight to facts. I have come to offer you a bargain.”

“What is it?”

“Oh, oh, General, do not go on too fast; in the first place how much will you give me?”

“Why in the first place I must know—”

“The amount, that is true; well, I will tell you—four hundred ounces.”(33-3)

“What! Four hundred ounces!” the general exclaimed, “You seem to me to be an amusing scoundrel; but take care I do not hang you, in order to teach you not to play the mountebank with me.”

“That is the reward for doing people a service,” the Canadian said with a philosophic shrug of his shoulders.

“But, animal,” the general continued impatiently, “what service are you doing me?”

“An immense one, General.”

“Come, explain yourself.”

“I am most anxious to do so, but you will not let me speak.”

The general had a knowledge, or fancied he had, of his fellow men; he remembered his interview with Oliver, and understood that if this man, knowing his reputation, ventured to speak in this way to him, he must have very powerful incentives, and feel very sure of impunity; besides, his own serious position made it a bounden duty for him to obtain information by all possible means. He therefore restrained himself, resolved if the Canadian was really laughing at him to have him hung at once.

“Well, speak, and the plague smother you!” he said to him.

“In that case, General, the matter is this. But pledge me first your word of honour that if what I am going to tell you is really as important to you as I fancy, you will at once pay me the sum I ask.”

“Very good; but if you deceive me you will be hung or shot—the choice being left you.”

“Very good; it is a bargain. Where is the money?”

“Do you suppose that I carry four hundred ounces about me?”

“Hang it, what is to be done?” the Canadian said, scratching his head.

“Stay,” the general said, as he showed him two diamond rings, “these are worth nearly double the sum you ask. Are you satisfied?”

“On your word, now? Well, I will risk it. Well, listen. This night I had sheltered myself as well as I could about three or four leagues from here, for the purpose of camping. Unfortunately for me, the storm came on, and compelled me to seek a safer shelter.”

“Cut it short.”

“I will, General. The night was so dark that, not knowing the country, I lost my way, and got into the very centre of the Mexican camp.”

“Ah, ah! And I suppose they gave you a warm reception?”

“They gave me no reception at all, General.”

“What? Did they turn you out?”

“Who turn me out?”

“Hang it, how do I know? The sentries, perhaps.”

“Why, General, that is the very point; the camp is deserted; the Mexican army has disappeared.”

The general gave a bound of surprise.

“Are you mocking me, scoundrel?” he shouted violently; “Are you aware whom you are speaking to when you come to tell me such falsehoods?”

“Hang it, General, it is easy to assure yourself whether I speak the truth, by going to see. However, it appears that the Mexicans were in a hurry to be off, for they left behind them cannon, forage—everything, in a word.”

“That is strange,” the general muttered, as he fixed on the Canadian a glance that seemed trying to read his very heart’s secrets, which the hunter sustained without evincing the slightest confusion, “that is strange,” he repeated; “and do you not know the cause of this precipitate departure?”

“How should I know it? I am a stranger. Perhaps, though—but no, they cannot know it yet, as I expected to obtain a good reception from them by telling them of it.”

The hunter spoke with such simple frankness, his face displayed such candour, that the general had not for a moment a thought of suspecting him; on the contrary, he listened to him with the most earnest attention.

“What more?” he asked eagerly.

“What, do you not know it?”

“It seems not.”

“And yet it has caused a regular disturbance. It is reported that General Iturbide has been surprised by the Viceroy’s troops and taken prisoner, after an obstinate resistance, so that the insurrection is once again subdued.”

At this moment an officer, who had gone off with several others to obtain information about the Canadian’s statement, ran up breathless.

“General,” he said, “what this man has told you is true; the Mexican army has abandoned its camp with such haste that hardly anything has been removed.”

“Then,” said the hunter, “I have earned my money, General?”

“Yes,” he answered, as he handed the Canadian the rings, which he carefully placed in his bosom. “But,” he added, as he looked at him fixedly, and laid a stress on every word, “as you might, after all, be a traitor and clever spy, you will remain here till we obtain more thorough information. You appear to me to be much sharper than you pretend, and your head shall answer for your sincerity.”

“I shall be very glad to remain here,” the hunter replied carelessly; “here or elsewhere makes little difference to me. Still I do not quite understand how I can be a traitor, since you recognize the truth of what I have told you.”

Moonshine allowed himself to be led away without the slightest emotion, and the general mounted his horse, in order to assure himself of the certainty of the facts announced to him. The camp was most thoroughly deserted, not a man or horse remained in it. Everything testified to the precipitation with which the Mexicans had retired. They had attempted to carry off a few guns and baggage waggons; but, doubtless discouraged by the difficulties they had to overcome, and probably demoralized by some crushing news, they had left guns and train scattered in all directions. Tumbrils filled with ammunition, arms, stores, even

provisions, were thrown about in disorder, as if they had at first intended to remove them, but, pressed by time, had been forced to leave them behind.

The road followed by the Mexican army was perfectly visible, not only by the deep marks on the saturated ground, but also by the utensils of every description, uniforms, and arms scattered on the road. It was no longer a retreat, but a flight. The general tried in vain to seek the clue to this insoluble enigma. The chief of the Mexican army could not have had the idea of laying a trap for him. Everything contradicted this supposition; it was not admissible that an experienced soldier, for the purpose of deceiving his enemy, would consent to abandon to him his guns, ammunition, and even provisions; such a trick would have been most clumsy, since it would provide the Spaniards with all they wanted, as the Mexicans must be perfectly aware.

It was more simple to believe that what the hunter said was true; that General Iturbide has been defeated and made a prisoner by the Spanish troops, and that the Mexicans, terrified by this disastrous news, had been assailed by a panic and disbanded, seeking their safety in flight, as had happened several times already during the course of the war. Still, the general in chief, as a prudent and experienced man, would not risk anything till he had heard the opinions of his officers. After giving the requisite orders for a guard to be placed in the camp, he galloped back to the town and summoned a council of war. Moonshine was summoned before the council, and was heard again. The hunter repeated, without the variation of a syllable, what he had already told the general.

This deposition produced a marked effect on the members of the council. Each was of opinion that they must at once start in pursuit of the fugitives, in order not to allow them time to recover from their terror and reassemble. This was the general's opinion too; still, under circumstances of such gravity, he had desired to avoid responsibility, and appear constrained to yield to the wishes of his officers. As generally happens in such cases, the Spaniards passed from a state of the utmost dejection to the greatest braggadocio. The Mexicans, who had so long caused them to tremble, were only scoundrels, unworthy to contend with brave men, and they could be brought to order with the flat of the sabre.

The general, considering it useless to leave a strong garrison in the town, as the enemy had retired, and not wishing, in the case of the Mexicans making a stand, to advance without an imposing force, ordered two regiments of cavalry to mount, each trooper having an infantry man on his crupper, and took two field guns with him. This small army amounted to about five thousand men, more than sufficient to pursue and destroy demoralized bands, who would probably attempt no defence and be easily cut up. When all was ready for the start, General Cárdenas gave orders to bring up the Canadian, who had first brought him the happy news of the enemy's flight. The latter arrived, accompanied by the officer to whom he had been given in charge. The general smiled on the hunter.

"Listen to me," he said to him, "you appear a man of sense. You will come with us."

"What to do, General?" the hunter answered coldly; "I suppose you do not want me anymore?"

"I should like to have you near me."

"In order to blow out my brains, if you think proper to do so, eh?"

“That is possible; but come, notwithstanding.”

“That would not be fair, General; I have honestly kept to my bargain. It is not my fault if, instead of quietly remaining here, you think proper to roam about the country at the risk of something happening.”

“Then your advice would be that I should remain here?” the general said to him, with a searching glance.

“I have no advice to give you, General; I am neither a soldier nor an officer, and your affairs do not concern me. I tell you my opinion, that is all.”

“But you are a wood ranger?” he continued, after a moment’s reflection.

“Yes, General, and nothing else.”

“In that case, you will make a famous scout.”

“You want to make a second bargain with me, I think.”

“Perhaps so. Do you refuse?”

“I am not at liberty either to accept or decline. You have the power on your side, and I am forced to obey.”

“I like to hear you talk in that way. Perhaps you can find the enemy for me?”

The hunter detected the snare.

“Hang it!” he said simply, “As a wood ranger I can easily follow a trail. Put me on the traces of the Mexicans, and if they have not run to earth like prairie dogs, or flown away like eagles, there are heavy odds in favour of my bringing you up with them.”

The general reflected.

“Listen to me,” he said directly after, “I trust to you. If you serve me faithfully, you shall be nobly rewarded; if you deceive me, you will die.”

“I do not understand you; I will try to bring you up with the people you are looking for; but I cannot pledge myself to more, as the rest concerns you.”

“That is all I ask.”

“On those conditions I am your man.”

“Come along, then,” the general continued; “but,” he added, looking fixedly at him, “remember that you risk your head; at the slightest suspicion I will have you strung up without the least hesitation.”

The Canadian merely shrugged his shoulders in answer to this threat, smiled craftily, mounted a horse that was brought him, coolly placed himself on the general’s right hand, and at the word of command the small corps left the town in good order. So soon as it reached the plain, it proceeded towards the Mexican camp, curiously watched by all the inhabitants of Coahuila, who had flocked to the ramparts to witness the departure of the Spaniards, and who, in all probability, formed internal vows never to see them again.

Chapter XXXIV

The Teocali.

Sotavento was completely exhausted by the efforts he had been compelled to make in reaching the islet on which he had so luckily found a refuge. For nearly an hour he lay with his eyes closed and in a half fainting state. When his strength had gradually returned, when his blood began to circulate more freely and his ideas regained their equilibrium, he thought of the horse, which, in his present situation, became the more precious to him, as the animal alone could save him.

The poor brute had halted a few paces from its master with hanging head and piteous look. The Indian rose, picked up a pebble, went to the horse coaxingly, and began vigorously rubbing all parts of its body, after which operation he dried it with a wisp of grass. The horse perceiving the comfort this produced, whinnied with pleasure as it rubbed its intelligent head against the Indian's shoulder, and then began eagerly browsing the grass which grew profusely in this sequestered spot.

"Come," Sotavento muttered with visible satisfaction, "this poor brute has had a luckier escape than I expected; it has bottom, and will be all right after a few hours' rest."

Certain of finding his steed again when he wanted it, he let it browse in peace, and went off to examine the islet and find out the exact nature of his position, whether good or bad. He could not think of eating, for he was utterly without provisions, but that troubled him very slightly. The Indians, like all nomadic races, are accustomed to endure without complaint, and almost without noticing them, privations which would render a European desperate and incapable of getting out of the scrape. The only weapon the Stag possessed was the knife he took from the soldier whom he had scalped; and hence he must display the greatest prudence, and carefully avoid a meeting with either men or wild beasts.

The islet on which he found himself was rather large and completely covered with wood. The Indian walked its entire length; but on reaching the end he uttered a cry of disappointment, for he noticed a portage, that is to say, a line of rocks crossed the whole width of the river, and formed an impassable crest of breakers; hence he could not dream of gaining the mainland on that side. Had he been alone he would have probably tried, and by his skill and strength have succeeded in reaching land by leaping from one rock to another; but he would not abandon his horse.

On the American savannahs a man unarmed and without a horse is hopelessly lost. Sotavento was aware of this, hence the thought did not occur to him of going away alone. He had crossed the whole length of the isle, and now resolved to go round it. It was a rough job to be undertaken by a man who had not taken any food for twenty-four hours, and whose strength was exhausted by long moral and physical fatigue; still his salvation depended on his resolution, and he did not hesitate. His search was protracted, and for a lengthy period sterile; he walked slowly along the sand with his eyes fixed on the opposite bank, seeking, without desponding, a spot where his horse could stand and climb the scarp with no excessive difficulty. At last he noticed at about the centre of the isle a place where the water was much clearer than elsewhere; it was a shallow ford, for the sand forming the riverbed was visible. He boldly entered the water and walked forward; he was not mistaken; he had really found a wide ford whose depth did not exceed two feet.

This discovery was most lucky; but this was not enough; he must assure himself whether the slope of the opposite bank was not too steep for his horse's hoofs. The Indian continued his march and crossed the river. Then he saw what he had been unable to discover from the isle—a mass of rock projected some distance into the stream and formed an elbow, behind which opened a species of haven, ascending to the top of the cliff by an almost insensible incline. The deeply formed marks in the sand indicated that this was a watering place to which wild beasts proceeded to drink at night. People say that a slice of luck never comes alone; Sotavento had a proof of this on the present occasion, for the ford and road were on the side of the stream to which he would have to cross in order to join his tribe. Henceforth at his ease, and certain of rejoining his friends, the Stag returned to the isle.

