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Author: Gustave Aimard
Translator: Sir Lascelles Wraxall

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THE TRAIL HUNTER.

A TALE OF THE FAR WEST.

BY

GUSTAVE AIMARD,

AUTHOR OF "THE PRAIRIE FLOWER," "THE INDIAN CHIEF," ETC.

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Contents

PREFACE.

The present volume of Aimard's Indian Tales is devoted to the earlier adventures of those hunters, whose acquaintance the reader has formed, I trust with pleasure, in the preceding series. It does not become me to say anything further in its favour, than that the sustained interest of the narrative, which has been regarded as the charm of stories referring to life in the desert and prairie, has not been departed from in this instance. The stories themselves supply an innate proof of the writer's correctness to Nature, and, in truth, many of the scenes are so startling that they must be the result of personal observation.

In conclusion, I may be permitted to thank the Press generally for the kindly aid they have afforded me in making the English translation of Aimard's volumes known to the British reading public, and the hearty way in which they have recognized the merits of the previous series. It would be an easy task to collect paragraphs, expressing a belief that Aimard is second to none of the writers who have hitherto described Indian life and scenery; but I prefer to rest my hopes of success on the inherent qualities of his stories.

LASCELLES WRAXALL.

CHAPTER I.

THE VIRGIN FOREST.

In Mexico the population is only divided into two classes, the upper and the lower. There is no intermediate rank to connect the two extremes, and this is the cause of the two hundred and thirty-nine revolutions which have overthrown this country since the declaration of its independence. Why this is so is simple enough. The intellectual power is in the hands of a small number, and all the revolutions are effected by this turbulent and ambitious minority; whence it results that the country is governed by the most complete military despotism, instead of being a free republic.

Still the inhabitants of the States of Sonora, Chihuahua, and Texas have retained, even to the present day, that stern, savage, and energetic physiognomy which may be sought in vain among the other States of the Confederation.

Beneath a sky colder than that of Mexico, the winter, which frequently covers the rivers of the region with a thick layer of ice, hardens the muscles of the inhabitants, cleanses their blood, purifies their hearts, and renders them picked men, who are distinguished for their courage, their intelligence, and their profound love of liberty.

The Apaches, who originally inhabited the greater portion of New Mexico, have gradually fallen back before the axe of the pioneers; and after retiring into the immense deserts that cover the triangle formed by the Rio Gila, the Del Norte, and the Colorado, they ravage almost with impunity the Mexican frontiers, plundering, firing, and devastating all they meet with on their passage.

The inhabitants of the countries we alluded to above, held in respect by these ever-shifting savages, are in a state of continual warfare with them, always ready to fight, fortifying their haciendas, and only travelling with weapons in their hands.

El Paso del Norte may be regarded as the outpost of the civilised portion of Mexico. Beyond that, to the north and north-west, extend the vast unfilled plains of Chihuahua, the *bolsón* of Mapimi, and the arid deserts of the Rio Gila. These immense deserts, known by the name of Apacheria, are still as little investigated as they were at the close of the eighteenth century. El Paso del Norte owes its name to its situation near a ford of the Rio Del Norte. It is the oldest of all the New Mexican settlements, and its establishment dates back to the close of the sixteenth century. The present settlement is scattered for a distance of about ten miles along the banks of the Del Norte, and contains four thousand inhabitants at the most. The *plaza*, or village of the Paso, is situated at the head of the valley: at the other extremity is the Presidio of San Elezario. All the interval is occupied by a continuous line of white, flat-roofed houses, buried in gardens, and surrounded by vineyards. About a mile above the ford the stream is dammed up, and led by a canal into the valley, which it waters. Apacheria begins only a few miles from this settlement.

It is easily seen that the foot of civilised man has only trodden timidly and at rare intervals this thoroughly primitive country, in which nature, free to develop herself under the omnipotent eye of the creator, assumes an aspect of incredible beauty and fancifulness.

On a lovely morning in the month of May, which the Indians call "the moon of the flowers," a man of high stature, with harsh and marked features, mounted on a tall, half-tamed steed, started at a canter from the plaza, and after a few minutes of hesitation, employed in realising his position, resolutely buried his spurs in the horse's flanks, crossed the ford, and after leaving behind him the numerous cottonwood trees which at this spot cover the river banks, proceeded toward the dense forest that flashed on the horizon.

This horseman was dressed in the costume generally adopted on the frontiers, and which was so picturesque that we will give a short description of it. The stranger wore a pelisse of green cloth, embroidered with silver, allowing a glimpse of an elegantly-worked shirt, the collar of which was fastened by a loosely-knotted black silk handkerchief, the ends passed through a diamond ring. He wore green cloth breeches, trimmed with silver, and two rows of buttons of the same metal, and fastened round the hips by a red silken scarf with gold fringe. The breeches, open on the side half way up the thigh, displayed his fine linen drawers beneath: his legs were defended by a strip of brown embossed and stamped leather, called *botas vaqueras*, attached below the knee by a silver garter. On his heels enormous spurs clanked. A *manga*, glistening with gold, and drawn up on the shoulder, protected the upper part of his body, while his head was sheltered from the burning sunbeams by a broad-leafed hat of brown stamped felt, the crown of which was contracted by a large silver *toquilla* passed twice or thrice round it.

His steed was caparisoned with graceful luxuriousness, which heightened all its beautiful points: a rich saddle of embossed leather, adorned with massive silver, on the back of which the *zarapé* was fastened; wide Moorish silver stirrups, and handsome water bottles at the saddle-bow; while an elegant *anquera*, made of openwork leather, and decorated with small steel chains, entirely covered the horse's croup, and sparkled with its slightest movement.

The stranger appeared, judging from the luxury he displayed, to belong to the high class of society. A *machete* hung down his right side, two pistols were passed through his girdle, the handle of a long knife protruded from his right boot, and he held a superbly damascened rifle across the saddle in front of him.

Bending over the neck of his galloping steed, he advanced rapidly without looking round him,

although the landscape that lay extended before him was one of the most attractive and majestic in those regions.

The river formed the most capricious windings in the centre of a terrain diversified in a thousand strange ways. Here and there on the sandy banks enormous trees might be seen lying, which, dried up by the sun, evidenced, in their washed-out appearance, that they had been dead for centuries. Near the shallow and marshy spots, caymans and alligators wandered about awkwardly. At other places, where the river ran almost straight, its banks were uniform, and covered with tall trees, round which creepers had twined, and then struck root in the ground again, thus forming the most inextricable confusion. Here and there small clearings or marshy spots might be detected in the midst of the dense wood, often piled up with trees that had died of old age. Further on, other trees, which seemed still young, judging from their colour and the solidity of their bark, fell into dust with the slightest breath of wind.

At times, the earth, entirely undermined beneath, drawn down by its own weight, dragged with it the wood which it bore, and produced a crashing, confused sound, which was returned on all sides by the echo, and possessed a certain degree of grandeur in this desert, whose depths no man has ever yet ventured to scrutinise.

Still the stranger galloped on, with his eye ardently fixed before him, and not appearing to see anything. Several hours passed thus: the horseman buried himself deeper in the forest. He had left the banks of the river, and only progressed with extreme difficulty, through the entanglement of branches, grass, and shrubs, which at every step arrested his movements, and forced him to make innumerable turnings. He merely reined in his horse now and then, took a glance at the sky, and then started again, muttering to himself but one word:

"*Adelante*! (Forward!)"

At length he stopped in a vast clearing, took a suspicious glance around him, and probably reassured by the leaden silence which weighed on the desert, he dismounted, hobbled his horse, and took off its bridle that it might browse on the young tree shoots. This duty accomplished, he carelessly lay down on the ground, rolled a maize cigarette in his fingers, produced a gold *mechero* from his waist belt, and struck a light.

The clearing was of considerable extent. On one side the eye could survey with ease, through the trees, the widely extending prairie, on which deer were browsing with security. On the other side, the forest, wilder than ever, seemed, on the contrary, an impassable wall of verdure. All was abrupt and primitive at this spot, which the foot of man had so rarely trodden. Certain trees, either entirely or partially dried up, offered the vigorous remains of a rich and fertile soil; others, equally ancient, were sustained by the twisted creepers, which in the course of time almost equalled their original support in size: the diversity of the leaves produced the strangest possible mixture. Others, containing in their hollow trunk a manure which, formed of the remains of their leaves and half-dead branches, had warmed the seeds they had let fall, and offered, in the young shoots they contained, some compensation for the loss of their father tree.

In the prairies, nature, ever provident, seems to have been desirous to shelter from the insults of time certain old trees, patriarchs of the forest which are crushed beneath the weight of ages, by forming them a cloak of greyish moss, which hangs in festoons from the highest branches to the ground, assuming the wildest and most fantastic shapes.

The stranger, lying on his back, with his head resting on his two crossed hands, was smoking with that beatitude, full of ease and sloth, which is peculiar to the Hispano-Americans. He only interrupted this gentle occupation to roll a fresh cigarette and cast a glance around, while muttering:

"Hum! He keeps me waiting a long time."

He emitted a puff of bluish smoke, and resumed his first position. Several hours passed thus. Suddenly, a rather loud rustling was heard in the thicket, some distance behind the stranger.

"Ah, ah!" he said, "I fancy my man is coming at last."

In the meanwhile, the sound became louder, and rapidly approached.

"Come on, hang it!" the horseman shouted, as he rose. "By our Lady of Pilar! You have surely been keeping me waiting long enough."

Nothing appeared: the clearing was still deserted, although the sound had attained a certain degree of intensity. The stranger, surprised at the obstinate silence of the man he was addressing, and specially by his continuing not to show himself, at length rose to see for himself the reason. At this moment, his horse pricked up its ears, snorted violently, and made a sudden effort to free itself from the lasso that held it; but our new acquaintance rushed toward it and patted it. The horse trembled all over, and made prodigious bounds in order to escape. The stranger, more and more surprised, looked round for an explanation of these extraordinary movements, and was soon satisfied.

Scarce twenty yards from him a magnificent jaguar, with a splendidly-spotted hide, was crouched on the main branch of an enormous cypress, and fixed on him two ferocious eyes, as it passed its blood-red, rugged tongue over its lips with a feline pleasure.

"Ah, ah!" the stranger said to himself in a low voice, but displaying no further excitement, "I did not expect you; but no matter, you are welcome, comrade. *Caray*! We shall have a fight for it."

Without taking his eye off the jaguar, he convinced himself that his machete quitted its scabbard

readily, picked up his rifle, and, after these precautions were taken, he advanced resolutely toward the ferocious brute, which saw him coming without changing its position. On arriving within ten yards of the jaguar, the stranger threw away the cigarette he had till now held between his lips, shouldered his rifle, and put his finger on the trigger. The jaguar drew itself together and prepared to leap forward. At the same moment a hoarse yell was heard from the opposite side of the clearing.

"Wait a minute," the stranger said to himself with a smile; "it seems there are two of them, and I fancied I had to do with a bachelor jaguar. This is beginning to grow interesting."

And he threw a glance on one side. He had not deceived himself: a second jaguar, rather larger than the first, had fixed its flashing eyes upon him.

CHAPTER II.

THE CONTEST.

The dwellers on the Mexican frontiers are accustomed to fight continually with wild animals, both men and brutes, that continually attack them. Hence the stranger was but slightly affected by the unexpected visit of the two jaguars. Although his position between his two ferocious enemies was somewhat precarious, and he did not at all conceal from himself the danger he ran alone against two, he did not the less resolve to confront them bravely. Not taking his eye off the jaguar he had first seen, he went back a few steps obliquely, so as to have his foes nearly opposite him, instead of standing between them. This manoeuvre, which demanded some little time, succeeded beyond his hopes. The jaguars watched him, licking their lips, and passing their paws behind their ears with those graceful movements peculiar to the feline race. The two wild beasts, certain of their prey, seemed to be playing with it and not over eager to pounce on it.

While keeping his eye on the watch, the Mexican did not yield to any treacherous feeling of security: he knew that the struggle he was about to undertake was a supreme one, and he took his precautions. Jaguars never attack a man unless forced by necessity; and the latter tried, before all, to seize the horse. The noble animal, securely fastened by its master, exhausted itself in efforts to break the bonds that held it, and escape. It trembled with terror on scenting its ferocious enemies.

The stranger, when his precautions were completely taken, shouldered his rifle for the second time. At this moment the jaguars raised their heads, while laying back their ears and snuffing anxiously. An almost imperceptible sound was audible in the bushes.

"Who goes there?" the Mexican asked in a loud voice.

"A friend, Don Miguel Zarate," was the reply.

"Ah! It is Don Valentine," the Mexican continued. "You have arrived just in time to see some fine sport."

"Ah, ah!" the man who had already spoken went on. "Can I help you?"

"It is useless; but make haste if you want to see."

The branches were sharply drawn aside, and two men appeared in the clearing. At the sight of the jaguars they stopped, not through alarm, for they quietly placed the butts of their rifles on the ground, but in order to give the hunter every facility to emerge victoriously from his rash combat.

The jaguars seemed to comprehend that the moment for action had arrived. As if by one accord, they drew themselves up and bounded on their enemy. The first, struck in its leap by a bullet which passed through its right eye, rolled on the ground, where it remained motionless. The second was received on the point of the hunter's machete, who after discharging his rifle, had fallen on his knee, with his left arm folded in his blanket in front, and the machete in the other hand. The man and the tiger writhed together in a deadly embrace, and after a few seconds only one of the adversaries rose: it was the man. The tiger was dead: the hunter's machete, guided by a firm hand, had passed right through its heart.

During this rapid fight the newcomers had not made a sign, but remained stoical spectators of all that was taking place. The Mexican rose, thrust his machete in the grass to clean the blade, and turning coldly to the strangers, said:

"What do you say to that?"

"Splendidly played," the first answered; "it is one of the best double strokes I ever saw in my life."

The two men threw their rifles on their shoulders, and walked up to the Mexican, who reloaded his piece with as much coolness and tranquillity as if he had not just escaped from a terrible danger by a miracle of skill.

The sun was sinking on the horizon, the shadow of the trees assumed a prodigious length, and the luminary appeared like a ball of fire amid the limpid azure of the heavens. The night would soon arrive, and the desert was awaking. On all sides could be heard, in the gloomy and mysterious depths of the virgin forest, the hoarse howling of the coyotes and the other wild beasts, mingled with the song of the birds perched on all the branches. The desert, silent and

gloomy during the oppressive heat of the day, emerged from its unhealthy torpor on the approach of dark, and was preparing to resume its nocturnal sports.

The three men in the clearing collected dried branches, made a pile of them and set fire to it. They doubtlessly intended to camp for a portion of the night at this spot. So soon as the flames rose joyously, skyward in long spirals, the two strangers produced from their game bags maize tortillas, jerked meat, and a gourd of pulque. These various comestibles were complacently spread out on the grass, and the three men began a hunter's meal. When the gourd had gone the round several times, and the tortillas had disappeared, the newcomers lit their Indian pipes, and the Mexican rolled a papelito.

Although this meal had been short, it lasted, however, long enough for night to have completely set in ere it was ended. Perfect darkness brooded over the clearing, the ruddy reflections of the fire played on the energetic faces of the three men, and gave them a fantastic appearance.

"And now," the Mexican said, after lighting his cigarette, "I will, with your permission, explain to you why I was so anxious to see you."

"One moment," one of the hunters answered. "You know that in the deserts the leaves have often eyes, and the trees ears. If I am not mistaken in your hints, you invited us here that our interview might be secret."

"In truth, I have the greatest interest in nothing of what is said here being overheard, or even suspected."

"Very good. Curumilla, to work."

The second hunter rose, seized his rifle and disappeared noiselessly in the gloom. His absence was rather long; but as long as it lasted, the two men left at the fire did not exchange a syllable. In about half an hour the hunter returned, however, and seated himself by his comrades' side.

"Well?" the one who had sent him off asked him.

"My brother can speak," he replied laconically; "the desert is quiet."

On this assurance the three men banished all anxiety. Still prudence did not abandon them: they took up their pipes, and turned their backs to the fire, so that they might watch the neighbourhood while conversing.

"We are ready to listen to you," the first hunter said.

"Listen to me with the greatest attention," the Mexican began; "what you are about to hear is of the utmost importance."

The two men bowed silently, and the Mexican prepared to speak again.

Before going further we must introduce to the reader the two men we have just brought on the stage, and go back a few paces in order to make it perfectly understood why Don Miguel Zarate, in lieu of receiving them at his own house, had given them the meeting in the heart of the virgin forest.

The two hunters seemed at the first glance to be Indians; but on examining them more attentively, you could recognise that one of them belonged to those white trappers whose boldness has become proverbial in Mexico. Their appearance and equipment offered a singular medley of savage and civilised life. Their hair was of a remarkable length; for in those countries, where a man is frequently only fought for the glory of lifting his scalp, it is considered the thing to wear it long and easy to seize.

The hunters had their hair neatly plaited, and intertwined with beaver skins and bright coloured ribbons. The rest of their garb harmonised with this specimen of their taste. A hunting shirt of bright red calico fell down to their knees; gaiters decorated with woolen ribbons and bells surrounded their legs; and their feet were shod with moccasins embroidered with beads which the squaws know so well how to make. A striped blanket, fastened round the hips by a belt of tanned deer hide, completed their clothing, but was not so closely drawn that at their every movement the butt of the pistols and the hilt of the machetes might be seen glistening. As for their rifles, useless at this moment, and carelessly thrown on the ground by their side, if they had been stripped of the plume-worked elk skin that covered them, it would have been possible to see, with what care their owners had decorated them with copper nails painted of various colours; for all about these two men bore the imprint of Indian habits.

The first of the two hunters was a man of thirty-eight at the most, tall and well-built; his muscular limbs denoted great bodily strength, allied to unequalled lightness. Although he affected all the manners of the redskins, it was an easy matter to perceive that he not only belonged to the unmixed white race, but also to the Norman or Gaulish type. He was fair; his large, blue and pensive eyes, adorned with long lashes, had an expression of undefinable sadness: his nose was slightly aquiline; his mouth large, and filled with teeth of dazzling whiteness; a thick chestnut beard covered the lower part of his face, which revealed gentleness, kindness, and courage without boasting, though the whole were combined with a will of iron.

His companion evidently belonged to the Indian race, all the characteristic signs of which he displayed; but, strange to say, he was not coppery like the American aborigines of Texas and North America; and his skin was brown and slightly of an olive hue. He had a lofty brow, a bent nose, small but piercing eyes, a large mouth and square chin; in short, he presented the complete type of the American race, which inhabits a limited territory in the South of Chili. This hunter had round his brow a purple-coloured fillet, in which was thrust over the right ear a plume of the

Andes Eagle, a sign which serves to distinguish the chiefs of the Aucas.

These two men, whom the reader has doubtless already recognised, as they played an important part in our previously published works[1], were Valentine Guillois, an ex-noncommissioned officer in the Spahis, and Curumilla, his friend—Ulmen of the Great Hare tribe.

We will introduce a parenthesis to explain their present position, and which is indispensable for a right understanding of what follows. The moment is capitally selected, by the way, for opening this parenthesis; for the three hunters are gaily talking round their fire, the night is gloomy, the forest quiet, and it does not appear likely that anything will arise to disturb them.

[1] "The Chief of the Aucas," "The Tiger Slayer," "The Gold Finders," "The Indian Chief."

CHAPTER III.

DON MIGUEL ZARATE.

Were Mexico better governed, it would be, without contradiction, one of the richest countries on the face of the globe. Indeed the largest private fortunes must still be sought in that country. Since the United States Americans have revealed to the world, by seizing one-half of Mexico, whither their ambition tends, the inhabitants of that fine country have slightly emerged from the torpor they enjoyed, and have made great efforts to colonise their provinces, and summon to their soil, which is so rich and fertile, intelligent and industrious labourers, who might change the face of affairs, and cause abundance and wealth to abound at spots, where, prior to their arrival, there was naught save ruin, desolation, carelessness, and misery.

Unfortunately, the noble efforts made up to the present day have, through an inexplicable fatality, remained without result, either owing to the natural apathy of the inhabitants, or the fault of the Mexican Government itself. Still the large landowners, comprehending all the advantages of the proposed measure, and how much it is to their interest to combat the deadly influence of the American invasions, have generously devoted themselves to the realization of this great question of social economy, which, unluckily is growing more and more unrealisable.

In fact, in Northern America two hostile races—the Anglo-Saxon and the Spanish—stand face to face. The Anglo-Saxons are devoured by an ardour for conquest, and a rage for invasion, which nothing can arrest, or even retard. It is impossible to see without amazement the expansive tendencies of this active and singular people, a heterogeneous composite of all the races which misery or evil instincts expelled from Europe originally, and which feels restricted in the immense territory which its numerical weakness yet prevents it entirely occupying.

Imprisoned within its vast frontiers, making a right of strength, it is continually displacing its neighbours' landmarks, and encroaching on territory of which it can make no use. Daily, bands of emigrants abandon their dwellings, and with their rifles on their shoulders, their axes in their hand, they proceed south, as if impelled by a will stronger than themselves; and neither mountains, deserts, nor virgin forests are sufficient obstacles to make them halt even for an instant. The Yankees imagine themselves generally the instruments of Providence, and appointed by the decrees of the Omnipotent to people and civilise the New World. They count with feverish impatience the hours which must elapse ere the day (close at hand in their ideas) arrive in which their race and government system will occupy the entire space contained between Cape North and the Isthmus of Panama, to the exclusion of the Spanish republics on one side, and the English colonies on the other.

These projects, of which the Americans make no mystery, but, on the contrary, openly boast, are perfectly well known to the Mexicans, who cordially detest their neighbours, and employ all the means in their power to create difficulties for them, and impede their successive encroachments.

Among the New Mexican landowners who resolved to make sacrifices in order to stop, or at least check, the imminent invasion from North America, the richest, and possibly, first of all, through his intelligence and the influence he justly enjoyed in the country, was Don Miguel Acamarichtzin Zarate.

Whatever may be asserted, the Indian population of Mexico is nearly double in number to the white men, and possesses an enormous influence. Don Miguel descended in a straight line from Acamarichtzin, first king of Mexico, whose name had been preserved in the family as a precious relic. Possessed of an incalculable fortune, Don Miguel lived on his enormous estates like a king in his empire, beloved and respected by the Indians, whom he effectively protected whenever the occasion presented itself, and who felt for him a veneration carried almost to idolatry; for they saw in him the descendant from one of their most celebrated kings, and the born defender of their race.

In New Mexico the Indian population has very largely increased during the past fifty years. Some authors, indeed, assert that it is now more numerous than prior to the conquest, which is very probable, through the apathy of the Spaniards, and the carelessness they have ever displayed in their struggles against it. But the Indians have remained stationary amid the incessant progress of civilization, and still retain intact the principal traits of their old manners. Scattered here and there in miserable ranchos or villages, they live in separate tribes, governed by their caciques, and they have mingled but very few Spanish words with their idioms, which they speak as in the

time of the Aztecs. The sole apparent change in them is their conversion to Catholicism—a conversion more than problematical, as they preserve with the utmost care all the recollections of their ancient religion, follow its rites in secret, and keep up all its superstitious practices.

The Indians—above all, in New Mexico—although called *Indios fideles*, are always ready on the first opportunity to ally themselves with their desert congeners; and in the incursions of the Apaches and Comanches it is rare for the faithful Indians not to serve them as scouts, guides, and spies.

The family of Don Miguel Zarate had retired to New Mexico, which country it did not leave again—a few years after the conquests of the adventurer Cortez. Don Miguel had closely followed the policy of his family by maintaining the bonds of friendship and good neighbourhood which, from time immemorial, attached it to the Indians, believers or not. This policy had borne its fruit. Annually, in September, when the terrible red warriors, preceded by murder and arson, rushed like a torrent on the wretched inhabitants, whom they massacred in the farms they plundered, without pity of age or sex, Don Miguel Zarate's estates were respected; and not merely was no damage inflicted on them, but even if at times a field were unwittingly trampled by the horses' hoofs, or a few trees destroyed by plunderers, the evil was immediately repaired ere the owner had opportunity for complaint.

This conduct of the Indians had not failed to arouse against Don Miguel extreme jealousy on the part of the inhabitants, who saw themselves periodically ruined by the *Indios Bravos.* Earnest complaints had been laid against him before the Mexican Government; but whatever might be the power of his enemies, and the means they employed to ruin him, the rich hacendero had never been seriously disturbed: in the first place, because New Mexico is too remote from the capital for the inhabitants to have anything to fear from the governing classes; and secondly, Don Miguel was too rich not to render it easy for him to impose silence on those who were most disposed to injure him.

Don Miguel, whose portrait we drew in a previous chapter, was left a widower after eight years' marriage, with two children, a boy and a girl, the son being twenty-four, the daughter seventeen, at the period when our story opens. Doña Clara—such was the daughter's name—was one of the most delicious maidens that can be imagined. She had one of those Murillo's virgin heads, whose black eyes, fringed with long silky lashes, pure mouth, and dreamy brow seem to promise divine joys. Her complexion, slightly bronzed by the warm sunbeams, wore that gilded reflection which so well becomes the women of these intertropical countries. She was short of stature, but exquisitely modelled. Gentle and simple, ignorant as a Creole, this delicious child was adored by her father, who saw in her the wife he had so loved living once more. The Indians looked after her when she at times passed pensively, plucking a flower before their wretched huts, and scarce bending the slants on which she placed her delicate foot. In their hearts they compared this frail maiden, with her soft and vaporous outline, to the "virgin of the first loves," that sublime creation of the Indian religion which holds so great a place in the Aztec mythology.

Don Pablo Zarate, the hacendero's son, was a powerfully built man, with harshly marked features, and a haughty glance, although at times it was imprinted with gentleness and kindness. Endowed with more than ordinary strength, skilled in all bodily exercises, Don Pablo was renowned through the whole country for his talent in taming the most spirited horses, and the correctness of his aim when on the chase. A determined hunter and daring wood ranger, this young man, when he had a good horse between his legs, and his rifle in his hand, knew none, man or animal, capable of barring his passage. The Indians, in their simple faith, yielded to the son the same respect and veneration they entertained for the father, and fancied they saw in him the personification of *Huitzilopochtli*, that terrible war god of the Aztecs, to whom 62,000 human victims were sacrificed in one day, upon the inauguration of his *teocali*.

The Zarates, then, at the period when our story opens, were real kings of New Mexico. The felicity they enjoyed was suddenly troubled by one of those vulgar incidents which, though unimportant in themselves, do not fail to cause a general perturbation, and a discomfort possessing no apparent cause, from the fact that it is impossible to foresee or prevent them. The circumstance was as follows:—

Don Miguel possessed, in the vicinity of the Paso, vast estates extending for a great distance, and consisting principally of haciendas, prairies, and forests. One day Don Miguel was returning from a visit to his haciendas. It was late, and he pressed on his horse in order to reach ere night the ford, when, at about three or four leagues at the most from the spot to which he was proceeding, and just as he was entering a dense forest of cottonwood trees, through which he must pass ere reaching the ford, his attention was attracted by cries mingled with growls emerging from the wood he was about to enter. The hacendero stopped in order to account for the unusual sounds he heard, and bent his head forward to detect what was happening. But it was impossible for him to distinguish anything through the chaos of creepers and shrubs which intercepted vision. In the meanwhile, the noise grew louder, and the shouts were redoubled, and mingled with oaths and passionate exclamations.

The Mexican's horse laid back its ears, neighed, and refused to advance. Still Don Miguel must make up his mind. Thinking that a man was probably attacked by wild beasts, he only consulted his heart; and, in spite of the visible repugnance of his steed, he compelled it to go forward and enter the wood. He had scarce gone a few yards ere he stopped in amazement at the strange spectacle that presented itself to him.

CHAPTER IV.

THE PECCARIES.

In the middle of the clearing lay a ripped up horse, which six or eight peccaries were rending, while a dozen others were attacking with their tusks the stem of an enormous tree, in the topmost branches of which a man had sought shelter.

Let us explain to our readers, who probably know little about them, what sort of animals the peccaries are. The peccaries hold the intermediate grade between the domestic pig and the wild boar. Although this animal does not exceed two feet in height, and is not more than three feet long from the end of the snout to the beginning of the tail, it is indubitably one of the most dangerous animals in North America. The animal's jaw is provided with tusks rather like those of the boar, but straight and sharp, their length varying between four and six inches. In the shape of the body it resembles a pig, but the bristles scattered over its warty hide are in colored strips; the part nearest the skin is white, and the point of a chocolate tinge. So soon as the animal is enraged, these bristles stand out like the quills of a porcupine.

The movements of the peccaries are as quick and sharp as those of a squirrel. They ordinarily live in herds of fifteen, thirty, and even fifty. The strength of the head, neck, and shoulders is so great when they charge, that nothing can resist the impetuosity of their attacks. A remarkable peculiarity of this genus is the clumsy wart they have on their backs, whence a musty fluid evaporates when the animal is in a fury.

The peccary lives in preference on acorns, roots, wheat, sugar cane, and reptiles of every description. It is a proved fact that the most venomous serpents are devoured by them without their feeling in the slightest degree incommoded.

The mode in which the peccary forms its lair is very singular. This lair is generally in the midst of tufted and impenetrable canes, found in marshy spots round the monarchs of the forest, which still stand like crushed giants, with their grappling lines of creepers and virgin vines. The trunks of these trees, which at times measure forty feet in circumference, are nearly all hollow, and thus afford a convenient shelter for the peccaries, which retire to them every night in herds of twenty to twenty-five, entering the cavity one after the other backwards; so that the last has the end of its snout placed just at the entrance of the hole, thus watching, as it were, over the rest of its companions.

The peccaries are unboundedly ferocious: they know not danger, or at least despise it completely. They always attack in herds, and fight with unequalled rage until the last succumbs, no matter the nature of their foe.

Hence men and animals all fly a meeting with these terrible beasts: the jaguar, so strong and redoubtable, will become their prey if it be so imprudent as to attack them. This is the way they set about conquering this wild beast:—

When a jaguar has wounded a peccary, the latter collect, chase it, and pursue until they can contrive to surround the common enemy. When every issue is closed, the jaguar, believing it can thus escape, seeks refuge up a tree. But the peccaries do not resign the vengeance; they establish themselves at the foot of the tree, being incessantly recruited by fresh allies, and patiently waiting till the jaguar, driven to extremities by hunger and thirst, decides on descending from its improvised fortress. This is almost always sure to happen at the end of two or three days at the most. The jaguar bounds into the midst of its enemies, which boldly await it, and attack it bravely; a terrible fight commences; and the tiger, after covering the ground with victims, at length succumbs beneath the efforts of its assailants, and is ripped up by their tusks.

After what we have said, it is easy to understand how precarious was the position of the man perched on the top of the tree, and surrounded by peccaries. His enemies seemed determined not to leave their ground; they craftily crept round the tree, attacked its base with their tusks, and then recognising the inutility of their onsets, they quietly lay down by the carcass of the horse, which they had already sacrificed to their fury. Don Miguel felt moved to pity for the poor fellow, whose position grew momentarily more critical; but in vain did he rack his brains how to help the unhappy man whose destruction was assured.

To attack the peccaries would have been extreme imprudence, and have produced no other result than that of turning on himself the fury of the animals, while not saving the man he wished to help. Still time pressed. What was to be done? How, without sacrificing himself, save the man who ran so great a risk?

The Mexican hesitated for a long period. It seemed to Don Miguel impossible to leave, without help, this man whose death was certain. This idea, which presented itself to his mind several times, he had energetically repulsed, so monstrous did it appear to him. At length he resolved at all risks to attempt impossibilities in favour of this stranger, of whose death he would have eventually accused himself had he left him to perish in the desert.

The stranger's position was the more critical because, in his haste to defend himself from the attacks of his enemies, he had left his rifle fall at the foot of the tree, and was consequently unable to reduce the number of the peccaries. In spite of their fineness of scent, the latter had not noticed Don Miguel's approach, who, by a providential accident, had entered the wood on the side opposite the wind. The Mexican dismounted with a sigh, patted his horse, and then took off its accoutrements. The noble animal, habituated to its master's caresses, shook his head joyously,

and fixed its large intelligent eyes on him. Don Miguel could not repress another sigh: a tear fell down on his bronzed cheeks. On the point of accomplishing the sacrifice, he hesitated.

It was a faithful companion, almost a friend, he was about to separate from; but the life of a man was at stake. The Mexican drove back the feelings that agitated him, and his resolution was formed. He passed a lasso round his horse's neck, and, in spite of its obstinate resistance, compelled it to advance to the entrance of the clearing in which the peccaries were assembled. A frail curtain of creepers and leaves alone hid it from their sight. On arriving here Don Miguel stopped: he had one more moment's hesitation, but only one; for then seizing a piece of tinder, which he lighted, he thrust it into the poor animal's ear while caressing it.

The effect was sudden and terrible. The horse uttered a snort of pain; and rendered mad by the burning, bounded forward into the clearing, striving in vain to get rid of the tinder which caused it intolerable suffering. Don Miguel had smartly leaped aside, and now followed with an anxious glance the result of the terrible tentative he had just made to save the stranger. On seeing the horse appear suddenly in their midst, the peccaries rose, formed a compact group and rushed with their heads down in pursuit of the horse, thinking no longer of the man. The animal, spurred on still more by the sight of its ferocious enemies, shot ahead with the speed of an arrow, breaking down with its chest all the obstacles in its way, and followed closely by the peccaries.

The man saved; but at what a price! Don Miguel repressed a last sigh of regret, and leaped into the clearing. The stranger had already descended from the tree; but the emotion he had undergone was so extreme, that he remained seated on the ground, almost in a state of unconsciousness.

"Quick, quick!" Don Miguel said to him sharply. "We have not a moment to lose: the peccaries may alter their minds and return."

"That is true," the stranger muttered in a hollow voice, as he cast a terrified glance around. "Let us be off—off at once."

He made an effort over himself, seized his rifle, and rose. Through a presentiment for which he could not account to himself, Don Miguel experienced at the sight of this man, whom he had hitherto scarce looked at, a feeling of invincible doubt and disgust. Owing to the life he was obliged to lead on these frontiers, frequented by people of every description, the hacendero had been often brought into relation with trappers and hunters whose faces were no recommendation to them; but never ere now had chance brought him in contact with an individual of such sinister appearance as this one.

Still he did not allow his feelings to be seen through, and invited this man to follow him. The latter did not let the invitation be repeated; for he was anxious to escape from the spot where he had been so near death. Thanks to the Mexican's acquaintance with the country, the wood was speedily traversed, and the two men, after a walk of scarce an hour's duration, reached the banks of the Del Norte, just opposite the village. Their speed had been so great, their anxiety so serious, that they had not exchanged a syllable, so terrified were they of seeing the peccaries appear at any moment. Fortunately this was not the case, and they reached the ford without being again disturbed.

Don Miguel was burdened with his horse's trappings, which he now threw on the ground, and looked around him in the hope of finding someone who would help him in crossing the river. His expectations were not deceived; for just as they reached the ford an *arriero* was preparing to cross to the other side of the river with his *recca* of mules, and, with the generosity innate in all Mexicans, he offered to carry them both to the Paso. The two men eagerly accepted, each mounted a mule, and half an hour later they found themselves in safety at the village. After giving the arriero a few reals to requite him for his services, Don Miguel took up his horse's trappings again, and prepared to start. The stranger stopped.

"We are about to part here, caballero," he said in a rough voice, with a very marked English accent; "but before leaving, let me express to you my deep gratitude for the noble and generous manner in which you saved my life at the peril of your own."

"Sir," the Mexican simply answered, "I only did my duty in saving you. In the desert all men are brothers, and owe each other protection. Hence do not thank me, I beg, for a very simple action: any other in my place would have acted as I have done."

"Perhaps so," the stranger continued; "but be kind enough, pray, to tell me your name, so that I may know to whom I owe my life."

"That is needless," Don Miguel said with a smile. "Still, as I fancy you are a stranger in these parts, let me give you a piece of advice."

"What is it, sir?"

"Never in future to attack the peccaries. They are terrible enemies, only to be conquered by a strong body of men; and an individual in attacking them commits an unpardonable folly, to which he must fall a victim."

"Be assured, sir, that I shall profit by the lesson I have received this day, and shall never put myself in such a wasps' nest again. I was too near paying dearly for my imprudence. But I beg you, sir, do not let us separate ere I know the name of my preserver."

"As you insist, sir, you shall learn it. I am Don Miguel de Zarate."

The stranger took a peculiar glance at the speaker, while repressing a movement of surprise.

"Ah!" he said in a singular tone, "Thanks, Don Miguel Zarate. Without knowing you personally, I was already acquainted with your name."

"That is possible," the hacendero answered; "for I am well known in this country, where my family has been established for many a long year."

"I, sir, am the man whom the Indians call Witchasta Joute, the Maneater, and the hunters, my companions, Red Cedar."

And after lifting his hand to his cap in salute, this man threw his rifle on his shoulder, turned on his heel, and went off at full speed. Don Miguel looked after him for a while, and then walked pensively toward the house he inhabited at el Paso. The hacendero did not suspect that he had sacrificed his favourite horse to save the life of his most implacable enemy.

CHAPTER V.

THE WOUND.

At sunrise, Don Miguel, mounted on an excellent horse, left the Paso, and proceeded toward the hacienda where he resided with his family. It was situated a few miles from the Presidio of San Elezario, in a delicious position, and was known as the *Hacienda de la Noria* (the Farm of the Well). The estate inhabited by Don Miguel stood in the centre of the vast delta formed by the Del Norte and the Rio San Pedro, or Devil's River. It was one of those strong and massive buildings which the Spaniards alone knew how to erect when they were absolute masters of Mexico.

The hacienda formed a vast parallelogram, supported at regular distances by enormous cross walls of carved stone. Like all the frontier habitations, which are rather fortresses than houses, it was only pierced on the side of the plain with a few narrow windows resembling loopholes, and protected by solid iron bars. This abode was begirt by a thick wall of circumvallation, defended on the top by that fretwork called *almenas*, which indicated the nobility of the owner. Within this wall, but separated from the chief apartments, were the stables, outhouses, barns and cabins for the peons.

At the extremity of the courtyard, in an angle of the hacienda, was the tall square belfry of the chapel, rising above its terraced roof. This chapel was served by a monk called Fray Ambrosio. A magnificent plain closed in this splendid farm. At the end of a valley more than fifty miles in length were cactus trees of a conical shape, loaded with fruit and flowers, and whose stems were as much as six feet in diameter.

Don Miguel employed a considerable number of peons in the cultivation of the sugar cane, which he carried on upon a very large scale. As everybody knows, the cane is planted by laying it horizontally in furrows half a foot deep. From each knot springs a shoot which reaches a height of about three yards, and which is cut at the end of a year to extract the juice.

Nothing can be more picturesque than the sight of a field of sugar canes. It was one of those superb American mornings during which nature seems to be holding a festival. The *centzontle* (American nightingale) frequently poured forth its harmonious notes; the red throstled cardinals, the blue birds, the parakeets, chattered gaily beneath the foliage; far away on the plain galloped flocks of light antelopes and timid ashatas, while on the extreme verge of the horizon rushed startled *manadas* of wild horses, which raised clouds of impalpable dust beneath the vibration of their rapid hoofs. A few alligators, carelessly stretched out on the river mud, were drying their scales in the sun, and in mid air the grand eagles of the Sierra Madre hovered majestically above the valley.

Don Miguel advanced rapidly at the favourite pace of the Mexican *jinetes,* and which consists in making the horse raise its front legs, while the hind ones almost graze the ground—a peculiar sort of amble which is very gentle and rapid. The hacendero only employed four hours in traversing the distance separating him from the hacienda, where he arrived about nine in the morning. He was received on the threshold of the house by his daughter, who, warned of his arrival, had hastened to meet him.

Don Miguel had been absent from home a fortnight; hence, he received his daughter's caresses with the greatest pleasure. When he had embraced her several times, while continuing to hold her tightly clasped in his arms, he regarded her attentively during several seconds.

"What is the matter, *mi querida* Clara?" he asked with sympathy. "You seem very sad. Can you feel vexed at the sight of me?" he added, with a smile.

"Oh, you cannot believe that, father!" she answered quickly; "for you know how happy your presence must render me."

"Thanks, my child! But whence, in that case, comes the sorrow I see spread over your features?"

The maiden let her eyes sink, but made no reply.

Don Miguel threw a searching glance around.

"Where is Don Pablo?" he said. "Why has he not come to greet me? Can he be away from the hacienda?"

"No, father, he is here."

"Well, then, what is the reason he is not by your side?"

"Because—" the girl said, with hesitation.

"Well?"

"He is ill."

"My son ill!" Don Miguel exclaimed.

"I am wrong," Doña Clara corrected herself.

"Explain yourself, in Heaven's name!"

"My father, the fact is that Pablo is wounded."

"Wounded!" the hacendero sharply said; and thrusting his daughter aside, he rushed toward the house, bounded up the few steps leading to the porch, crossed several rooms without stopping, and reached his son's chamber. The young man was lying, weak and faint, on his bed; but on perceiving his parent he smiled, and held his hand to him. Don Miguel was fondly attached to his son, his sole heir, and walked up to him.

"What is this wound of which I have heard?" he asked him in great agitation.

"Less than nothing, father," the young man replied, exchanging a meaning glance with his sister, who entered at the moment. "Clara is a foolish girl, who, in her tenderness, wrongly alarmed you."

"But, after all, you are wounded?" the father continued.

"But I repeat that it is a mere nothing."

"Come, explain yourself. How and when did you receive this wound?"

The young man blushed, and maintained silence.

"I insist on knowing," Don Miguel continued pressingly.

"Good heavens, father!" Don Pablo replied with an air of ill-humour, "I do not understand why you are alarmed for so futile a cause. I am not a child, whom a scratch should make frightened; and many times have I been wounded previously, and you have not disturbed yourself so much."

"That is possible; but the mode in which you answer me, the care you seem trying to take to keep me ignorant of the cause of this wound—in a word, everything tells me that this time you are trying to hide something grave from me."

"You are mistaken, father, and shall convince yourself."

"I wish nothing more: speak. Clara, my child, go and give orders to have breakfast prepared, for I am dying of hunger."

The girl went out.

"Now it is our turn," Don Miguel continued. "In the first place, where are you wounded?"

"Oh! I have merely a slight scratch on my shoulder: if I went to bed it was more through indolence than any other motive."

"Hum! and what scratched your shoulder?"

"A bullet."

"What! A bullet! Then you must have fought a duel, unhappy boy!" Don Miguel exclaimed with a shudder.

The young man smiled, pressed his father's hand, and bending toward him, said,—

"This is what has happened."

"I am listening to you," Don Miguel replied, making an effort to calm himself.

"Two days after your departure, father," Don Pablo continued, "I was superintending, as you wished me to do, the cutting of the cane crop, when a hunter whom you will probably remember having seen prowling about the estate, a man of the name of Andrés Garote, accosted me at the moment I was about to return home after giving my orders to the majordomo. After saluting me obsequiously as his wont, the scamp smiled cunningly, and lowering his voice so as not to be overheard by those around us, said, 'Don Pablo, I fancy you would give half an ounce to the man who brought you important news?' 'That depends,' I answered; for, having known the man a long time, I was aware much confidence could not be placed in him. 'Bah! Your grace is so rich,' he continued insidiously, 'that a miserable sum like that is less than nothing in his pocket, while in mine it would do me a deal of good.'

"Apart from his defects, this scamp had at times done us a few small services; and then, as he said, a half-ounce is but a trifle, so I gave it to him. He stowed it away in his pockets, and then bent down to my ear. 'Thanks, Don Pablo,' he said to me. 'I shall not cheat you of your money. Your horse is rested, and can stand a long journey. Proceed to Buffalo Valley, and there you will learn something to interest you.' It was in vain that I urged him to explain himself more clearly; I could draw no more from him. He merely added before parting from me, 'Don Pablo, you have good weapons; so take them with you, for no man knoweth what may happen.' Somehow the scamp's veiled confidence aroused my curiosity: hence I resolved to go to Buffalo Valley, and gain the clue of this riddle."

"Andrés Garote is a villain, who laid a snare for you, into which you fell," Don Miguel interrupted.

"No, father, you are mistaken. Andrés was honest towards me, and I have only thanks to give him. Still he should have explained himself, perhaps, more distinctly."

The hacendero shook his head with a doubting air.

"Go on," he said.

"I entered my house, procured the weapons, and then, mounted on Negro, my black charger, I proceeded toward Buffalo Valley. As you are aware, father, the place we call so, and which belongs to us, is an immense forest of cedars and maples, nearly forty miles in circumference, and traversed almost through its entire length by a wide confluent of the Rio San Pedro."

"Of course I know it, and I intend next year to fell some of the wood there."

"You need not take the trouble," the young man said with a smile, "for someone has done it for you."

"What do you mean?" the hacendero asked wrathfully. "Who dared?"

"Oh! One of those wretched heretic squatters, as they call themselves. The villain found the spot to suit him, and has quietly settled there with his three whelps—three big fellows with hang-dog faces, who laughed at me when I told them the forest was mine, and answered, while aiming at me, that they were North Americans, who cared as little for me as they did for a coyote; that the ground belonged to the first comer; and that I shall afford them lively pleasure by being off at full speed. What more shall I tell you, father? I take after you. I have hot blood, and I cordially hate that race of Yankee pirates, who, for some years back, have settled on our lovely country like a swarm of mosquitoes. I saw our forest plundered, our finest trees cut down. I could not remain unmoved in the presence of these scoundrels' insolence, and the quarrel became so sharp that they fired at me."

"*Virgen Santísima*!" Don Miguel exclaimed in fury, "They shall pay dearly for the affront they have offered you I swear it! I will take exemplary vengeance."

"Why be so angry, father?" the young man replied, visibly annoyed at the effect his story had produced. "The harm these people do us is really very trifling. I was in the wrong to let my passion carry me away."

"On the contrary, you were right. I will not have these Northern thieves come and commit their plunder here. I will put a stop to it."

"I assure you that, if you will leave me to act, I feel certain of arranging this affair to your entire satisfaction."

"I forbid you taking the slightest steps, for this matter concerns me now. Whatever may occur, I do not wish you to interfere. Will you promise me this?"

"As you insist, I do so, father."

"Very good. Get cured as speedily as possible, and keep your mind at rest. The Yankees shall pay me dearly for the blood they have shed."

With these words Don Miguel retired, and his son fell back on his bed stifling a sigh, and uttering a hoarse exclamation of passion.

CHAPTER VI.

THE SQUATTER'S SHANTY.

Don Pablo had not told his father the facts in all their truth or detail. He had fallen into a perfect ambuscade. He was suddenly attacked by the three brothers, who would have mercilessly killed him, resolved to lay the blame of his death on the wild beasts, had not, at the moment when one of them lifted his knife on the young man, who was thrown down and rendered motionless by the others, a providential succour reached him in the person of a charming maid scarce sixteen years of age.

The courageous girl rushed from a copse with the rapidity of a fawn, and threw herself resolutely into the midst of the assassins.

"What are you about, brother?" she exclaimed in a melodious voice, whose harmonious notes echoed amorously in Don Pablo's ears. "Why do you wish to kill this stranger?"

The three squatters, surprised by this apparition, which they were far from expecting, fell back a few paces. Don Pablo profited by this truce to jump up and regain possession of his arms, which had fallen by his side.

"Was it not enough," the girl continued, "to rob this man, that you must now try to take his life? Fie, brothers! Do you not know that blood leaves on the hands of him who spills it stains which nothing can efface? Let this man retire in peace."

The young men hesitated. Although unconsciously yielding to their sister's influence, they were ashamed of thus executing her wishes. Still they did not dare express their thoughts, and merely bent on their enemy, who awaited them with a firm foot and pistols in hand, glances laden with

hatred and anger.

"Ellen is right," the youngest of her brothers suddenly said. "No, I will not allow any harm to be done the stranger."

The others looked at him savagely.

"You would defend him, if necessary, I suppose, Shaw?" Nathan said to him ironically.

"Why should I not, were it required?" the young man said boldly.

"Eh!" Sutter remarked with a grin, "He is thinking of the Wood Eglantine."

This word had been scarce uttered ere Shaw, with purpled face, contracted features, and eyes injected with blood, rushed with uplifted knife on his brother, who awaited him firmly. The girl dashed between them.

"Peace, peace!" she shrieked in a piercing voice, "Do brothers dare threaten one another?"

The two young fellows remained motionless, but watching and ready to strike in a moment. Don Pablo fixed an ardent glance on the girl, who was really admirable at this moment. With her features animated by anger, her head erect, and her arms stretched out between the two men, she bore a startling likeness to those Druidesses who in olden times summoned the warriors to combat beneath the forests of Germany.

In her whole person she offered the complete type of the gentle Northern woman. Her hair light and golden like ripe corn; her eyes of extreme purity, which reflected the azure of the sky; her earnest mouth, with rosy lips and pearly teeth; her flexible and small waist; the whiteness of her complexion, whose delicate and transparent skin still bore the flush of adolescence—all was combined in this charming maiden to render her the most seductive creature imaginable.

Don Pablo, a stranger to this kind of beauty, felt himself involuntarily attracted toward the girl, and entirely subjugated by her. Forgetting the reason that had brought him to this spot, the danger he had incurred, and that which still menaced him, he was fascinated and trembling before this delicious apparition, fearing at each instant to see it vanish like a vision, and not daring to turn his glance from her while he felt he had no strength left to admire her.

This young creature, so frail and delicate, formed a strange contrast with the tall statures and marked features of her brothers, whose coarse and savage manners only served to heighten the elegance and charm exhaled by her whole person. Still this scene could not be prolonged, and must be ended at once. The maiden walked toward Don Pablo.

"Sir," she said to him with a soft smile, "You have nothing more to fear from my brothers; you can mount your horse again, and set out, and no one will oppose your departure."

The young man understood that he had no pretext to prolong his stay at this spot; he therefore let his head sink, placed his pistols in his holsters, leaped on his horse, and set out with regret, and as slowly as possible.

He had scarce gone a league when he heard the hasty clatter of a horse behind him. He turned back. The approaching horseman was Shaw, who soon caught up with Don Pablo. The pair then proceeded some distance side by side without exchanging a syllable, and both seemed plunged in profound thought. On reaching the skirt of the forest, Shaw checked his horse, and softly laid his right hand on the Mexican's bridle. Don Pablo also stopped on this hint, and waited, while fixing an inquiring glance on his strange comrade.

"Stranger," the young man said, "my sister sends me. She implores you, if it be possible, to keep secret what occurred between us today. She deeply regrets the attack to which you fell a victim, and the wound you have received; and she will try to persuade Red Cedar, our father, to retire from your estates."

"Thank your sister for me," Don Pablo answered. "Tell her that her slightest wish will ever be a command to me, and that I shall be happy to execute it."

"I will repeat your words to her."

"Thanks. Render me a parting service."

"Speak."

"What is your sister's name?"

"Ellen. She is the guardian angel of our hearth. My name is Shaw."

"I am obliged to you for telling me your name, though I cannot guess the reason that induces you to do so."

"I will tell you. I love my sister Ellen before all: she urged me to offer you my friendship. I obey her. Remember, stranger, that Shaw is yours to the death."

"I shall not forget it, though I hope never to be under the necessity of reminding you of your words."

"All the worse," the American said, with a shake of his head; "but if at any time the opportunity offers, I will prove to you that I am a man of my word, so surely as I am a Kentuckian."

And hurriedly turning his horse's head, the young man rapidly disappeared in the windings of the forest.

Buffalo Valley, illumined by the parting rays of the setting sun, seemed a lake of verdure to which

the golden mist of night imparted magical tones. A light breeze rustled through the lofty crests of the cedars, catalpas, tulip and Peru trees, and agitated the grass on the banks of the Rio San Pedro. Don Pablo let the reins float idly on his horse's neck, and advanced dreamily through the forest, where the birds were leaping from spray to spray, each saluting in its language the arrival of night.

An hour later, the young man reached the hacienda; but the wound he had received in his shoulder was more serious than was at first supposed. He was obliged, to his great regret, to keep his bed, which prevented him seeking to meet again the maiden whose image was deeply engraved on his heart.

So soon as the Mexican had gone off, the squatters continued felling trees and sawing planks, and did not abandon this work till the night had grown quite black. Ellen had returned to the interior of the jacal, where she attended to the housekeeping duties with her mother. This jacal was a wretched hut, hastily made with branches of intertwined trees, which trembled with every breeze, and let the sun and rain penetrate to the interior.

This cabin was divided into three compartments: the one to the right served as the bedroom of the two females, while the men slept in the one to the left. The central compartment, furnished with worm-eaten benches and a clumsily-planed table, was at once keeping room and kitchen.

It was late: the squatters, assembled round the fire, over which a huge pot was boiling, were silently awaiting the return of Red Cedar, who had been absent since the morning. At length, a horse's hoofs sounded sharply on the detritus collected for years on the floor of the forest, the noise grew gradually nearer, the horse stopped in front of the jacal, and a man made his appearance. It was Red Cedar. The men slowly turned their heads toward him, but did not otherwise disturb themselves, or address a syllable to him.

Ellen alone rose and embraced her father affectionately. The giant seized the girl in his nervous arms, raised her from the ground, and kissed her several times, saying in his rough voice, which his tenderness sensibly softened,—

"Good evening, my dear."

Then he put her down on the ground again, and not troubling himself further about her, fell heavily on a bench near the fire, and thrust his feet toward the fire.

"Come, wife," he said, after the expiration of a moment, "the supper, in the fiend's name! I have a coyote's hunger."

The wife did not let this be repeated. A few moments later an immense dish of *frijoles*, with pimiento, smoked on the table, with large pots of pulque. The meal was short and silent, the four men eating with extreme rapacity. So soon as the beans had disappeared Red Cedar and his sons lit their pipes, and began smoking, while drinking large draughts of whiskey, though still not speaking. At length Red Cedar took his pipe from his lips, and hit the table sharply, while saying in a rough voice,—

"Come, women, decamp! You have nothing more to do here. You are in our way, so go to the deuce!"

Ellen and her mother immediately went out, and entered their separate apartment. For a few minutes they could be heard moving about, and then all became silent again.

Red Cedar made a sign, and Sutter rose and gently put his ear to the parting board. He listened for a few moments while holding his breath, and then returned to his seat, saying laconically,—

"They are asleep."

"Quick, my whelps!" the old squatter said in a low voice. "We have not a minute to lose: the others are expecting us."

A strange scene then occurred in this mean room, which was merely illumined by the expiring light of the hearth. The four men arose, opened a large chest, and produced from it various objects of strange shapes—leggings, mittens, buffalo robes, collars of grizzly bear claws; in a word, the complete costumes of Apache Indians.

The squatters disguised themselves as redskins; and when they had put on their garments, which rendered it impossible to recognise them, they completed the metamorphosis by painting their faces of different colours.

Assuredly the traveller whom accident had brought at this moment to the jacal would have fancied it inhabited by Apaches or Comanches.

The garments which the squatters had taken off were locked up in the chest, of which Red Cedar took the key; and the four men, armed with their American rifles, left the cabin, mounted their horses, which were awaiting them ready saddled, and started at full gallop through the winding forest paths.

At the moment they disappeared in the gloom Ellen stood in the doorway of the cabin, took a despairing glance in the direction where they had gone, and fell to the ground murmuring sadly, —

"Good Heaven! What diabolical work are they going to perform this night?"

CHAPTER VII.

THE RANGERS.

On the banks of the Rio San Pedro, and on the side of a hill, stood a *rancheria* composed of some ten cabins, inhabited by a population of sixty persons at the most, including men, women and children. These people were Coras Indians, hunters and agriculturists, belonging to the Tortoise tribe. These poor Indians lived there on terms of peace with their neighbours, under the protection of the Mexican laws. Quiet and inoffensive beings, during the nearly twenty years they had been established at this place they had never once offered a subject of complaint to their neighbours, who, on the contrary, were glad to see them prosper, owing to their gentle and hospitable manners. Though Mexican subjects, they governed themselves after their fashion, obeying their caciques, and regulating in the assembly of their elders all the difficulties that arose in their village.

On the night when we saw the squatters leave the cabin in disguise, some twenty individuals, armed to the teeth and clothed in strange costumes, with their faces blackened so as to render them unrecognizable, were bivouacked at about two leagues from the rancheria, in a plain on the river's bank. Seated or lying round huge fires, they were singing, laughing, quarrelling or gambling with multitudinous yells and oaths. Two men seated apart at the foot of an enormous cactus, were conversing in a low tone, while smoking their husk cigarettes. These two men, of whom we have already spoken to the reader, were Fray Ambrosio, chaplain to the Hacienda de la Noria, and Andrés Garote, the hunter.

Andrés was a tall, thin fellow, with a sickly and cunning face, who draped himself defiantly in his sordid rags, but whose weapons were in a perfectly good condition.

Who were the men causing this disturbance? They were "rangers," but this requires explanation.

Immediately after each of the different revolutions which have periodically overturned Mexico since that country so pompously declared its independence, the first care of the new president who reaches power is to dismiss the volunteers who had accidentally swollen the ranks of his army, and supplied him the means of overthrowing his predecessor. These volunteers, we must do them the justice of allowing, are the very scum of society, and the most degraded class human nature produces. These sanguinary men, without religion or law, who have no relations or friends, are an utter leprosy to the country.

Roughly driven back into society, the new life they are forced to adopt in no way suits their habits of murder and pillage. No longer able to wage war on their countrymen, they form free corps, and engage themselves for a certain salary, to hunt the Indios Bravos—that is to say, the Apaches and Comanches—who desolate the Mexican frontiers. In addition to this, the paternal government of North America in Texas, and of Mexico in the States of the Confederation, allots them a certain sum for each Indian scalp they bring in.

We do not fancy we are saying anything new in asserting that they are the scourge of the colonists and inhabitants, they plunder shamelessly in every way when they are not doing worse.

The men assembled at this moment on the banks of the Rio San Pedro were preparing for a war party—the name they give to the massacres they organise against the redskins.

Toward midnight Red Cedar and his three sons reached the rangers' camp. They must have been impatiently expected, for the bandits received them with marks of the greatest joy and the warmest enthusiasm. The dice, the cards, and botas of mezcal and whiskey were immediately deserted. The rangers mounted their horses, and grouped round the squatters, near whom stood Fray Ambrosio and his friend Andrés Garote.

Red Cedar took a glance round the mob, and could not repress a smile of pride at the sight of the rich collection of bandits of every description whom he had around him, and who recognised him as chief. He extended his arm to command peace. When all were silent the giant took the word.

"Señores caballeros," he said, in a powerful and marked voice, which made all these scamps quiver with delight at being treated like honest people, "the audacity of the redskins is growing intolerable. If we let them alone they would soon inundate the country, when they would end by expelling us. This state of things must have an end. The government complains about the few scalps we supply; it says we do not carry out the clauses of the agreement we have formed with it; it talks about disbanding us, as our services are useless, and therefore burdensome to the republic. It is our bounden duty to give a striking denial to these malevolent assertions, and prove to those who have placed confidence in us that we are ever ready to devote ourselves to the cause of humanity and civilisation. I have assembled you here for a war party, which I have been meditating for some time, and shall carry out this night. We are about to attack the rancheria of the Coras, who for some years past have had the impudence to establish themselves near this spot. They are pagans and thieves, who have one hundred times merited the severe chastisement we are about to inflict on them. But I implore you, señores caballeros, display no mistaken pity. Crush this race of vipers—let not one escape! The scalp of a child is worth as much as that of a man; so do not let yourselves be moved by cries or tears, but scalp, scalp to the end."

This harangue was greeted as it deserved to be; that is, by yells of joy.

"Señores," Red Cedar continued, "the worthy monk who accompanies me will call down the blessing of Heaven on our enterprise; so kneel down to receive the absolution he is about to give you."

The bandits instantaneously dismounted, took off their hats, and knelt on the sand. Fray Ambrosio then repeated a long prayer, to which they listened with exemplary patience, repeating *amen* after each occasion, and he ended by giving them absolution. The rangers rose, delighted at being thus freed from the burden of their sins, and got into their saddles again.

Red Cedar then whispered a few words in Fray Ambrosio's ears, who bowed his head in assent, and immediately set out in the direction of the Hacienda de la Noria, followed by Andrés Garote. The squatter then turned to the rangers, who were awaiting his orders.

"You know where we are going, gentlemen," he said. "Let us start, and, before all, be silent, if we wish to catch our game in its lair; for you know that the Indians are as cunning as opossums."

The band started at a gallop, Red Cedar and his sons being at their head. It was one of those calm nights which predispose the soul to reverie, such as America alone has the privilege of possessing. The dark blue sky was spangled with an infinite number of stars, in the centre of which shone the majestic Southern Cross, sparkling like a king's mantle; the atmosphere was extraordinarily transparent, and allowed objects to be noticed at a great distance; the moon profusely spread around her silvery rays, which gave the scenery a fantastic appearance; a mysterious breeze sported through the tops of the great trees; and at times vague rumours traversed the space, and were lost in the distance.

The gloomy horsemen still went on, silent and frowning, like the phantoms of the ancient legends, which glide through the shadows to accomplish a deed without a name. At the end of scarce an hour the rancheria was reached. All were resting in the village—not a light flashed in the hut. The Indians, wearied with the hard toil of the day, were reposing, full of confidence in the sworn faith, and apprehending no treason.