The sun had risen a long time, and the heat was beginning to grow intolerable. The Indian, who was in no hurry, resolved to let the great heat pass and not start till toward evening; moreover, the violent exercise he had taken in seeking a passage had greatly fatigued him, and he needed rest. When he rubbed down his horse, he had unbuckled the girths and removed the saddle, which he threw on the grass without looking at it. On his return, at the moment when he sought a convenient spot for sleeping, his eyes fell accidentally on this saddle, and he noticed an alforja, or a species of double canvas pocket, which every Mexican carries with him when travelling, which he had not observed, for the simple reason that these bags, fastened behind the saddle, were concealed by a blanket and sheepskin, which almost entirely covered them.

The poor soldier whom the Indian had killed carried in these alforjas all his wretched property, flint and steel, and tobacco, precious things for the fugitive; but what caused him greater pleasure still, there was nearly a yard of tasajo, meat dried in the sun, as well as a dozen biscuits, and a large lump of goat's cheese. All this was wet though, it is true; but what did the Indian care for this, when he was half dead of hunger.

Instead of sleeping, as he had originally intended, Sotavento spread out all the provisions on the ground to let them dry in the sun, which was effected in less than ten minutes, collected dry leaves, lit a fire, roasted his tasajo, and began eating as Indians eat when they have long gone without food, that is to say, with no thought of the morrow. He devoured all his provisions at one meal; then, his hunger appeased, he filled his pipe, and began smoking with the beatitude and satisfaction of a man whose life has hung by a thread, and who has only been saved by a miracle.

Sotavento thus spent the greater part of the day in a gentle *far niente*, smoking, sleeping, and ruminating plans of vengeance, for he constantly thought of the two hapless prisoners he had left at the teocali, whom he was most anxious to rejoin now that he had escaped such imminent danger. When the sun began to elongate enormously the shadows of the trees, and its oblique beams had lost nearly all their heat, the Indian considered it time to start; horse and rider, well fed and rested, were in a condition to ride a long distance. Sotavento got up, saddled his horse, and leading it by the bridle to save it unnecessary fatigue, waded through the ford; when he reached the other bank, he took a parting glance of gratitude at this isle, which had offered him such pleasant shelter. Then he mounted, and

whispering to his horse the word “Santiago,” he set out, as if borne on the wings of the wind, in the direction of the desert.

It was not till nine o’clock of the next evening that he reached the ford of the Río del Norte. He crossed, let his horse breathe for a while, and henceforth certain that the enemy could not catch him up, he continued his desperate ride across the savannah. Still, in spite of his diligence, the Indian did not reach the teocali until the third evening after his flight. During his absence the number of his comrades had greatly increased. The messenger he had sent to the village after the capture of Doña Emilia had returned, bringing with him all the male and female members of the tribe whom pressing business did not detain at the atepetl. The Indians were curious to witness the punishment of the prisoners. With them it was an act of justice they were about to perform, for the vengeance they had pursued for so many years was on the point of being consummated.

Sotavento’s first care, on reaching the teocali, was to inquire after his prisoners; they were still calm and resigned. The chief, in his heart, was vexed at seeing so many warriors assembled; he, however, concealed his dissatisfaction, and, on the contrary, feigned great joy, intending, if circumstances demanded it, to act vigorously; but wishing temporarily to remain neutral, lest he should arouse the suspicious susceptibility of his comrades, and make them distrustful about the plans he was meditating. The Stag knew that, in case of necessity, he could claim the support and assistance of the young warriors of the tribe, and that he would only have to contend with the old sachems, in whose hearts no feeling but that of revenge any longer existed.

The council of the chiefs was assembled at the moment when he arrived, and he at once proceeded to it. The sachems received him with great marks of distinction, and congratulated him on the fortunate result of his expedition; then they informed him of the measures decided on with respect to the prisoners. These were simple and terrible; the two ladies would be fastened to the stake on the next day, tortured for four hours, and then flayed alive and burnt. The Stag did not wince, he listened to these fearful details without manifesting the slightest emotion; but when the president of the council, who was no other than his father, had imparted to him these resolutions, he asked leave to speak, which was granted him. Then, in an artful harangue, perfectly suited to the intellect of the men who surrounded him, the chief adroitly went over, all the services he had rendered the tribe; the long exile to which he had been condemned in order to insure the success of his plans; the countless difficulties he had had to overcome not to arouse the suspicion of those whom he was betraying; what trouble and care he had been obliged to take in at length securing the captives. He insinuated that no reward had been offered him, although he had a right to claim one; that, according to the Indian fashion, women become the property of those who carry them off; that, consequently, the prisoners belonged to him, and that he alone had the right to decide their fate; but that, if he claimed this right at the moment, it was not for the sake of thwarting the decision of the council, but, on the contrary, to ensure the general vengeance, and render it more exemplary.

The chiefs, who at first listened to this address with marked dissatisfaction, applauded the unexpected finale, and urged the Stag to explain himself. The latter,

inwardly satisfied with the effect his remarks produced, only allowed himself to be pressed just long enough to excite the general curiosity more.

"What good is it torturing these two squaws in such a way? Is that the manner in which you would take your revenge? It would be ridiculous, and last but a few hours; and I propose something better. These women are white, rich, and accustomed to all the refinements of luxury which civilization procures; deprive them of all this, not by killing them, but by letting them live in a condition a thousandfold worse than death. However cruel the palefaces may be, they love their children as we love ours. This woman, whom the people of her own colour call Doña Emilia, whom we call the Queen of the Savannah, on account of all the wrongs she has dealt to us, adores her daughter. Order this girl to marry a chief of the tribe, and force her mother to consent to this union. Once the wife of a chief, this haughty Spaniard will suffer tortures a hundred times more terrible than those she would endure if fastened to the stake. The mother, witness of her daughter's suffering and unable to calm or mitigate it, will suffer unusual and incessant grief, which will be the more cruel as she can have no hope. Do you not think that such vengeance is preferable to what you proposed?"

The chiefs applauded enthusiastically; Running Water alone shook his head dubiously.

"That race is intractable," he said, "and nothing can tame it; these women will not consent, they will not accept a proposition which must appear to them dishonouring; they will prefer death."

"In that case they shall die!" the Stag shouted, with a ferocious accent.

Running Water rose.

"Yes," he said, "my son the Stag has spoken well; these palefaces, these Spaniards, whom the genius of evil sent in his wrath upon our land, hunt us like wild beasts; I myself, a few days ago, only escaped from their clutches through the protection of the Wacondah! Let the mother die, while the daughter becomes the squaw of the man who captured her; in that way our vengeance will be complete."

"Let it be so," White Crow remarked. "The Stag will communicate to the prisoners the decision of the council."

"I will do so," the chief said. "Give orders to prepare everything for the torture, for, I repeat, they shall die tomorrow if they meet me with a refusal."

The council broke up; the chiefs retired to the tents erected for them by their squaws, and soon fell asleep. The majordomo alone did not think of rest; he proceeded at a rapid pace to the spot where the prisoners were. On reaching the wickerwork which formed the door, the Indian hesitated for a moment, but, surmounting the emotion which contracted his brow, he violently opened the door, and walked in. The two ladies were sadly seated by a smouldering fire, with their heads bowed on their chests; at the noise produced by the chief's entrance, they quickly raised their heads, stifling a cry of surprise and terror. The Indian looked at them for a moment with an undefinable expression.

"I frighten you," he said, in a low guttural voice, as he smiled.

"No," Doña Emilia answered, "your presence does not terrify us, it merely excites disgust."

The chief frowned angrily, but checked himself.

"It is dangerous," he said, "to rouse the lion when you are in his power."

“The lion?” she continued, disdainfully; “You mean the coyote. The lion is brave, his character is noble, and he only attacks enemies worthy of his fury.”

“Very good, I am a coyote,” he continued with perfect calmness, “insult is permissible to persons who are about to die.”

“Die?” Doña Diana exclaimed, with an outburst of joy that confounded the Indian. “Oh, thanks, señor; this is the first time you have brought me good news. When are we to die?”

“Tomorrow,” he replied, in a hollow voice. There was a mournful silence, and then the majordomo continued—

“You seem very weary of life?”

“Yes, of such a life as you have made it; I prefer death to remaining longer exposed to the sufferings of every description to which I have been subjected during my captivity.”

“You can both live if you like,” he said significantly. They shook their heads in denial, but said nothing.

“At liberty,” he continued.

“At liberty?” the young lady repeated, her eyes suddenly lighting up with a flash of hope.

Doña Emilia gently laid her hand on her shoulder, and addressed the chief—

“Come,” she said, “explain yourself frankly; your words must conceal some terrible trap; on what condition are we to live and be free? We must be told these conditions in order to know whether we are able to accept them.”

“Can life be bargained for in this way?”

“Yes, where life is to be purchased with dishonour.”

“Tomorrow you will be fastened to the stake, and tortured for four hours without respite or mercy.”

“What next?” Doña Emilia asked haughtily.

“After that,” he continued with an ill-omened smile, “you will be flayed alive, and burnt while still quivering.”

While uttering these cruel words, the chief fixed a viper glance on his captives. Doña Emilia shrugged her shoulders contemptuously.

“I am waiting for you to tell us the conditions on which you will allow us to live,” she went on with a bitter smile. “They must be very horrible, since you, whom nothing checks, hesitate in revealing them to us.”

“You know the condition already,” he said slowly.

“Repeat it, I have forgotten it,” Doña Emilia remarked.

The chief made an effort over himself, and said in a choking voice—

“That your daughter consents to become my wife.”

Doña Emilia broke into a loud harsh laugh, and looked at her daughter. The latter drew herself up proudly, walked toward the chief, who was apparently calm, although a terrible tempest raged in his breast and fixed on him a glance of sovereign contempt.

“Invent the most atrocious tortures,” she said to him, “I prefer death to such fearful degradation.”

“Well said, my child!” Doña Emilia exclaimed, as she passionately pressed her to her heart.

The chief stamped his foot passionately; he gave the two ladies a glance of implacable hatred and went away, after saying one word of frightful meaning, “Tomorrow.” So soon as the ladies were alone, they joined hands, knelt and prayed fervently to Him who alone had the power to save them.

Chapter XXXV

In the Field.

The duty confided to Moonshine by General Cárdenas was not difficult to carry out. The track of the Mexicans was clearly marked on the ground, and the hunter suspected that the bargain the general had proposed to him was merely a pretext, and that in reality he wished to keep him by his side, in order to punish him if he had laid a trap for the Spaniards. Still the couple continued to gallop side by side, talking pleasantly and apparently well satisfied with each other. The day was splendid, the sky blue, and the sun dazzling; the leaves, washed by the rain, were greener and dew laden; the night storm had refreshed the atmosphere, and the hot sunbeams incessantly drawing out the moisture, made the earth smoke like the mouth of a crater; the birds twittered beneath the foliage, the squirrels leapt from branch to branch, and at times elks and antelopes, awakened by the sound of the horses, rose amid the lofty grass, looked around them timidly, and then bounded off in all directions. Men and horses unconsciously underwent the influence of the scene; they eagerly inhaled the air impregnated with the sharp scent of flowers and plants, and felt happy at living.

“On my honour,” said the general, “give me the country. It is pleasant to breathe the fresh air, when you have been confined within stone walls for several days.”

“Yes, you are right, General,” the Canadian answered, joyously; “life is splendid in the desert; existence in town is ridiculous. Men were great asses for inventing them, and restricting their horizon, when they had space and liberty before them. Deuce take towns. The handsomest house is not worth the blade of grass that shelters the grasshopper we can hear singing so merrily.”

“You seem to love the desert, Señor Moonshine?”

“I, General? Why I was born in it. My father was in the service of the Hudson’s Bay Company as trapper. My mother brought me into the world on the shore of one of our magnificent Canadian lakes. My eyes first opened beneath the majestic verdant arcades of a virgin forest. The first horizon I gazed at was surrounded by chains of mountains whose haughty crest no human foot has yet trodden. Oh! General, how glorious it is to live in the desert without ties of any sort, to feel your heart beat freely in your bosom, to aspire through every pore the fragrant exhalations of the savannah. Alone with your horse, with no regrets for the past or care for the future, you feel that you live, and you unconsciously become a better man, because you are nearer to GOD whose sublime book ever lies open before you. Such an existence is the only true one, the only possible for a stout-hearted man; the other is only a continual slavery, an incessant restraint which withers

ideas, dulls the intellect, and converts man such as GOD created him into a badly organized machine, a quarrelsome and wicked creature, who goes to his grave pale, sickly, and discontented."