Red Cedar halted twenty yards from the rancheria, and drew up his horsemen so as to surround the village on all sides. When each had taken his post, and the torches were lighted, Red Cedar uttered the terrible war cry of the Apaches, and the rangers galloped at full speed on the village, uttering ferocious howls, and brandishing the torches, which they threw on the cabins.

A scene of carnage then took place which the human pen is powerless to describe. The unhappy Indians, surprised in their sleep, rushed terrified and half naked out of their poor abodes, and were pitilessly massacred and scalped by the rangers, who waved with a demoniac laugh their smoking, blood-dripping scalps. Men, women, and children, all were killed with refinements of barbarity. The village, fired by the rangers' torches, soon became an immense funebral pile, in which victims and murderers were huddled pell-mell.

Still a few Indians had succeeded in collecting. Formed in a compact troop of twenty men, they opposed a desperate resistance to their assassins, exasperated by the odour of blood and the intoxication of carnage. At the head of this band was a half-nude, tall Indian of intelligent features, who, armed with a ploughshare, which he wielded with extreme force and skill, felled all the assailants who came within reach of his terrible weapon. This man was the cacique of the Coras. At his feet lay his mother, wife, and two children—dead. The unhappy man struggled with the energy of despair. He knew his life would be sacrificed, but he wished to sell it as dearly as possible.

In vain had the rangers fired on the cacique—he seemed invulnerable: not one of the bullets aimed at him had struck him. He still fought, and the weight of his weapon did not seem to fatigue his arm. The rangers excited each other to finish him; but not one dared to approach him.

But this combat of giants could not endure longer. Of the twenty companions he had round him on commencing the struggle, the cacique now only saw two or three upright: the rest were dead. There must be an end. The circle that inclosed the hapless Indian drew closer and closer. Henceforth it was only a question of time with him. The rangers, recognising the impossibility of conquering this lion-hearted man, had changed their tactics: they no longer attacked him, but contented themselves with forming an impassable circle round him, waiting prudently for the moment when the strength of the prey, which could not escape them, was exhausted, in order to rush upon him.

The Coras understood the intention of his enemies. A contemptuous smile contracted his haughty lips, and he rushed resolutely toward these men who recoiled before him. Suddenly, with a movement quicker than thought, he threw with extraordinary strength the ploughshare among the rangers, and bounding like a tiger, leaped on a horse, and clutched its rider with superhuman vigour.

Ere the rangers had recovered from the surprise this unforeseen attack occasioned in them, by a desperate effort, and still holding the horseman, the chieftain drew from his girdle a short sharp knife, which he buried up to the hilt in the flanks of the horse. The animal uttered a shriek of pain, rushed headlong into the crowd, and bore both away with maddening speed.

The rangers, rendered furious at being played with by a single man, and seeing their most terrible enemy escape them, started in pursuit; but with his liberty the Coras had regained all his energy: he felt himself saved. In spite of the desperate efforts the rangers made to catch him up, he disappeared in the darkness.

The cacique continued to fly till he felt his horse tottering under him. He had not loosed his hold of the horseman, who was half strangled by the rude embrace, and both rolled on the ground. This man wore the costume of the Apache Indians. The Coras regarded him for an instant attentively, and then a smile of contempt played round his lips.

"You are not a redskin," he said, in a hollow voice; "you are only a paleface dog. Why put on the

skin of the lion when you are a cowardly coyote?"

The ranger, still stunned by the fall he had suffered, and the hug he had endured, made no reply.

"I could kill you," the Indian continued; "but my vengeance would not be complete. You and yours must pay me for all the innocent blood you have shed like cowards this night. I will mark you, so that I may know you again."

Then, with fearful coolness, the Coras threw the ranger on his back, put his knee on his chest, and burying his finger in the socket of his eye, gave it a sharp rotatory movement, and plucked out his eyeball. On this frightful mutilation, the wretch uttered a cry of pain impossible to describe. The Indian got up.

"Go!" he said to him. "Now I am certain of finding you again whenever I want you."

At this moment the sound of hoofs could be heard a short distance off: the rangers had evidently heard their comrade's cry, and were hurrying to his aid. The Coras, rushed into the bushes and disappeared. A few moments later the rangers came up.

"Nathan, my son!" Red Cedar shouted as he leaped from his horse and threw himself on the body of the wounded man. "Nathan, my firstborn, is dead!"

"No," one of the rangers answered; "but he is very bad."

It was really the squatter's eldest son whom the cacique had mutilated. Red Cedar seized him in his arms, placed him before him on the saddle, and the band started again at a gallop. The rangers had accomplished their task: they had sixty human scalps hanging from their girdles. The rancheria of the Coras was no longer aught save a pile of ashes.

Of all the inhabitants of this hapless village only the cacique survived; but he would suffice to avenge his brothers.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE VALLEY OF THE BUFFALO.

Don Miguel Zarate, on leaving his son, remounted his horse and rode straight to Paso, to the house of Don Luciano Pérez, the *juez de letras* (police magistrate).

The hacendero was one of the richest landed proprietors in the country; and as he was thoroughly acquainted with the spirit of the depositaries of justice in those parts, he had consequently been careful to line his purse well. Here were two reasons, then, to interest the judge in his favour, and this really happened.

The worthy Don Luciano shuddered on hearing the details of what had occurred between Don Pablo and the squatters. He swore that he would, without delay, take an exemplary vengeance for this starting felony on the part of the heretic dogs, and that it was high time to bring them reason. Confirming himself more and more in his resolution, he buckled on his sword, gave orders to twenty well-armed alguaciles to mount, and placing himself at the head of this numerous escort, he proceeded toward Buffalo Valley.

Don Miguel had witnessed with secret annoyance all these formidable preparations. He placed but slight confidence in the courage of the policemen, and he would have preferred the judge leaving him master to act as he pleased. He had even adroitly attempted to obtain from Don Luciano a regular warrant, which he would have executed however he might think proper; but the judge, burning with an unusual warlike ardor, and spurred on by the large sum he had received, would listen to nothing, but insisted on himself taking the head of the expedition.

Don Luciano Pérez was a plump little man of about sixty years of age, round as a tub, with a jolly face, adorned with a rubicund nose and two cunning little eyes. This man cordially detested the North Americans; and, in the courageous deed he was committing at this moment, hatred was as much the instigation as avarice.

The little band set out at a canter, and proceeded rapidly toward the forest. The judge hurled fire and flames at the audacious usurpers, as he called them; he spoke of nothing less than killing them without mercy, if they attempted even the slightest resistance to the orders he was about to give them. Don Miguel, who was much calmer, and foreboded no good from this great wrath, sought in vain to pacify him by telling him that he would in all probability have to do with men difficult to intimidate, against whom coolness would be the best weapon.

They gradually approached. The hacendero, in order to shorten the journey, had led the band by a cross road, which saved at least one-third the distance; and the first trees of the forest already appeared about two miles off. The mischief produced by the squatters was much more considerable than Don Pablo had represented to his father; and, at the first glance, it seemed impossible that, in so short a time, four men, even though working vigorously, could have accomplished it. The finest trees lay on the ground; enormous piles of planks were arranged at regular distances, and on the San Pedro an already completed raft only awaited a few more stems of trees to be thrust into the water.

Don Miguel could not refrain from sighing at the sight of the devastation committed in one of his best forests; but the nearer they approached the spot where they expected to meet the squatters,

the more lukewarm grew the warlike zeal of the judge and his acolytes, and the hacendero soon found himself compelled to urge them on, instead of restraining them as he had hitherto done. Suddenly the sound of an axe re-echoed a few paces ahead of the band. The judge impelled by the feeling of his duty, and shame of appearing frightened, advanced boldly in the direction of the sound, followed by his escort.

"Stop!" a rough voice shouted at the moment the policemen turned the corner of a lane.

With that instinct of self-preservation which never abandons them, the alguaciles stopped as if their horses' feet had been suddenly welded to the ground. Ten paces from them stood a man in the centre of the ride, leaning on an American rifle. The judge turned to Don Miguel with such an expression of hesitation and honest terror that the hacendero could not refrain from laughing.

"Come, courage, Don Luciano," he said to him. "This man is alone; he cannot venture to bar our passage."

"*Con mil diablos!*" the judge exclaimed, ashamed of this impression which he could not master, and frowning portentously, "forward, you fellows, and fire on that scoundrel if he make but a sign to resist you."

The alguaciles set out again with prudential hesitation.

"Stop! I tell you again," the squatter repeated. "Did you not hear the order I gave you!"

The judge, reassured by the presence of the hacendero, then advanced, and said with a tone which he strove to render terrible, but which was only ridiculous through the terror he revealed, —

"I, Don Luciano Pérez, *juez de letras* of the town of Paso, have come, by virtue of the powers delegated to me by the Government, to summon you and your adherents to quit within twenty-four hours this forest you have illegally entered, and which—"

"Ta, ta!" the stranger shouted, rudely interrupting the judge, and stamping his foot savagely. "I care as much for all your words and laws as I do for an old moccasin. The ground belongs to the first comers. We are comfortable here, and mean to remain."

"Your language is very bold, young man," Don Miguel then said. "You do not consider that you are alone, and that, failing other rights, we have strength on our side."

The squatter burst into a laugh.

"You believe that," he said. "Learn, stranger, that I care as little for the ten humbugs I now have before me as I do for a woodcock, and that they will do well to leave me at peace, unless they want to learn the weight of my arm at their expense. However, here is my father; settle it with him."

And he began carelessly whistling "Yankee Doodle." At the same instant three men, at the head of whom was Red Cedar, appeared on the path. At the sight of these unexpected reinforcements for their arrogant enemy the alguaciles made a movement in retreat. The affair was becoming singularly complicated, and threatened to assume proportions very grave for them.

"Halloh! What's up?" the old man asked roughly. "Anything wrong, Sutter?"

"These people," the young man answered, shrugging his shoulders contemptuously, "are talking about driving us from the forest by virtue of some order."

"Halloh!" Red Cedar said, his eyes flashing as he cast a savage glance at the Mexicans. "The only law I recognise in the desert," he continued with a gesture of terrible energy as he struck his rifle barrel, "is this. Withdraw, strangers, if you do not wish blood to be shed between us. I am a peaceful man, wishing to do no one hurt; but I warn you that I will not allow myself to be kicked out without striking a blow."

"You will not be turned out," the judge remarked timidly; "on the contrary, you have seized on what belongs to other people."

"I won't listen to your arguments, which I do not understand," the squatter roughly exclaimed. "God gave the ground to man that he might labour on it. Every proprietor that does not fulfil this condition tacitly renounces his rights, and the earth then becomes the property of the man who tills it with the sweat of his brow; so go to the devil! Be off at full speed, if you do not wish harm to happen to you!"

"We will not suffer ourselves to be intimidated by your threats," the judge said, impelled by his anger, and forgetting for a moment his alarm; "we will do our duty, whatever may happen."

"Try it," Red Cedar said with a grin.

And he made a sign to his sons. The latter arranged themselves in a single line, and occupied the entire width of the path.

"In the name of the law," the judge said with energy, as he pointed out the old man, "alguaciles, seize that person."

But, as so frequently happens under similar circumstances, this order was more easy to give than to execute. Red Cedar and his sons did not appear at all disposed to let themselves be collared. We must, however, do the alguaciles the justice of stating that they did not hesitate for a moment. They plainly refused to carry out the order they had received.

"For the last time, will you be off?" the squatter shouted. "Let them have it."

His three sons raised their rifles. At this movement, which removed all doubts that might still remain on their minds, and which proved to them that the squatters would not hesitate to proceed to extremities, the alguaciles were seized with an invincible terror. They turned bridle and galloped off at full speed, followed by the yells of the Americans.

One man alone remained motionless before the squatters—Don Miguel Zarate. Red Cedar had not recognised him, either owing to the distance that separated them, or because the hacendero had purposely pulled over his eyes his broad-brimmed hat. Don Miguel dismounted, placed the pistols from his holsters through his belt, fastened his horse to a tree, and coolly throwing his rifle across his shoulders, boldly advanced toward the squatters. The latter, surprised by the courage of this man, who alone attempted what his comrades had given up all hopes of achieving, let him come up to them without offering the slightest opposition. When Don Miguel was a couple of paces from the old squatter; he stopped, put the butt of his rifle on the ground, and removing his hat, said,—

"Do you recognise me, Red Cedar?"

"Don Miguel Zarate!" the bandit shouted in surprise.

"As the judge deserts me," the hacendero continued, "and fled like a coward before your threats, I am obliged to take justice for myself, and, by heavens! I will do so! Red Cedar, I, as owner of this forest, in which you have settled without permission, order you to depart at once."

The young men exchanged a few muttered threats.

"Silence!" Red Cedar commanded. "Let the caballero speak."

"I have finished, and await your answer."

The squatter appeared to reflect deeply for a few minutes.

"The answer you demand is difficult to give," he at length said: "my position toward you is not a free one."

"Why so?"

"Because I owe you my life."

"I dispense you from all gratitude."

"That is possible. You are at liberty to do so; but I cannot forget the service you rendered me."

"It is of little consequence."

"Much more than you fancy, caballero. I may be, through my character, habits, and the mode of life I lead, beyond the law of civilised beings; but I am not the less a man, and if of the worst sort, perhaps, I no more forget a kindness than I do an insult."

"Prove it, then, by going away as quickly as you can, and then we shall be quits."

The squatter shook his head.

"Listen to me, Don Miguel," he said. "You have in this country the reputation of being the providence of the unfortunate. I know from myself the extent of your kindness and courage. It is said that you possess an immense fortune, of which you do not yourself know the extent."

"Well, what then?" the hacendero impatiently interrupted him.

"The damage I can commit here, even if I cut down all the trees in the forest, would be but a trifle to you; then whence comes the fury you display to drive me out?"

"Your question is just, and I will answer it. I demand your departure from my estates, because, only a few days back, my son was grievously wounded by your lads, who led him into a cowardly snare; and if he escaped death, it was only through a miracle. That is the reason why we cannot live side by side, for blood severs us."

Red Cedar frowned.

"Is this true?" he said, addressing his sons.

The young men only hung their heads in reply.

"I am waiting," Don Miguel went on.

"Come, the question cannot be settled thus, so we will proceed to my jacal."

"For what purpose? I ask you for a yes or no."

"I cannot answer you yet. We must have a conversation together, after which you shall decide to my future conduct. Follow me, then, without fear."

"I fear nothing, as I believe I have proved to you. Go on, as you demand it: I will follow you."

Red Cedar made his sons a sign to remains here they were, and proceeded with long strides toward his jacal, which was but a short distance off. Don Miguel walked carelessly after him. They entered the cabin. It was deserted. The two females were doubtless also occupied in the forest. Red Cedar closed the door after him, sat down on a bench, made his guest a sign to do the same, and began speaking in a low and measured voice, as if afraid what he had to say might be heard outside.

CHAPTER IX.

THE ASSASSINATION.

"Listen to me, Don Miguel," Red Cedar said, "and pray do not mistake my meaning. I have not the slightest intention of intimidating you, nor do I think of attempting to gain your confidence by revelations which you may fairly assume I have accidentally acquired."

The hacendero regarded with amazement the speaker, whose tone and manner had so suddenly changed.

"I do not understand you," he said to him. "Explain yourself more clearly, for the words you have just uttered are an enigma, the key to which I seek in vain."

"You shall be satisfied, caballero; and if you do not catch the meaning of my words this time it must be because you will not. Like all intelligent men, you are wearied of the incessant struggles in which the vital strength of your country is exhausted unprofitably. You have seen that a land so rich, so fertile, so gloriously endowed as Mexico, could not—I should say ought not—to remain longer the plaything of paltry ambitions, and the arena on which all these transitory tyrannies sport in turn. For nearly thirty years you have dreamed of emancipation, not of your entire country, for that would be too rude a task, and unrealisable; but you said to yourself, 'Let us render New Mexico independent; form it into a new State, governed by wise laws rigorously executed. By liberal institutions let us give an impetus to all the riches with which it is choked, give intellect all the liberty it requires, and perhaps within a few years the entire Mexican Confederation, amazed by the magnificent results I shall obtain, will follow my example. Then I shall die happy at what I have effected—my object will be carried out. I shall have saved my country from the abyss over which it hangs, through the double pressure of the invasion of the American Union and the exhaustion of the Spanish race.' Are not those ideas yours, caballero? Do you consider that I have explained myself clearly this time?"

"Perhaps so, though I do not yet see distinctly the point you wish to reach. The thoughts you attribute to me are such as naturally occur to all men who sincerely love their country, and I will not pretend that I have not entertained them."

"You would be wrong in doing so, for they are great and noble, and breathe the purest patriotism."

"A truce to compliments, and let us come to the point, for time presses."

"Patience: I have not yet ended. These ideas must occur to you sooner than to another, as you are the descendant of the first Aztec kings, and born defender of the Indians in this hapless country. You see that I am well acquainted with you, Don Miguel Zarate."

"Too well, perhaps," the Mexican gentleman muttered.

The squatter smiled and went on:—

"It is not chance that led me to this country. I knew what I was doing, and why I came. Don Miguel, the hour is a solemn one. All your preparations are made: will you hesitate to give New Mexico the signal which must render it independent of the metropolis which has so long been fattening at its expense? Answer me."

Don Miguel started. He fixed on the squatter a burning glance, in which admiration at the man's language could be read. Red Cedar shrugged his shoulders.

"What! You still doubt?" he said.

He rose, went to a box from which he took some papers, and threw them on the table before the hacendero, saying,—

"Read."

Don Miguel hurriedly seized the papers, and ran his eye over them.

"Well?" he asked, looking fixedly at the strange speaker.

"You see," the squatter answered, "that I am your accomplice. General Ibañez, your agent in Mexico, is in correspondence with me, as is Mr. Wood, your agent at New York."

"It is true," the Mexican said coldly, "you have the secret of the conspiracy. The only point left is to what extent that goes."

"I possess it entirely. I have orders to enlist the volunteers who will form the nucleus of the insurrectionary army."

"Good!"

"Now, you see, by these letters of General Ibañez and Mr. Wood, that I am commissioned by them to come to an understanding with you, and receive your final orders."

"I see it."

"What do you purpose doing?"

"Nothing."

"What, nothing!" the squatter exclaimed, bounding with surprise. "You are jesting, I suppose."

"Listen to me in your turn, and pay attention to my words, for they express my irrevocable

resolution. I know not nor care to know, by what means, more or less honourable, you have succeeded in gaining the confidence of my partners, and becoming master of our secrets. Still it is my firm conviction that a cause which employs such men as yourself is compromised, if not lost; hence I renounce every combination in which you are called to play a part. Your antecedents, and the life you lead, have placed you without the pale of the law."

"I am a bandit—out with it! What matter so long as you succeed? Does not the end justify the means?"

"That may be your morality, but it will never be mine. I repudiate all community of ideas with men of your stamp. I will not have you either as accomplice or partner."

The squatter darted a look at him laden with hatred and disappointment.

"In serving us," Don Miguel continued, "you can only have an interested object, which I will not take the trouble of guessing at. An Anglo-American will never frankly aid a Mexican to conquer his liberty; he would lose too much by doing it."

"Then?"

"I renounce forever the projects I had formed. I had, I grant, dreamed of restoring to my country the independence of which it was unjustly stripped: but it shall remain a dream."

"That is your last word?"

"The last."

"You refuse?"

"I do."

"Good; then I now know what is left me to do."

"Well, what is it? Let me hear," the hacendero said, as he crossed his arms on his breast, and looked him boldly in the face.

"I will tell you."

"I am waiting for you to do so."

"I hold your secret."

"Entirely?"

"Hence you are in my power."

"Perhaps."

"Who will prevent me going to the Governor of the State and denouncing you?"

"He will not believe you."

"You think so?"

"I am sure of it."

"Perhaps, I will say in my turn."

"Why so?"

"Oh! you shall easily see."

"I am curious to learn it."

"However rich you may be, Don Miguel Zarate, and perhaps because of those very riches, and in spite of the kindness you sow broadcast, the number of your enemies is very considerable."

"I know it."

"Very good. Those enemies will joyfully seize the first opportunity that presents itself to destroy you."

"It is probable."

"You see, then. When I go to the governor and tell him you are conspiring, and, in support of my denunciation, hand him not only these letters, but, several others written and signed by you, lying in that chest, do you believe that the governor will treat me as an impostor, and refuse to arrest you?"

"Then you have letters in my hand-writing?"

"I have three, which will be enough to have you shot."

"Ah!"

"Yes. Hang it all! you understand: that, in an affair so important as this, it is wise to take one's precautions, for no one knows what may happen; and men of my stamp," he added, with an ironical smile, "have more reasons than others for being prudent."

"Come, that is well played," the hacendero said, carelessly.

"Is it not?"

"Yes, and I compliment you on it: you are a better player than I gave you credit for."

"Oh! You do not know me yet."

"The little I do know suffices me."

"Then?"

"We will remain as we are, if you will permit me."

"You still refuse?"

"More than ever."

The squatter frowned.

"Take care, Don Miguel," he muttered, hoarsely. "I will do what I told you."

"Yes, if I allow you time."

"Eh?"

"*Caspita!* If you are a clever scamp, I am not altogether a fool. Do you believe, in your turn, that I will let myself be intimidated by your threats, and that I should not find means to keep you from acting, not for my own sake, as I care little personally for what you can do, but for my friends, who are men of honour, and whose lives I do not wish to be compromised by your treachery?"

"I am curious to know the means you will employ to obtain this result."

"You shall see," Don Miguel replied with perfect coolness.

"Well?"

"I shall kill you."

"Oh, oh!" the squatter said, as he looked complacently at his muscular limbs, "That is not easy."

"More so than you suppose, my master."

"Hum! and when do you reckon on killing me?"

"At once!"

The two men were seated in front of the hearth, each at the end of a bench: the table was between them, but a little back, so that while talking they only leaned an elbow on it. While uttering the last word, Don Miguel bounded like a tiger on the squatter, who did not at all expect the attack, seized him by the throat, and hurled him to the ground. The two enemies rolled on the uneven flooring of the jacal.

The Mexican's attack had been so sudden and well directed that the half-strangled squatter, in spite of his Herculean strength, could not free himself from his enemy's iron clutch, which pressed his throat like a vice. Red Cedar could neither utter a cry nor offer the slightest resistance: the Mexican's knee crushed his chest, while his fingers pressed into his throat.

So soon as he had reduced the wretch to utter impotence, Don Miguel drew from his vaquera boot a long sharp knife, and buried the entire blade in his body. The bandit writhed convulsively for a few seconds; a livid pallor suffused his face; his eyes closed, and he then remained motionless. Don Miguel left the weapon in the wound, and slowly rose.

"Ah, ah!" he muttered as he gazed at him with a sardonic air, "I fancy that rogue will not denounce me now."

Without loss of time he seized the letters lying on the table, took from the box the few documents he found in it, hid them all in his bosom, opened the door of the cabin, which he carefully closed after him, and went off with long strides.

The squatter's sons had not quitted their post; but, so soon as they perceived the Mexican, they went up to him.

"Well," Shaw asked him, "have you come to an understanding with the old man?"

"Perfectly so," the Mexican answered.

"Then the affair is settled?"

"Yes, to our mutual satisfaction."

"All the better," the young men exclaimed joyously.

The hacendero unfastened his horse and mounted.

"Good-bye, gentlemen!" he said to them.

"Good-bye!" they replied, returning his bow.

The Mexican put his horse to a trot, but at the first turn in the road he dug his spurs into its flanks, and started at full speed.

"Now," Sutter observed, "I believe that we can proceed to the cabin without inconvenience."

And they gently walked toward the jacal, pleasantly conversing together.

Don Miguel, however, had not succeeded so fully as he imagined. Red Cedar was not dead, for the old bandit kept a firm hold on life. Attacked unawares, the squatter had not attempted a resistance, which he saw at the first glance was useless, and would only have exasperated his adversary. With marvellous sagacity, on feeling the knife blade enter his body, he stiffened himself against the pain, and resolved on "playing 'possum;" that is to say, feigning death. The success of his stratagem was complete. Don Miguel, persuaded that he had killed him, did not dream of repeating his thrust.

So long as his enemy remained in the jacal the squatter was careful not to make the slightest movement that might have betrayed him; but, so soon as he was alone, he opened his eyes, rose with an effort, drew the dagger from the wound, which emitted a jet of black blood, and looking at the door, through which his assassin had departed, with a glance so full of hatred that it is impossible to describe, he muttered,—

"Now we are quits, Don Miguel Zarate, since you have tried to take back the life of him you saved. Pray God never to bring us face to face again!"

He uttered a deep sigh, and rolled heavily on the ground in a fainting fit. At this moment his sons entered the cabin.

CHAPTER X.

THE SACHEM OF THE CORAS.

A few days after the events we have described in the previous chapter there was one of those lovely mornings which are not accorded to our cold climates to know. The sun poured down in profusion its warm beams, which caused the pebbles and sand to glisten in the walks of the garden of the Hacienda de la Noria. In a clump of flowering orange and lemon trees, whose sweet exhalations perfumed the air, and beneath a copse of cactus, nopals, and aloes, a maiden was asleep, carelessly reclining in a hammock made of the thread of the *Phormium tenax,* which hung between two orange trees.

With her head thrown back, her long black hair unfastened, and falling in disorder on her neck and bosom; with her coral lips parted, and displaying the dazzling pearl of her teeth, Doña Clara (for it was she who slept thus with an infantile slumber) was really charming. Her features breathed happiness, for not a cloud had yet arisen to perturb the azure horizon of her calm and tranquil life.

It was nearly midday: there was not a breath in the air. The sunbeams, pouring down vertically, rendered the heat so stifling and unsupportable, that everyone in the hacienda had yielded to sleep, and was enjoying what is generally called in hot countries the *siesta.* Still, at a short distance from the spot where Doña Clara reposed, calm and smiling, a sound of footsteps, at first almost imperceptible, but gradually heightening, was heard, and a man made his appearance. It was Shaw, the youngest of the squatter's sons. How was he at this spot?

The young man was panting, and the perspiration poured down his cheeks. On reaching the entrance of the clump he bent an anxious glance on the hammock.

"She is there," he murmured with a passionate accent. "She sleeps."

Then he fell on his knees upon the sand, and began admiring the maiden, dumb and trembling. He remained thus a long time, with his glance fixed on the slumberer with a strange expression. At length he uttered a sigh and tearing himself with an effort from this delicious contemplation, he rose sadly, muttering in a whisper,—

"I must go—if she were to wake—oh, she will never know how much I love her!"

He plucked an orange flower, and softly laid it on the maiden; then he walked a few steps from her, but almost immediately returning, he seized, with a nervous hand, Doña Clara's *rebozo,* which hung down from the hammock, and pressed it to his lips several times, saying, in a voice broken by the emotion he felt,—

"It has touched her hair."

And rushing from the thicket, he crossed the garden and disappeared. He had heard footsteps approaching. In fact, a few seconds after his departure, Don Miguel, in his turn, entered the copse.

"Come, come," he said gaily, as he shook the hammock, "sleeper, will you not have finished your siesta soon?"

Doña Clara opened her eyes, with a smile.

"I am no longer asleep, father," she said.

"Very good. That is the answer I like."

And he stepped forward to kiss her; but, with sudden movement, the maiden drew herself back as if she had seen some frightful vision, and her face was covered with a livid pallor.

"What is the matter with you?" the hacendero exclaimed with terror.

The girl showed him the orange flower.

"Well," her father continued, "what is there so terrific in that flower? It must have fallen from the tree during your sleep."

Doña Clara shook her head sadly.

"No," she said: "for some days past I have always noticed, on waking a similar flower thrown on me."

"You are absurd; chance alone is to blame for it all. Come, think no more about it; you are pale as death, child. Why frighten yourself thus about a trifle? Besides the remedy may be easily found. If so afraid of flowers now, why not take your siesta in your bedroom, instead of burying yourself in this thicket?"

"That is true, father," the girl said, all joyous, and no longer thinking of the fear she had undergone. "I will follow your advice."

"Come, that is settled, so say no more about it. Now give me a kiss."

The maiden threw herself into her father's arms, whom she stifled with kisses. Both sat down on a grassy mound, and commenced one of those delicious chit-chats whose charm only those who are parents can properly appreciate. Presently a peon came up.

"What has brought you?" Don Miguel asked.

"Excellency," the peon answered, "a redskin warrior has just arrived at the hacienda, who desires speech with you."

"Do you know him?" Don Miguel asked.

"Yes, Excellency; it is Eagle-wing, the sachem of the Coras of the Rio San Pedro."

"Mookapec! (Flying Eagle)" the hacendero repeated with surprise. "What can have brought him to me? Lead him here."

The peon retired and in a few minutes returned, preceding Eagle-wing.

The chief had donned the great war-dress of the sachems of his nation. His hair, plaited with the skin of a rattlesnake, was drawn up on the top of his head; in the centre an eagle plume was affixed. A blouse of striped calico, adorned with a profusion of bells, descended to his thighs, which were defended from the stings of mosquitoes by drawers of the same stuff. He wore moccasins made of peccary skin, adorned with glass beads and porcupine quills. To his heels were fastened several wolves' tails, the distinguishing mark of renowned warriors. Round his loins was a belt of elk hide, through which passed his knife, his pipe and his medicine bag. His neck was adorned by a collar of grizzly bear claws and buffalo teeth. Finally, a magnificent robe of a white female buffalo hide, painted red inside, was fastened to his shoulders, and fell down behind him like a cloak. In his right hand he held a fan formed of a single eagle's wing, and in his left hand an American rifle. There was something imposing and singularly martial in the appearance and demeanor of this savage child of the forest.

On entering the thicket, he bowed gracefully to Doña Clara, and then stood motionless and dumb before Don Miguel. The Mexican regarded him attentively, and saw an expression of gloomy melancholy spread over the Indian chief's features.

"My brother is welcome," the hacendero said to him. "To what do I owe the pleasure of seeing him?"

The chief cast a side glance at the maiden. Don Miguel understood what he desired, and made Doña Clara a sign to withdraw. They remained alone.

"My brother can speak," the hacendero then said; "the ears of a friend are open."

"Yes, my father is good," the chief replied in his guttural voice. "He loves the Indians: unhappily all the palefaces do not resemble him."

"What does my brother mean? Has he cause to complain of anyone?"

The Indian smiled sadly.

"Where is there justice for the redskins?" he said. "The Indians are animals: the Great Spirit has not given them a soul, as He has done for the palefaces, and it is not a crime to kill them."

"Come, chief, pray do not speak longer in riddles, but explain why you have quitted your tribe. It is far from Rio San Pedro to this place."

"Mookapec is alone: his tribe no longer exists."

"How?"

"The palefaces came in the night, like jaguars without courage. They burned the village, and massacred all the inhabitants, even to the women and little children."

"Oh, that is frightful!" the hacendero murmured, in horror.

"Ah!" the chief continued with an accent full of terrible irony, "The scalps of the redskins are sold dearly."

"And do you know the men who committed this atrocious crime?"

"Mookapec knows them, and will avenge himself."

"Tell me their chief, if you know his name."

"I know it. The palefaces call him Red Cedar, the Indians the Maneater."

"Oh! As for him, chief, you are avenged, for he is dead."

"My father is mistaken."

"How so? Why, I killed him myself."

The Indian shook his head.

"Red Cedar has a hard life," he said: "the blade of the knife my father used was too short. Red Cedar is wounded, but in a few days he will be about again, ready to kill and scalp the Indians."

This news startled the hacendero: the enemy he fancied he had got rid of still lived, and he would have to begin a fresh struggle.

"My father must take care," the chief continued. "Red Cedar has sworn to be avenged."

"Oh! I will not leave him the time. This man is a demon, of whom the earth must be purged at all hazards, before his strength has returned, and he begins his assassinations again."

"I will aid my father in his vengeance."

"Thanks, chief. I do not refuse your offer: perhaps I shall soon need the help of all my friends. And now, what do you purpose doing?"

"Since the palefaces reject him, Eagle-wing will retire to the desert. He has friends among the Comanches. They are redskins, and will welcome him gladly."

"I will not strive to combat your determination, chief, for it is just; and if, at a later date, you take terrible reprisals on the white men, they will have no cause of complaint, for they have brought it on themselves. When does my brother start?"

"At sunset."

"Rest here today: tomorrow will be soon enough to set out."

"Mookapec must depart this day."

"Act as you think proper. Have you a horse?"

"No; but at the first manada I come to I will lasso one."

"I do not wish you to set out thus, but will give you a horse."

"Thanks; my father is good. The Indian chief will remember—"

"Come, you shall choose for yourself."

"I have still a few words to say to my father."

"Speak, chief; I am listening to you."

"Koutonepi, the pale hunter, begged me to give my father an important warning."

"What is it?"

"A great danger threatens my father. Koutonepi wishes to see him as soon as possible, in order himself to tell him its nature."

"Good! My brother will tell the hunter that I shall be tomorrow at the 'clearing of the shattered oak,' and await him there till night."

"I will faithfully repeat my father's words to the hunter."

The two men then quitted the garden, and hurriedly proceeded toward the hacienda. Don Miguel let the chief choose his own horse, and while the sachem was harnessing his steed in the Indian fashion, he withdrew to his bedroom, and sent for his son to join him. The young man had perfectly recovered from his wound. His father told him that he was obliged to absent himself for some days: he intrusted to him the management of the hacienda, while recommending him on no consideration to leave the farm, and to watch attentively over his sister. The young man promised him all he wished, happy at enjoying perfect liberty for a few days.

After embracing his son and daughter for the last time Don Miguel proceeded to the *patio,* where in the meanwhile, the chief had been amusing himself by making the magnificent horse he had chosen curvet. Don Miguel admired for several moments the Indian's skill and grace, for he managed a horse as well as the first Mexican *jinete;* then mounted, and the two men proceeded together toward the Paso del Norte, which they must cross in order to enter the desert, and reach the clearing of the shattered oak.

The journey passed in silence, for the two men were deeply reflecting. At the moment they entered Paso the sun was setting on the horizon in a bed of red mist, which foreboded a storm for the night. At the entrance of the village they separated; and on the morrow, as we have seen in our first chapter, Don Miguel set out at daybreak, and galloped to the clearing.

We will now end this lengthy parenthesis, which was, however, indispensable for the due comprehension of the facts that are about to follow, and take up our story again at the point where we left it.

CHAPTER XI.

CONVERSATION.

Valentine Guillois, whom we have already introduced to the reader in previous works[1], had inhabited, or, to speak more correctly, traversed the vast solitudes of Mexico and Texas during the past five or six years. We saw him just now accompanied by the Araucano chief. These two

men were the boldest hunters on the frontier. At times, when they had collected an ample harvest of furs, they went to sell them in the villages, renewed their stock of powder and ball, purchased a few indispensable articles, and then returned to the desert.

Now and then they engaged themselves for a week, or even a fortnight, with the proprietors of the haciendas, to free them from the wild beasts that desolated their herds; but so soon as the ferocious animals were destroyed, and the reward obtained, no matter the brilliancy of the offers made them by the landowners, the two men threw their rifles on their shoulders and went off.

No one knew who they were, or whence they came. Valentine and his friend maintained the most complete silence as to the events of their life which had preceded their appearance in these parts. Only one thing had betrayed the nationality of Valentine, whom his comrade called Koutonepi, a word belonging to the language of the Aucas, and signifying "The Valiant." On his chest the hunter wore the cross of the Legion of Honor. The deeds of every description performed by these hunters were incalculable, and their stories were the delight of the frontier dwellers during the winter night. The number of tigers they had killed was no longer counted.

Chance had one day made them acquainted with Don Miguel Zarate under strange circumstances, and since then an uninterrupted friendship had been maintained between them. Don Miguel, during a tempestuous night, namely, had only owed his life to the accuracy of Valentine's aim, who sent a bullet through the head of the Mexican's horse at the moment when, mad with terror, and no longer obeying the bridle, it was on the point of leaping into an abyss with its master. Don Miguel had sworn eternal gratitude to his saviour.

Valentine and Curumilla had made themselves the tutors of the hacendero's children, who, for their part, felt a deep friendship for the hunters. Don Pablo had frequently made long hunting parties in the desert with them; and it was to them he owed the certainty of his aim, his skill in handling weapons, and his knack in taming horses.

No secrets existed between Don Miguel and the hunters: they read in his mind as in an ever open book. They were the disinterested confidants of his plans; for these rude wood rangers esteemed him, and only required for themselves one thing—the liberty of the desert. Still, despite the sympathy and friendship which so closely connected these different persons, and the confidence which formed the basis of that friendship, Don Miguel and his children had never been able to obtain from the hunters information as to the events that had passed prior to their arrival in this country.

Frequently Don Miguel, impelled, not by curiosity, but merely by the interest he felt in them, had tried, by words cleverly thrown into the conversation, to give them an opening for confidence; but Valentine had always repelled those hints, though cleverly enough for Don Miguel not to feel offended by this want of confidence. With Curumilla they had been even more simple. Wrapped in his Indian stoicism, intrenched in his habitual sullenness, he was wont to answer all questions by a shake of the head, but nothing further.

At length, weary of the attempt, the hacendero and his family had given up trying to read those secrets which their friends seemed obstinately determined to keep from them. Still the friendship subsisting between them had not grown cold in consequence, and it was always with equal pleasure that Don Miguel met the hunters again after a lengthened ramble in the prairies, which kept them away from his house for whole months at a time.

The hunter and the Mexican were seated by the fire, while Curumilla, armed with his scalping knife, was busy flaying the two jaguars so skillfully killed by Don Miguel, and which were magnificent brutes.

"Eh, *compadre!*" Don Miguel said with a laugh; "I was beginning to lose patience, and fancy you had forgotten the meeting you had yourself given me."

"I never forgot anything, as you know," Valentine answered seriously; "and if I did not arrive sooner, it was because the road is long from my jacal to this clearing."

"Heaven forbid that I should reproach you, my friend! Still I confess to you that the prospect of passing the night alone in this forest only slightly pleased me, and I should have been off had you not arrived before sunset."

"You would have done wrong, Don Miguel: what I have to tell you is of the utmost importance to you. Who knows what the result might have been had I not been able to warn you?"

"You alarm me, my friend."

"I will explain. In the first place let me tell you that you committed, a few days back, a grave imprudence, whose consequences threaten to be most serious for you."

"What is it?"

"I said one, but ought to have said two."

"I am waiting till you think proper to express yourself more clearly," Don Miguel said with a slight tinge of impatience, "before I answer."

"You have quarrelled with a North American bandit."

"Red Cedar."

"Yes; and when you had him in your power you let him escape, instead of killing him out and out."

"That is true, and I was wrong. What would you? The villain has as tough a life as an alligator. But be at ease. If ever he fall into my hands again, I swear that I will not miss him."

"In the meanwhile you did do so—that is the evil."

"Why so?"

"You will understand me. This man is one of those villains, the scum of the United States, too many of whom have lived on the frontier during the last few years. I do not know how he contrived to deceive your New York agent; but he gained his confidence so cleverly that the latter told him all the secrets he knew about your enterprise."

"He told me so himself."

"Very good. It was then, I suppose, that you stabbed him?"

"Yes, and at the same time I plucked out his claws; that is to say, I seized the letters he held, and which might compromise me."

"A mistake. This man is too thorough-paced a scoundrel not to foresee all the chances of his treason. He had a last letter, the most important of all; and that you did not take from him."

"I took three."

"Yes, but there were four. As the last, however, in itself was worth as much as the other three, he always wore it about him in a leathern bag hung round his neck by a steel chain; you did not dream of looking for that."

"But what importance can this letter, I do not even remember writing, possess, that you should attach such weight to it?"

"It is merely the agreement drawn up between yourself, General Ibañez, and Mr. Wood, and bearing your three signatures."

"*Con mil demonios!*" the hacendero exclaimed in terror. "In that case I am lost; for if this man really possesses such a document, he will not fail to employ it in order to be revenged on me."

"Nothing is lost so long as a man's heart beats in his breast, Don Miguel. The position is critical, I allow, but I have saved myself in situations far more desperate than the one you are now in."

"What is to be done?"

"Red Cedar has been about again for two days. His first care, so soon as he could sit a horse, was to go to Santa Fe, the capital of New Mexico, and denounce you to the Governor. That has nothing to surprise you from such a man."

"Then I can only fly as speedily as I can?"

"Wait. Every man has in his heart at least one of the seven deadly sins as a bait for the demon."

"What are you driving at?"

"You will see. Fortunately for us, Red Cedar has them all seven, I believe, in the finest stage of development. Avarice, before all, has reached its acme with him."

"Well?"

"This happened. Our man denounced you to the governor as a conspirator, etc., but was careful not to give up the proofs he possessed in support of the denunciation at the outset. When General Isturitz, the governor, asked him for these proofs, he answered that he was ready to supply them in exchange for the sum of one hundred thousand piastres in gold."

"Ah!" the hacendero said, with a breath of relief, "and what did Isturitz say?"

"The general is one of your most inveterate enemies, I grant, and he would give a good deal for the pleasure of having you shot."

"That is true."

"Yes, but still the sum appeared to him, as it really is, exorbitant, the more so as he would have to pay it all himself, as the government does not recognise transactions of that nature."

"Well, what did Red Cedar do then?"

"He did not allow himself beaten; on the contrary, he told the general he would give him a week to reflect, and quietly left the Cabildo."

"Hum! And on what day was this visit paid?"

"Yesterday morning; so that you have six days still left for action."

"Six days—that is very little."

"Eh?" the Frenchman said, with a shrug of his shoulders impossible to describe. "In my country —"

"Yes, but you are Frenchmen."

"That is true: hence I allow you twice the time we should require. Come, let us put joking aside. You are a man of more than common energy; you really wish the welfare of your country, so do not let yourself be crushed by the first reverse. Who knows but that it may all be for the best?"

"Ah, my friend, I am alone! General Ibañez, who alone could help me in this critical affair, is fifty leagues off. What can I do? Nothing."

"All. I foresaw your objection. Eagle-wing, the Chief of the Coras, has gone from me to warn the general. You know with what speed Indians travel; so he will bring us the general in a few hours,

I feel convinced."

Don Miguel regarded the hunter with mingled admiration and respect.

"You have done that, my friend?" he said to him as he warmly pressed his hand.

"By Jove!" Valentine said, gaily, "I have done something else too. When the time arrives I will tell you what it is. But let us not lose an hour. What do you intend to do for the present?"

"Act."

"Good: that is the way I like to hear you talk."

"Yes, but I must first come to an understanding with the general."

"That is true; but it is the least thing," Valentine answered, as he looked skyward, and attentively consulted the position of the stars. "It is now eight o'clock. Eagle-wing and the man he brings must be at midnight at the entrance of the *Cañon del Buitre*. We have four hours before us, and that is more than we require, as we have only ten leagues to go."

"Let us go, let us go!" Don Miguel exclaimed eagerly.

"Wait a moment; there is no such hurry. Don't be alarmed; we shall arrive in time."

He then turned to Curumilla, and said to him in Araucano a few words which the hacendero did not understand. The Indian rose without replying, and disappeared in the density of the forest.

"You know," Valentine continued, "that I prefer, through habit, travelling on foot; still, as under present circumstances minutes are precious, and we must not lose them, I have provided two horses."

"You think of everything, my friend."

"Yes, when I have to act for those I love," Valentine answered with a retrospective sigh.

There was a moment's silence between the two men, and at the end of scarce a quarter of an hour there was a noise in the shrubs, the branches parted, and Curumilla re-entered the clearing, holding two horses by the bridle. These noble animals, which were nearly untamed *mustangs*, bore a striking resemblance to the steeds of the Apaches, on whose territory our friends now were. They were literally covered with eagle plumes, beads, and ribbons, while long red and white spots completed their disguise, and rendered it almost impossible to recognise them.

"Mount!" Don Miguel exclaimed so soon as he saw them. "Time is slipping away."

"One word yet," Valentine remarked.

"Speak."

"You still have as chaplain a certain monk by the name of 'Fray Ambrosio.'"

"Yes."

"Take care of that man—he betrays you."

"You believe it?"

"I am sure of it."

"Good! I will remember."

"All right. Now we will be off," Valentine said, as he buried his spurs in his horse's flanks.

And the three horsemen rushed into the darkness with headlong speed.

[1] "Tiger-Slayer," etc. Same publishers.

CHAPTER XII.

EL MESON.

The day on which our story commences the village of the Paso del Norte presented an extraordinary appearance. The bells were ringing out full peals, for the three hundredth anniversary of its foundation was celebrated. The population of Paso, greatly diminished since the proclamation of Mexican independence, was hurrying to the churches, which flashed with silver and gold. The houses were decorated with rich tapestry, and the streets strewn with flowers.

Toward nightfall the inhabitants, whom the intolerable heat of the tropical sun had kept prisoners in the interior of the houses, flocked out to inhale the sharp perfumes of the desert breeze, and bring back a little fresh air into their parched lungs. The town, which had for several hours appeared deserted, suddenly woke up: shouts and laughter were heard afresh. The walks were invaded by the mob, and in a few minutes the *mesóns* were thronged with idlers, who began drinking pulque and mezcal, while smoking their cigarettes, and strumming the jarabe and vihuela.

In a house of poor appearance, built like all its neighbours, of earth bricks, and situated at the angle formed by the Plaza Mayor and the Calle de la Merced, some twenty-five fellows, whom it was easy to recognise as adventurers by the feather in their hats, their upturned moustaches,

and specially by the long bronzed-hilted sword they wore on the thigh, were drinking torrents of aguardiente and pulque at the gambling tables, while yelling like deaf men, swearing like pagans, and threatening at every moment to unsheathe their weapons.

In a corner of the room occupied by these troublesome guests two men, seated opposite each other at a table, seemed plunged in deep thought, and looked round them absently, not thinking about drinking the contents of their glasses, which had not been emptied for more than half an hour. These two men presented the most striking contrast. They were still young. The first, aged twenty-five at the most, had one of those frank, honest, and energetic faces which call for sympathy, and attract respect. His pallid brow, his face of a delicate hue, surrounded by his long black curls, his straight and flexible nose, his mouth filled with a double row of teeth of dazzling whiteness, and surmounted by a slight brown moustache, gave him a stamp of distinction, which was the more striking owing to the strict, and perhaps common, style of his attire.

He wore the costume of the wood rangers; that is to say, the Canadian *mitasse*, fastened round the hips, and descending to the ankle; *botas vaqueras* of deer skin, fastened at the knee; and a striped zarapé of brilliant colours. A panama straw hat was thrown on the table, within reach of his hand, by the side of an American rifle and two double-barrelled pistols. A machete hung on his left side, and the hilt of a long knife peeped out of his left boot.

His companion was short and thick-set; but his well-knit limbs and his outstanding muscles indicated no ordinary strength. His face, the features of which were commonplace enough, had a cunning look, which suddenly disappeared to make room for a certain nobility whenever under the influence Of any sudden emotion; his eyebrows contracted; and his glance, ordinarily veiled, flashed forth. He wore nearly the same garb as his comrade; but his hat stained with rain, and the colours of his zarapé faded by the sun, evidenced lengthened wear. Like the first one we described, he was well armed.

It was easy to see at the first glance that these two men did not belong to the Hispano-American race, indeed, their conversation would have removed any doubts on that head, for they spoke in the French dialect employed in Canada.

"Hum!" the first said, taking up his glass, which he carelessly raised to his lips. "After due consideration, Harry, I believe we shall do better by mounting our horses again, and starting, instead of remaining in this horrible den, amid these *gachupinos*, who croak like frogs before a storm."

"Deuce take your impatience!" the other replied ill-temperedly. "Can't you remain a moment at rest?"

"You call it a moment, Harry. Why, we have been here an hour."

"By Jove! Dick, you're a wonderful fellow," the other continued with a laugh. "Do you think that business can be settled all in a moment?"

"After all, what is our game? For may the old one twist my neck, or a grizzly give me a hug, if I know the least in the world! For five years we have hunted and slept side by side. We have come from Canada together to this place. I have grown into a habit—I cannot say why—of referring to you everything that concerns our mutual interests. Still I should not be sorry to know, if only for the rarity of the fact, why on earth we left the prairies, where we were so well off, to come here, where we are so badly off."

"Have you ever repented, up to today, the confidence you placed in me?"

"I do not say so, Harry. Heaven forbid! Still I think—"

"You think wrong," the young man sharply interrupted. "Let me alone, and before three months you shall have three times your hat full of massive gold, or call me a fool."

At this dazzling promise the eyes of Dick, the smaller of the hunters, glistened like two stars. He regarded his comrade with a species of admiration.

"Oh, oh!" he said in a low voice, "It is a placer, is it?"

"Hang it!" the other said, with a shrug of his shoulders, "were it not, should I be here? But silence, our man has arrived."

In fact, a man entered at this moment. On his appearance a sudden silence fell on the mesón; the adventurers gambling and cursing at all the tables, rose as if moved by a spring, respectfully took off their plumed hats, and ranged themselves with downcast eyes to let him pass. The man remained for an instant on the threshold of the venta, took a profound glance at the company, and then walked toward the two hunters.

This man wore the gown of a monk; he had the ascetic face, with the harsh features and sharply-marked lines, that forms, as it were, the type of the Spanish monks of which Titian has so admirably caught the expression on his canvas. He passed through the adventurers, holding out right and left his wide sleeves, which they reverentially kissed. On approaching the two hunters he turned round.

"Continue your sports, my sons," he said to the company; "my presence need not disturb your frolics, for I only wish to speak for a few moments with those two gentlemen."

The adventurers did not let the invitation be repeated, but took their places again tumultuously, and soon cries and oaths recommenced with equal intensity. The monk smiled, took a butaca, and seated himself between the two hunters, while bending a searching glance on them. The latter

had followed with a mocking eye all the interludes of this little scene, and without making a movement, they let the monk seat himself by their side. So soon as he had done so, Harry poured him out a large glass of pulque, and placed within his reach the squares of maize leaf and tobacco.

"Drink and smoke, señor padre," he said to him.

The monk, without any observation, rolled a cigarette, emptied the glass of pulque at a draught, and then leaning his elbows on the table and bending forward, said,—

"You are punctual."

"We have been waiting an hour," Dick observed in a rough voice.

"What is an hour in the presence of eternity?" the monk said with a smile.

"Let us not lose any more time," Harry continued. "What have you to propose to us?"

The monk looked around him suspiciously, and lowered his voice.

"I can, if you like, make you rich in a few days."

"What is the business?" Dick asked.

"Of course," the monk continued, "this fortune I offer you is a matter of indifference to me. If I have an ardent desire to obtain it, it is, in the first place, because it belongs to nobody, and will permit me to relieve the wretchedness of the thousands of beings confided to my charge."

"Of course, señor padre," Harry answered seriously. "Let us not weigh longer on these details. According to what you told me a few days back, you have discovered a rich placer."

"Not I," the monk sharply objected.

"No consequence, provided that it exists," Dick answered.

"Pardon me, but it is of great consequence to me. I do not wish to take on myself the responsibility of such a discovery. If, as I believe, people will go in search of it, it may entail the death of several persons, and the church abhors bloodshed."

"Very good: you only desire to profit by it."

"Not for myself."

"For your parishioners. Very good; but let us try to come to an understanding, if possible, for our time is too precious for us to waste it in empty talk."

"*Válgame Dios*!" the monk said, crossing himself, "How you have retained the impetuosity of your French origin! Have a little patience, and I will explain myself."

"That is all we desire."

"But you will promise me—"

"Nothing," Dick interrupted. "We are honest hunters, and not accustomed to pledge ourselves so lightly before knowing positively what is asked of us."

Harry supported his friend's words by a nod. The monk drank a glass of pulque, and took two or three heavy puffs at his cigarette.

"Your will be done," he then said. "You are terrible men. This is the affair."

"Go on."

"A poor scamp of a gambusino, lost, I know not how, in the great desert, discovered at a considerable distance off, between the Rio Gila and the Colorado, the richest placer the wildest imagination can conceive. According to his statement the gold is scattered over the surface, for an extent of two or three miles, in nuggets, each of which would make a man's fortune. This gambusino, dazzled by such treasures, but unable to appropriate them alone, displayed the greatest energy, and braved the utmost perils, in order to regain civilised regions. It was only through boldness and temerity that he succeeded in escaping the countless enemies who spied, and tracked him on all sides; but Heaven at length allowed him to reach Paso safe and sound."

"Very good," Dick observed. "All this may very possibly, be true; but why did you not bring this gambusino, instead of talking to us about the placer, of which you know as little as we do? He would have supplied us with information which is indispensable for us, in the event of our consenting to help you in looking for this treasure."

"Alas!" the monk replied, hypocritically casting his eyes down, "the unhappy man was not destined to profit by this discovery, made at the price of so many perils. Scarce two days after his arrival at Paso, he quarrelled with another gambusino, and received a stab which sent him a few hours later to the tomb."

"In that case," Harry observed, "how did you learn all these details, señor padre?"

"In a very simple way, my son. It was I who reconciled the poor wretch in his last moments with Heaven; and," he added, with an air of compunction splendidly assumed, "when he understood that his end was at hand, and that nothing could save him, he confided to me, in gratitude for the consolation I bestowed on him, what I have just told you, revealed to me the situation of the placer, and for greater certainty gave me a clumsy chart he had drawn out on the spot. You see that we can proceed almost with certainty."

"Yes," Harry said, thoughtfully; "but why, instead of first applying to the Mexicans, your

countrymen, did you propose to us to help you in your enterprise?"

"Because the Mexicans are men who cannot be trusted, and before reaching the placer we should have to fight the Apaches and Comanches, on whose territory it is situated."

After these words, there was a lengthened silence between the three speakers: each was reflecting deeply on what he had just heard. The monk tried to read with cunning eye the impression produced on the hunters by his confidence; but his hopes were deceived. Their faces remained unmoved. At length Dick spoke in a rough voice, after exchanging a meaning look with his comrade.

"All that is very fine," he said; "but it is absurd to suppose that two men, however brave they may be, can attempt such an enterprise in unknown regions peopled by ferocious tribes. It would require at least fifty resolute and devoted men, otherwise nothing could be possible."

"You are right, and hence I did not calculate on you alone. You will have determined men under your orders, chosen carefully by myself, and I shall also accompany you."

"Unluckily, if you have counted on us, you are mistaken, señor padre," Harry said, peremptorily. "We are honest hunters; but the trade of a gambusino does not at all suit us. Even if we had a chance of gaining an incalculable fortune, we would not consent to take part in an expedition of gold seekers."

"Not even if Red Cedar were at the head of the expedition, and consented to take the direction?" the monk said in a honeyed voice, and with a side glance.

The hunter started, a feverish blush suffused his face, and it was in a voice choked by emotion that he exclaimed,—

"Have you spoken with him about it?"

"Here he is; you can ask him," the monk answered.

In fact, a man was entering the mesón at this moment. Harry looked down in confusion, while Dick tapped the table with his dagger and whistled. A smile of undefinable meaning wandered over the monk's pallid lips.

CHAPTER XIII.

RED CEDAR.

Red Cedar was more than six feet in height; his enormous head was fastened to his square shoulders by a short and muscular neck, like a bull's; his bony members were covered with muscles hard as ropes. In short, his whole person was a specimen of brute strength at its culminating point.

A fox-skin cap, pressed down on his head, allowed escape to a few tufts of coarse greyish hair, and fell on his little grey eyes, which were close to a nose that was hooked like the beak of a bird of prey; his wide mouth was filled with white, large teeth; his cheekbones were prominent and purpled; and the lower part of his face disappeared in a thick black beard, mingled with grey hairs. He wore a hunting shirt of striped calico, fastened round the waist by a strap of brown leather, through which were passed two pistols, an axe, and a long knife; a pair of leggings of tawny leather, sewed at equal distances with hair, fell down to his knees; while his legs were protected by Indian moccasins, ornamented with a profusion of beads and bells. A game bag of fawn skin, which seemed full, fell over his right hip; and he held in his hand an American rifle, studded with copper nails.

No one knew who Red Cedar was, or whence he came. About two years prior to the period of our story opening he had suddenly made his appearance in the country, accompanied by a wife of a certain age—a species of Megaera, of masculine form and repellant aspect; a girl of seventeen; and three vigorous lads, who resembled him too closely not to be his own, and whose age varied from nineteen to twenty-four.

Red Cedar himself appeared to be fifty-five at the most. The name by which he was known had been given to him by the Indians, of whom he had declared himself the implacable enemy, and boasted that he had killed two hundred. The old woman was called Betsy; the girl, Ellen; the eldest son, Nathan; the second, Sutter; and the last, Shaw.

This family had built a shanty in the forest, a few miles from Paso, and lived alone in the desert, without having entered into any relations with the inhabitants of the village; or the trappers and wood rangers, its neighbours. The mysterious conduct of these strangers had given rise to numerous comments; but all had remained without reply or solution, and after two years they remained as perfect strangers as on the day of their arrival.

Still, mournful and sad stories were in circulation on their account: they inspired an instinctive hatred and involuntary terror in the Mexicans. Some said in a whisper that old Red Cedar and his three sons were nothing less than "scalp hunters;" that is to say, in the public esteem, people placed beneath the pirates of the prairies, that unclean breed of birds of prey which everybody fears and despises.

The entry of Red Cedar was significant; the otherwise unscrupulous men who filled the venta

hurriedly retired on his approach, and made room for him with a zeal mingled with disgust. The old partisan crossed the room with head erect; a smile of haughty disdain played round his thin lips at the sight of the effect his presence produced, and he went up to the monk and his two companions. On reaching them he roughly placed the butt of his rifle on the ground, leaned his two crossed hands upon the barrel, and after bending a cunning glance on the persons before him, said to the monk in a hoarse voice,—

"The deuce take you, señor padre! Here I am: what do you want with me?"

Far from being vexed at this brutal address, the latter smiled on the colossus, and held out his hand to him, as he graciously made answer,—

"You are welcome, Red Cedar; we were expecting you impatiently. Sit down by my side on this butaca, and we will talk while drinking a glass of pulque."

"The deuce twist your neck, and may your accursed pulque choke you! Do you take me for a wretched abortion of your sort?" the other answered as he fell into the seat offered him. "Order me some brandy, and that of the strongest. I am not a babe, I suppose."

Without making the slightest observation, the monk rose, went to speak with the host, and presently returned with a bottle, from which he poured a bumper for the old hunter. The latter emptied the glass at a draught, put it back on the table with a sonorous "hum!" and turned to the monk with a grimacing smile.

"Come, the devil is not always so black as he looks, señor padre," he said, as he passed his hand over his mouth to wipe his moustache. "I see that we can come to an understanding."

"It will only depend on you, Red Cedar. Here are two worthy Canadian hunters who will do nothing without your support."

The Hercules took a side glance at the young men.

"Eh!" he said, "what do you want with these children? Did I not promise you to reach the placer with my sons only?"

"He, he! You are powerfully built, both you and your lads, I allow; but I doubt whether four men, were they twice as strong as you are, could carry out this affair successfully. You will have numerous enemies to combat on your road."

"All the better! The more there are, the more we shall kill," he answered with a sinister laugh.

"Señor padre," Dick interrupted, "as far as I am concerned, I care little about it."

But he was suddenly checked by a meaning glance from his mate.

"What do you care little about, my pretty lad?" the giant asked in a mocking voice.

"Nothing," the young man answered drily. "Suppose I had not spoken."

"Good," Red Cedar remarked; "it shall be as you wish. Here's your health."

And he poured the rest of the bottle into his glass.

"Come," said Harry, "Let us have but few words. Explain yourself once for all, without beating about the bush, señor padre."

"Yes," Red Cedar observed, "men ought not to waste their time thus in chattering."

"Very good. This, then, is what I propose. Red Cedar will collect within three days from this time thirty resolute men, of whom he will take the command, and we will start immediately in search of the placer. Does it suit you in that way?"

"Hum!" Red Cedar said. "In order to go in search of the placer we must know a little in what direction it is, or deuce take me if I undertake the business!"

"Do not trouble yourself about that, Red Cedar; I will accompany you. Have I not got a plan of the country?"

The colossus shot at the monk a glance which sparkled under his dark eyelash, but he hastened to moderate its brilliancy by letting his eyes fall.

"That is true," he said with feigned indifference; "I forgot that you were coming with us. Then you will leave your parishioners during your absence?"

"Heaven will watch over them."

"Eh! It will have its work cut out. However, that does not concern me at all. But why did you oblige me to come to this mesón?"

"In order to introduce you to these two hunters, who will accompany us."

"I beg your pardon," Dick observed, "but I do not exactly see of what use I can be to you in all this: my aid, and that of my mate, do not appear to me to be indispensable."

"On the contrary," the monk answered quickly, "I reckon entirely on you."

The giant had risen.

"What!" he said, as he roughly laid his enormous hand on Dick's shoulder, "You do not understand that this honourable personage, who did not hesitate to kill a man in order to rob him of the secret of the placer, has a terrible fear of finding himself alone with me on the prairie? He fears that I shall kill him in my turn to rob him of the secret of which he became master by a

crime. Ha, ha, ha!"

And he turned his back unceremoniously.

"How can you suppose such things, Red Cedar?" the monk exclaimed.

"Do you fancy that I did not read you?" the latter answered. "But it is all the same to you. Do as you please: I leave you at liberty to act as you like."

"What! You are off already?"

"Hang it! What have I to do any longer here? All is settled between us. In three days thirty of the best frontiersmen will be assembled by my care at Grizzly Bear Creek, where we shall expect you."

After shrugging his shoulders once again he went off without any salute, or even turning his head.

"It must be confessed," Dick observed, "that the man has a most villainous face. What a hideous fellow!"