"By Jove! That is what I call enthusiasm, my boy," the general said, laughing. "Unfortunately, all this is only good in theory. What would become of civilization if everybody followed your example?"

"Oh, yes," the hunter exclaimed, with a disdainful smile, "that's the great word, 'civilization'—that is to say, slavery; brutalization of the masses for the advantage of ambitious and insatiable minorities; an association of bandits decorated with pompous titles and sounding names, among whom strength represents the law, and who answer arguments by gaols, prisons, and bullets; where everything is paid for, life as well as death, and even the very vitiated atmosphere, breathed in muddy, narrow streets, and low, stifling houses. Deuce take civilization and the rogues who invented it for their own profit! Civilization is the plague and cause of all the diseases that afflict humanity. I'll have none of it."

The general listened to the hunter with increasing surprise. The nervous blunt language involuntarily seduced him. It was the first time he found himself in the presence of one of those wood rangers who, impatient of control, have resolutely broken with the life of society. He could not understand this strange nature, so contrary to those he had hitherto elbowed in life.

While conversing thus the general and the Canadian reached the ford where Sotavento had escaped that morning. The column halted for a moment; for about two leagues on the other side of the river ran a chain of lofty, wooded mountains, while an enormous barranca yawned in the centre of this range, and formed a narrow defile—the only place by which the Spanish troops could pass to continue their march. The general examined with growing anxiety the gloomy landscape spread out before him. All around was silent and desolate. In vain did the general survey the plain through his telescope; he could see nothing but trees growing very close together, through which it seemed almost impossible to force a passage. The canyon or barranca began just opposite the ford, and there was no doubt but that the Mexican army had followed this, the sole practicable road, for the traces of its passage were deeply marked in the ground. The general frowned, and looked suspiciously at the hunter; the latter, who had fallen behind to tighten his girths, went up to him.

"I understand—" he said to him.

"What do you understand?"

"Why, that you suspect me, General."

"And suppose I did, what then?"

"You would be wrong."

"Why so?"

"For a hundred reasons."

"Tell me one of them."

"For what purpose should I have led you into a trap?"

"To betray me, viva Cristo! If, as I suppose, you belong to the Mexican army."

"I do belong to that army," the hunter replied coolly; "but what does that prove?"

"What it proves?" the general exclaimed furiously, "That you are a spy, and that I shall have you shot."

“That is not answering, General, but knocking a man down.”

“Be it so; recommend your soul to God.”

“A man like myself is ever ready to appear before Him. Could you say the same?”

The general stamped his foot furiously.

“But give me a reason, at least,” he said.

“I did give you one; but you would not accept it.”

“Seek another.”

“Well, if you wish to argue the matter, I am quite agreeable,” the hunter, who still quiet, calm, and straightforward, continued.

“What has occurred between us? I informed you that the Mexicans had abandoned their camp, leaving their train behind. Was that false? No; it was true, and I told you nothing else. You resolved to set out in pursuit of the insurgents, and instead of urging you on to do so, I recommended you to remain at Coahuila. Is that like a traitor? I do not think so. You insisted on my following you, and I obeyed. My part was entirely restricted to that, I think you will allow, General? Now that you find yourself in front of a defile in which you are afraid of being attacked, you turn upon me. Is that fair? I fancy that if you are really afraid of falling into an ambuscade, there is one very easy thing to do.”

“What is it?”

“Why, turn back and reach Coahuila again as quickly as possible; if the Mexicans wished to lay a trap for you, they will be caught in it themselves, as they leave their guns and ammunition in your hands.”

The general reflected.

“What would you do in my place?” he asked.

“Well, I will be frank with you, General. We men of the desert regard courage in a manner diametrically opposite to yours. As we generally fight only to save our life or our plunder, we never venture on an action unless we have almost a certainty of success.”

“Hence, under the present circumstances?”

“I should turn back without shame, and be off to Coahuila at the same pace at which I started, that is, a gallop; that is what I should do. I can understand that you would act differently.”

“Ah!” the general said, giving him a piercing glance, “For what reason?”

“Nonsense, General, you are making fun of me; for you know as well as I do. Come, have me shot, and let us have an end of it.”

“I shall not have you shot,” he answered; “for, traitor or no, you have spoken to me like an honest man. Go where you please; you are free.”

The Canadian felt involuntarily affected by this remark.

“Thanks, General. Now take my advice, and do not push on.”

“Does danger really exist?”

“I cannot tell you; still, I confess that I have a bad opinion of that black large hole I see over there; it seems to me to contain a storm.”

“Yes, I feel that I ought to follow your advice, but unhappily I cannot do so. The troops of the king, my master, must not appear to recoil before such miserable foes; for it would be giving these scoundrels an importance which they do not possess.”

“You know better than I how you should act; but, I repeat, take care.”

“Oh, be sure of that. Well, good-bye; get away before the action begins.”

“Well, then, thank you, and good-bye, General—I dare not wish you good luck.”

The Canadian turned his horse and started at a gallop in the direction of Coahuila. The general looked after him till he was hidden by a turn in the road.

“What a singular man!” he muttered; “If he is a spy I never saw one like him.”

It was high time, however, to come to some resolution, and so the general summoned his officers around him.

“Caballeros,” he said bluntly, when they were assembled, “I am afraid that we acted very imprudently in venturing to pursue the enemy with so small a force as we have at our disposal. Although I do not wish to throw any of my responsibility as chief upon you, still I deem it urgent to take your advice before crossing this stream, beyond which, as you can see from here, is a canyon, which, if I am not mistaken, contains a formidable ambuscade. Answer me frankly, which shall we do? Push boldly on, at the risk of what may happen; or quietly turn back and regain our entrenchments?”

The officers were mostly of opinion that they must march forward at all risks. The effect of a retreat made almost in the presence of the enemy might have as disastrous an influence upon the prestige that surrounded the Spanish army as a battle lost. All these brave soldiers were ashamed at appearing to fly before an invisible enemy; for as yet only vague suspicions were entertained, which might be false, more especially as the plain continued to be deserted, and nothing of a dubious nature had been perceived.

“Very well, caballeros,” the general said with a bow to his officers, “we will march on; if fate betrays our courage we will fall like brave men. Long live Spain!”

“Long live Spain!” the officers repeated enthusiastically.

“Captain Don Luis Obregozo, take two hundred horse, and make a reconnoissance in the canyon; be very prudent, and do not venture too far. Don Pedro Castilla will hold himself in readiness to support you with five hundred cavalry, should it be necessary; the rest of the army will not cross the stream till your return. Go at once.”

The two officers selected by the general immediately prepared to obey; the troopers, leaving the infantry they carried with the main body, crossed the ford, and galloped into the plain. The general gave orders for the troops to be drawn up in a column, in order to lose as little time as possible in passing, and, opening his telescope, he attentively followed the movements of the two detachments he had sent on ahead. The second body, commanded by Captain Castilla, halted about halfway between the stream and the canyon, ready to act on the first alarm, Captain Obregozo boldly pushed on, sending a few troopers ahead as scouts, while others scattered on either side the main body, and examined the thickets. The detachment advanced thus almost into the entrance of the defile, and nothing suspicious occurred. On reaching this point the captain ordered a halt.

“My lads,” he said to his soldiers, “if the enemy is really in there, it is unnecessary for us all foolishly to enter the wolf’s throat; a few men of good will are enough. Who will follow me?”

The soldiers remained motionless and silent.

“What?” the captain exclaimed with a frown, “Does not a man offer to follow me?”

“It is not that, Captain,” an old sergeant replied roughly; “you know very well that we are all of good will and ready to follow you to purgatory; choose yourself the men you will take with you.”

“Very good,” the captain said gaily, as he pointed out five or six troopers. They at once quitted the ranks, and placed themselves behind the captain; The latter, after temporarily entrusting the command of the detachment to his lieutenant, with strict orders not to enter the defile, whatever might happen, but, on the contrary, to fall back on the reserve if he did not return, boldly entered the canyon, followed by his weak escort. Several minutes elapsed, and then a discharge was suddenly heard, and two riderless horses galloped back into the plain.

“The captain! Let us save the captain!” the dragoons shouted, as they waved their sabres frantically.

And without listening to the remonstrances of their lieutenant, who tried in vain to hold them back, they dashed irregularly into the defile. The officer, finding his efforts useless, bravely placed himself at their head. Then the sound of a regular combat and a well sustained musketry fire was audible.

“Let us support our brothers!” Captain Castilla exclaimed, drawing his sword.

“Forward, forward!” the soldiers yelled.

The second detachment, starting at a gallop, in its turn was engulfed in this accursed defile, which, like the mouth of the infernal regions, swallowed up everything but gave nothing back. The general, as we said, was attentively watching the movements of his scouts.

“The unhappy men!” he exclaimed, on seeing what was going on, “The maniacs! They will be killed to the last man. Come back, come back, I command you,” he shouted, without reflecting that the troops he thus addressed were too far off to hear or obey him, and that had they by chance heard, they would not have obeyed him, owing to the frenzy which seemed to have suddenly assailed them.

The soldiers remaining on the river bank also saw, not what was going on in the defile, but on the plain; they began muttering at the inactivity to which their chief condemned them, and brandished their weapons with a fury which only required an excuse to break out.

“Shall we let our brothers be butchered?” an old officer asked, biting his moustache passionately.

“Silence, caballero,” the general answered savagely; “had they obeyed my orders, this would not have occurred.”

“But the misfortune is done at present, General; we must not desert seven hundred men in that way.”

“Look, look,” the soldiers exclaimed, on perceiving several horsemen issue from the defile vigorously pursued by others, who speedily caught them up and sabred them.

This last episode raised the exasperation of the troops to the highest pitch, a species of vertigo seized on them, and refusing to listen to anything, many of them forced their horses into the river.

“Stop, stop!” the general shouted in a voice of thunder, “Since you absolutely insist on marching to an inevitable butchery, let me at least guide you.”

The soldiers recognizing, in spite of their excitement, the voice they had so long been accustomed to obey, halted instinctively. Then the general restored order among them as far as was possible, and the ford was crossed rapidly and in a manner that did not endanger the position of the army. On reaching the plain the infantry dismounted and formed; the general arranged them so that they should support the cavalry, and drew his sword, whose blade flashed in the sun.

“I throw away the scabbard,” he shouted in a voice heard by all; “forward! For the king and for Spain!”

“Long live Spain!” the soldiers shouted.

The Spanish army then rushed like an avalanche into the defile, whence the noise of the invisible combat could still be heard.

Chapter XXXVI

A Young Heart.

Oliver Clary, when he left the Hacienda del Río, was not mistaken in saying to Count de Melgosa that he was afraid Don Melchior would commit some folly; the hunter’s foreboding was destined to be realized even sooner than he thought. The young man, whose mind was made up beforehand, did not wish to argue with his two friends; but, satisfied with the information the hunter had given him, impatiently awaited the moment when he should be alone, in order to carry out the plan he had formed. This plan, of an audacity that trenched almost on insanity, he had been careful not to let the count or the Canadian suspect, as he felt sure they would oppose it with all their might.

Don Melchior, brought up on the Indian border, accustomed from his earliest youth to scour the woods in all directions in the pursuit of Indians or wild beasts, was habituated to desert life and thoroughly conversant with redskin habits; hence, he had no doubt he would be able to get to the prisoners. Hence, so soon as the count and Oliver had left the hacienda, the young man made his preparations; that is to say, he carefully inspected his firearms, placed provisions in his alforjas, and mounted his horse. It was about four in the afternoon. The great gate of the hacienda was open; hence he went out the more easily, because being merely regarded as a guest of the count, no one had received orders to impede his movements or prevent him doing what he thought proper. The young man slowly descended the mountain; at the moment when he reached the plain, the sound of a galloping horse made him turn round. Diego López was coming toward him at full speed, and Don Melchior waited for him.

“¡Viva Dios!” the worthy man exclaimed, “Where on earth are you going, Don Melchior?”

The young man looked at him haughtily.

“Am I your master’s prisoner?” he replied, drily.

“Not at all, señor,” the peon said, with the greatest politeness.

“In that case, by what right do you ask me such a question? Am I not at liberty to do what I please?”

“I do not say the contrary.”

“If that is the case, what do you want with me?”