"Oh!" the monk answered with a sigh, "The exterior is nothing. You should know the inner man."

"Why, in that case, do you have any dealings with him?"

The monk blushed slightly.

"Because it must be so," he muttered.

"All right for you," Dick continued; "but as nothing obliges my friend and myself to have any more intimate relations with that man, you must not mind, señor Padre, if—"

"Silence, Dick!" Harry shouted, angrily. "You do not know what you are talking about. We will accompany you, señor padre. You can reckon on us to defend you if necessary, for I suppose that Red Cedar is right."

"In what way?"

"You do not wish to trust your life defencelessly in his hands, and you reckoned on us to protect you. Is it not so?"

"Why should I feign any longer? Yes, that man terrifies me, and I do not wish to trust myself to his mercy."

"Do not be alarmed; we shall be there, and on our word as hunters, not a hair of your head shall fall."

A lively satisfaction appeared on the monk's pale face at this generous promise.

"Thanks," he said warmly.

Harry's conduct appeared so extraordinary to Dick, who knew the lofty sentiments and innate honor of his comrade, that, without striving to fathom the motives which made him act thus, he contented himself by backing up his words by an affirmative nod of the head.

"Be assured, caballeros, that when we have reached the placer, I will give you a large share, and you will have no cause to regret accompanying me."

"The money question has but slight interest with us," Harry answered. "My friend and I are free hunters, caring very little for riches, which would be to us rather a source of embarrassment than of pleasure and enjoyment. Curiosity alone, and the desire of exploring strange countries, are sufficient to make us undertake this journey."

"Whatever the reason that makes you accept my proposals, I am not the less obliged to you."

"Now you will permit us to take leave of you, and we shall hold ourselves at your orders."

"Go, gentlemen; I will not keep you longer. I know where to find you when I want you."

The young men took up their hats, slung their rifles on their shoulders, and left the mesón. The monk looked after them.

"Oh!" he muttered, "I believe I can trust to those men: they have still in their veins a few drops of that honest French blood which despises treachery. No matter," he added, as if on reflection; "I will take my precautions."

After this aside, he rose and looked around him. The room was full of adventurers, who drank or played at *monte*, and whose energetic faces stood out in the semi-obscurity of the room, which was scarce lighted by a smoky lamp. After a moment's reflection the monk boldly struck the table with his clenched fist, and shouted in a loud voice:

"Señores caballeros, I invite you to listen to me. I have, I fancy, an advantageous proposal to make to you."

The company turned their heads; those who were gambling for a moment abandoned their cards and dice; the drinkers alone kept in their hands the glasses they held; but all approached the monk, round whom they grouped themselves curiously.

"Caballeros," he continued, "if I am not mistaken, all present are gentlemen whom fortune has more or less ill-treated."

The adventurers, by an automatic movement of extraordinary regularity, bowed their heads in affirmation.

"If you wish it," he continued with an imperceptible smile, "I will undertake to repair the wrong by it done you."

The adventurers pricked up their ears.

"Speak, speak, señor padre!" they shouted with delight.

"What is the affair?" a man with a hang-dog face said, who stood in the front ranks.

"A war party which I intend to lead shortly into Apacheria," the monk said, "and for which purpose I need you."

At this proposition the first ardor of the adventurers visibly cooled down. The Apaches and Comanches inspire an invincible terror in the inhabitants of the Mexican frontiers. The monk guessed the effect he had produced; but he continued, as if not observing anything:—

"I take you all into my service for a month, at the rate of four piastres a day."

At this magnificent offer the eyes of the adventurers sparkled with greed, fear gave way to avarice, and they all exclaimed,—

"We accept, reverend father!

"But," the man continued who had already spoken, "we shall be happy, señor padre, if, before starting, you would give us your holy benediction, and absolve us from the few sins we may have committed."

"Yes," the company yelled, "we shall be happy if you consent to that, reverend father."

The monk appeared to reflect: the adventurers, anxiously waited.

"Well, be it so," he answered after a moment. "As the work in which I am about to employ you is so meritorious, I will give you my blessing, and grant you absolution of your sins."

For a few minutes there was a shout and exclamations of joy in the room. The monk demanded silence, and when it was restored he said,—

"Now, caballeros, give me each your name, that I may find you when I need you."

He sat down and began enrolling the adventurers, who, with the men Red Cedar supplied, would form the band with which he hoped to reach the placer. We will leave the worthy monk for a few moments, and follow the two Canadian hunters.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE TWO HUNTERS.

Harry and Dick, whom we saw seated at a table in the mesón with Red Cedar and Fray Ambrosio, were however, very far from resembling those two men morally. They were free and bold hunters, who had spent the greater part of their life in the desert, and who, in the vast solitude of the prairie, had accustomed themselves to a life free and exempt from those vices which accompany a town residence.

For them gold was only the means to procure the necessary objects for their trade as hunters and trappers; and they never imagined that the possession of a large quantity of that yellow metal they despised would place them in a position to enjoy other pleasures than those they found in their long hunts of wild beasts—hunts so full of strange incidents and striking joys.

Thus Dick had been to the highest degree surprised when he saw his friend eagerly accept the monk's offer, and agree to go in search of the placer; but what even more surprised him was Harry's insisting that Red Cedar must take the lead of the expedition. Though no one could positively accuse the squatter, owing to the precautions he took, of leading a life of rapine and murder, still the mysterious conduct he affected, and the solitude in which he lived with his family, had cast on him a shadow of reprobation.

Every one regarded him as a scalp hunter, and yet no one would have ventured to affirm the odious deeds of which he was accused. The result of the general reprobation that fell on the squatter, and which we know to be fully merited, was that he and his family were placed under a ban by the frontier hunters and trappers, and every one fled not only their society, but any contact with them. Dick was thoroughly acquainted with his friend's upright character and nobility of heart. Hence his conduct under the present circumstances seemed to him perfectly incomprehensible, and he resolved to have an explanation with him.

They had scarce quitted the mesón ere Dick bent down to his companion, and said, while looking at him curiously,—

"We have been hunting together for five years, Harry, and up to the present I have ever let myself be guided by you, leaving you free to act as you pleased for our mutual welfare. Still this evening your conduct has appeared to me so extraordinary that I am obliged, in the name of our friendship, which has never suffered a break up to this day, to ask you for an explanation of what has occurred in my presence."

"For what good, my boy? Do you not know me well enough to be certain that I would not consent to do any dishonourable deed?"

"Up to this evening I would have sworn it, Harry: yes, on my honor I would have sworn it—"

"And now?" the young man asked, stopping and looking his friend in the face.

"Now," Dick answered, with a certain degree of hesitation, "hang it all! I will be frank with you, Harry, as an honest hunter should ever be. Now I do not know if I should do so: no, indeed I should not."

"What you say there causes me great pain, Dick. You oblige me, in order to dissipate your unjust suspicions, to confide to you a secret which is not my own, and which I would not have revealed for anything in the world."

"Pardon me, Harry, but in my place I am convinced you would act as I am doing. We are very far from our country, which we shall never see again, perhaps. We are responsible for each other, and our actions must be free from all double interpretation."

"I will do what you ask, Dick, whatever it may cost me. I recognise the justice of your observations. I understand how much my conduct this night must have hurt you and appeared ambiguous. I do not wish our friendship to receive the least wound, or the slightest cloud to arise between us. You shall be satisfied."

"I thank you, Harry. What you tell me relieves my bosom of a heavy load. I confess that I should have been in despair to think badly of you; but the words of that intriguing monk, and the manners of that worthy acolyte, Red Cedar, put me in a passion. Had you not warned me so quickly to silence, I believe—Heaven pardon me!—that I should have ended by telling them a piece of my mind."

"You displayed considerable prudence in keeping silence, and be assured you will completely approve me."

"I do not doubt it, Harry; and now I feel certain I deceived myself. I feel all jolly again."

While speaking thus the two hunters, who were walking with that rapid step peculiar to men habituated to traverse great distances on foot, had crossed the village, and found themselves already far in the plain. The night was magnificent—the sky of a deep blue. An infinite number of glistening stars seemed floating in ether. The moon spread its silvery rays profusely over the landscape. The sharp odour of the flowers perfumed the atmosphere. The two hunters still walked on.

"Where are we going now, Harry?" Dick asked. "I fancy we should do better by taking a few hours' rest, instead of fatiguing ourselves without any definite object."

"I never do anything without a reason, friend, as you know," Harry answered; "so let me guide you, and we shall soon arrive."

"Do as you think proper, my boy; I shall say nothing."

"In the first place you must know that the French hunter, Koutonepi, has begged me, for reasons he did not tell me, to watch Fray Ambrosio. That is one of the motives which made me be present at this night's interview, although I care as little for a placer as for a musk-rat's skin."

"Koutonepi is the first hunter on the frontier; he has often done us a service in the desert. You acted rightly, Harry, in doing what he asked."

"As for the second reason that dictated my conduct, Dick, you shall soon know it."

Half talking, half dreaming, the young men reached Buffalo Valley, and soon entered the forest which served as a lair for the squatter and his family.

"Where the deuce are we going?" Dick could not refrain from saying.

"Silence!" said the other: "We are approaching."

The darkness was profound in the forest: the density of the leafy dome under which they walked completely intercepted the light of the moonbeams. Still the Canadians, long accustomed to a night march, advanced as easily through the chaos of creepers and trees tangled in each other as if they had been in open day. On reaching a certain spot where the trees, growing less closely together, formed a species of clearing, and allowed an uncertain and tremorous light to pass, Harry stopped, and made his comrade a sign to do the same.

"This is the place," he said. "Still, I as the person I have come to see expects me to be alone, and your unexpected presence might cause alarm, hide yourself behind that larch tree: above all, be careful not to stir till I call I you."

"Oh, oh!" the hunter said, with a laugh, "have you perchance led me to a love meeting, Harry?"

"You shall judge," Harry replied laconically. "Hide yourself."

Dick, greatly troubled, did not need the invitation to be repeated: he concealed himself behind the tree his friend had indicated, and which would have sheltered a dozen men behind its enormous stem. So soon as Harry was alone, he raised his fingers to his lips, and at three different intervals imitated the cry of an owl with such perfection that Dick himself was deceived, and mechanically looked up to seek the bird in the tall branches of the tree by which he stood. Almost immediately, a slight noise was audible in the shrubs, and a graceful and white form appeared in the glade. It was Ellen, who rapidly walked toward the young man.

"Oh, it is you, Harry!" she said with joy. "Heaven be blessed, I was afraid you would not come, as it is late."

"It is true, Ellen: pardon me. I made all possible speed, however; and it is not my fault that I did not arrive sooner."

"How good you are, Harry, to take so much trouble for my sake! How can I ever recognise the continual services you do me?"

"Oh! Do not speak about them. It is a happiness for me to do anything agreeable to you."

"Alas!" the maiden murmured, "Heaven is my witness that I feel a deep friendship for you, Harry."

The young man sighed gently.

"I have done what you asked of me," he said suddenly.

"Then it is true my father is thinking about leaving this country to go further still?"

"Yes, Ellen, and into frightful countries, among the ferocious Indians."

The girl gave a start of terror.

"Do you know the reason of his going?" she continued.

"Yes; he is about to look for a gold placer."

"Alas! Who will protect me, who will defend me in future, if we go away?"

"I, Ellen!" the hunter exclaimed impetuously. "Have I not sworn to follow you everywhere?"

"It is true," she said sadly; "but why should you risk your life on the distant journey we are about to undertake? No, Harry, remain here; I cannot consent to your departure. From what I have heard say, the band my father commands will be numerous—it will have scarce anything to fear from the Indians; while, on the other hand, you, compelled to hide yourself, will be exposed alone to terrible danger. No, Harry, I will not permit it."

"Undeceive yourself, Ellen. I shall not be forced to conceal myself; I shall not be alone, for I am a member of your father's band."

"Is it possible, Harry?" she exclaimed, with an expression of joy that made the young man quiver.

"I enrolled myself this very evening."

"Oh!" she said, "Then in that case we can often meet?"

"Whenever you please, Ellen, as I shall be there."

"Oh! Now I am anxious to be away from here, and wish we had already started."

"It will not be long first, set your mind at rest. I am convinced that we shall start within the week."

"Thanks for the good news you bring me, Harry."

"Are your father and mother still unkind to you, Ellen?"

"It is nearly always the same thing; and yet their conduct toward me is strange. It often seems to me incomprehensible, as it is so marked with peculiarities. There are moments in which they seem to love me dearly. My father especially caresses and embraces me, and then all at once, I know not why, repulses me rudely, and looks at me in a way that causes me to shudder."

"That is indeed strange, Ellen."

"Is it not? There is one thing above all I cannot explain."

"Tell it me, Ellen; perhaps I can do so."

"You know that all my family are Protestants?"

"Yes."

"Well, I am a Catholic."

"That is certainly curious."

"I wear around my neck a small golden crucifix. Every time accident makes this trinket glisten before my father and mother they grow furious, threaten to beat me, and order me to hide it at once. Do you understand the meaning of this, Harry?"

"No, I do not, Ellen; but, believe me, leave everything to time; perhaps it will enable us to find the clue to the mystery which we seek in vain at this moment."

"Well, your presence has rendered me happy for a long time, Harry, so now I will retire."

"Already?"

"I must, my friend. Believe me that I am as sad as yourself at this separation; but my father has not yet returned, and may arrive at any moment. If he noticed that I was not asleep, who knows what might happen?"

While saying the last words the girl held out her delicate hand to the hunter, who raised it to his lips passionately. Ellen withdrew it suddenly, and bounding like a startled fawn, darted into the forest, where she soon disappeared, giving the young man a parting word, which caused him to quiver with joy:—

"We shall meet soon."

Harry stood for a long time with his eyes fixed on the spot where the seductive vision had disappeared. At length he uttered a sigh, threw his rifle over his shoulder, and turned as if to depart. Dick was before him. Harry gave a start of surprise, for he had forgotten his friend's presence; but the latter smiled good-humouredly.

"I now comprehend your conduct, Harry," he said to him; "you were right to act as you did. Pardon my unjust suspicions, and count on me everywhere and always."

Harry silently pressed the hand his friend offered him, and they walked back rapidly in the direction of the village. As they emerged from the forest they passed, a man who did not see them. It was Red Cedar. So soon as he had gone a short distance Harry stopped his companion, and pointing to the squatter, whose long black shadow glided through the trees, said, as he laid his hand on his shoulder,—

"That man hides in his heart a horrible secret, which I am ignorant of, but have sworn to discover."

CHAPTER XV.

FRAY AMBROSIO.

The monk remained for a long time in the room of the mesón, taking down the names of the adventurers he wished to enrol in his band. It was late when he left it to return to the Hacienda de la Noria; but he was satisfied with his night's work, and internally rejoiced at the rich collection of bandits of the purest water he had recruited.

The monks form a privileged caste in Mexico: they can go at all hours of the night wherever they please without fearing the numerous "gentlemen of the road," scattered about the highways. Their gown inspires a respect which guarantees them from any insult, and preserves them better than anything from unpleasant rencontres. Besides, Fray Ambrosio, as the reader has doubtless already perceived, was not the man to neglect indispensable precautions in a country where, out of ten persons you meet on your road, you may boldly assert that nine are rogues, the tenth alone offering any doubts. The worthy chaplain carried under his gown a pair of double-barrelled pistols, and in his right sleeve he concealed a long *navaja*, sharp as a razor, and pointed as a needle.

Not troubling himself about the solitude that reigned around him, the monk mounted his mule and proceeded quietly to the hacienda. It was about eleven o'clock.

A few words about Fray Ambrosio, while he is peacefully ambling along the narrow path which will lead him in two hours to his destination, will show all the perversity of the man who is destined to play an unfortunately too important part in the course of our narrative.

One day a gambusino, or gold seeker, who had disappeared for two years, no one knowing what had become of him, and who was supposed to be dead long ago, assassinated in the desert by the Indians, suddenly reappeared at the Paso del Norte. This man, Joaquin by name, was brother to Andrés Garote, an adventurer of the worst stamp, who had at least a dozen *cuchilladas* (knife stabs) on his conscience, whom everybody feared, but who, through the terror he inspired, enjoyed at the Paso, in spite of his well-avouched crimes, a reputation and species of impunity which he abused whenever the opportunity offered.

The two brothers began frequenting together the mesones and ventas of the village, drinking from morn till night, and paying either in gold dust enclosed in stout quills, or in lumps of native gold. The rumour soon spread at Paso that Joaquin had discovered a rich placer, and that his expenses were paid with the specimens he had brought back. The gambusino replied neither yes nor no to the several insinuations which his friends, or rather his boon companions, attempted on him. He twinkled his eyes, smiled mysteriously, and if it were observed that, at the rate he was living at, he would soon be ruined, he shrugged his shoulders, saying:—

"When I have none left I know where to find others."

And he continued to enjoy his fill of all the pleasures which a wretched hole like Paso can furnish.

Fray Ambrosio had heard speak, like everyone else, of the gambusino's asserted discovery; and his plan was at once formed to become master of this man's secret, and rob him of his discovery, were that possible.

The same evening Joaquin and his brother Andrés were drinking, according to their wont, in a mesón, surrounded by a crowd of scamps like themselves. Fray Ambrosio, seated at a table with his hands hidden in the sleeves of his gown, and hanging head, appeared plunged in serious reflections, although he followed with a cunning eye the various movements of the drinkers, and not one of their gestures escaped him.

Suddenly a man entered, with his hand on his hip, and throwing in the face of the first person he passed the cigarette he was smoking. He planted himself in front of Joaquin, to whom he said nothing, but began looking at him impudently, shrugging his shoulders, and laughing ironically at all the gambusino said. Joaquin was not patient, he saw at the first glance that this person wished to pick a quarrel with him; and as he was brave, and feared nobody, man or devil, he walked boldly up to him, and looking at him fixedly in his turn, he said to him, as he thrust his face in his:

"Do you seek a quarrel, Tomaso?"

"Why not?" the latter said impudently, as he set his glass on the table.

"I am your man. We will fight how you please."

"Bah!" Tomaso said carelessly, "let us do things properly, and fight with the whole blade."

"Be it so."

The combats which take place between the adventurers are truly like those of wild beasts. These coarse men, with their cruel instincts, like fighting beyond all else, for the smell of blood intoxicates them. The announcement of this duel caused a thrill of pleasure to run through the ranks of the leperos and bandits who pressed round the two men. The fun was perfect: one of the adversaries would doubtless fall—perhaps both—and blood flow in streams. Cries and yells of delight were raised by the spectators.

The duel with knives is the only one that exists in Mexico, and is solely left to the leperos and people of the lowest classes. This duel has its rules, which cannot be broken under any pretext. The knives usually employed, have blades from fourteen to sixteen inches in length, and the duelists fight according to the gravity of the insult, with one, two, three, six inches, or the entire blade. The inches are carefully measured and the hand clutches the knife at the marked spot.

This time it was a duel with the whole blade, the most terrible of all. With extraordinary politeness and coolness the landlord had a large ring formed in the middle of the room, where the two adversaries stationed themselves, about six paces from each other at the most.

A deep silence hung over the room, a moment previously so full of life and disturbance; every one anxiously awaited the *dénouement* of the terrible drama that was preparing. Fray Ambrosio alone had not quitted his seat or made a sign.

The two men rolled their zarapés round their left arm, planted themselves firmly on their outstretched legs, bent their bodies slightly forward and gently placing the point of the knife blade on the arm rounded in front of the chest, they waited, fixed on each other flashing glances. A few seconds elapsed, during which the adversaries remained perfectly motionless: all hearts were contracted, all bosoms heaving.

Worthy of Callot's pencil was the scene offered by these men, with their weather-stained faces and harsh features, and their clothes in rags, forming a circle round two combatants ready to kill each other in this mean room, slightly illumined by a smoky lamp, which flashed upon the blue blades of the knives, and in the shadow, almost disappearing in his black gown, the monk, with his implacable glance and mocking smile, who, like a tiger thirsting for blood, awaited the hour to pounce on his prey.

Suddenly, by a spontaneous movement rapid as lightning, the adversaries rushed on each other, uttering a yell of fury. The blades flashed, there was a clashing of steel, and both fell back again. Joaquin and Tomaso had both dealt the same stroke, called, in the slang of the country, the "blow of the brave man." Each had his face slashed from top to bottom with a gaping wound.

The spectators frenziedly applauded this magnificent opening scene: the jaguars had scented blood, and were mad.

"What a glorious fight!" they exclaimed with admiration.

In the meanwhile the two combatants, rendered hideous by the blood that streamed from their wounds and stained their faces, were again watching for the moment to leap on one another. Suddenly they broke ground; but this time it was no skirmish, but the real fight, atrocious and merciless. The two men seized each other round the waist, and entwined like serpents, they twisted about, trying to stab each other, and exciting themselves to the struggle by cries of rage and triumph. The enthusiasm of the spectators was at its height: they laughed, clapped hands, and uttered inarticulate howls as they urged the fighters not to loose their hold.

At length the enemies rolled on the ground still enclasped. For some seconds the combat continued on the ground, and it was impossible to distinguish who was the conqueror. All at once one of them, who no longer had a human form, and whose body was as red as an Indian's, bounded to his feet brandishing his knife. It was Joaquin.

His brother rushed toward him to congratulate him on his victory, but all at once the gambusino tottered and fainted. Tomaso did not rise again: he remained motionless, stretched out on the uneven floor of the mesón. He was stark dead.

This scene had been so rapid, its conclusion so unforeseen, that, in spite of themselves, the spectators had remained dumb, and as if struck with stupor. Suddenly the priest, whom all had forgotten, rose and walked into the centre of the room, looking round with a glance that caused all to let their eyes fall.

"Retire, all of you," he said in a gloomy voice, "now that you have allowed this deed worthy of savages to be accomplished. The priest must offer his ministry, and get back from Satan, if there be still time, the soul of this Christian who is about to die. Begone!"

The adventurers hung their heads, and in a few moments the priest was left alone with the two men, one of whom was dead, the other at the last gasp. No one could say what occurred in that room; but when the priest left it, a quarter of an hour later, his eyes flashed wildly. Joaquin had given his parting sigh. On opening the door to go out Fray Ambrosio jostled against a man, who drew back sharply to make room for him. It was Andrés Garote. What was he doing with his eye

at the keyhole while the monk was shriving his brother?

The adventurer told no one what he had seen during this last quarter of an hour, nor did the monk notice in the shade the man he had almost thrown down.

Such was the way in which Fray Ambrosio became master of the gambusino's secret, and how he alone knew at present the spot where the placer was.

CHAPTER XVI.

TWO VARIETIES OF VILLAINS.

Now that the reader is well informed touching Fray Ambrosio, we will follow him on his road home from the mesón. The night was calm, silent and serene. Not a sound troubled the silence, save the trot of the mule over the pebbles on the road, or at times, in the distance, the snapping bark of the coyotes chasing in a pack, according to their wont, some straggling hind.

Fray Ambrosio ambled gently on, while reflecting on the events of the evening, and calculating mentally the probable profits of the expedition he meditated. He had left far behind him the last houses of the village, and was advancing cautiously along a narrow path that wound through an immense sugar cane field. Already the shadow of the tall hacienda walls stood out blackly in the horizon. He expected to reach it within twenty minutes, when suddenly his mule, which had hitherto gone so quietly, pricked up its ears, raised its head, and stopped short.

Roughly aroused from his meditations by this unexpected halt, the monk looked about for some obstacle that might impede his progress. About ten paces from him a man was standing right in the middle of the path. Fray Ambrosio was a man not easily to be frightened: besides, he was well armed. He drew out one of the pistols hidden under his gown, cocked it, and prepared to cross-question the person who so resolutely barred his way. But the latter, at the sharp sound of the setting hammer, thought it prudent to make himself known, and not await the consequences of an address nearly always stormy under similar circumstances.

"Halloh!" he shouted in a loud voice, "Return your pistol to your belt, Fray Ambrosio; I only want to talk with you."

"*Diavolo*!" the monk said, "the hour and moment are singularly chosen for a friendly conversation, my good fellow."

"Time belongs to nobody," the stranger answered sententiously. "I am obliged to choose that which I have at my disposal."

"That is true," the monk said as he quietly uncocked his pistol, though not returning it to his belt. "Who the deuce are you, and why are you so anxious to speak with me? Do you want to confess?

"Have you not recognised me yet, Fray Ambrosio? Must I tell you my name that you may know with whom you have to deal?"

"Needless, my good sir, needless; but how the deuce is it, Red Cedar, that I meet you here! What can you have so pressing to communicate to me?"

"You shall know if you will stop for a few moments and dismount."

"The deuce take you with your whims! Cannot you tell me that as well tomorrow! Night is getting on, my home is still some distance off and I am literally worn out."

"Bah! you will sleep capitally by the side of a ditch, where you could not be more comfortable. Besides, what I have to say to you does not admit of delay."

"You wish to make a proposal to me, then?"

"Yes."

"What about, if you please?"

"About the affair we discussed this evening at the Paso."

"Why, I fancied we had settled all that, and you accepted my offer."

"Not yet, not yet, my master. That will depend on the conversation we are about to have, so you had better dismount and sit down quietly by my side; for if you don't do it, it will come to nothing."

"The deuce take people that change their minds every minute, and on whom one cannot reckon more than on an old surplice!" the monk growled with an air of annoyance, while, for all that, getting off his mule, which he fastened to a shrub.

The squatter did not seem to remark the chaplain's ill temper, and let him sit down by his side without uttering a syllable.

"Here I am," the monk went on, so soon as he was seated. "I really do not know, Red Cedar, why I yield so easily to all your whims."

"Because you suspect that your interest depends on it: were it not for that, you would not do so."

"Why talk thus in the open country, instead of going to your house, where we should be much

more comfortable?"

Red Cedar shook his head in denial.

"No," he said; "the open is better for what we have to talk about. Here we need not fear listeners at out doors."

"That is true. Well, go on; I am listening."

"Hum! You insist upon my commanding the expedition you project?"

"Of course. I have known you a long time. I am aware that you are a sure man, perfectly versed in Indian signs; for, if I am not mistaken, the greater part of your life has been spent among them."

"Do not speak about what I have done? The question now concerns you, and not me."

"How so?"

"Good, good! Let me speak. You need me, so it is to my interest to make you pay as dearly as I can for me."

"Eh?" the monk muttered, as he made a grimace. "I am not rich, gossip, as you are aware."

"Yes, yes; I know that, so soon as you have a few piastres or ounces, the monte table strips you of them immediately."

"Hang it! I have always been unlucky at play."

"For that reason I do not intend asking you for money."

"Very good. If you have no designs on my purse we can easily come to an understanding. You may speak boldly."

"I hope that we shall easily understand one another, the mere so as the service I expect from you is almost a mere nothing."

"Come to the point, Red Cedar: with your deuced way of twining your phrases together in the Indian way, you never make an end of it."

"You know that I have a deadly hatred against Don Miguel Zarate?"

"I have heard some say about it. Did he not lodge his knife somewhere in your chest?"

"Yes, and the blow was so rude that I all but died of it; but, thanks to the devil, I am on my legs again, after remaining three weeks on my back like a cast sheep. I want my revenge."

"I can't help saying you are right: in your place, may Satan twist my neck if I would not do the same!"

"For that I count on your help."

"Hum! that is a delicate affair. I have no cause of complaint against Don Miguel—on the contrary: besides, I do not see how I can serve you."

"Oh! very easily."

"You believe so?"

"You shall see."

"Go on, then; I am listening."

"Don Miguel has a daughter?"

"Doña Clara."

"I mean to carry her off."

"Deuce take the mad ideas that pass through your brain-pan, gossip! How would you have me help you in carrying off the daughter of Don Miguel, to whom I owe so many obligations? No, I cannot do that, indeed."

"You must, though."

"I will not, I tell you."

"Measure your words well, Fray Ambrosio, for this conversation is serious. Before refusing so peremptorily to give me the help I ask, reflect well."

"I have reflected well, Red Cedar, and never will I consent to help you in carrying off the daughter of my benefactor. Say what you like, nothing will ever change my resolution on that head, for it is inflexible."

"Perhaps."

"Oh! Whatever may happen, I swear that nothing will make me alter."

"Swear not, Fray Ambrosio, for you will be a perjurer."

"Ta, ta, ta! You are mad, my good fellow. Don't let us waste our time. If you have nothing else to say to me, I will leave you, though I take such pleasure in your society."

"You have become scrupulous all of a sudden, my master."

"There is a beginning to everything, compadre; so let us say no more, but good-bye."

And the monk rose.

"You are really going?"

"*Caray*! Do you fancy I mean to sleep here?"

"Very good. You understand that you need not count on me for your expedition?"

"I am sorry for it; but I will try to find someone to take your place."

"Thank you."

The two men were standing, and the monk had put his foot in the stirrup. Red Cedar also appeared ready to make a start. At the moment of separation a sudden idea seemed to occur to the squatter.

"By the way," he said carelessly, "be kind enough to give me some information I require."

"What is it now?" the monk asked.

"Oh! a mere trifle," the squatter remarked indifferently. "It concerns a certain Don Pedro de Tudela, whom I think you formerly knew."

"Eh!?" the monk exclaimed, as he turned, with his leg still in the air.

"Come, come, Fray Ambrosio," Red Cedar continued in a jeering voice, "let us have a little more talk together. I will tell you, if you like, a very remarkable story about this Don Pedro, with whom you were acquainted."

The monk was livid; a nervous tremor agitated all his limbs; he let loose his mule's bridle, and followed the squatter mechanically, who seated himself tranquilly on the ground, making him a sign to follow his example. The monk fell, suppressing a sigh, and wiping away the drops of cold perspiration that beaded on his forehead.

"Eh, eh!" the squatter continued at the end of a moment, "we must allow that Don Pedro was a charming gentleman—a little wild, perhaps; but what would you have? He was young. I remember meeting him at Albany a long time ago—some sixteen or seventeen years ago—how old one gets!—at the house of one—wait awhile, the name has slipped my memory—could you not help me to it, Fray Ambrosio?"

"I do not know what you mean," the monk said in a hollow voice.

The man was in a state that would have produced pity; the veins in his forehead were swollen ready to burst; he was choking; his right hand clutched the hilt of his dagger; and he bent on the squatter a glance full of deadly hatred. The latter seemed to see nothing of all this.

"I have it!" he continued. "The man's name was Walter Brunnel, a very worthy gentleman."

"Demon!" the monk howled in a gasping voice, "I know not who made you master of that horrible secret, but you shall die."

And he rushed upon him, dagger in hand.

Red Cedar had known Fray Ambrosio a long time, and was on his guard. By a rapid movement he checked his arm, twisted it, and seized the dagger, which he threw a long distance off.

"Enough," he said in a harsh voice. "We understand one another, my master. Do not play that game with me, for you will be sick of it, I warn you."

The monk fell back on his seat, without the strength to make a sign or utter a syllable. The squatter regarded him for a moment with mingled pity and contempt and shrugged his shoulders.

"For sixteen years I have held that secret," he said, "and it has never passed my lips. I will continue to keep silence on one condition."

"What is it?"

"I want you to help me in carrying off the hacendero's daughter."

"I will do it."

"Mind, I expect honest assistance; so do not attempt any treachery."

"I will help you, I tell you."

"Good! I count on your word. Besides you may be easy, master; I will watch you."

"Enough of threats. What is to be done?"

"When do we start for Apacheria?"

"You are coming, then?"

"Of course."

A sinister smile played round the monk's pale lips.

"We shall start in a week," he said.

"Good! On the day of the start you will hand over the girl to me, one hour before our departure."

"What shall I do to compel her to follow me?"

"That is not my business."

"Still—"

"I insist."

"Be it so," the monk said with an effort. "I will do it; but remember, demon, if I ever hold you in my hands, as I am this day in yours, I shall be pitiless and make you pay for all I suffer at this moment."

"You will be right to do so—it is your due; still I doubt whether you will ever be able to reach me."

"Perhaps."

"Live and learn. In the meanwhile I am your master, and I reckon on your obedience."

"I will obey."

"That is settled. Now, one thing more; how many men have you enlisted this evening?"

"About twenty."

"That's not many; but, with the sixty I shall supply, we shall have a very decent band to hold the Indians in check."

"May Heaven grant it!"

"Don't be alarmed, my master," the squatter said, re-assuming the friendly tone which he employed at the outset of the conversation; "I pledge myself, to lead you straight to your placer. I have not lived ten years with the Indians not to be up to all their tricks."

"Of course," the monk answered as he rose, "You know, Red Cedar, what was agreed upon; the placer will be shared between us. It is, therefore, to your interest to enable us to reach it without obstacle."

"We shall reach it. Now that we have nothing more to say to each other and have agreed on all points—for we have done so, I think?" he said significantly.

"Yes, all."

"We can part, and go each home. No matter, my master! I told you that I should succeed in making you alter your mind. Look you, Fray Ambrosio," he added in impudent tone, which made the monk turn pale with rage; "people need only to understand one another to do anything."

He rose, threw his rifle over his shoulder, and turning away sharply, went off with lengthened strides. The monk remained for a moment as if stunned by what had happened. Suddenly he thrust his hand under his gown, seized a pistol, and aimed at the squatter. But ere he had time to pull the trigger his enemy disappeared round a turning, uttering a formidable burst of laughter, which the mocking echo bore to his ear, and revealed to him all the immensity of his impotence.

"Oh!" he muttered as he got in the saddle, "How did this fiend discover the secret which I believed no one knew?"

And he went off gloomy and thoughtful. Half an hour later he reached the Hacienda de la Noria, when the gate was opened for him by a trusty peon, for everybody was asleep. It was past midnight.

CHAPTER XVII.

EL CAÑON DEL BUITRE.

We will now return to the hacendero, who, accompanied by his two friends, is galloping at full speed in the direction of Valentine's jacal. The road the three men followed led them further and further from the Paso del Norte. Around them nature grew more abrupt, the scenery sterner. They had left the forest, and were galloping over a wide and arid plain. On each side of the way the trees, becoming rarer, defiled like a legion of phantoms. They crossed several tributary streams of the Del Norte, in which their horses were immersed up to the chest.

At length they entered a ravine deeply imbedded between two wooded hills, the soil of which, composed of large flat stones and rounded pebbles, proved that this spot was one of those *desaguaderos* which serve to carry off the waters in the rainy season. They had reached the Cañon del Buitre, so named on account of the numerous vultures constantly perched on the tops of the surrounding hills.

The defile was deserted, and Valentine had his cabin not far from this spot. So soon as the three men had dismounted, Curumilla took the horses and led them to the jacal.

"Follow me," Valentine said to Don Miguel.

The latter obeyed, and the two men began then climbing the escarped flanks of the right hand hill. The climb was rude, for no road was traced; but the two hunters, long accustomed to force a passage through the most impracticable places, seemed hardly to perceive the difficulty of the ascent, which would have been impossible for men less used to a desert life.

"This spot is really delicious," Valentine said with the complacent simplicity of a landowner who boasts of his estate. "If it were day, Don Miguel, you would enjoy from this spot a magnificent view. A few hundred yards from the place where we are, down there on that hill to the right, are the ruins of an ancient Aztec camp in a very fine state of preservation. Just imagine that this hill, carved by human hands, though you cannot see it in the darkness, is of the shape of a pyramidal cone: its base is triangular, the sides are covered with masonry, and it is divided into several

terraces. The platform is about ninety yards long by seventy-five in width, and is surrounded on three sides by a platform, and flanked by a bastion on the north. You see that it is a perfect fortress, constructed according to all the rules of military art. On the platform are the remains of a species of small teocali, about twenty feet high, composed of large stones covered with hieroglyphics sculptured in relief, representing weapons, monsters, rabbits, crocodiles, and all sorts of things; for instance, men seated in the oriental fashion, and wearing spectacles. Is not that really curious? This little monument, which has no staircase, doubtless served as the last refuge to the besieged when they were too closely beleaguered by the enemy."

"It is astonishing," Don Miguel answered, "that I never heard of these ruins."

"Who knows them? Nobody. However, they bear a considerable likeness to those found at Jochicalco."

"Where are you leading me, my friend? Are you aware that the road is not one of the pleasantest, and I am beginning to feel tired?"

"A little patience: in ten minutes we shall arrive. I am leading you to a natural grotto which I discovered a short time back. It is admirable. It is probable that the Spaniards were unacquainted with it, although the Indians, to my knowledge, have visited it from time immemorial. The Apaches imagine it serves as a palace to the genius of the mountain. At any rate, I was so struck by its beauty that I abandoned my jacal, and converted it into my residence. Its extent is immense. I am certain, though I never tried to convince myself, that it goes for more than ten leagues under ground. I will not allude to the stalactites that hang from the roof, and form the quaintest and most curious designs; but the thing that struck me is this: this grotto is divided into an infinite number of chambers, some of them containing pools in which swim immense numbers of blind fish."

"Blind fish! You are jesting, my friend," Don Miguel exclaimed, and stopped.

"I am wrong: blind is not the word I should have employed, for these fish have no eyes."

"What! No eyes?"

"None at all; but that does not prevent them being very dainty food."

"That is strange."

"Is it not? But stay—we have arrived."

In fact, they found themselves in front of a gloomy, gaping orifice, about ten feet high by eight wide.

"Let me do the honours of my mansion," Valentine said.

"Do so, my friend."

The two men entered the grotto: the hunter struck a match, and lit a torch of candlewood. The fairy picture which suddenly rose before Don Miguel drew from him a cry of admiration. There was an indescribable confusion: here a gothic chapel, with its graceful soaring pillars; further on, obelisks, cones, trunks of trees covered with moss and acanthus leaves, hollow stalactites of a cylindrical form, drawn together and ranged side by side like the pipes of an organ, and yielding to the slightest touch varied metallic sounds which completed the illusion. Then, in the immeasurable depths of these cavernous halls, at times formidable sounds arose, which, returned by the echoes, rolled along the sides of the grotto like peals of thunder.

"Oh, it is grand, it is grand!" Don Miguel exclaimed, struck with fear and respect at the sight.

"Does not man," Valentine answered, "feel very small and miserable before these sublime creations of nature, which God has scattered here as if in sport? Oh, my friend! It is only in the desert that we understand the grandeur and infinite omnipotence of the Supreme Being; for at every step man finds himself face to face with Him who placed him on this earth, and traces the mark of His mighty finger engraved in an indelible manner on everything that presents itself to his sight."

"Yes," Don Miguel said, who had suddenly become thoughtful, "it is only in the desert that a man learns to know, love, and fear God, for He is everywhere."

"Come," said Valentine.

He led his friend to a hall of not more than twenty square feet, the vault of which, however, was more than a hundred yards above them. In this hall a fire was lighted. The two men sat down on the ground and waited, while thinking deeply. After a few moments the sound of footsteps was audible, and the Mexican quickly raised his head. Valentine did not stir, for he had recognised his friend's tread. In fact, within a moment the Indian chief appeared.

"Well?" Valentine asked him.

"Nothing yet," Curumilla laconically answered.

"They are late, I fancy," Don Miguel observed.

"No," the chief continued, "it is hardly half past eleven: we are before our time."

"But will they find us here?"

"They know we shall await them in this hall."

After these few words each fell back into his thoughts. The silence was only troubled by the

mysterious sounds of the grotto, which re-echoed nearly at equal intervals with an horrific din. A long period elapsed. All at once, ere any sensible noise had warned Don Miguel, Valentine raised his head with a hurried movement.

"Here they are," he said.

"You are mistaken, my friend," Don Miguel observed; "I heard nothing."

The hunter smiled.

"If you had spent," he said, "like we have, ten years in the desert, interrogating the mysterious voices of the night, your ear would be habituated to the vague rumours and sighs of nature which have no meaning to you at this moment, but which have all a significance for me, and, so to speak, a voice every note of which I understand, and you would not say I was mistaken. Ask the chief: you will hear his answer."

"Two men are climbing the hill at this moment," Curumilla answered sententiously. "They are an Indian and a white man."

"How can you recognise the distinction?"

"Very easily," Valentine responded with a smile. "The Indian wears moccasins, which touch the ground without producing any other sound than a species of friction: the step is sure and unhesitating, as taken by a man accustomed to walk in the desert, and only put down his foot firmly: the white man wears high-heeled boots, which at each step produce a distinct and loud sound; the spurs fastened to his boots give out a continuous metallic clink; the step is awkward and timid; at each moment a stone or crumble of earth rolls away under the foot, which is only put down hesitatingly. It is easy to see that the man thus walking is accustomed to a horse, and does not know the use of his feet. Stay! They are now entering the grotto: you will soon hear the signal."

At this moment the bark of the coyote was raised thrice at equal intervals. Valentine answered by a similar cry.

"Well, was I mistaken?" he said.

"I know not what to think, my friend. What astonishes me most is that you heard them so long before they arrived."

"The ground of this cave is an excellent conductor of sound," the hunter answered simply: "that is all the mystery."

"The devil!" Don Miguel could not refrain from saying; "You neglect nothing, I fancy."

"If a man wants to live in the desert he must neglect nothing: the smallest things have their importance, and an observation carefully made may often save a man's life."

While these few words were being exchanged between the two friends the noise of footsteps was heard drawing nearer and nearer. Two men appeared: one was Eagle-wing, the Chief of the Coras; the second, General Ibañez.

The general was a man of about thirty-five, tall and well-built, with a delicate and intelligent face. His manners were graceful and noble. He bowed cordially to the hacendero and Valentine, squeezed Curumilla's hand, and fell down in a sitting posture by the fire.

"Ouf!" he said, "I am done, gentlemen. I have just ridden an awful distance. My poor horse is foundered, and to recover myself I made an ascent, during which I thought twenty times I must break down; and that would have infallibly happened, had not friend Eagle-wing charitably come to my aid. I must confess that these Indians climb like real cats: we *gente de razón*[1] are worth nothing for that trade."

"At length you have arrived, my friend," Don Miguel answered. "Heaven be praised! I was anxious to see you."

"For my part I confess that my impatience was equally lively, especially since I learned the treachery of that scoundrelly Red Cedar. That humbug of a Wood sent him to me with so warm a recommendation that, in spite of all my prudence, I let myself be taken in, and nearly told him all our secrets. Unfortunately, the little I did let him know is sufficient to have us shot a hundred times like vulgar conspirators of no consequence."

"Do not feel alarmed, my friend. After what. Valentine told me today, we have, perchance, a way of foiling the tricks of the infamous spy who has denounced us."

"May Heaven grant it! But nothing will remove my impression that Wood has something to do with what has happened to us. I always doubted that American, who is cold as an iceberg, sour as a glass of lemonade, and methodical as a Quaker. What good is to be expected from these men, who covet the possession of our territory, and who, unable to take it from us at one lump, tear it away in parcels?"

"Who knows, my friend? Perhaps you are right. Unfortunately, what is done cannot be helped, and our retrospective recriminations will do us no good."

"That is true; but, as you know, man is the same everywhere. When he has committed a folly he is happy to find a scapegoat on which he can lay the iniquities with which he reproaches himself. That is slightly my case at this moment."

"Do not take more blame on yourself, my friend, than you deserve; I guarantee your integrity and

the loyalty of your sentiments. Whatever may happen, be persuaded that I will always do you justice, and, if needed, defend you against all."

"Thanks, Don Miguel. What you say causes me pleasure and reconciles me with myself. I needed the assurance you give me in order to regain some slight courage, and not let myself be completely crushed by the unforeseen blow which threatens to overthrow our hopes at the very moment when we expected to find them realised."

"Come, come, gentlemen," Valentine said, "the time is slipping away, and we have none to waste. Let us seek to find the means by which to repair the check we have suffered. If you permit me I will submit to your approval a plan which, I believe, combines all the desirable chances of success, and will turn in our favour the very treachery to which we have fallen victims."

"Speak, speak, my friend!" the two men exclaimed, as they prepared to listen.

Valentine took the word.

[1] Literally, "men of reason"—a graceful expression the whites employ to distinguish themselves from the Indians, whom they affect to consider brute beasts, and to whom they do not even grant a soul.

CHAPTER XVIII.

FATHER SERAPHIN.

"Gentlemen," said Valentine, "this is what I propose. The treachery of Red Cedar, in surrendering to the Government the secret of your conspiracy, places you in a critical position, from which you cannot escape save by violent measures. You are between life and death. You have no alternative save victory or defeat. The powder is fired, the ground is mined under your feet, and an explosion is imminent. Well, then, pick up the glove treachery throws to you—accept frankly the position offered you. Do not wait till you are attacked, but commence the contest. Remember the vulgar adage, which is perfectly true in politics, and specially in revolution—that 'the first blow is half the battle.' Your enemies will be terrified by your boldness—dashed by this uprising which they are far from expecting, especially now, when they imagine they hold in their hands all the threads of the conspiracy—an error which makes them put faith in the revelations of a common spy, and will ruin them if you act with skill—above all, with promptitude. All depends on the first blow. It must be terrible, and terrify them: if not, you are lost."

"All that is true; but we lack time," General Ibañez observed.

"Time is never lacking when a man knows how to employ it properly," Valentine answered peremptorily. "I repeat, you must be beforehand with your adversaries."

At this moment the sound of footsteps was heard under the vault of the cave. The most extreme silence at once reigned in the chamber where the five conspirators were assembled. Mechanically each sought his weapons. The steps rapidly approached, and a man appeared in the entrance of the hall. On seeing him all present uttered a cry of joy and rose respectfully, repeating, "Father Seraphin!"

The man advanced smiling, bowed gracefully, and answered in a gentle and melodious voice, which went straight to the soul,—

"Take your places again, gentlemen, I beg of you. I should be truly vexed if I caused you any disturbance. Permit me only to sit down for a few moments by your side."

They hastened to make room for him. Let us say in a few words who this person was, whose unexpected arrival caused so much pleasure to the people assembled in the grotto.

Father Seraphin was a man of twenty-four at the most, although the fatigues he supported, the harsh labours he had imposed on himself, and which he fulfilled with more than apostolic abnegation, had left numerous traces on his face, with its delicate features, its gentle and firm expression, imprinted with a sublime melancholy, rendered even more touching by the beam of ineffable goodness which escaped from his large, blue and thoughtful eyes. His whole person, however, exhaled a perfume of youth and health which disguised his age, as to which a superficial observer might have been easily deceived.

Father Seraphin was a Frenchman, and belonged to the order of the Lazarists. For five years he had been traversing as an indefatigable missionary, with no other weapon than his staff, the unexplored solitudes of Texas and New Mexico, preaching the gospel to the Indians, while caring nothing for the terrible privations and nameless sufferings he incessantly endured, and the death constantly suspended over his head.

Father Seraphin was one of those numerous soldiers, ignored martyrs of the army of faith, who, making a shield of the Gospel, spread at the peril of their lives the word of God in those barbarous countries, and die heroically, falling bravely on their battlefield, worn out by the painful exigencies of their sublime mission, aged at thirty, but having gained over a few souls to the truth, and shed light among the ignorant masses.

The abnegation and devotion of these modest men, yet so great in heart, are too much despised in France, where however, the greater number of these martyrs are recruited. Their sacrifices pass unnoticed; for, owing to the false knowledge possessed of beyond-sea countries, people are

far from suspecting the continual struggles they have to sustain against a deadly climate. And who would credit it? The most obstinate adversaries they meet with in the accomplishment of their mission are not among the Indians, who always nearly welcome them with respect, if not joy, but among the men whom their labours benefit, and who ought to aid and protect them with all their might. There is no vexation or humiliation which they do not endure from the agents of Mexico and the American Union, to try and disgust and compel them to abandon the arena in which they combat so nobly.

Father Seraphin had gained the friendship and respect of all those with whom accident had brought him into contact. Charmed with meeting a fellow countryman in the midst of those vast solitudes so distant from that France he never hoped to see again, he had attached himself closely to Valentine, to whom he vowed a deep and sincere affection. For the same motives, the hunter, who admired the greatness of character of this priest so full of true religion, felt himself drawn to him by an irresistible liking. They had frequently taken long journeys together, the hunter guiding his friend to the Indian tribes across the desolate regions of Apacheria.

So soon as Father Seraphin had taken his place near the fire, Eagle-wing and Curumilla hastened to offer him all those slight services which they fancied might be agreeable to him, and offered him a few lumps of roast venison with maize tortillas. The missionary gladly gratified the two chiefs, and accepted their offerings.

"It is a long time since we saw you, father," the hacendero said. "You neglect us. My daughter asked me about you only two days ago, for she is anxious to see you."

"Doña Clara is an angel who does not require me," the missionary replied gently. "I have spent nearly two months with the Comanche tribe of the Tortoise. Those poor Indians claim all my care. They are thirsting for the Divine Word."

"Are you satisfied with your journey?"

"Sufficiently so, for these men are not such as they are represented to us. Their instincts are noble, and, as their primitive nature is not adulterated by contact with the vicious civilization that surrounds them, they easily understood what is explained to them."

"Do you reckon on staying long among us?"

"Yes; this last journey has fatigued me extremely. My health is in a deplorable state, and I absolutely need a few days' rest in order to regain the requisite strength to continue my ministry."

"Well, father, come with me to the hacienda; you will remain with us, and make us all truly happy."

"I am going to make that request to you, Don Miguel. I am delighted that you have thus met my wishes. If I accept your obliging offer, it is because I know I shall not incommode you."

"On the contrary, we shall be delighted to have you among us."

"Ah! I know the goodness of your heart."

"Do not make me better than I am, father: there is a spice of egotism in what I am doing."

"How so?"

"Hang it! By labouring at the education of the Indians you render an immense service to the race I have the honor of belonging to; for I, too, am an Indian."

"That is true," the priest answered with a laugh. "Come, I absolve you from the sin of egotism, in favour of the intention which makes you commit it."

"Father," Valentine then said, "is the game plentiful in the desert just at present?"

"Yes, there is a great deal: the buffaloes have come down from the mountains in herds—the elks, the deer, and the antelopes swarm."

Valentine rubbed his hands.

"It will be a good season," he said.

"Yes, for you. As for myself, I have no cause of complaint, for the Indians have been most attentive to me."

"All the better. I ever tremble when I know you are among those red devils. I do not say that of the Comanches, who are warriors I esteem, and have always displayed the sincerest affection for you; but I have a terrible fear lest those villains of Apaches may play you a wicked trick some fine day."

"Why entertain such ideas, my friend?"

"They are correct. You cannot imagine what treacherous and cruel cowards those Apache thieves are. I know them, and carry their marks; but do not frighten yourself. If ever they ventured on any extremities against you, I know the road to their villages: there is not a nook in the desert which I have not thoroughly explored. It is not for nothing I have received the name of the 'Trail-hunter.' I swear to you I will not leave them a scalp."

"Valentine, you know I do not like to hear you speak so. The Indians are poor ignorant men, who know not what they do, and must be pardoned for the evil they commit."

"All right—all right!" the hunter growled. "You have your ideas on that score, and I mine."

"Yes," the missionary replied with a smile, "but I believe mine be better."

"It is possible. You know I do not discuss that subject with you; for I do not know how you do it, but you always succeed in proving to me that I am wrong."

Everybody laughed at this sally.

"And what are the Indians doing at this moment?" Valentine continued. "Are they still fighting?"

"No; I succeeded in bringing Unicorn, the principal chief of the Comanches, and Stanapat (the Handful of Blood), the Apache sachem, to an interview, at which peace was sworn."

"Hum!" Valentine said incredulously, "that peace will not last long, for Unicorn has too many reasons to owe the Apaches a grudge."

"Nothing leads to the supposition, at present, that your forebodings will be speedily realised."

"Why so?"

"Because, when I left Unicorn, he was preparing for a grand buffalo hunt, in which five hundred picked warriors were to take part."

"Ah, ah! and where do you think the hunt will take place, father?"

"I know for a certainty, because, when I left Unicorn, he begged me to invite you to it, as he knew I should see you shortly."

"I willingly accept, for a buffalo hunt always had great attractions for me."

"You will not have far to go to find Unicorn, for he is scarce ten leagues from this place."

"The hunt will take place, then, in the neighbourhood?"

"The meeting-place is Yellowstone Plain."

"I shall not fail to be there, father. Ah! I am delighted, more than you can suppose, at the happy news you have brought me."

"All the better, my friend. Now, gentlemen, I will ask you to excuse me; for I feel so broken with fatigue that, with your permission, I will go and take a few hours' rest."

"I was a fool not to think of it before," Valentine exclaimed with vexation as he struck his forehead. "Pardon me, father."

"I thought for my brother," said Curumilla. "If my father will follow me all is ready."

The missionary thanked him with a smile and rose, bowed to all present, and supported by Eagle-wing, he followed Curumilla into another chamber of the grotto. Father Seraphin found a bed of dry leaves covered with bear skins, and a fire so arranged as to burn all night. The two Indians retired after bowing respectfully to the father, and assuring themselves that he needed nothing more.

After kneeling on the ground of the grotto Father Seraphin laid himself on his bed of leaves, crossed his arms on his chest, and fell into that childlike sleep which only the just enjoy. After his departure Valentine bent over to his two friends.

"All is saved," he said in a low voice.

"How? Explain yourself," they eagerly answered.

"Listen to me. You will spend the night here; at daybreak you will start for the Hacienda de la Noria, accompanied by Father Seraphin."

"Good! What next?"

"General Ibañez will proceed, as from you, to the governor, and invite him to a grand hunt of wild horses, to take place in three days."

"I do not understand what you are driving at."

"That is not necessary at this moment. Let me guide you; but, above all, arrange it so that all the authorities of the town accept your invitation and are present at the hunt."

"That I take on myself."

"Very good. You, general, will collect all the men you can, so that they can support you on a given signal, but hide themselves so that no one can suspect their presence."

"Very good," Don Miguel answered; "all shall be done as you recommend. But where will you be all this while?"'

"You know very well," he answered with a smile of undefinable meaning. "I shall be hunting the buffalo with my friend Unicorn, the great chief of the Comanches."

Hastily breaking off the interview, the hunter wrapped himself in his buffalo robe, stretched himself before the fire, closed his eyes, and slept, or feigned to sleep. After a few minutes' hesitation his friend imitated his example, and the grotto became calm and silent as on the day of the creation.

CHAPTER XIX.

Before retiring to rest Father Seraphin, on the previous evening, had whispered a couple of words in the Indians' ears. The sun had scarce begun to rise a little above the extreme blue line of the horizon ere the missionary opened his eyes, and after a short prayer hurried to the hall in which his companions had remained. The four men were still asleep, wrapped in their furs and buffalo skins.

"Wake up, brothers," Father Seraphin said, "for day is appearing."

The four men started up in an instant.

"My brothers," the young missionary said in a gentle and penetrating voice, "I thought that we ought, before separating, to thank God in common: for the blessings He does not cease to vouchsafe to us—to celebrate our happy meeting of last night. I have, therefore, resolved to hold a mass, at which I shall be happy to see you with that purity of heart which such a duty demands."

At this proposition the four men exclaimed gladly their assent.

"I will help you to prepare the altar, father," Valentine said; "the idea is excellent."

"The altar is all ready, my friends. Have the kindness to follow me."

Father Seraphin then led them out of the grotto.

In the centre of a small esplanade in front of the cave an altar had been built by Eagle-wing and Curumilla on a grassy mound. It was very simple. A copper crucifix planted in the centre of the mound, covered by a cloth of dazzling whiteness; on either side of it two block-tin candlesticks, in which burned candles of yellow tallow, a Bible on the right, the pyx in the centre—that was all.

The hunter and the two Mexicans knelt piously, and Father Seraphin commenced offering the holy sacrifice, served devotedly by the two Indian chiefs.

It was a magnificent morning; thousands of birds, hidden beneath the foliage, saluted the birth of day with their harmonious songs; a fickle breeze poured through the branches, and refreshed the air; in the distance, far as eye could extend, undulated the prairie, with its oceans of tall grass incessantly agitated by the hurried foot falls of the wild beasts returning to their dens; and on the naked side of this hill, at the entrance of this grotto—one of the marvels of the New World—a priest, simple as an apostle, was celebrating mass on a grass altar under the eye of Heaven, served by two poor savages, and having as sole congregation three half-civilised men.

This spectacle, so simple primitive, had something about it imposing and sublime, which inspired respect and summoned up dreams of ancient days, when the persecuted church took refuse in the desert, to find itself face to face with God. Hence the emotion experienced by the witnesses of this religious act was sincere. A beam of happiness descended into their souls, and it was with real effusion that they thanked the priest for the pleasant surprise he had reserved for them. Father Seraphin was delighted at the result he had attained. Seeing the truly profound faith of his friends, he felt his courage heightened to continue the rude and noble task he had imposed on himself.

The mass lasted about three quarters of an hour. When it was finished the missionary placed the poor holy vessels in the bag he constantly carried with him, and they returned to the grotto for breakfast. An hour later, Don Miguel, General Ibañez, and the missionary took leave of Valentine, and mounted on their horses, which Curumilla had led to the entrance of the ravine. They started at a gallop in the direction of the Paso del Norte, whence they were about twenty leagues distant. Valentine and the two Indian chiefs remained behind.

"I am about to leave my brother," Eagle-wing said.

"Why not remain with us, chief?"

"My pale brother no longer requires Eagle-wing. The chief hears the cries of the men and women of his tribe who were cowardly assassinated, and demand vengeance."

"Where goes my brother?" the hunter asked, who was too thoroughly acquainted with the character of the Indians to try and change the warrior's determination, though he was vexed at his departure.

"The Coras dwell in villages on the banks of the Colorado. Eagle-wing is returning to his friends. He will ask for warriors to avenge his brothers who are dead."

Valentine bowed.

"May the Great Spirit protect my father!" he said. "The road is long to the villages of his tribe. The chief is leaving friends who love him."

"Eagle-wing knows it: he will remember," the chief said with a deep intonation.

And, after pressing the hands the two hunters held out to him, he bounded on his horse, and soon disappeared in the windings of the cañon.

Valentine watched his departure with a sad and melancholy look.

"Shall I ever see him again!" he murmured. "He is an Indian: he is following his vengeance. It is his nature: he obeys it, and God will judge him. Every man must obey his destiny."

After this aside the hunter threw his rifle on his shoulder and started in his turn, followed by

Curumilla. Valentine and his comrade were on foot: they preferred that mode of travelling, which seemed to them sure, and quite as quick as on horseback. The two men, after the Indian custom, walked one behind the other, not uttering a syllable; but toward midday the heat became so insupportable that they were obliged to stop to take a few moments' repose. At length the sunbeams lost their strength, the evening breeze rose, and the hunters could resume their journey. They soon reached the banks of the Rio Puerco (Dirty River), which they began ascending, keeping as close as they could to the banks, while following the tracks made since time immemorial by wild animals coming down to drink.

The man unacquainted with the splendid American scenery will have a difficulty in imagining the imposing and savage majesty of the prairie the hunters were traversing. The river, studded with islets covered with cottonwood trees, flowed silent and rapid between banks of slight elevation, and overgrown with grass so tall that it obeyed the impulse of the wind from a long distance. Over the vast plain were scattered innumerable hills, whose summits, nearly all of the same height, present a flat surface; and for a greater distance northward the ground was broadcast with large lumps of pebbles resembling gravestones.

At a few hundred yards from the river rose a conical mound, bearing on its summit a granite obelisk one hundred and twenty feet in height. The Indians, who, like all primitive nations, are caught by anything strange, frequently assembled at this spot; and here the hecatombs are offered to the Kitchi Manitou.

A great number of buffalo skulls, piled up at the foot of the column, and arranged in circles, ellipses, and other geometrical figures, attest their piety for this god of the hunt, whose protecting spirit, they say, looks down from the top of the monolith. Here and there grew patches of the Indian potato, wild onion, prairie tomato, and those millions of strange flowers and trees composing the American flora. The rest of the country was covered with tall grass, continually undulating beneath the light footfall of the graceful antelopes or big horns, which bounded from one rock to the other, startled by the approach of the travellers.

Far, far away on the horizon, mingling with the azure of the sky, appeared the denuded peaks of the lofty mountains that serve as unassailable fortresses to the Indians: their summits, covered with eternal snow, formed the frame of this immense and imposing picture, which was stamped with a gloomy and mysterious grandeur.

At the hour when the *maukawis* uttered its last song to salute the setting of the sun, which, half plunged in the purple of evening, still jaspered the sky with long red bands, the travellers perceived the tents of the Comanches picturesquely grouped on the sides of a verdurous hill. The Indians had, in a few hours, improvised a real village with their buffalo skin tents, aligned to form streets and squares.

On arriving at about five hundred yards from the village the hunters suddenly perceived an Indian horseman. Evincing not the slightest surprise, they stopped and unfolded their buffalo robes, which floated in the breeze, as a signal of peace. The horseman uttered a loud cry. At this signal—for it was evidently one—a troop of Comanche warriors debouched at a gallop from the village, and poured like a torrent down the sides of the hill, coming up close to the motionless travellers, brandishing their weapons, and uttering their war yell.

The hunters waited, carelessly leaning on their guns. Assuredly, to a man not acquainted with the singular manners of the prairie, this mode of reception would have seemed overt hostilities. But it was not so; for, on coming within range of the hunters, the Comanches began making their horses leap and curvet with that grace and skill characteristic of the Indians, and deploying to the right and left, they formed a vast circle, inclosing the two unmoved hunters.

Then a horseman quitted the group, dismounted, and rapidly approached the newcomers: the latter hastened to meet him. All three had their arm extended with the palm forward in sign of peace. The Indian who thus advanced to meet the hunters was Unicorn, the great chief of the Comanches.