“Caballero, I beg you not to take in ill part what I am so free as to say to you. The Señor Conde feels a very lively interest in you; before leaving the hacienda, he ordered me to pay the greatest attention to you.”

“Admitted.”

“On seeing you mount your horse at so advanced an hour, and take provisions with you, I assumed that it was your intention to leave the hacienda.”

“Your assumption was correct, I am really leaving the hacienda. What then?”

“Very good. You are at liberty to do so. I have no right to control your actions; but be kind enough to inform me where you are going, in order that I may tell my master.”

“For what object?”

“I am merely obeying the orders I received, señor. I am but a servant;” and he added, with a marked stress on the words, “perhaps it is as well for your own sake that my master should know where you are going.”

The young gentleman reflected for a moment.

“Forgive me, Diego López,” he said, presently, “the rather rough way in which I received you. I did wrong to act thus, for you are a worthy man. Tell your master that I am resolved to try and save Doña Emilia and her daughter, and that is why I quitted his hospitable roof.”

The peon shook his head sadly.

“Alone, señor?” he said; “take care.”

“Heaven will aid me, my friend.”

“I have no right to prevent you, I have no wish to do so, but if I may be permitted to make a remark?”

“Speak!”

“I would tell you that this plan is insane, that you are rushing to your destruction, and that you are attempting an expedition in which you will perish, perhaps without seeing the persons for whom you devote yourself.”

“Yes, that is true,” the young man answered sadly. “What you say to me I have said to myself, but my destiny carries me away. I must accomplish this sacrifice, while knowing that I am committing an act of madness; I will carry it through to the end.”

“I have neither the strength nor the courage to blame you, señor, I can only pity you; put your trust in heaven. As for me, I shall go to my master and tell him what you are doing at this moment. If we do not succeed in saving you, at least we will avenge you, and if I may believe my foreboding, the vengeance will be terrible.”

“Go, my friend; go, and thank you. Tell your master how truly grateful I am to him for all that he has done for me, but that fatality carries me away; and that I would sooner die than suffer from the grief which is devouring me. I wish to know the fate of the two unhappy prisoners, and, no matter what may happen, I will know it.”

“May heaven protect you, señor! You are well acquainted with the redskins; perhaps by acting prudently you may foil their vigilance, although it is almost impossible. But,” he added with a species of forced resolution, “what is the use of arguing longer. Perhaps your plan will succeed, through the very fact of its insanity. Children and lovers are privileged.”

The young man blushed, and dug his spurs into the flanks of his horse, which started at a gallop. The peon looked after him, sorrowfully shaking his head several times.

“Well, good-bye, Don Melchior,” he said, “I repeat, may God protect you, for He alone can save you.”

The young man scarce heard him. The peon’s voice struck his ear, but he did not understand the sense of his words. He waved his hand in farewell and disappeared in the tall grass that overgrew the banks of the stream. Diego López remained motionless for an instant.

“Poor boy!” he murmured, “He has a noble heart; a soul full of devotion; but what can he do? He is lost; death clutches him already, its hand is spread out over him. Let me go and warn the Señor Conde,” he added, repressing a sympathetic sigh.

And loosening his bridle he galloped off in the direction of the Hacienda del Barrio.

Don Melchior, through the frequent excursions he had made in carrying out Doña Emilia’s monomania for vengeance, had a thorough knowledge of the country for thirty or forty leagues round; several times accident had led him to the vicinity of the teocali, where the ladies were now held in captivity, and hence he was well aware of the exact position of this strange monument, the sole vestige of the ancient, civilization of the Indians.

While himself thoroughly convinced of the madness of his attempt in favour of the prisoners, he had drawn up his plans with the greatest prudence, ready to sacrifice his life, but not wishing to leave anything to chance, while unconsciously retaining in his heart a last glance of hope, that divine spark which is never completely extinguished in the human heart, and allows him a glimpse of success even in the most senseless undertakings.

So soon as Diego López parted from him, Don Melchior checked the speed of his horse in order not to reach the ford of the Río Grande del Norte till sunset. He was obliged to travel by night, for as the Indians are in their encampments at that period, the young man would have nothing to fear from their vigilance, and incurred no risk but that of meeting wild beasts, a trifling danger for an experienced hunter. Besides, so far as it was possible to calculate distances, Don Melchior believed himself only seven or eight leagues distant from the teocali. By galloping in a straight line, he would therefore only have a two hours’ ride to make in a country which he had frequently traversed, and which was perfectly familiar to him.

We have already stated, on several occasions, that in hot countries there is no twilight, and that when the sun has set night arrives almost without transition. The young man had so well calculated, that he was a gunshot from the ford at the moment when the sun disappeared on the horizon in a glory of purple and gold. In spite of the complete absence of twilight, there is, however, a charming moment in

American evenings. It is the one when, after night has quite set in, you witness the sudden awakening of the denizens of the darkness; when the night breeze agitates the majestic tops of the trees, and the wild beasts, leaving their lairs, bay the moon with their guttural notes, which are repeated in every way by the echoes of the ravines. The traveller, involuntarily affected by a vague respect at the sight of this immensity which he cannot comprehend, feels himself weak and paltry.

Don Melchior crossed the ford without obstacle, and then dashed at full speed into the desert, cutting through the tall grass in a straight line. For two hours he galloped in the pale light of the stars, with his hand on his weapons, and ready for any event. On coming within about two musket shots of the teocali he stopped, dismounted, and taking his horse by the bridle, led it into a thicket, where, after hobbling it, he fastened up its nostrils to prevent it neighing. Then thrusting his pistols in his belt, he seized his rifle, and proceeded toward the teocali, muttering in a suppressed voice one sentence, which completely represented the thought that impelled him to act as he was doing—

"Heaven be gracious to me!"

The night was calm and serene; the stars sparkled in a deep blue sky, and spread a gentle light, which allowed him to distinguish the diversities of the landscape for a long distance. A veiled silence, if we may employ the expression, reigned over the prairie, where no other sound was audible save that produced by the incessant murmurs of the infinitely little creatures buzzing beneath every blade of grass, and carrying on their laborious task under the ever open eye of the Creator. At times the distant echo bore down on the breeze the snapping bark of the coyotes, or the hoarse roar of the jaguars at the watering place.

Don Melchior advanced firmly and resolutely, having sacrificed his life beforehand, but determined only to succumb in an unequal struggle of one against a host. We fancy that we said in one of our previous chapters that the teocali in which the prisoners were detained stood in the middle of a plain, for a great distance round which the trees had been cut down. At the moment when the young man was preparing to emerge from the covert, and asked himself how he should manage to reach the mountain unseen, he perceived an Indian sentry leaning motionless against a sumach and on the watch.

Don Melchior stopped, for the situation was a critical one. The moon profusely shed its pale pallid beams upon this man, whose appearance had at a certain distance something gloomy and threatening about it. A cry uttered by this sentry would ruin Don Melchior. After a few seconds' hesitation his resolution was formed. Uncocking his gun, which might go off without his will, he lay down on the ground, and began crawling on his hands and knees in the direction of the sentry, before whom he must infallibly pass.

Anyone who has not been in the situation of our hero could not form an idea of it. Don Melchior was at this moment playing a terrible game. It was to him a question of life and death; the fall of a leaf, the breaking of a branch was sufficient to settle it. The hurried beating of his heart terrified him, and he took half an hour in proceeding a distance of twenty paces. At length, on coming close to the sentry, he suddenly rose behind him, and plunged his dagger straight into his neck, at the very spot where the head is attached to the spine. The redskin fell like a log, without uttering a cry or even giving a sigh.

The young man at once understanding the importance to himself of a disguise, in order to cross the clearing round the teocali, stripped the Indian of his clothes, put them on himself, and after dragging the corpse a few paces, in order that it might not be found immediately, he hid it under a pile of dry leaves. Then, assuming the calm and grave step of Indian warriors, the young man boldly quitted the shelter of the covert, and advanced slowly toward the teocali, now ready for all events, and keeping his finger on the trigger of his gun, which he laid carelessly on his shoulder.

Numerous watch fires burnt round the teocali; the Indians, wrapped, up in their buffalo hides, blankets, or zarapés, were sleeping peacefully, trusting to the vigilance of the sentry. Don Melchior walked right through the camp, unmolested. At times, as he passed, an Indian turned towards him, half opened his eyes, and then fell back on the ground again, muttering a few unintelligible words. The young man's heart beat as if going to burst his breast; the emotion he felt was so powerful that, on reaching the first steps of the teocali, he was involuntarily constrained to stop. Still, sustained by the feeling of the sacred mission he had taken on himself, he succeeded, by a supreme effort, in overcoming his emotion, and continued his walk.

No one opposed his passage. The Indians guard themselves badly. Under present circumstances, they could not suppose that a single man would enter their camp, and succeed in deceiving their sentries. This confidence caused the security of the bold young man, and once he reached the teocali, almost entirely insured his security.

I forgot who said that mad enterprises are those which succeed the beet owing to their extravagance, and this paradoxical remark is far truer than a person might be disposed to believe it. Don Melchior's plan of thus introducing himself alone into the presence of the prisoners, a project of wild boldness, would succeed entirely on account of its impossibility.

When the young man reached the top of the teocali he stopped, for he must discover the place where the prisoners were confined. He looked searchingly around him. The moon allowed him to distinguish clearly the smallest objects. Several Indians were lying round a smouldering fire, but Don Melchior's eyes did not dwell on them, he was examining the most obscure corner of the buildings that stood on the platform. His eye was caught by a man lying across a door, closed by a wickerwork frame; he gave a violent start, for the prisoners were behind that door. Stepping boldly over the sleeper, he Went up to it. At the moment he reached the Indian the latter rose before him, and set the sharp point of his lance against his chest.

"What does my brother want?" he asked in a guttural voice.

Don Melchior was not troubled. In spite of his interned emotion, his face remained calm and stoical.

"Good," he said in Comanche, a language which he spoke perfectly. "My brother was asleep. Is that the way in which he watches his prisoners?"

"The Opossum is not asleep," the Indian said haughtily. "He knows the importance of the duty entrusted to him."

"If he is not asleep, how is it that he is ignorant the hour has arrived when I am to take his place?" the young man continued.

“Is it so late? I have not heard the hoot of the owl.”

“Yet it has been sounded twice. Good, my brother is tired; let him go and sleep, while I watch in his stead.”

The Indian had no reason to doubt what Don Melchior said to him. Besides, he was really desirous of sleep, and was not sorry to catch up a few hours’ rest. Hence he made no remark, but quietly surrendered his post, and five minutes later was lying by the side of his comrades fast asleep.

This last alarm had been serious, although Don Melchior had bravely gone through with it. Still his agitation was so great, partly to regain his coolness, he remained quiet for nearly a quarter of an hour before he ventured to enter the prisoners’ room. At length he did so. Doña Emilia, seated in a corner, was holding her daughter’s head on her lap.

“Who’s there?” she asked, with a sudden start.

“A friend,” the young man answered in a low voice. Doña Diana sprang up.

“Don Melchior!” she cried.

“Silence,” he said, “silence, in heaven’s name.”

“Oh! I was certain he would come,” the young lady continued, as she walked towards him.

“Thanks, Melchior,” Doña Emilia said, as she offered him her hand. “Thank you for coming; however terrible my situation may be, your presence here is an immense consolation.”

“Have you come to deliver us, Melchior?” the maiden continued.

“Yes,” he answered simply, “such is my object; and believe me, señorita, all that a man can do, I will.”

“What,” Doña Emilia asked, “are you alone?”

“Alas, yes; but what matter?” Doña Diana fell back on her bed.

“Flight is impossible,” she murmured with despair.

“Why so?” the young man continued boldly, “Have I not contrived to get in here alone?”

She shook her head sadly.

“Yes,” she said; “but you were alone.”

Don Melchior sighed, for he understood the meaning of the remark.

“Why despair?” Doña Emilia exclaimed, starting up impetuously. “We are three now. The Indians tremble at the sight of me, and we shall succeed in escaping.”

“Mother, mother,” the girl said entreatingly, “dismiss that thought. Alas! Flight is impossible, as you know well. Melchior is as well aware of it as we are.”

The young man hung his head.

“If I cannot save you, señorita,” he answered, “I can die with you.”

“Die with us!” she exclaimed impetuously. “Oh no, that must not be, I insist.”

“It was my hope in coming here,” he said.

“Very good, Melchior,” Doña Emilia said; “but cease to fear for us. The Indians will not dare, I feel firmly convinced, to make an attack on our lives, in spite of their frightful threats.”