As a distinctive sign of his race, his skin was of a red tinge, brighter than the palest new copper. He was a man of thirty at the most, with masculine and expressive features; his face possessed a remarkable intelligence, and was stamped with that natural majesty found among the savage children of the prairie; he was tall and well built; and his muscular limbs evidenced a vigour and suppleness against which few men would have contended with advantage.

He was completely painted and armed for war; his black hair was drawn up on his head in the form of a casque, and fell down his back like a mane; a profusion of wampum collars, claws of grizzly bear, and buffalo teeth adorned his breast, on which was painted with rare dexterity a blue tortoise, the distinctive sign of the tribe to which he belonged, and of the size of a hand.

The rest of his costume was composed of the *mitasses*, fastened round the hips by a leathern belt, and descending to the ankles; a deerskin shirt, with long hanging sleeves, the seams of which, like those of the mitasse, were fringed with leather strips and feathers; a wide cloak, of the hide of a female buffalo, was fastened across his shoulders with a buckle of pure gold, and fell down to the ground; on his feet he had elegant moccasins of different colours, embroidered with beads and porcupine quills, from the heels of which trailed several wolf tails; a light round shield, covered with buffalo hide, and decorated with human scalps, hung on his left side by his panther skin quiver full of arrows. His weapons were those of the Comanche Indians; that is to say, the scalping knife, the tomahawk, a bow, and an American rifle; but a long whip, the handle of which painted red, was adorned with scalps, indicated his rank as chief.

When the three men were close together they saluted by raising their hands to their foreheads; then Valentine and Unicorn crossed their arms by passing the right hand over the left shoulder, and bowing their heads at the same time, kissed each other's mouth after the prairie fashion. Unicorn then saluted Curumilla in the same way; and this preliminary ceremony terminated, the Comanche chief took the word.

"My brothers are welcome at the village of my tribe," he said. "I was expecting them impatiently. I had begged the Chief of Prayer of the palefaces to invite them in my name."

"He performed his promise last night. I thank my brother for having thought of me."

"The two stranger great hunters are friends of Unicorn. His heart was sad not to see them near him for the buffalo hunt his young people are preparing."

"Here we are! We set out this morning at sunrise."

"My brothers will follow me, and rest at the council fire."

The hunters bowed assent. Each received a horse, and at a signal from Unicorn, who had placed himself between them, the troop started at a gallop, and returned to the village, which it entered to the deafening sound of drums, chikikouis, shouts of joy from the women and children who saluted their return, and the furious barking of the dogs. When the chiefs were seated round the council fire the pipe was lit, and ceremoniously presented to the two strangers, who smoked in silence for some minutes. When the pipe had gone the round several times Unicorn addressed Valentine.

"Koutonepi is a great hunter," he said to him; "he has often followed the buffalo on the plains of the Dirty River. The chief will tell him the preparations he has made, that the hunter may give his opinion."

"It is needless, chiefs," Valentine replied. "The buffalo is the friend of the redskins: the Comanches know all its stratagems. I should like to ask a question of my brother."

"The hunter can speak; my ears are open."

"How long will the chief remain on the hunting grounds with his young men?"

"About a week. The buffaloes are suspicious: my young men are surrounding them, but they drive them in our direction before four or five days."

Valentine gave a start of joy.

"Good," he said. "Is my brother sure of it?"

"Very sure."

"How many warriors have remained with the chief?"

"About four hundred: the rest are scattered over the plain to announce the approach of the buffaloes."

"Good! If my brother likes I will procure him a fine hunt within three days."

"Ah!" the chief exclaimed, "then my brother has started some game?"

"Oh!" Valentine answered with a laugh, "Let my brother trust to me, and I promise him rich spoils."

"Good! Of what game does my brother speak?"

"Of *gachupinos*[1]. In two days they will meet in large numbers not far from here."

"Wah!" said the Comanche, whose eyes sparkled at this news, "My young men will hunt them. My brother must explain."

Valentine shook his head.

"My words are for the ears of a chief," he said.

Without replying, Unicorn made a signal: the Indians rose silently, and left the tent. Curumilla and Unicorn alone remained near the fire. Valentine then explained to the Comanche, in its fullest details, the plan he had conceived, in the execution of which the aid of the Indians was indispensable for him. Unicorn listened attentively without interrupting. When Valentine had ended,—

"What does my brother think?" the latter asked, fixing a scrutinising glance on the impassive countenance of the chief.

"Wah!" the other replied, "the paleface is very crafty. Unicorn will do what he desires."

This assurance filled Valentine's heart with joy.

[1] Wearers of shoes—a name given by the Indians to the Spaniards at the conquest.

CHAPTER XX.

THE HUNT OF WILD HORSES.

Don Miguel Zarate and his two friends did not reach the hacienda till late. They were received in the porch by Don Pablo and Doña Clara, who manifested great joy at the sight of the French missionary, for whom they felt a sincere esteem and great friendship. Spite of all his care, Fray Ambrosio had always seen his advances repelled by the young people, in whom he instinctively inspired that fear mingled with disgust that is experienced at the sight of a reptile.

Doña Clara, who was very pious, carried this repulsion to such a pitch that she only confessed her faults and approached the holy table when Father Seraphin came to spend a few days at the hacienda.

Fray Ambrosio was too adroit to appear to notice the effect his presence produced on the hacendero's children: he feigned to attribute to timidity and indifference on religious matters what was in reality a strongly expressed loathing for himself personally. But in his heart a dull hatred fermented against the two young folk, and especially against the missionary, whom he had several times already attempted to destroy by well-laid snares.

Father Seraphin had always escaped them by a providential chance; but in spite of the chaplain's obsequious advances, and the offers of service he did not fail to overwhelm him with each time they met, the missionary had thoroughly read the Mexican monk. He had guessed what fearful corruption was hidden beneath his apparent simplicity and feigned piety: and while keeping to himself the certainty he had acquired, he remained on his guard, and carefully watched this man, whom he suspected of incessantly planning some dark treachery against him. Don Miguel left his children with the missionary, who immediately took possession of him and dragged him away, lavishing on him every possible attention. The hacendero retired to his study with General Ibañez, when the two men drew up a list of the persons they intended to invite; that is to say, the persons Valentine proposed to get out of the way, though they were innocent of his scheme. The general then mounted his horse, and rode off to deliver the invitations personally. For his part Don Miguel sent off a dozen peons and vaqueros in search of the wild horses, and to drive them gradually toward the spot chosen for the hunt.

Gen. Ibañez succeeded perfectly: the invitations were gladly accepted, and the next evening the guests began arriving at the hacienda, Don Miguel receiving them with marks of the most profound respect and lavish hospitality.

The governor, General Isturitz, Don Luciano Pérez, and seven or eight persons of inferior rank were soon assembled at the hacienda. At sunrise a numerous party, composed of forty persons, left the hacienda, and proceeded, accompanied by a crowd of well-mounted peons, towards the meet. This was a vast plain on the banks of the Rio del Norte, where the wild horses were accustomed to graze at this season. The caravan produced the most singular and picturesque effect with the brilliant costumes of the persons who composed it, and their horses glittering with gold and silver. Starting at about four a.m. from the hacienda, they reached four hours later a clump of trees, beneath whose shade tents had been raised and tables laid by Don Miguel's orders, so that they might breakfast before the hunt.

The riders, who had been journeying for four hours, already exposed to the rays of the sun and the dust, uttered a shout of joy at the sight of the tents. Each dismounted: the ladies were invited to do the same, among them being the wives of the governor and General Isturitz, and Doña Clara, and they gaily sat down round the tables.

Toward the end of the breakfast Don Pablo arrived, who had started the evening previously to join the vaqueros. He announced that the horses had been started, that a large manada was now crossing the Plain of the Coyotes, watched by the vaqueros, and that they must make haste if they wished to have good sport. This news augmented the ardor of the hunters. The ladies were left in camp under the guard of a dozen well-armed peons, and the whole party rushed at a gallop in the direction indicated by Don Pablo.

The Plain of the Coyotes extended for an enormous distance along the banks of the river. Here and there rose wooded hills, which varied the landscape that was rendered monotonous by the tall grass, in which the riders disappeared up to their waists. When the hunting party reached the skirt of the plain Don Miguel ordered a halt, that they might hold a council, and hear the report of the leader of the vaqueros.

The races of wild horses that nowadays people the deserts of North America, and especially of Mexico, is descended from Cortez' cavalry. Hence it is a pure breed, for at the period of the Spanish conquest only Arab horses were employed. These horses have multiplied in really an extraordinary manner. It is not rare to meet with manadas of twenty and even thirty thousand head. They are small, but gifted with an energy and vigour of which it is impossible to form a fair idea without having seen them. They accomplish without fatigue journeys of prodigious length. Their coat is the same as that of other horses, save that during winter it grows very long, and frizzy like the wool of sheep. In spring this species of fur falls off. The American horses may be easily trained. Generally, so soon as they find themselves caught they easily submit to the saddle.

The Mexicans treat their steeds very harshly, make them journey the whole day without food or drink, and only give them their ration of maize and water on reaching the bivouac, where they let them wander about the whole night under guard of the *nena*, a mare whose bell the horses follow, and will never leave. It is not from any cruel motive, however, that the Mexicans treat their horses thus, for the riders are very fond of their animals, which at a given moment may save their lives. But it seems that this mode of treatment, which would be impracticable in Europe, is perfectly successful in Mexico, where the horses are much better off than if treated in a more gentle way.

The leader of the vaqueros made his report. A manada of about ten thousand head was two leagues off on the plain, quietly grazing in the company of a few elks and buffaloes. The hunters scaled a hill, from the top of which they easily saw on the horizon a countless mob of animals, grouped in a most picturesque way, and apparently not at all suspecting the danger that threatened them.

To hunt the wild horses men must be like the Mexicans, perfect centaurs. I have seen the *jinetes* of that country accomplish feats of horsemanship before which our Europeans would turn pale.

After the vaquero's report Don Miguel and his friends held a council, and this is the resolution they came to. They formed what is called in Mexico the grand circle of the wild horses; that is to say, the most skilful riders were echeloned in every direction at a certain distance from each other, so as to form an immense circle. The wild horses are extremely suspicious: their instinct is so great, their scent is so subtle, that the slightest breath of wind is sufficient to carry to them the smell of their enemies, and make them set off at headlong speed. Hence it is necessary to act with the greatest prudence, and use many precautions, if a surprise is desired.

When all the preparations were made the hunters dismounted, and dragging their horses after them, glided through the tall grass so as to contract the circle. This manoeuvre had gone on for some time, and they had sensibly drawn nearer, when the manada began to display some signs of restlessness. The horses, which had hitherto grazed calmly, raised their heads, pricked their ears, and neighed as they inhaled the air. Suddenly they collected, formed a compact band, and started at a trot in the direction of some cottonwood trees which stood on the banks of the river. The hunt was about to commence.

At a signal from Don Miguel six well-mounted vaqueros rushed at full speed ahead of the manada, making their lassoes whistle round their heads. The horses, startled by the apparition of the riders, turned back hastily, uttering snorts of terror, and fled in another direction. But each time they tried to force the circle, horsemen rode into the midst of them, and compelled them to turn back.

It is necessary to have been present at such a chase, to have seen this hunt on the prairies, to form an idea of the magnificent sight offered by all these noble brutes, their eyes afire, their mouths foaming, their heads haughtily thrown up, and their manes fluttering in the wind, as they bounded and galloped in the fatal circle the hunters had formed round them. There is in such a sight something intoxicating, which carries away the most phlegmatic, and renders them mad with enthusiasm and pleasure.

When this manoeuvre had lasted long enough, and the horses began to grow blinded with terror, at a signal given by Don Miguel the circle was broken at a certain spot. The horses rushed, with a sound like thunder, toward this issue which opened before them, overturning with their chests everything that barred their progress. But it was this the hunters expected. The horses, in their mad race, galloped on without dreaming that the road they followed grew gradually narrower in front of them, and terminated in inevitable captivity.

Let us explain the termination of the hunt. The manada had been cleverly guided by the hunters toward the entrance of a cañon, or ravine, which ran between two rather lofty hills. At the end of this ravine the vaqueros had formed, with stakes fifteen feet long, planted in the ground, and firmly fastened together with cords of twisted bark, an immense corral or inclosure, into which the horses rushed without seeing it. In less than no time the corral was full; then the hunters went to meet the manada, which they cut off at the risk of their lives, while the others closed the entrance of the corral. More than fifteen hundred magnificent wild horses were thus captured at one stroke.

The noble animals rushed with snorts of fury at the walls of the inclosure, trying to tear up the stakes with their teeth, and dashing madly against them. At length they recognised the futility of their efforts, lay down, and remained motionless. In the meanwhile a tremendous struggle was going on in the ravine between the hunters and the rest of the manada. The horses confined in this narrow space made extraordinary efforts to open a passage and fly anew. They neighed, stamped, and flew at everything that came within their reach. At length they succeeded in regaining their first direction, and rushed into the plain with the velocity of an avalanche. Several vaqueros had been dismounted and trampled on by the horses, and two of them had received such injuries that they were carried off the ground in a state of insensibility.

With all the impetuosity of youth Don Pablo had rushed into the very heart of the manada. Suddenly his horse received a kick which broke its off foreleg, and it fell to the ground, dragging its rider with it. The hunters uttered a cry of terror and agony. In the midst of this band of maddened horses the young man was lost, for he must be trampled to death under their hoofs. But he rose with the rapidity of lightning, and quick as thought seizing the mane of the nearest horse, he leaped on its back, and held on by his knees. The horses were so pressed against one another that any other position was impossible. Then a strange thing occurred—an extraordinary struggle between the horse and its rider. The noble beast, furious at feeling its back dishonoured by the weight it bore, bounded, reared, rushed forward; but all was useless, for Don Pablo adhered firmly.

So long as it was in the ravine, the horse, impeded by its comrades, could not do all it might have wished to get rid of the burden it bore; but so soon as it found itself on the plain it threw up its head, made several leaps on one side, and then started forward at a speed which took away the young man's breath.

Don Pablo held on firmly by digging his knees into the panting sides of his steed; he unfastened

his cravat, and prepared to play the last scene in this drama, which threatened to terminate in a tragic way for him. The horse had changed its tactics; it was racing in a straight line to the river, resolved to drown itself with its rider sooner than submit. The hunters followed with an interest mingled with terror the moving interludes of this mad race, when suddenly the horse changed its plans again, reared, and tried to fall back with its rider. The hunters uttered a shout of agony. Don Pablo clung convulsively to his animal's neck, and, at the moment it was falling back, he threw his cravat over its eyes with extraordinary skill.

The horse, suddenly blinded, fell back again on its feet, and stood trembling with terror. Then the young man dismounted, put his face to the horse's head, and breathed into its nostrils, while gently scratching its forehead. This operation lasted ten minutes at the most, the horse panting and snorting, but not daring to leave the spot. The Mexican again leaped on the horse's back, and removed the bandage; it remained stunned—Don Pablo had tamed it[1]. Everybody rushed toward the young man, who smiled proudly, in order to compliment him on his splendid victory. Don Pablo dismounted, gave his horse to a vaquero, who immediately passed a bridle round its neck, and then walked toward his father, who embraced him tenderly. For more than an hour Don Miguel had despaired of his son's life.

[1] This mode of taming horses is well known to the Indians, and we submit the fact to our readers without comment.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE SURPRISE.

So soon as the emotion caused by Don Pablo's prowess was calmed they began thinking about returning. The sun was rapidly descending in the horizon: the whole day had been spent with the exciting incidents of the chase. The Hacienda de la Noria was nearly ten leagues distant: it was, therefore, urgent to start as speedily as possible, unless the party wished to run the risk of bivouacking in the open air.

The men would easily have put up with this slight annoyance, which, in a climate like that of New Mexico, and at this season of the year, has nothing painful about it; but they had ladies with them. Left one or two leagues in the rear, they must feel alarmed by the absence of the hunters—an absence which, as so frequently happens when out hunting, had been protracted far beyond all expectation.

Don Miguel gave the vaqueros orders to brand the captured horses with his cipher; and the whole party then returned, laughing and singing, in the direction of the tents where the ladies had been left. The vaqueros who had served as beaters during the day remained behind to guard the horses.

In these countries, where there is scarce any twilight, night succeeds the day almost without transition. As soon as the sun had set the hunters found themselves in complete darkness; for, as the sun descended on the horizon, the shade invaded the sky in equal proportions, and, at the moment when the day planet disappeared, the night was complete. The desert, hitherto silent, seemed to wake up all at once: the birds, stupefied by the heat, commenced a formidable concert, in which joined at intervals, from the inaccessible depths of the forest, the snapping of the *carcajous* and the barking of the coyotes mingled with the hoarse howling of the wild beasts that had left their dens to come down and drink in the river.

Then gradually the cries, the songs, and the howling ceased, and nothing was audible save the hurried footfalls of the hunters' horses on the pebbles of the road. A solemn silence seemed to brood over this abrupt and primitive scenery. At intervals the green tufts of the trees and the tall grass bowed slowly with a prolonged rustling of leaves and branches, as if a mysterious breath passed over them, and compelled them to bend their heads. There was something at once striking and terrible in the imposing appearance offered by the prairie at this hour of the night, beneath this sky studded with brilliant stars, which sparkled like emeralds, in the presence of this sublime immensity, which only suffered one voice to be heard—that of Deity.

The young and enthusiastic man to whom it is given to be present at such a spectacle feels a thrill run over all his body: he experiences an undefinable feeling of happiness and extraordinary pleasure on looking round him at the desert, whose unexplored depths conceal from him so many secrets, and display to him Divine Majesty in all its grandeur and omnipotence. Many a time during our adventurous journeys on the American continent, when marching at hazard during these lovely nights so full of charms, which nothing can make those comprehend who have not experienced them, we have yielded to the soft emotions that overcame us. Isolating and absorbing ourselves within ourselves, we, have fallen into a state of beatitude, from which nothing had the power of drawing us.

The hunters so gay and talkative at the start, had yielded to this omnipotent influence of the desert, and advanced rapidly and silently, only exchanging a few syllables at lengthened intervals. The profoundest calm still continued to reign over the desert; and while, owing to the astonishing transparency of the atmosphere, the eye could embrace a horizon, nothing suspicious was visible.

The fireflies buzzed carelessly round the top of the grass, and the flickering fires burning before

the tents to which the hunters were bound could be already seen about half a league ahead. At a signal from Don Miguel the party, which had, up to the present, only trotted, set out at a long canter; for each felt anxious to leave a scene which, in the darkness, had assumed a sinister aspect.

They thus arrived within a hundred yards of the fires, whose ruddy glow was reflected on the distant trees, when suddenly a fearful yell crossed the air, and from behind every bush out started an Indian horseman brandishing his weapons, and making his horse curvet round the white men, while uttering his war cry. The Mexicans, taken unawares, were surrounded ere they sufficiently recovered from their stupor to think about employing their weapons. At a glance Don Miguel judged the position: it was a critical one. The hunters were at the most but twenty: the number of Comanche warriors surrounding them was at least three hundred.

The Comanches and Apaches are the most implacable foes of the white race. In their periodical invasions of the frontiers they hardly ever make any prisoners: they mercilessly kill all who fall into their hands. Still the Mexicans rallied. Certain of the fate that awaited them, they were resolved to sell their lives dearly. There was a moment of supreme expectation before the commencement of the deadly combat, when suddenly an Indian galloped out of the ranks of the warriors, and rode within three paces of the little band of Mexicans. On arriving there he stopped, and waved his buffalo robe in sign of peace. The governor of the provinces prepared to speak.

"Let me carry on the negotiations," Don Miguel said. "I know the Indians better than you do, and perhaps I shall succeed in getting out of this awkward position."

"Do so," the governor answered.

General Ibañez was the only one who had remained calm and impassive since the surprise: he did not make a move to seize his weapons; on the contrary, he crossed his arms carelessly on his chest, and took a mocking glance at his comrades as he hummed a seguidilla between his teeth. Don Pablo had placed himself by his father's side, ready to defend him at the peril of his life. The Indian chief took the word.

"Let the palefaces listen," he said; "an Indian sachem is about to speak."

"We have no time to spare in listening to the insidious words which you are preparing to say to us," Don Miguel replied in a haughty voice. "Withdraw, and do not obstinately bar our passage, or there will be blood spilt."

"The palefaces will have brought it on themselves," the Comanche answered in a gentle voice. "The Indians mean no harm to the pale warriors."

"Why, then, this sudden attack? The chief is mad. We do not let ourselves be so easily deceived as he seems to suppose: we know very well that he wants our scalps."

"No; Unicorn wishes to make a bargain with the palefaces."

"Come, chief, explain yourself; perhaps your intentions are as you describe them. I do not wish to reproach myself with having refused to listen to you."

The Indian smiled.

"Good!" he said. "The great white chief is becoming reasonable. Let him listen, then, to the words Unicorn will pronounce."

"Go on, chief; my comrades and myself are listening."

"The palefaces are thieving dogs," the chief said in a rough voice; "they carry on a continual war with the redskins, and buy their scalps as if they were peltry; but the Comanches are magnanimous warriors, who disdain to avenge themselves. The squaws of the white men are in their power: they will restore them."

At these words a shudder of terror ran along the ranks of the hunters; their courage failed them; they had only one desire left—that of saving those who had so wretchedly fallen into the hands of these bloodthirsty men.

"On what conditions will the Comanches restore their prisoners?" Don Miguel asked, whose heart was contracted at the thought of his daughter, who was also a prisoner. He secretly cursed Valentine, whose fatal advice was the sole cause of the frightful evil that assailed him at this moment.

"The palefaces," the chief continued, "will dismount and arrange themselves in a line. Unicorn will choose from among his enemies those whom he thinks proper to carry off as prisoners; the rest will be free, and all the women restored."

"Those conditions are harsh, chief. Can you not modify them?"

"A chief has only one word. Do the palefaces consent?"

"Let us consult together for a few moments at any rate."

"Good! Let the white men consult. Unicorn grants them ten minutes," the chief made answer.

And turning his horse, he went back to his men. Don Miguel then addressed his friends.

"Well; what do you think of what has occurred?"

The Mexicans were terrified: still they were compelled to allow that the conduct of the Indians was extraordinary, and that they had never before evinced such lenity. Now that reflection had

followed on the first feeling of excitement, they understood that a struggle against enemies so numerous was insensate, and could only result in rendering their position worse than it was before, and that the chiefs conditions, harsh as they were, offered at least some chance of safety for a portion of them, and the ladies would be saved.

This last and all powerful consideration decided them. Don Miguel had no occasion to convince them of the necessity of submission. Whatever struggle it cost them, they dismounted and arranged themselves in a line, as the chief had demanded, Don Miguel and his son placing themselves at the head.

Unicorn, with that cool courage characteristic of the Indians, then advanced alone toward the Mexicans, who still held their weapons, and who, impelled by their despair, and at the risk of being all massacred, would have sacrificed him to their vengeance. The chief had also dismounted. With his hands crossed on his back, and frowning brow, he now commenced his inspection.

Many a heart contracted at his approach, for a question of life and death was being decided for these hapless men: only the perspective of the atrocious tortures which menaced the ladies could have made them consent to this humiliating and degrading condition. The Unicorn, however, was generous: he only selected eight of the Mexicans, and the rest received permission to mount their horses, and leave the fatal circle that begirt them. Still, by a strange accident, or a premeditation of which the reason escaped them, these, eight prisoners—among whom were the governor, General Isturitz, and the criminal judge, Don Luciano Pérez—were the most important personages in the party, and the members of the Provincial Government.

It was not without surprise that Don Miguel observed this; the Comanches, however, faithfully fulfilled their compact, and the ladies were at once set at liberty. They had been treated with the greatest respect by the Indians, who had surprised their camp, and seized them almost in the same way as they had done the hunters—that is to say, the camp was invaded simultaneously on all sides. It was a matter worthy of remark in an Indian ambuscade that not a drop of blood had been spilt.

After the moments given up to the happiness of seeing his daughter again safe and sound, Don Miguel resolved to make a last attempt with Unicorn in favour of the unhappy men who remained in his hands. The chief listened with deference, and let him speak without interruption; then he replied with a smile whose expression the hacendero tried in vain to explain,—

"My father has Indian blood in his veins; the redskins love him: never will they do him the slightest injury. Unicorn would like to restore him immediately the prisoners, for whom he cares very little; but that is impossible. My father himself would speedily regret Unicorn's obedience to his Wish; but, in order to prove to my father how much the chief desires to do a thing that will be agreeable to him, the prisoners will not be ill-treated, and will be let off with a few days' annoyance. Unicorn consents to accept a ransom for them, instead of making them slaves. My father can himself tell them this good news."

"Thanks, chief," Don Miguel answered. "The nobility of your character touches my heart: I shall not forget it. Be persuaded that, under all circumstances, I shall be happy to prove to you how grateful I am."

The chief bowed gracefully and withdrew, in order to give the hacendero liberty to communicate with his companions. The latter were seated sadly on the ground, gloomy and downcast. Don Miguel repeated to them the conversation he had held with Unicorn, and the promise he had made with respect to them. This restored them all their courage; and, with the most affectionate words and marks of the liveliest joy, they thanked the hacendero for the attempt he had made in their favour.

In fact, thanks to the promise of liberating them for a ransom at the end of a week, and treating them well during the period of their captivity, there was nothing so very terrifying about the prospect; and it was one of those thousand annoyances to which men are exposed by accident, but whose proportions had been so reduced in their eyes, that, with the carelessness which forms the staple of the national character, they were the first to laugh at their mishap.

Don Miguel, however, was anxious to retire; so he took leave of his companions, and rejoined the chief. The latter repeated his assurances that the prisoners should be free within a week, if they consented each to pay a ransom of one thousand piastres, which was a trifle. He assured the hacendero that he was at liberty to withdraw whenever he pleased, and he should not oppose his departure.

Don Miguel did not allow the invitation to be repeated. His friends and himself immediately mounted their horses, together with the ladies, who were placed in the centre of the detachment; and after taking leave of Unicorn, the Mexicans dug their spurs into their horses, and started at a gallop, glad to have got off so cheaply. The campfires were soon left far behind them, and General Ibañez then approached his friend, and bending down to his ear, whispered,—

"Don Miguel, can the Comanches be our allies? I fancy that they have this night given a bold push to the success of our enterprise."

This thought, like a ray of light, had already crossed the hacendero's brain several times.

"I do not know," he said with a clever smile; "but at any rate, my dear general, they are very adroit foes."

The little band continued to advance rapidly toward the hacienda, which was now no great

distance, and which they hoped to reach before sunrise. The events we have described had occurred in less than an hour.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE MEETING.

"By Jove!" General Ibañez said, "it must be confessed that these red devils have done us an immense service without suspecting it. It might be said, deuce take me, that they acted under a knowledge of facts. This Unicorn, as the chief is called, is a precious man in certain circumstances. I am anxious to cultivate his acquaintance, for no one knows what may happen. It is often good to have so intelligent a friend as him at hand."

"You are always jesting, general. When will you be serious for once?" Don Miguel said with a smile.

"What would you have, my friend? We are at this moment staking our heads in a desperate game, so let us at any rate keep our gaiety. If we are conquered, it will be time enough then to be sad, and make bitter reflections about the instability of human affairs."

"Yes, your philosophy is not without a certain dose of fatalism, which renders it more valuable to me. I am happy to see you in this good temper, especially at a moment when we are preparing to play our last card."

"All is not desperate yet, and I have a secret foreboding, on the contrary, that all is for the best. Our friend the Trail-hunter, I feel convinced, has something to do, if not all, with what has happened to us."

"Do you believe it?" Don Miguel asked quickly.

"I am certain of it. You know as well as I do these Indios Bravos, and the implacable hatred they have vowed against us. The war they wage with us is atrocious; and for them to be suddenly changed from wolves into lambs requires some powerful motive to make them act thus. People do not lay aside in a moment a hatred which has endured for ages. The Comanches, by the choice they made, know the importance of the prisoners they have seized. How is it that they consent so easily to give them up for a trifling ransom? There is some inexplicable mystery in all this."

"Which is very easy to explain though," a laughing voice interrupted from behind the shrubs.

The two Mexicans started, and checked their horses. A man leaped from a thicket, and suddenly appeared in the centre of the track the little band of hunters was following. The latter, believing in a fresh attack and treachery on the part of the Comanches, seized their weapons.

"Stop!" Don Miguel said sharply, "the man is alone. Let me speak with him."

Each waited with his hand on his weapon.

"Hold!" Don Miguel continued, addressing the stranger, who stood motionless, carelessly resting on his gun. "Who are you, my master?"

"Do you not recognise me, Don Miguel? and must I really tell you my name?" the stranger answered with a laugh.

"The Trail-hunter!" Don Miguel exclaimed.

"Himself," Valentine continued. "Hang it all! You take a long time to recognise your friends."

"You will forgive us when you know all that has happened to us, and how much we must keep on our guard."

"Confound it!" Valentine said laughingly, as he regulated his pace by the trot of the horses, "do you fancy you are going to tell me any news? Did you not really suspect from what quarter the blow came?"

"What!" Don Miguel exclaimed in surprise, "did you—"

"Who else but I? Do you think the Spaniards are such friends of the Indians that the latter would treat them so kindly when meeting them face to face in the desert?"

"I was sure of it," General Ibañez affirmed. "I guessed it at the first moment."

"Good heavens! Nothing was more simple. Your position, through Red Cedar's treachery, was most critical. I wished to give you the time to turn round by removing, for a few days, the obstacles that prevented the success of your plans. I have succeeded, I fancy."

"You could not have managed better," exclaimed the general.

"Oh!" Don Miguel said with a reproachful accent, "why did you hide it from me?"

"For a very simple reason, my friend. I wished that in these circumstances your will and conscience should be free."

"But—"

"Let me finish. Had I told you of my plan, it is certain that you would have opposed it. You are a man of honor, Don Miguel: your heart is most loyal."

"My friend—"

"Answer me. Had I explained to you the plan I formed, what would you have done?"

"Well—"

"Answer frankly."

"I should have refused."

"I was sure of it. Why would you have done so? Because you would never have consented to violate the laws of hospitality, and betray enemies you sheltered beneath your roof, though you knew all the while that these men, on leaving you, would have considered it their duty to seize you, and that they watched your every movement while sitting by your side, and eating at your table. Is it not so?"

"It is true; my honor as a gentleman would have revolted. I could not have suffered such horrible treachery to be carried out under my very eyes."

"There! You see that I acted wisely in saying nothing to you. In that way your honor is protected, your conscience easy, and I have in the most simple fashion freed you for some days from your enemies."

"That is true; still—"

"What? Have the prisoners to complain of the way in which they have been treated?"

"Not at all; on the contrary, the Comanches, and Unicorn in particular, treated them most kindly."

"All is for the best, then. You must congratulate yourself on the unexpected success you have achieved, and must now profit by it without delay."

"I intend to do so."