“Mother, undeceive yourself, our death is resolved. It is close at hand, for the conditions offered us compel us to die.”

“That is true,” Doña Emilia murmured despondingly. “Great God, what is to be done?”

“Fly,” Don Melchior exclaimed boldly.

“No,” the young lady continued, “the plan is impracticable, and it would be madness to dwell on it. If you have reached us by a miracle, it is impossible for you to convey us through the Indian camp and pass the sentries unseen. It would be precipitating our death instead of checking it.”

“It is well, señorita,” Don Melchior said, leaning his shoulder against the wall. “Since you refuse to attempt to fly, I shall come back to my first resolution.”

“What is it?”

“To die with you.”

The young lady took a step forward, and turned to Doña Emilia.

“Do you hear, mother?” she exclaimed in agony. “Do you hear what Don Melchior says? I will not have him die. Order him to go away.”

“Why should I order him?” Doña Emilia coldly replied. “Don Melchior has ever been devoted to us. He has come to die with us, and neither you nor I have the right to prevent him.”

“I must, I tell you, I must.”

“And why so, my child?”

“Why?” she repeated, wild with grief. “Because, mother, I love him, and will not have him die!”

Doña Emilia stood for a moment as if annihilated by the sudden revelation of this love, which she suspected, though unwilling to believe in it. A reaction took place in her, and she laid her hand on the young man’s arm.

“Go, Don Melchior,” she said in a gentle voice, half choked by sobs. “My daughter loves you, and will not have you die.”

“Thanks, thanks, mother!” the maiden exclaimed, as she fell into her arms, and hid her face in her bosom.

“Oh, let me, let me die with you!” Don Melchior said, clasping his hands imploringly.

“No,” Doña Emilia repeated, “you must leave us.”

“The night is getting on; I implore you, Melchior to be gone!” the maiden exclaimed.

The young man hesitated, and a violent combat took place in his heart.

“It is your wish,” he muttered, with hesitation.

“In the name of our love, I command you!”

“Your will be done. Bless me, madam, for I shall return, and for your sake attempt impossibilities.”

Doña Emilia wiped away the tears that ran down her cheeks against her will.

“Bless you, my son!” she said, in a voice choked by sobs. “God alone knows the future, Melchior. I thank you for not having deserted us. Embrace your betrothed; perhaps this first kiss will be the last.”

The two young people fell into each other’s arms.

“And now, farewell,” Doña Emilia continued. “Begone, you must begone!”

Don Melchior tore himself with difficulty from the maiden’s clasp.

“Oh, not farewell!” he exclaimed, his eyes sparkling with hope. “We shall meet again,” and he tottered out of the room.

“Mother, mother,” Doña Diana said, throwing herself wildly into Doña Emilia’s arms, “oh, now I wish to die!”

“Poor child!” her mother murmured, as she covered her with kisses. “Take patience; we have but a few hours longer to suffer.”

Chapter XXXVII

The Ambush.

THE provost marshal recognized the inutility of further search, and, despairing of recapturing the fugitive, whom he supposed to be hidden in the irregular masses of rock that bordered the stream, collected his men, and gave them orders to close up, after bidding them keep the prisoner’s escape temporarily a secret, as he himself intended to tell the general what had occurred when the latter asked at his hands the prisoner confided to him. An hour later he entered the canyon, and rejoined the main body of the army.

General Sandoval, although he had nearly twenty thousand men under his orders, perceived, almost immediately after he invested Coahuila, that with soldiers like his, badly armed, worse disciplined, and completely deficient in the necessary articles for a regular siege, he would never succeed in storming a town defended by a garrison of veteran troops, and commanded by one of the best generals of the Spanish army. He therefore converted the siege into a blockade, contenting himself with cutting off the enemy’s communications with the interior, and hoping finally to reduce him by famine.

But about this time he received a despatch from General Iturbide. After informing him fully of the events that had occurred, which had, in a few days, changed the state of affairs, and destroyed the power of Spain throughout the entire viceroyalty, the general told him that the Spaniards now held but two points on the Mexican territory—the fortress of San Juan de Ulúa, near Veracruz, and the town of Coahuila. Ulúa but slightly troubled the new chief of the Mexican government.

The Spaniards, shut up in the fortress, and completely cut off from the seaboard, even supposing that they held out for a long time, could not by any possibility exert any influence over the affairs of the country; but the case was not the same with Coahuila. The intendancy of which this town was the capital was one of the richest in Mexico. Being mountainous and well wooded, a clever leader of partizans could collect the malcontents, whose number was large, organize guerillas, and carry on the war, till the Spanish government recovered from its stupor and tried to seize again the rich colonies which had only just slipped from its grasp.

Now, such a skilful chief was invested at Coahuila at this very moment. He had a numerous and well-disciplined garrison, sufficient to form the nucleus of an army which would soon become formidable if time were allowed for its organization. Hence it was absolutely necessary to finish with this general by capturing him, and cutting up his troops.

On perusing this explicit and positive despatch, General Don Pelagio Sandoval found himself no little embarrassed. General Iturbide gave him to understand that he trusted entirely to him, that he had accomplished things far more important than this, and the provisional government felt assured he would carry it through honourably. For two days the general remained plunged in deep thought, forming a dozen plans, and rejecting them in turn. He could not dream of attempting an assault, and carrying the town by storm when opposed by adversaries like the Spaniards. Don Pelagio only saw one way of success: it was to compel General Cárdenas to leave the town, lay a trap for him, and force him into a surrender.

The idea was certainly good; but what stratagem should he employ to cheat General Cárdenas, and draw him out? The general was not the man to let himself be caught in a clumsy snare. He would immediately scent it, and the Mexicans would have to begin over again, under greater difficulties than at first, as the enemy would be on his guard. At last, after long hesitation, Don Pelagio decided on a plan of unexampled temerity, and which must infallibly succeed through its sheer audacity, if matters were carried out with prudence.

Taking advantage of a frightful storm that raged over his camp and the town, and rendered the darkness of night denser still, he ordered his troops to leave the encampment in small detachments, giving each leader of a corps detailed instructions about the movements he must make and the spot he was to go to, and remained himself to the last, to make sure of the due execution of his orders. As it was necessary that the Spaniards should believe in a precipitate flight, rather than a retreat, he was obliged to leave behind him the larger portion of his guns and ammunition, certain, were he the victor, of finding it all intact, but resolved, like the gambler who risks his whole fortune on a card, to blow out his brains if he were conquered, for he knew that Iturbide would not forgive him a defeat.

Moonshine, the Canadian, thoroughly instructed by the general, and who, in his careless gaiety, only thought of playing the Spaniards a famous trick, was left behind to induce the enemy to nibble. We have seen in what manner the Canadian performed the delicate task.

The spot where Don Pelagio proposed waiting for the Spaniard was excellently adapted for a surprise. It was a canyon, or defile, about three leagues in length, and so narrow that two horsemen could scarce ride side by side. This canyon, like most of those found in these latitudes, was merely a dried up watercourse, produced by an earthquake. It formed countless angles and turns, so close to each other that it was impossible to see anything ahead save the wood covered sides of the canyon, which rose precipitously to an enormous height It was evident that if the Spaniards were so mad as to enter this defile, they might perish to the last man, without a chance of resistance.

The Mexicans, on reaching the canyon a little before sunrise, had plenty of time to prepare for action. General Pelagio had all the heights crowned and established his troops in unassailable positions. These measures were taken with such skill and prudence, that this spot where, at the moment, more than four and twenty thousand men were assembled, seemed completely deserted, and it would have been impossible, within a pistol shot, to see the barrel of a single gun glisten. If the Spaniards, from the spot where they had halted on the riverbank, could perceive nothing, it was not the same with the Mexicans. Not one of the enemy's

movements escaped Don Pelagio. When he saw the long columns of the Spanish army arrive on the riverbank the Mexican chief quivered with joy. His stratagem had succeeded, his calculations were just, and, as he had expected, his enemy, deceived by the feigned retreat, was about to deliver himself into his hands.

A man must have himself experienced the feelings of a lucky player, who gains a decisive game, in order to understand the full extent of the delight which filled the Mexican general's heart. Still, he felt a moment of indescribable anxiety and agony when he saw the enemy halt on the bank of the stream, and remain there so long quiescent. He feared for a moment lest the Spaniards, guessing the trap laid for them, would turn back. All in that case would be left to the chances of a battle in the open with an experienced enemy accustomed to conquer, and who would, doubtless, contest the field warmly. But this apprehension soon faded away when the scouts crossed the ford. The decisive moment was at hand, and the Mexicans prepared seriously for action.

"My friends," the general said to the persons who surrounded him, "here are the last relics of the troops of those who have oppressed us for three centuries. God has reserved for us the glory of fighting the last battle which will sully the sacred soil of our country with bloodshed. All our brothers have their eyes on us; they ask victory at our hands; shall we disappoint them?"

"No!" the soldiers, electrified by these generous words answered as one man.

"Swear to conquer!" the general continued.

"We swear it!" they exclaimed enthusiastically.

"It is well! I hold your promise, and God has heard it. *Méjico e independencia!* Each to his post now, for blood is about to flow!"

The officers hastily returned to the positions assigned to them, the soldiers lay down on the grass with their finger on the trigger, and all awaited with palpitating hearts the signal for action. At this moment the two detachments sent forward as scouts separated. Captain Castilla halted while Captain Obregozo formed his columns of attack, and continued his forward march.

When the captain, resolved to carry out his duty thoroughly, entered the defile, a few well-aimed musket shots sufficed to destroy his weak escort, and the officer himself fell with a bullet through his chest. This brave officer was the first victim of this day, so fatal to the Spanish army. Unhappily, many others were fated to follow him. When the second detachment, which hurried up to the aid of the first, followed into the defile, the combat assumed the proportions of a battle.

Unhappily, the Spaniards having no infantry, and covered by invisible foes, fell one after the other with cries of impotent rage. On all sides bullets hailed on them, against which they had no protection, and were unable to reply. At times, a bullet, aimed haphazard, or guided by destiny, reached an object it was not aimed at. The shrubs parted, and a corpse rolling down the precipice fell crushed at the feet of the horses.

But for one man the Mexicans lost the Spaniards lost fifty. The fight was too unequal; it was no longer a combat, but a butchery. Suddenly, a tremendous shout was heard; the earth trembled beneath the hoofs of nearly two thousand horses, and General Cárdenas appeared, his face inflamed with noble ardour, his hair in disorder, leaning over his saddle, with his right arm extended, and his sword hanging from his wrist by a steel chain. Behind him came the whole

Spanish army—the real battle was about to begin. The infantry arrived at the double on the flanks of the column, firing into the bushes and shrubs where they saw shots fired. The Spanish general, as an experienced leader, had made the best of a bad position. He had scarce entered the canyon with the cavalry, ere a large infantry corps, facing front and rear, occupied the gorge with two guns levelled on the plain. The general rightly conjectured that his enemies might try to catch him between two fires, which was really the plan of the Mexicans; for, no sooner had the infantry occupied the allotted post than Don Aurelio Gutiérrez, at the head of a considerable body of troops, infantry and cavalry, darted suddenly from the forest which had hitherto concealed him, and dashed furiously on the Spaniards, in order to dislodge them and drive them into the interior of the defile.

An obstinate hand to hand fight at once began. Here, at least, the combat was equal; for the Spaniards could see their enemies. Unhappily, the sharpshooters, concealed behind bushes, covered and decimated them, being most desperate against the artillerymen, whom they mercilessly shot down each time when they went up to reload their guns.

General Cárdenas, in spite of all obstacles—the bullets, lumps of rock, and whole trees showered down on his troops—crossed the whole defile with the rapidity of an arrow. He then perceived, some distance ahead, a barricade erected by the Mexicans to intercept his passage.

“There is the road, boys,” the general shouted;

“Forward, forward!”

All dashed on to clear the barricade, but suddenly a battery was unmasked, and death passed along the Spanish ranks. Four howitzers, loaded with canister, thundered simultaneously, sweeping down whole lines of horsemen, and making a bloody gap through the entire column. Two-thirds of this magnificent Spanish cavalry were laid low. The general, lifting his horse with a prodigious effort, had forced the noble animal to mount the face of the barricade.

“Forward!” the general shouted, brandishing his sword over his head and digging his spurs into his horse’s belly.

The animal made a last generous effort, and rolled dying in the centre of the Mexicans. General Cárdenas was already on his feet, sword in hand.

“Surrender, surrender!” a numbers of soldiers shouted, as they rushed toward him.

“Nonsense! Does a Spanish general ever surrender?” he said, with a gloomy smile of contempt.

And, whirling his formidable sabre round his head, he drove back the men who had ventured too near him.

“Stop, stop!” Oliver Clary shouted, as he dashed forward. “By heaven, he is a noble soldier; let us grant him the death of a brave man. Defend, yourself, General.”

“Thank you, señor,” the general replied with a smile; “I expected nothing less from your courtesy.”

“A fair fight. Back, señores,” the hunter said.

“No, no,” a man suddenly shouted, as he hurried to the front. “You are a foreigner, Señor Don Oliver; allow me to settle this quarrel.”

The Canadian turned and recognized Don Aníbal de Saldibar.

“Very good,” he said, lowering his point with a gesture of respectful deference.

“Do you accept me as an adversary, General?” the hacendero asked.

“I care little whom I fight, señor,” the general replied haughtily.

“On guard, then!”

The two blades crossed with a portentous clang. There was something grand and chivalrous in this singular duel in the midst of a battle. The two adversaries, however, had no fear of being separated. The Mexicans had suddenly stopped. As for the Spaniards, decimated by the canister, and discouraged by the loss of their chief, they fought without any order, more for the purpose of selling their lives dearly than in the hope of conquering.

Don Aníbal and General Cárdenas carried on the duel they had so bravely commenced, while the Canadian and other officers kept back the spectators. The general was a very skilful swordsman, but, wearied by the violent exercise he had been taking, and rendered desperate by the probable defeat of his troops, he was not sufficiently master of himself to contend advantageously against an adversary of the strength of Don Aníbal. In a very short time he fell, run through the body. They rushed forward to help him; the general attempted to rise. For the last time, he waved his sword defiantly, and raised to heaven his eyes already glazed with death.

“Long live Spain!” he shouted in a powerful voice, and he fell back. He was dead, like a soldier should die, sword in hand. The battle was won. Of five thousand men that composed the Spanish army, hardly fifteen hundred survived. The Mexicans had conquered, more through the strength of their position and the madness of their enemy, than through their skill and courage. Perhaps, though, it was the will of God, who, in His omniscience, had marked this day as the last of the Spanish rule in Mexico.

Chapter XXXVIII

The Pursuit.

It was about two p.m. on the day after the battle. Twenty men were encamped in a clearing some ten or twelve miles at the most from the Río Grande del Norte; with the exception of three or four of them, who were attired like Mexican campesinos, the rest appeared to be hunters or wood rangers. The majority were lying asleep on the grass at the foot of the trees, with their heads in the shade and their feet in the sun. Their horses, hobbled and ready to be mounted, were eating their ration of Indian corn spread on woollen blankets, laid on the ground in front of them. Several sentries, leaning on their rifles, watched over the common safety.

A little apart was a group composed of four or five persons, seated on buffalo skins. These persons, whom our readers are well acquainted with, were the Count de Melgosa, Don Aníbal de Saldibar, Don Aurelio Gutiérrez, and Moonshine. Don Aníbal, with his elbows on his knees and his head in his hands, seemed suffering from profound sorrow. The count was looking at him sadly. The Canadian was

philosophically smoking his Indian pipe, while at times taking a commiserating look at the hacendero. As for Don Aurelio, he was yawning as if going to put his jaw out, with his back carelessly resting against a tree, his arms folded, and his legs stretched out.

We will now explain to the reader why these persons were collected at this spot. To do so we will go back a little way, and return to the canyon in which the fate of Mexico was decided. The first moments following a victory are always devoted by the victors to joy and delirium, order and discipline no longer exist. Men congratulate each other and run backwards and forwards, singing, laughing, and forgetting all the perils and agony of the struggle. But when minds began to calm, and reason regains its sway, reflection comes, and the sanguinary details of the battle appear in all their horror.

General Don Pelagio Sandoval after giving quarter to the conquered immediately disarmed them, and employed them in removing the wounded and burying the dead. Of all the Spanish soldiers who entered the defile, not a single man had succeeded in escaping to bear to Coahuila the news of this awful defeat. The Mexicans had comparatively lost very few men, although their loss for all that was considerable. The Mexican general resolved to encamp on the battlefield, and his troops were encamped on the plain in front of the mouth of the canyon.

It was about nine in the evening. The bivouac fires formed a brilliant circle round the camp, the soldiers were singing and laughing while narrating to each other the exciting incidents of the battle. The general, who had retired to a jacal of branches built for him, which his troops had lined inside with the flags captured from the enemy, was conversing with Oliver Clary. The Canadian had just finished a story which must have powerfully affected his hearer, for his face was pale, and a burning tear trembled at the end of his lashes.

“Poor Don Aníbal,” he said, passing his hand over his eyes, “what a frightful misfortune. This last blow is the most terrible of all. He will not get over it.”

“Immediately after the battle,” the hunter continued, “Count de Melgosa, who as you know took no part in the action, but constantly remained with the rearguard, came to join the hacendero at the barricade which you ordered him to defend, and at which he fought so bravely.”

“I know it, he killed General Cárdenas with his own hand. It is better that it should be so. That man had excited such hatred against himself, that had he lived I should probably have been powerless to protect him in spite of my eager desire to do so.”

“The moment was well selected for a confession of the nature which the count had to make to Don Aníbal. The latter, overexcited by the fighting, and intoxicated by the smell of powder, endured this new misfortune with more strength than we had ventured to expect. Still the blow was terrible, and fears were entertained for his life during a moment. He rolled on the ground like an oak uprooted by the hurricane, and for some minutes was a prey to frightful convulsions and a delirium which threatened to change into insanity. Fortunately, the very intensity of the crisis saved him. He recovered, thanked the count and myself for the sympathy we had shown him, sat down on a gun carriage, and after a few nervous spasms managed to weep. Now he is calmer, and you will see him soon, for he means at once to start in pursuit of the Indians.”

“Alas, I fear that his search will be unsuccessful. The villain who betrayed him has escaped. Does he know it?”

“Not yet.”

“What is to be done? Unluckily, I can only offer him sterile consolation. But I have it,” he said, striking his forehead, “that is the very thing. ¡Viva Cristo! if Don Aníbal does not succeed in saving his hapless wife and daughter, he will at any rate be able to catch the scoundrels who carried them off, and sacrifice them to his righteous wrath.”

“Ah,” said the Canadian, “in what way? I do not know, General, especially as I fear lest the misfortune is greater than you imagine.”

“How so; what do you mean, Don Oliver?”

The Canadian reflected for a moment. A strange emotion agitated this brave man, and an expression of vexation, repentance, and timidity appeared on his frank and manly face. The general examined him with surprise.

“Come,” he said to him, “speak. I know not why, but I fancy I have still the most frightful part of this frightful story to hear.”

“You may be right, General,” the Canadian said in a low and almost unintelligible voice.

“Speak; in heaven’s name tell me all.”

“Nonsense,” the adventurer said, “my repentance has been quite enough for me to open my heart to you. General, I have committed one bad action in my life.”

“You, my friend?” Don Pelagio exclaimed quickly, “That is impossible.”

“Thanks for that remark, General. The opinion you have of me, restores me the courage to complete my confession. Yes, I repeat, I have committed one bad action, the memory of which has incessantly pursued me and filled me with remorse. One day I was a coward.”

“Go on,” the general interrupted him, with a shake of his head.

“You know,” the adventurer continued, with a certain degree of hesitation, and looking down to the ground, “that nearly my whole life has been spent, in traversing the woods, either alone, or in the company of the Indians.”

“I know it; go on.”

“You lived on this border for a long time; you will doubtless remember the frightful catastrophe in which the Count de Melgosa’s brother was assassinated?”

“Wretch! Were you mixed up in that frightful affair?” the general exclaimed.

“No,” the Canadian answered with a start of horror, “and yet I was guilty. The count’s son was carried off: do you remember it?”

“Alas! The count has never recovered from the effects of that abduction.”

“When the redskins returned from that sanguinary expedition, bringing the poor lad with them, there was a grand discussion among them to decide the fate of the weak creature. The majority wished him to be killed, while others asserted, on the other hand, that the child ought to be preserved, in order to be converted into a hostage at a later date. I was present at this discussion; the poor boy cried; I felt an involuntary interest in him, and implored the Indians to give him to me. I succeeded in convincing them by my intreaties, and they granted my request.”

“Well?” the general asked anxiously.

“A few weeks later,” the Canadian continued, “the Mexican hacenderos took a brilliant revenge. The redskins, surprised in their turn, were massacred without

pity. Nothing would have been easier for me at the time than to restore to the heart-broken father the boy who had been so treacherously carried off; but I had sworn not to do so; it was on that condition he was intrusted to me. I did not dare break my promise; still, taking advantage of the confusion, I tried to evade it. I placed the boy in the hands of a servant of Don Aníbal, begging him to deliver him to his master, as I felt convinced that he would be taken care of, and that at a later date I might perhaps be able to restore him alive to the parent who bewailed his death. Years passed, and various events kept me away from these parts, to which I had only accidentally come. Still the memory of this boy incessantly pursued me; my conscience cried to me that I had acted badly. In a word, my remorse became so great that I resolved to return to this country in order to discover the fate of the poor boy I had abandoned, and repair, were it in my power, the evil I had done."

"Good, my friend—good," the general exclaimed, warmly, "now I recognize you. Still, has your search been successful, and have you found the count's son again?"

"Yes," he answered, in a hollow voice; "yes, General, I have a moral certainty that the boy is no other than Don Melchior Díaz."

"Melchior! Thank heaven! Who would not be proud and happy of such a son?"

"As the rapidity of events has not yet allowed me to confirm my suspicions, and convert them into a certainty, I have preserved the greatest silence to everybody, and the count before all."

"You acted prudently."

"Yes," he continued, sorrowfully; "but unhappily Diego López has told me that Don Melchior has left the Hacienda del Río, where he was, in order to start on the track of the redskins."

"Alone?" the general said, with a start of terror. "That is the very thing that terrifies me, General. The poor young man burns with a desire to save Doña Emilia and her daughter; he is ignorant of Indian habits, and I feel convinced that he will allow his ardour to carry him away, and become a victim to his devotion."

"That is only too probable."

"The more so, because the redskins are implacable, and will not hesitate to sacrifice him to their hatred of the Mexicans. Fortunately the count is still ignorant that this young man is his son, as the news would have infallibly killed him."

The general let his head fall on his chest, and sighed. At this moment the door of the jacal was opened, and the count and Don Aníbal entered. In a few hours the hacendero had aged ten years; his pale, worn features, his eyes hollowed by fever, and his wild looks were pitiable to behold.

"General," he said in a faint voice, "Sotavento has escaped; did you know it?"

"I did, my friend," the general said, taking his hand affectionately; "I know it, and am glad of it." His hearers gave a start of surprise.

"This man," the general continued gently, "is a villain of the worst species. The horrible crime of which he has been guilty he must have long been meditating; all his measures were taken so as to throw out your pursuit, the confidence you placed in him only favoured him too thoroughly in the execution of his odious plots."

The hacendero sighed.

“This man would have died sooner than reveal anything to you. You know the Indians. You are aware to what a point they carry their obstinacy; his living and his flight are of more use to you now than his presence or his death would be. Clary, my friend, has the provost marshal told you at what spot the villain escaped?”

“He has, Excellency.”

“It is well. This man, however crafty he may be, cannot have disappeared without leaving a trail, and that trail must be lifted: Be assured that it will lead you to the den where this monster has concealed his victims.”

“Yes,” Don Aníbal observed; “but who will find this trail?”

“Here is the man,” the general said, stretching out his arm to the Canadian. “Did you never hear tell of the skill of the Canadians in following a trail?”

“This time, General, my skill would be thrown out,” the hunter replied. “Water does not retain a trail.”

“Clary,” the general said to him, sternly, “why this hesitation? Would you refuse to do what I ask of you?”

“I do not refuse, General,” he said sharply, “I only call attention to an impossibility.”

“Nothing is impossible when a man has a firm will. Moreover, any discussion is useless,” he added, laying a marked stress on his words, “*the hour has arrived, and the master awaits* for you to answer distinctly.”

The hunter started at these words, and said, with a respectful bow—

“Very good, I will obey, since you insist, Excellency. You know that you can do anything with me; but on one condition.”

“I will have no conditions.”

“Pray listen to one remark.”

“Be brief, for time presses.”

“I claim the right to choose my companions. We are going to undertake a campaign in which we shall leave our scalps, if not our carcases; and as I am greatly attached to mine, I must be sure of the men I take with me.”

“What you ask is quite fair, my friend, and if you have no other condition to make—”

“No other, General.”

“Then I grant it.”

“Very good; with your leave, I will set to work at once. Two words, however, before I leave you.”

“Speak, my friend.”

“The desert has its laws, which no one cares to infringe. Personally I have no animosity against the Indians; on the contrary, I have always lived on good terms with them, and only a few days ago a Comanche chief welcomed me to his camp as a friend.”

“What conclusion do you draw from that?”

“None at all; still, as I must break these pleasant relations, I request, once again, that the whole management of this affair may be left in my hands. Before mounting, I will come to an understanding with my friend, Moonshine.”

“Very good.”

“Don Aníbal, you will let yourself be guided by me; for I presume that you intend to accompany us?”

“Can you doubt it, señor?”

“Well, it would, perhaps, be better for you to remain with the general.”

“No, no, I will go on this expedition; for no one is more interested than myself in its success.”

“That is true. Well, as you please.”

“I, too, will accompany you, Don Oliver,” said the count.

“Very well, caballero.”

“But there is another person who would not forgive you for leaving him behind. Don Melchior Díaz; you will not forget to warn him, I trust, señor, for you know that we promised it to him.”

The general and the hunter exchanged a meaning glance.

“That is my business,” the former remarked, “so do not trouble yourself, Señor Conde.”

“Now, I will be off,” the Canadian continued; “however long my absence may be, do not feel anxious about it. When I rejoin you, I shall be perfectly sure of the road we have to follow.”

“Can you not tell us, at least, who the people are you mean to take with you?”

“Nothing is easier; they are men like myself, hunters and adventurers belonging to my cuadrilla, accustomed to a desert life and Indian tricks. Soldiers would do us more harm than good. In this expedition, courage takes the second place; skill and craftiness alone can ensure our success. Good-bye, good-bye, all is arranged; I shall be back soon.”

“Go, my friend, and luck be with you,” the general said, affectionately.

“All that it is possible to attempt, General, I will do. Good-bye.”

The hunter went out.

“That is all the assistance I can offer you, Don Aníbal; I wish that I could do more. Place the most perfect confidence in this adventurer; he is a man of heart, thoroughly devoted and intelligent.”

“I have been able to appreciate him under critical circumstances,” the count said, “and I have the best opinion of him.”

“Heaven grant that his help may prove effectual,” Don Aníbal murmured, with a sigh.

“Hope, my friend, hope. God will not abandon you.”

Don Aníbal only answered with a sigh more profound than the first, and, after taking leave of the general, he and the count proceeded to the spot where the cuadrilla of the adventurers was encamped.

“Poor man!” the general muttered, as he saw the hacendero retire. “Will he succeed in saving the two unhappy captives? Alas!”

He shook his head doubtfully, and fell back into his meditations.

“Are you ready to start?” Moonshine asked the two gentlemen on seeing them.

“At once?” the count asked.

“Well, that will be better for what we have to do.”

“Have we the time to go and fetch our horses?”

“Your peon has brought them.”

Fifteen adventurers, already mounted, were waiting, motionless and silent. They were men with bold features and a resolute air, whose bronzed faces testified to the fatigue they had endured in their rough profession. A few minutes later the little band quitted the camp at a gallop, and went out into the plain under the guidance of Moonshine. It was a cold night, as most American nights are. The men wrapped themselves carefully in their cloaks, to escape being saturated by the chilling dew, which fell upon them in an abundance unknown in our climate; and they rode sharply till sunrise without exchanging a word. At about four in the morning they halted to give their horses a rest.

"Are we going to stop?" Don Aníbal asked. These were the first words he had spoken since they started.

"Only for two hours," the hunter said.

"Very well."

And he fell back into his silence, from which the count did not deem it necessary to draw him. As Moonshine had said, within two hours the horses were resaddled, and they set out again, after eating a biscuit and a strip of tasajo, and drinking a draught of spirits. The count could only succeed in making his friend swallow a few mouthfuls, by representing to him that he must keep up his strength. His grief was intensely gloomy. This time they rode a long distance, and only halted at one o'clock p.m. in a clearing.

"We will wait for Oliver here," the hunter said, as he dismounted.

Don Aníbal raised his head.

"Will he come soon?" he asked, with considerable eagerness.

"I do not know. That will depend on the information he may have picked up."

"Nonsense," said Don Aurelio Gutiérrez, who had joined the party through his warm affection for the hacendero, "he will not be long."

"My hacienda is not very far from here, señor," the count said. "There would be time to send someone to fetch Don Melchior."

Moonshine made a sign to Diego López, gave him an order in a low voice, and the latter at once went off.

"Where are we?" Don Aurelio asked. "I do not know at all. What is that river running down there between the cottonwood trees?"

"We are on the Indian border, señor, and that river you can see from here is the Río Bravo del Norte, which serves as a limit between Mexico and the great Indian prairies."

"May I ask," the count then said, joining in the conversation, "why you have made us take this road sooner than another?"

"For a very simple reason, señor. The man who carried off the two ladies whom we wish to deliver is an Indian—not a civilized Indian, but one of those to whom you give the name of Bravos, or untameable, is he not?"

"You are quite correct."

"Very well. That being so, there are heavy odds that this man, after carrying off the ladies, tried to rejoin his tribe and shelter himself from pursuit by entering the desert. On the other hand, Oliver and you, count, were attacked a little time ago by a party of Comanche marauders. It was on the same night that Doña Emilia and her daughter, after saving you by their unforeseen presence, disappeared—in all probability captured by the same men who attacked you, or another

detachment of the tribe. You see, then, everything leads to the belief that the ravishers must have retired into the desert, where they are certain of meeting friends, instead of remaining in a hostile country, where it would be impossible for them to remain any length of time without running a risk of discovery."

"Yes, you are right. We were attacked by Comanches, and most assuredly should have been massacred, had it not been for the providential intervention of Doña Emilia," he added, in a low voice, not to be heard by Don Aníbal.

Time slipped away; the hacendero now and then raised his head, looked anxiously around him, and then fell back into his gloomy reverie. At length, at about five in the evening, the noise of horses could be heard, and the sentries signalled two riders coming up at a gallop. They were Don Melchior Díaz and Diego López. Moonshine was greatly puzzled by the young gentleman's arrival, for, having been warned by Oliver of the occurrences at the Hacienda del Río, he had told Diego López to remain absent for a time, and then return, saying that General Sandoval had told Don Melchior to come to him alone, and that the latter had at once left the hacienda in obedience to this order.

Diego López, consequently, rode about haphazard, and resolved to employ the time granted him in making a reconnoissance of the banks of the Río del Norte. Great was his surprise on recognizing in a horseman fording the river, the man he was supposed to have gone to fetch. In two words, Don Melchior explained what he had attempted on behalf of the captives. On his side, the peon informed him of the expedition organized to proceed to their assistance. The young man's heart bounded with delight on hearing this, and, after agreeing with Diego that they should be silent, they proceeded to the encampment in all haste.

By extraordinary good fortune. Don Melchior had succeeded in foiling the ever active vigilance of the Indians, and, after his interview with the ladies, left the teocali undisturbed; he had found his clothes and horse again at the spot where he stopped to disguise himself, after killing the sentinel; and then, mad with despair and grief, he dashed across the prairie for the purpose of joining Oliver and persuading him to fly with him to the rescue of the prisoners. At this moment it was that he met the peon.

So soon as he entered the bivouac, the young gentleman leapt from his horse, pressed the counts hand, and then rushed toward Don Aníbal, while Diego López told Moonshine, in a low voice, all about this chance interview. The hacendero had risen on perceiving Don Melchior; they fell into each other's arms, and remained embraced for a long time, mingling their tears but not speaking, for great sorrows are dumb.

"Courage!" Don Melchior at length murmured, "Courage, we shall find them again."

"Do you think so?" Don Aníbal exclaimed eagerly. "Oh! could I but believe it. Oh, heaven! Have I not suffered enough?"

He let his head droop on his chest again, and burst into tears. There was something affecting in the sight of this strong man, who was so utterly crushed by grief and cried like a child. His friends regarded him with the most earnest compassion; they did not dare offer him consolations whose inutility they recognized; but the sadness displayed on their features sufficiently proved the sympathy they felt with him.

The sun had set a long time but the hunter did not appear, and the anxiety became general. No one spoke, but each mentally calculated the hours that had elapsed, and began to think that the Canadian's absence threatened to become indefinitely prolonged. Moonshine alone did not seem to feel any anxiety or surprise, because he alone of the persons who surrounded him knew what difficulties the hunter would have to surmount in procuring positive information, and discovering on the sand or in the grass the flying traces of a man who, with the diabolical prudence of his race, had doubtless tried to efface every mark of his passage.

At about ten o'clock, at the moment when the moon, disappearing between two clouds, plunged the clearing into complete darkness for a few minutes, Moonshine, who, as an attentive sentry, had undertaken to watch over the safety of all his comrades, suddenly heard the cry of the whippoorwill rise softly and plaintively in the silence. The Canadian listened; the same cry was repeated thrice at regular intervals.

"It is he," the Canadian muttered, as he returned the same signal.

Almost immediately a man entered the clearing, leading his horse by the bridle—it was Oliver Clary. He walked to the hacendero, and laid his hand on his shoulder.

"Up, Don Aníbal," he said to him, "within twenty-four hours we shall have recovered those whom you thought lost."

"At last!" the hacendero shouted wildly as he leapt to his feet.

Chapter XXXIX

Running Water.

Although the Indians, if judged by the standard of our advanced civilization, are still plunged in the deepest barbarism, they are far from being so ferocious at the present day as they were fifty or sixty years ago. In spite of themselves, their continued contact with the white men has gradually modified their manners, and their native cruelty is beginning to yield to gentler feelings and less cruel customs. The usage of torturing the enemies whom fate has thrown into their hands is beginning to die out, and it is only under exceptional circumstances that prisoners are still attached to the stake.

The honour of this progress is entirely due to the missionaries, those sublime pioneers of civilization who, at the peril of their life, disdaining fatigue and danger to win over a soul to our holy religion, constantly traverse the desert in all directions, preaching to the Indians and gradually initiating them in the comforts of civilization. The Comanches especially, that indomitable and haughty race, the undegenerated descendants of the first owners of the soil, no longer torture their prisoners, save under extraordinary circumstances.

The tribe of the Red Buffaloes had, at a certain period, tried to enter the great family of civilized nations; and certainly, if it fell back into barbarism, the blame

cannot be fairly laid on the redskins. The sachems and aged men remembered, with sighs of regret, the long and quiet years they had passed on the Mexican territory, tilling the soil, breeding cattle, and protected from insults and depredations. Hence they kept up an implacable hatred of the man who had ruined their lodges, burnt their crops, killed their horses, and forced them to resume their nomadic life by driving them back like wild beasts into the desert. The most persistent feeling in the heart of the Indians is hatred; they only live in the hope of vengeance.

After long years of expectation the Red Buffaloes at length saw their desires satisfied. The wife and daughter of the man who was the cause of all their woes had fallen into their hands, and frightful reprisals were preparing, the more so, because one of these ladies was that terrible Queen of the Savannah before whom they had so long trembled. On the morning of the day appointed for the holiday—for such the death of the captives was to the Indians—the sun rose radiantly in a golden mist. The whole tribe had been assembled to witness the punishment of the Queen of the Savannah. On the plain, about a musket shot from the teocali, and in a spacious forest clearing, two stakes had been planted in the ground, and round them was piled up the wood destined to burn mother and daughter alive. The wood had been chosen in a green state in order that it might burn with difficulty and produce a dense smoke. It was an ingenious mode of making the torture last longer by rendering it more atrocious.

The women and children, more ferocious than the warriors, had been busy since daybreak in cutting small pointed splints of larch wood, which were to be thrust under the nails of the victims. Scalping knives were ground, and the points of the lances sharpened. Warriors were preparing sulphur matches, while others were heating iron nails, to be thrust into the bleeding wounds inflicted by their comrades. In a word, all, men, women, and children, were expending their ingenuity in inventing instruments of torture, and rendering the frightful punishment more cruel still.

The two ladies had spent the night in prayer. They only hoped now in God, in whom they placed entire confidence. Calm and resigned they awaited their executioners. The glad shouts of the Indians and the noise of their horrible preparations reached their ears. At times they shuddered; but mother and daughter then exchanged a look full of tenderness, and their clasped hands were furtively pressed. The captives passed the whole morning in a state of moral agony impossible to describe. Their torture had already begun. The Indians, with a refinement of cruelty perfectly in accordance with their manners, took a delight in thus heightening their suffering by a continued succession of fears and apprehensions.

The chiefs had decided that the punishment should not begin till the great heat of the day had passed. At length, about one o'clock, a sound of footsteps was heard, and the majordomo entered the prison of his captives. His manner was rough and abrupt, and his hollow eyes seemed to flash fire. He tried in vain to hide a terrible emotion which overpowered him.

"I have come for your answer," he said in a metallic voice.

"We are ready to die," they replied impetuously; and they rose and walked towards him.

“You are mad,” he exclaimed with a bitter laugh. “Who says anything about death, you weak creatures? Impelled by a nervous excitement which will soon abandon you, you try in vain to deceive me by deceiving yourselves. Death is nothing, but suffering is everything.”

“Heaven will give us the necessary strength to support it,” Doña Emilia answered.

“Unhappy woman! Even supposing you can endure a slow death of several hours, will you expose your daughter to it?”

The Indian had hit the mark. Doña Emilia felt all her courage abandon her. She hid her face in her hands, and burst into tears.

“Villain!” the young lady exclaimed passionately, “Even if my mother, blinded by her tenderness for me, were so weak as to consent to the odious compact which you proposed to us, I would prefer death, and would kill myself with my own hand, sooner than belong to you.”

The Indian burst into the yell of a wild beast. “It is too much, proud Spanish girl!” he shouted furiously. “Your fate is decided. Follow me!”

“Show me the way,” the noble maiden said proudly. “The hangman should go before his victims. Come, mother, lean on my arm. I am strong, for I already feel as if I no longer belonged to this world. Dry your tears and raise your head, mother. Do not let these monsters suppose that your courage fails you.”

“Alas!” Doña Emilia answered, as she mechanically passed her arm through her daughter’s, “Poor child, I am the cause of your death. Oh forgive me! Forgive me!”

“Forgive you, mother? What? That I am about to die with you? Oh, could I ever hope for greater happiness!”

“I implore you, daughter, not to let your filial affection deceive you. I see it now. I was mad, and did wrong in exhorting you to die. Death is horrible at your age, my child, when you have scarce entered upon life and all still appears smiling.”

“All the better, mother,” the maiden answered, kissing her forehead. “I have only known the sweets of life; does not that make me the happier?”

“Oh, oh, woe is me!” Doña Emilia exclaimed, as she twined her arms desperately; “I have killed my daughter.”

The Indian listened gloomy and pensive; a poignant remorse was silently gnawing his heart.

“Mother,” Doña Diana said, kneeling piously before her, as she was wont to do each night in happier times; “mother, you are a holy woman; mother, bless your child.”

“Oh, bless you, bless you; may God hear the prayer I offer up, and withdraw from you this frightful cup, to offer it to me alone.”

The maiden rose. Her face shone with a pure and holy joy; never had her features reflected such a sublime expression; she was lovely, with the beauty of Virgin and Martyr.

“Let us go,” she said, in a tone of authority which overpowered her mother’s grief, “we should not keep our murderers waiting.”

And with a sovereign gesture she showed the Indian chief the door. The latter, involuntarily overcome by this omnipotent will, went out with hanging head, and the two ladies followed him. They walked down the staircase of the teocali with a firm step, followed and preceded by a number of old squaws and children, who

overwhelmed with insults and hurled mud in their faces. Doña Diana smiled; for a moment she felt her mother's arm tremble upon hers; fancying that the latter was giving way, she leant gently over to her and said with an ineffable expression—

"Courage, my kind mother, each step brings us nearer to heaven."

They at length reached the plain; on the last step they looked round instinctively to take a farewell glance at the wretched spot in which they had suffered so greatly. The Indian warriors, squaws, and children greeted the arrival of the captives on the plain with a yell of ferocious joy. The Stag had called up several braves, who, by his orders, ranged themselves round the prisoners, in order to protect them from the insults of the hideous women, who, at each step, rushed toward them as if to tear them with their long nails, which were bent like the claws of a panther.

"The paleface women must not be wounded before they are fastened to the stake," the chief said; "they would not have the strength left to endure the torture."

This reason appeared just, and the squaws restricted themselves to hurling at them the most disgusting insults they could imagine, resolved soon to take their revenge for the constraint imposed on them at this moment. Perhaps, in speaking as he had done, the majordomo disguised his thoughts, and this cruel insinuation was, in reality, hidden protection.

The distance to the place of torture was rather long; the two ladies, but little accustomed to walk through brambles and thorns, advanced slowly to their Calvary; still, they approached, and at length entered the clearing. The sachems of the tribe, gravely seated in a semicircle in front of the stakes of torture, were stoically smoking their calumets. The sinister procession stopped before them, and the Stag advanced.

"Here are the two white captives!" he said in a a voice which, despite all his efforts, trembled slightly.

Running Water raised his head and fixed his dull glance on the prisoners, while a cruel smile curled his thin lips, and displayed his teeth, white as those of a jaguar.

"Well," he asked, "what do they resolve? Do they accept the conditions the council offered them, or do they prefer death?"

The Stag turned to the captives with an expression of indescribable agony. They looked away from him disdainfully.

"They prefer death," he said.

"Wah!" the chief remarked, "the paleface squaws are like the red wolves of the prairie; they had a deal of boasting and little courage. Let them die, as they wish it; their cries of pain will rejoice the hearts of the Red Buffaloes."

A yell of joy greeted this finale, and the two ladies were led to the posts.

"There is still time," the Stag whispered in a hollow voice in the maiden's ear; "save yourself; save your mother! One word, but one, and you will escape the horrible punishment that threatens you."

"No," she answered in a firm voice, "I will not save myself by a cowardly deed; my fate is in the hands of God, and He can deliver me if He wills it."

"Summon thy God to thy help, then, proud fool, but make haste, for in a second it will be too late."

Suddenly, as if God wished to confound the blasphemer, a discharge of musketry burst forth like a thunderclap, and thirty horsemen dashed into the clearing, uttering cries of defiance and felling all who opposed their passage with sabre cuts and blows with their gun stocks. The Indians, who fancied themselves safe in their den, were terrified by this sudden attack, for which they were the less prepared, because the majority of them, supposing that they were going to celebrate a festival, had thrown their weapons pell-mell in a corner of the clearing. At the first moment the medley was frightful; the Indians fell like ripe corn beneath the strokes of the hunters. The women, half mad with terror, escaped in all directions, uttering fearful shrieks. Some warriors, however, had succeeded in recovering their lances, and prepared for a regular resistance.

"Ah!" the majordomo shouted, as he seized Doña Diana in his arms, "Dead or alive, you shall not escape me."

And lifting the maiden as if she were an infant, he started for the teocali.

"Mother; help, help!" the maiden shrieked in terror.

Doña Emilia leapt on the Indian and clung to him like a lioness; it was in vain that the latter tried to free himself; maternal love had increased her strength a hundredfold.

"Hold on, hold on!" Oliver shouted, as he made his horse leap over the corpses.

The Stag heard him, and he understood that his victim would escape him.

"Ah!" he shouted wildly, "Die then!"

And raising his scalping knife, he tried to stab her to the heart; but, with a movement swift as thought, Doña Emilia threw herself before the knife which completely disappeared in her throat.

"Thank you, my God!" she exclaimed, as she clung to the arm of the Comanche with a last supreme effort.

At the same moment Clary's sabre descended on the head of the chief, who rolled on the ground with cloven skull, dragging down with him the two females, one of whom was in the death agony, while the other had fainted, but was saved by her mother's heroic devotion. With the assistance of some of his comrades, Oliver raised the captives from the ground.

The battle was at an end; the Comanches had fled, leaving the clearing encumbered with corpses and a number of wounded, whom the implacable warriors set to work dispatching with the cold cruelty of men accustomed to such a task.

"Stay," said Oliver, noticing Running Water lying a few paces from him covered with wounds, "do not kill that man, he is an old acquaintance of mine."

The hunter had placed Doña Diana in her father's arms. Don Aníbal, delighted at seeing his daughter saved, but rendered desperate by the death of his wife, whose agony had already begun, was striving, by all the means in his power, to recall her to life.

"Good-bye," Doña Emilia murmured in a dying voice, as she gently pressed the hands of her daughter and her husband; "our daughter will console you for the loss of me. I die happy, because I died in saving her."

And gently laying her head on her husband's shoulder, she gave back her soul, still trying to smile on those whom she was leaving for ever.

It was after confiding Doña Diana to her father that Clary noticed Running Water. Count de Melgosa was lying by the side of the old sachem, with a lance thrust through his thigh. The hunters were preparing to remove the count to a more convenient spot, but the sachem, who had hitherto remained motionless, with his eyes closed as if he were already dead, gave a sudden start, and raised his head.

"One moment," he said, rising on his elbow with a great effort, "let me say a couple of words to this man."

The count ordered the hunters to withdraw.

"Chief, I am grieved to see you in this state," the Canadian said compassionately, for he remembered the sachem's kind reception; "let me bind up your wounds, and then you can speak at your ease."

"What good!" the chief answered bitterly; "I feel death approaching; its black wings are already spread out over my eyes; do not torment me."

"Let him speak," the count interrupted, "perhaps what he has to say to me may be more important than we suspect."

"Yes, yes," the chief continued with a groan, "much more than you believe."

And with a supreme effort he placed his face close to the count's, exclaiming with an expression of deadly hatred—

"Do you recognize me?"

"No," the count answered, after gazing fixedly at him.

The features of the old chief, already nearly decomposed by the advent of death, assumed a sinister expression.

"You do not recognize me," he said in a hollow voice, "and yet you are my enemy. My hand has fallen heavily upon you. You remember your brother's horrible death? Well, it was I who killed him. Oh! A portion of my vengeance has escaped me today, it is true, but my soul will not fly away alone to our happy hunting grounds. This woman, the Queen of the Savannah, and her daughter are dead. I have, therefore, gained my object."

"You are mistaken, chief," honest Clary interrupted him, scandalized by the Indian's language at such a moment; "although the Queen of the Savannah, as you call Doña Emilia, is dead, I was so fortunate as to save her daughter."

A convulsive quivering ran over the Indian's body; he gave the hunter an angry look, but almost immediately resumed, with a triumphant look—

"I have also sacrificed another victim to my hatred, the boy I carried off and entrusted to the Sumach."

"Well?" the Canadian said, with a cunning look, with the evident intention of drawing the redskin into a thorough confession.

"Yes, yes," the chief continued bitterly, "I know that all the palefaces are cowards, and that this one betrayed me."

The adventurer gave a start of passion, which was at once checked.

"That boy," the sachem exclaimed with cruel delight, "Don Aníbal educated as if he were his own son. Ah, ah! That handsome Don Melchior Díaz!"

"Well?" the count said, with feverish impatience.

"He was your son; but he is dead—crushed at the foot of a precipice."

Oliver leant over the chief, and gently touched his shoulder.

“Look, scoundrel!” he said, pointing to the young man who was running up to help the count, “Look, and die in despair, for there is the man whom you believe dead.”

Running Water raised himself as if sustained by unknown strength; his eyes, dilated by horror and disappointed rage, were fixed on the young man with a terrible expression.

“Oh!” he exclaimed in a thundering voice, “All, all saved! the God of the palefaces has conquered!”

And he fell back without an effort to prevent it; ere he touched the ground he was dead.

* * * * *

Don Melchior Díaz was recognized without any difficulty as the count’s son, and a year after the events we have narrated married Doña Diana. Don Aníbal de Saldibar, inconsolable at his wife’s death, withdrew to a monastery in Mexico; after giving all property to his son-in-law and daughter, he took the vows, but grief had destroyed all his energy. Don Aníbal survived but a short time the death of the woman he had so dearly loved, and, in accordance with his request, was buried by her side.

Oliver Clary and his friend Moonshine, in spite of the young Count de Melgosa’s earnest entreaties that they would remain with him, made but a short stay at the hacienda. Carried away by the irresistible attractions of a desert life, they resumed their adventurous excursions in the savannah, at the head of their bold cuadrilla, joyously recommencing the happy existence of wood rangers, and carrying with them Diego López, who had always a sneaking affection for the prairie.

(4-1) The person to whom we allude is at this moment in Paris, and could, if necessary, confirm our statement.

(4-2) However incredible this fact may appear, we repeat that it is strictly true.

(33-3) About £1600 of our currency.