"You must act at once."

"I ask nothing better. All is ready. Our men are warned, and they will rise at the first signal."

"It must be given immediately."

"I only ask the time to leave my daughter at the hacienda; then accompanied by my friends, I will march on Paso, while General Ibañez, at the head of a second band, seizes Santa Fe."

"The plan is well conceived. Can you count on the persons who follow you?"

"Yes; they are all my relatives or friends."

"All for the best. Let us not go further. We are here at the place where the roads part; let your horses breathe awhile, and I will tell you a plan I have formed, and which, I think, will please you."

The small party halted. The horsemen dismounted, and lay down on the grass. As all knew of the conspiracy formed by Don Miguel, and were his accomplices in different degrees, this halt did not surprise them, for they suspected that the moment for action was not far off, and that their chief doubtless wished to take his final measures before throwing off the mask, and proclaiming the independence of New Mexico. On inviting them to hunt the wild horses, Don Miguel had not concealed from them Red Cedar's treachery, and the necessity in which he found himself of dealing a great blow, if he did not wish all to be hopelessly lost.

Valentine led the hacendero and the general a short distance apart. When they were out of ear-shot the hunter carefully examined the neighbourhood; then within a few minutes rejoined his friends, whom his way of acting considerably perplexed.

"Caballeros," he said to them, "what do you intend doing? In our position minutes are ages. Are you ready to make your pronunciamento?"

"Yes," they answered.

"This is what I propose. You, Don Miguel, will proceed direct on Paso. At about half a league from that town you will find Curumilla, with twenty of the best rifles on the frontier. These men, in whom you can trust, are Canadian and Indian hunters devoted to me. They will form the nucleus of a band sufficient for you to seize on Paso without striking a blow, as it is only defended by a garrison of forty soldiers. Does that plan suit you?"

"Yes; I will set about it at once. But my daughter?"

"I will take charge of her. You will also leave me your son, and I will convey them both to the hacienda. As for the other ladies, on reaching the town, they will merely go to their homes, which I fancy, presents no difficulty."

"None."

"Good! Then that is settled?"

"Perfectly."

"As for you, general, your men have been échelonned by my care in parties of ten and twenty along the Santa Fe road, up to two leagues of the city, so that you will only have to pick them up. In this way you will find yourself, within three hours, at the head of five hundred resolute and well-armed men."

"Why, Valentine, my friend," the general said laughingly, "do you know there is the stuff in you to make a partisan chief, and that I am almost jealous of you."

"Oh! that would be wrong, general: I assure you I am most disinterested in the affair."

"Well, my friend, I know it: you are a free desert hunter, caring very little for our paltry schemes."

"That is true; but I have vowed to Don Miguel and his family a friendship which will terminate with my life. I tremble for him and his children when I think of the numberless dangers that surround him, and I try to aid him as far as my experience and activity permit me. That is the secret of my conduct."

"This profession of faith was at least useless, my friend. I have known you too intimately and too long to doubt your intentions. Hence, you see, I place such confidence in you, that I accept your ideas without discussion, so convinced am I of the purity of your intentions."

"Thanks, Don Miguel; you have judged me correctly. Come, gentlemen, to horse, and start. We must separate here—you, Don Miguel, to proceed by the right-hand track to Paso; you, general, by the left hand one to Santa Fe; while I, with Don Pablo and his sister proceed straight on till we reach the Hacienda de la Noria."

"To horse, then!" the hacendero shouted resolutely; "And may God defend the right!"

"Yes," the general added; "for from this moment the revolution is commenced."

The three men returned to their friends. Don Miguel said a few words to his children, and in an instant the whole party were in the saddle.

"The die is cast!" Valentine exclaimed. "May Heaven keep you, gentlemen!"

"Forward!" Don Miguel commanded.

"Forward!" General Ibañez shouted, as he rushed in the opposite direction.

Valentine looked after his departing friends. Their black outlines were soon blended with the darkness, and then the footfalls of their horses died out in the night. Valentine gave a sigh and raised his head.

"God will protect them," he murmured; then turning to the two young people, "Come on, children," he said.

They started, and for some minutes kept silence. Valentine was too busy in thought to address his companions; and yet Doña Clara and Don Pablo, whose curiosity was excited to the highest pitch, were burning to question him. At length the girl, by whose side the hunter marched with that quick step which easily keeps up with a horse, bent down to him.

"My friend," she said to him in her soft voice, "what is taking place? Why has my father left us, instead of coming to his house?"

"Yes," Don Pablo added, "he seemed agitated when he parted from us. His voice was stern, his words sharp. What is happening, my friend? Why did not my father consent to my accompanying him?"

Valentine hesitated to answer.

"I implore you, my friend," Doña Clara continued, "do not leave us in this mortal anxiety. The announcement of a misfortune would certainly cause us less pain than the perplexity in which we are."

"Why force me to speak, my children?" the hunter answered in a saddened voice. "The secret you ask of me is not mine. If your father did not impart his plans to you, it was doubtless because weighty reasons oppose it. Do not force me to render you more sorrowful by telling you things you ought not to know."

"But I am not a child," Don Pablo exclaimed. "It seems tome that my father ought not to have thus held his confidence from me."

"Do not accuse your father, my friend," Valentine answered gravely: "probably he could not have acted otherwise."

"Valentine, Valentine! I will not accept those poor reasons," the young man urged. "In the name of our friendship I insist on your explaining yourself."

"Silence!" the hunter suddenly interrupted him. "I hear suspicious sounds around us."

The three travellers stopped and listened, but all was quiet. The hacienda was about five hundred yards at the most from the spot where they halted. Don Pablo and Doña Clara heard nothing, but Valentine made them a sign to remain quiet; then he dismounted and placed his ear to the ground.

"Follow me," he said. "Something is happening here which I cannot make out; but it alarms me."

The young people obeyed without hesitation; but they had only gone a few paces when Valentine stopped again.

"Are your weapons loaded?" he sharply asked Don Pablo.

"Yes."

"Good! Perhaps you will have to make use of them."

All at once the gallop of a horse urged to its utmost speed was audible.

"Attention!" Valentine muttered.

Still the horseman, whoever he might be, rapidly advanced in the direction of the travellers, and soon came up to them. Suddenly Valentine bounded like a panther, seized the horse by the bridle and stopped it dead.

"Who are you, and where are you going?" he shouted, as he put a pistol barrel against the stranger's chest.

"Heaven be praised!" the latter said, not replying to the question. "Perhaps I shall be able to save you. Fly, fly, in all haste!"

"Father Seraphin!" Valentine said with stupor, as he lowered his pistol. "What has happened?"

"Fly, fly!" the missionary repeated, who seemed a prey to the most profound terror.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE ABDUCTION.

Red Cedar and Fray Ambrosio had not remained inactive since their last interview up to the day when Don Miguel set out to hunt the wild horses. These two fellows, so suited to understand each other, had manoeuvred with extreme skill. Fray Ambrosio, all whose avaricious instincts had been aroused since he had so artfully stolen from poor Joaquin the secret of his placer, had assembled a formidable collection of the bandits who always swarm on the Indian frontiers. In a few days he found himself at the head of one hundred and twenty adventurers, all men who had cheated the gallows, and of whom he felt the more sure as the secret of the expedition was concealed from them, and they fancied they formed a war party engaged to go scalp hunting.

These men, who all knew Red Cedar by reputation, burnt to set out, so convinced were they of carrying out a successful expedition under such a leader. Only two men formed an exception to this band of scoundrels, the smallest culprit of whom had at least three or four murders on his conscience. They were Harry, and Dick, who, for reasons the reader has doubtless guessed, found themselves, to their great regret, mixed up with these bandits. Still we must say, in justice to Fray Ambrosio's soldiers, that they were all bold hunters, accustomed for many a year to desert life, who knew all its perils, and feared none of its dangers.

Fray Ambrosio; apprehending the effects of mezcal and pulque on his men, had made them bivouac at the entrance of the desert, at a sufficiently great distance from the Paso del Norte to prevent them easily going there. The adventurers spent their time joyously in playing, not for money, as they had none, but for the scalps they intended presently to lift from the Indians, each of which represented a very decent sum. Still Fray Ambrosio, so soon as his expedition was completely organised, had only one desire—to start as speedily as possible; but for two days Red Cedar was not to be found. At length Fray Ambrosio succeeded in catching him just as he was entering his jacal.

"What has become of you?" he asked him.

"What does that concern you?" the squatter answered brutally. "Have I to answer for my conduct to you?"

"I do not say so: still, connected as we are at this moment, it would be as well for me to know where to find you when I want you."

"I have been attending to my business, as you have to yours."

"Well, are you satisfied?"

"Very much so," he answered with a sinister smile. "You will soon learn the result of my journey."

"All the better. If you are satisfied, I am so too."

"Ah, ah!"

"Yes, all is ready for departure."

"Let us be off—tomorrow if you like."

"On this very night."

"Very good. You are like me, and don't care to travel by day on account of the heat of the sun."

The two accomplices smiled at this delicate jest.

"But before starting," the squatter continued, becoming serious again, "we have something left to do here."

"What is it?" Fray Ambrosio asked with candor.

"It is wonderful what a short memory you have. Take care: that failing may play an awkward trick some day."

"Thanks! I will try to correct it."

"Yes, and the sooner the better: in the meanwhile I will refresh your memory."

"I shall feel obliged to you."

"And Doña Clara, do you fancy we are going to leave her behind?"

"Hum! Then you still think of that?"

"By Jove! More than ever."

"The fact is it will not be easy to carry her off at this moment."

"Why not?"

"In the first place, she is not at the hacienda."

"That is certainly a reason."

"Is it not?"

"Yes; but she must be somewhere, I suppose?" the squatter said with a coarse laugh.

"She has gone with her father to a hunt of wild horses."

"The hunt is over and they are on their return."

"You are well informed."

"It is my trade. Come, do you still mean serving me?"

"I must."

"That is how I like you. There cannot be many people at the hacienda?"

"A dozen at the most."

"Better still. Listen to me: it is now four in the afternoon. I have a ride to take. Return to the hacienda, and I will come there this evening at nine, with twenty resolute men. You will open the little gate of the corral, and leave me to act. I'll answer for all."

"If you wish it it must be so," Fray Ambrosio said with a sigh.

"Are you going to begin again?" the squatter asked in a meaning voice as he rose.

"No, no, it is unnecessary," the monk exclaimed. "I shall expect you."

"Good: till this evening."

"Very well."

On which the two accomplices separated. All happened as had been arranged between them. At nine o'clock Red Cedar reached the little gate, which was opened for him by Fray Ambrosio, and the squatter entered the hacienda at the head of his three sons and a party of bandits. The peons, surprised in their sleep, were bound before they even knew what was taking place.

"Now," Red Cedar said, "we are masters of the place, the girl can come as soon as she likes."

"Eh?" the monk went on. "All is not finished yet. Don Miguel is a resolute man, and is well accompanied: he will not let his daughter be carried off under his eyes without defending her."

"Don Miguel will not come," the squatter said with a sardonic grin.

"How do you know?"

"That is not your business."

"We shall see."

But the bandits had forgotten Father Seraphin. The missionary, aroused by the unusual noise he heard in the hacienda, had hastily risen. He had heard the few words exchanged between the accomplices, and they were sufficient to make him guess the fearful treachery they meditated. Only listening to his heart, the missionary glided out into the corral, saddled a horse, and opening a door, of which he had a key, so that he could enter or leave the hacienda as his duties required, he started at full speed in the direction which he supposed the hunters must follow in returning to the hacienda. Unfortunately, Father Seraphin had been unable to effect his flight unheard by the squatter's practised ear.

"Malediction!" Red Cedar shouted, as he rushed, rifle in hand, toward a window, which he dashed out with his fist, "We are betrayed."

The bandits rushed in disorder into the corral where their horses were tied up, and leaped into their saddles. At this moment a shadow flitted across the plain in front of the squatter, who rapidly shouldered his rifle and fired. Then he went out: a stifled cry reached his ear, but the person the bandit had fired at still went on.

"No matter," the squatter muttered; "that fine bird has lead in its wing. Sharp, sharp, my men, on the trail!"

And all the bandits rushed off in pursuit of the fugitive.

Father Seraphin had fallen in a fainting condition at Valentine's feet.

"Good heavens!" the hunter exclaimed in despair, "what can have happened?"

And he gently carried the missionary into a ditch that ran by the side of the road. Father Seraphin had his shoulder fractured, and the blood poured in a stream from the wound. The hunter looked around him; but at this moment a confused sound could be heard like the rolling of distant thunder.

"We must fall like brave men, Don Pablo, that is all," he said sharply.

"Be at your ease," the young man answered coldly.

Doña Clara was pale and trembling.

"Come," Valentine said.

And, with a movement rapid as thought, he bounded on to the missionary's horse. The three fugitives started at full speed. The flight lasted a quarter of an hour, and then Valentine stopped. He dismounted, gave the young people a signal to wait, lay down on the ground, and began crawling on his hands and knees, gliding like a serpent through the long grass that concealed him, and stopping at intervals to look around him, and listen attentively to the sounds of the desert. Suddenly he rushed towards his companions, seized the horses by the bridle, and dragged them behind a mound, where they remained concealed, breathless and unable to speak.

A formidable noise of horses was audible. Some twenty black shadows passed like a tornado within ten paces of their hiding place, not seeing them in consequence of the darkness.

Valentine drew a deep breath.

"All hope is not lost," he muttered.

He waited anxiously for five minutes: their pursuers were going further away. Presently the sound of their horses' hoofs ceased to disturb the silence of the night.

"To horse!" Valentine said.

They leaped into their saddles and started again, not in the direction of the hacienda, but in that of the Paso.

"Loosen your bridles," the hunter said: "more still—we are not moving."

Suddenly a loud neigh was borne on the breeze to the ears of the fugitives.

"We are lost!" Valentine muttered. "They have found our trail."

Red Cedar was too old a hand on the prairie to be long thrown out: he soon perceived that he was mistaken, and was now turning back, quite certain this time of holding the trail. Then began one of those fabulous races which only the dwellers on the prairie can witness—races which intoxicate and cause a giddiness, and which no obstacle is powerful enough to stop or check, for the object is success or death. The bandits' half wild horses, apparently identifying themselves with the ferocious passions of their riders, glided through the night with the rapidity of the phantom steed in the German ballad, bounded over precipices, and rushed with prodigious speed.

At times a horseman rolled with his steed from the top of a rock, and fell into an abyss, uttering a yell of distress; but his comrades passed over his body, borne along like a whirlwind, and responding to this cry of agony, the final appeal of a brother, by a formidable howl of rage. This pursuit had already lasted two hours, and the fugitives had not lost an inch of ground: their horses, white with foam, uttered hoarse cries of fatigue and exhaustion as a dense smoke came out of their nostrils. Doña Clara, with her hair untied and floating in the breeze, with sparkling eye and closely pressed lips, constantly urged her horse on with voice and hand.

"All is over!" the hunter suddenly said. "Save yourselves! I will let myself be killed here, so that you may go on for ten minutes longer, and be saved. I will hold out for that time, so go on."

"No," Don Pablo answered nobly; "we will be all saved or perish together."

"Yes," the maiden remarked.

Valentine shrugged his shoulders.

"You are mad," he said.

All at once he started, for their pursuers were rapidly approaching.

"Listen," he said. "Do you two let yourselves be captured; they will not follow me, as they owe me no grudge. I swear to you that if I remain at liberty I will deliver you, even if they hide you in the bowels of the earth."

Without replying Don Pablo dismounted, and Valentine leaped on to his horse.

"Hope for the best!" he shouted hoarsely, and disappeared.

Don Pablo, so soon as he was alone with his sister, made her dismount, seated her at the foot of a tree, and stood before her with a pistol in either hand. He had not to wait long, for almost immediately he was surrounded by the bandits.

"Surrender!" Red Cedar shouted in a panting voice.

Don Pablo smiled disdainfully.

"Here is my answer," he said.

And with two pistol shots he laid two bandits low; then he threw away his useless weapons, and crossing his arms on his breast said,—

"Do what you please now; I am avenged."

Red Cedar bounded with fury.

"Kill that dog!" he shouted.

Shaw rushed toward the young man, threw his nervous arms around him, and whispered in his ear,—

"Do not resist, but fall as if dead."

Don Pablo mechanically followed his advice.

"It is all over," said Shaw. "Poor devil! He did not cling to life."

He returned his knife to his belt, threw the supposed corpse on his shoulders, and dragged it into a ditch. At the sight of her brother's body, whom she supposed to be dead, Doña Clara uttered a shriek of despair and fainted. Red Cedar laid the maiden across his saddle-bow, and the whole band, starting at a gallop was soon lost in the darkness. Don Pablo then rose slowly, and took a sorrowful glance around.

"My poor sister!" he murmured.

Then he perceived her horse near him.

"Valentine alone can save her," he said.

He mounted the horse, and proceeded toward the Paso, asking himself this question, which he found it impossible to answer:—

"But why did not that man kill me?"

A few paces from the village he perceived two men halting on the road, and conversing with the greatest animation. They hurriedly advanced toward him, and the young man uttered a cry of surprise on recognising them. They were Valentine and Curumilla.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE REVOLT.

Don Miguel Zarate had marched rapidly on the Paso, and an hour after leaving Valentine he saw flashing in the distance the lights that shone in the village windows. The greatest calmness prevailed in the vicinity; only at times could be heard the barking of the dogs baying at the moon, or the savage miawling of the wild cats hidden in the shrubs. At about one hundred yards from the village a man suddenly rose before the small party.

"Who goes there?" he shouted.

"*Méjico e independencia!*" the hacendero answered.

"*¿Qué gente?*" the stranger continued.

"Don Miguel Zarate."

At these words twenty men hidden in the brushwood rose suddenly, and throwing their rifles on their shoulders, advanced to meet the horsemen. They were the hunters commanded by Curumilla, who, by Valentine's orders, were awaiting the hacendero's arrival to join him.

"Well," Don Miguel asked the chief, "is there anything new?"

Curumilla shook his head.

"Then we can advance?"

"Yes."

"What is the matter, chief? Have you seen anything alarming?"

"No; and yet I have a feeling of treachery."

"How so?"

"I cannot tell you. Apparently everything is as usual: still there is something which is not so. Look you, it is scarce ten o'clock: generally at that hour all the mesones are full, the ventas are crammed with gamblers and drinkers, the streets flocked with promenaders. This night there is nothing of the sort: all is closed—the town seems abandoned. This tranquillity is factitious. I am alarmed, for *I hear the silence*. Take care."

Don Miguel was involuntarily struck by the chief's remarks. He had known Curumilla for a long time. He had often seen him display in the most dangerous circumstances a coolness and contempt for death beyond all praise: hence some importance must be attached to the apprehensions and anxiety of such a man. The hacendero ordered his party to halt, assembled his friends, and held a council. All were of opinion that, before venturing to advance further, they should send as scout a clever man to traverse the town, and see for himself if the fears of the Indian chief were well founded.

One of the hunters offered himself. The conspirators concealed themselves on either side the road, and awaited, lying in the shrubs, the return of their messenger. He was a half-breed, Simon Muñez by name, to whom the Indians had given the soubriquet of "Dog-face," owing to his extraordinary likeness to that animal. This name had stuck to the hunter, who, *nolens volens*, had been compelled to accept it. He was short and clumsy, but endowed with marvellous strength; and we may say at once that he was an emissary of Red Cedar, and had only joined the hunters in

order to betray them.

When he left the conspirators he proceeded toward the village whistling. He had scarce taken a dozen steps into the first street ere a door opened, and a man appeared. This man stepped forward and addressed the hunter.

"You whistle very late, my friend."

"A whistle to wake those who are asleep," the half breed made answer.

"Come in," the man continued.

Dog-face went in, and the door closed upon him. He remained in the house half an hour, then went out, and hurried back along the road he had traversed.

Red Cedar, who wished before all to avenge himself on Don Miguel Zarate, had discovered, through Fray Ambrosio, the conspirators' new plan. Without loss of time he had taken his measures in consequence, and had managed so well that, although the general, the governor, and the criminal judge were prisoners, Don Miguel must succumb in the contest he was preparing to provoke. Fray Ambrosio, to his other qualities, joined that of being a listener at doors. In spite of the distrust which his patron was beginning to display toward him on Valentine's recommendation, he had surprised a conversation between Don Miguel and General Ibañez. This conversation, immediately reported to Red Cedar, who, according to his usual custom, had appeared to attach no importance to it, had been sufficient, however, to make the squatter prepare his batteries and countermine the conspiracy.

Dog-face rejoined his companions after an hour's absence.

"Well?" Don Miguel asked him.

"All is quiet," the half-breed answered; "the inhabitants have retired to their houses, and everybody is asleep."

"You noticed nothing of a suspicious nature?"

"I went through the town from one end to the other, and saw nothing."

"We can advance, then?"

"In all security: it will only be a promenade."

On this assurance the conspirators regained their courage, Curumilla was treated as a visionary, and the order was given to advance. Still Dog-face's report, far from dissipating the Indian chief's doubts, had produced the contrary effect, and considerably augmented them. Saying nothing, he placed himself by the hunter's side, with the secret intention of watching him closely.

The plan of the conspirators was very simple. They would march directly on the Cabildo (Town hall), seize it, and proclaim a Provisional Government. Under present circumstances nothing appeared to be easier. Don Miguel and his band entered the Paso, and nothing occurred to arouse their suspicions. It resembled that town in the "Arabian Nights," in which all the inhabitants, struck by the wand of the wicked enchanter, sleep an eternal sleep. The conspirators advanced into the town with their rifle barrels thrust forward, with eye and ear on the watch, and ready to fire at the slightest alarm; but nothing stirred. As Curumilla had observed, the town was too quiet. This tranquillity hid something extraordinary, and must conceal the tempest. In spite of himself Don Miguel felt a secret apprehension which he could not master.

To our European eyes Don Miguel will perhaps appear a poor conspirator, without foresight or any great connection in his ideas. From our point of view that is possible; but in a country like Mexico, which counts its revolutions by hundreds, and where *pronunciamentos* take place, in most cases, without sense or reason because a colonel wishes to become a general, or a lieutenant a captain, things are not regarded so closely; and the hacendero, on the contrary, had evidenced tact, prudence, and talent in carrying out a conspiracy which, during the several years it had been preparing, had only come across one traitor. And now it was too late to turn back: the alarm had been given, and the Government was on its guard. They must go onwards, even if they succumbed in the struggle.

All these considerations had been fully weighed by Don Miguel; and he had not given the signal till he was driven into his last intrenchments, and convinced that there was no way of escape left him. Was it not a thousand fold better to die bravely with arms in their hands, in support of a just cause, than wait to be arrested without having made an attempt to succeed? Don Miguel had sacrificed his life, and no more could be expected of him.

In the meanwhile the conspirators advanced. They had nearly reached the heart of the town; they were at this moment in a little, dirty, and narrow street, called the Calle de San Isidro, which opens out on the Plaza Mayor, when suddenly a dazzling light illumined the darkness; torches flashed from all the windows; and Don Miguel saw that the two ends of the street in which he was were guarded by strong detachments of cavalry.

"Treachery!" the conspirators shouted in terror.

Curumilla bounded on Dog-face, and buried his knife between his shoulders. The half-breed fell in a lump, quite dead, and not uttering a cry. Don Miguel judged the position at the first glance: he saw that he and his party were lost.

"Let us die!" he said.

"We will!" the conspirators resolutely responded.

Curumilla with the butt of his rifle beat in the door of the nearest house, and rushed in, the conspirators following him. They were soon intrenched on the roof. In Mexico all the houses have flat roofs, formed like terraces. Thanks to the Indian chief's idea, the rebels found themselves in possession of an improvised fortress, where they could defend themselves for a long time, and sell their lives dearly.

The troops advanced from each end of the street, while the roofs of all the houses were occupied by soldiers. The battle was about to begin between earth and heaven, and promised to be terrible. At this moment General Guerrero, who commanded the troops, bade them halt, and advanced alone to the house on the top of which the conspirators were intrenched. Don Miguel beat up the guns of his comrades, who aimed at the officer.

"Wait," he said to them; and, addressing the general, "What do you want?" he shouted.

"To offer you propositions."

"Speak."

The general came a few paces nearer, so that those he addressed could not miss one of his words.

"I offer you life and liberty if you consent to surrender your leader," he said.

"Never!" the conspirators shouted in one voice.

"It is my place to answer," Don Miguel said; and then turning to the general, "What assurance do you give me that these conditions will be honourably carried out?"

"My word of honor as a soldier," the general answered.

"Very good," Don Miguel went on; "I accept. All the men who accompany me will leave the town one after the other."

"No, we will not!" the conspirators shouted as they brandished their weapons; "we would sooner die."

"Silence!" the hacendero said in a loud voice. "I alone have the right to speak here, for I am your chief. The life of brave men like you must not be needlessly sacrificed. Go, I say; I order you—I implore it of you," he added with tears in his voice. "Perhaps you will soon take your revenge."

The conspirators hung their heads mournfully.

"Well?" the general asked.

"My friends, accept. I will remain alone here. If you break your word I will kill myself."

"I repeat that you hold my word," the general answered.

The conspirators came one after the other to embrace Don Miguel, and then went down into the street without being in any way interfered with. Things happen thus in this country, where conspiracies and revolutions are on the order of the day, as it were. The defeated are spared as far as possible, from the simple reason that the victors may find themselves tomorrow fighting side by side with them for the same cause. Curumilla was the last to depart.

"All is not ended yet," he said to Don Miguel. "Koutonepi will save you, father."

The hacendero shook his head sadly.

"Chief," he said in a deeply moved voice, "I leave my daughter to Valentine, Father Seraphin, and yourself. Watch over her: the poor child will soon have no father."

Curumilla embraced Don Miguel silently and retired; he had soon disappeared in the crowd, the general having honourably kept his word.

Don Miguel threw down his weapons and descended.

"I am your prisoner," he said.

General Guerrero bowed, and made him a sign to mount the horse a soldier had brought up.

"Where are we going?" the hacendero said.

"To Santa Fe," the general answered, "where you will be tried with General Ibañez, who will doubtless soon be a prisoner like yourself."

"Oh!" Don Miguel muttered thoughtfully, "who betrayed us this time?"

"It was still Red Cedar," the general answered.

The hacendero let his head sink on his chest, and remained silent. A quarter of an hour later the prisoner left the Paso del Norte, escorted by a regiment of dragoons. When the last trooper had disappeared in the windings of the road three men left the shrubs that concealed them, and stood like three phantoms in the midst of the desolate plain.

"O heavens!" Don Pablo cried in a heart-rending voice, "my father, my sister—who will restore them to me?"

"I!" Valentine said in a grave voice, as he laid his hand on his shoulder. "Am I not the TRAIL-HUNTER?"

PART II.—EL PRESIDIO DE SANTA FE.

CHAPTER I.

EL RANCHO DEL COYOTE.

About a month after the events we have described in the first part of this veracious history, two horsemen, well mounted, and carefully enwrapped in their cloaks, entered at a smart trot the town of Santa Fe between three and four o'clock in the afternoon.

Santa Fe, the capital of New Mexico, is a pretty town, built in the midst of a laughing and fertile plain. One of its sides occupies the angle formed by a small stream: it is surrounded by the *adobe* walls of the houses by which it is bordered. The entrance of each street is closed by stakes in the form of palisades; and like the majority of towns in Spanish America, the houses, built only one story high in consequence of the earthquakes, are covered with terraces of well-beaten earth, called *azoteas,* which are a sufficient protection in this glorious climate, where the sky is constantly pure.

In the time of the Castilian rule Santa Fe enjoyed a certain importance, owing to its strategic position, which allowed an easy defence against the incursions of the Indians; but since the emancipation of Mexico this city, like all the other centres of population in his unhappy country, has seen its splendour vanish forever, and despite the fertility of its soil and the magnificence of its climate, it has entered into such a state of decadence that the day is at hand when it will be only an uninhabited ruin. In a word, this city, which fifty years back contained more than ten thousand inhabitants, has now scarcely three thousand, eaten up by fevers and the utmost wretchedness.

Still during the last few weeks Santa Fe had appeared to emerge, as if by magic from the lethargy into which it is ordinarily plunged; a certain degree of animation prevailed in its usually deserted streets; in short, a new life circulated in the veins of this population, to whom, however, all must appear a matter of indifference. The fact was that an event of immense importance had recently taken place in this town. The two leaders of the conspiracy lately attempted had been transferred to safe keeping at Santa Fe.

The Mexicans, ordinarily so slow when justice has to be dealt, are the most expeditious people in the world when a conspiracy has to be punished. Don Miguel and General Ibañez had not pined long in prison. A court martial, hurriedly convened, had assembled under the presidency of the governor, and the two conspirators were unanimously condemned to be shot.

The hacendero, through his name and his position, and especially on account of his fortune, had numerous partisans in the province: hence the announcement of the verdict had caused a profound stupor, which almost immediately changed into anger, among the rich land owners and the Indians of New Mexico. A dull agitation prevailed throughout the country; and the governor, who felt too weak to hold head against the storm that threatened him, and regretted that he had carried matters so far, was temporising, and trying to evade the peril of his position until a regiment of dragoons he had asked of the Government arrived, and gave strength to the law. The condemned men, whom the governor had not yet dared to place in *capilla*, were still provisionally detained in the prison.

The two men of whom we have spoken, rode without stopping through the streets of the town, deserted at this hour, when everybody is at home enjoying his siesta, and proceeded toward an unpretending rancho, built on the banks of the stream, at the opposite end of the town from that by which they entered.

"Well," one of the horsemen said, addressing his comrade, "was I not right? You see everyone is asleep: there is nobody to watch us. We have arrived at a capital moment."

"Bah!" the other answered in a rough voice, "Do you believe that? In towns there is always somebody watching to see what does not concern him, and report it after his fashion."

"That is possible," the first said, shrugging his shoulders disdainfully. "I care about it as little as I do for a stringhalt horse."

"And I, too," the other said sharply. "Do you imagine that I care more than you do for the gossips? But stay; I fancy we have reached the rancho of Andrés Garote. This must be the filthy tenement, unless I am mistaken."

"It is the house. I only hope the scamp has not forgotten, the meeting I gave him. Wait a minute, señor padre; I will give the agreed-on signal."

"It is not worth while, Red Cedar. You know that I am always at your excellency's orders when you may please to give them," a mocking voice said from inside the rancho, the door of which immediately opened to give admission to the newcomers, and allowed a glimpse of the tall figure and intelligent face of Andrés Garote himself.

"*Ave Maria purísima!*" the travellers said, as they dismounted and entered the rancho.

"*Sin pecado concebida!*" Andrés replied, as he took the bridles of the horses and led them to the corral, where he unsaddled them and gave each a truss of alfalfa.

The travellers, fatigued by a long journey, sat down on butacas arranged against the wall, and awaited the host's return, while wiping their dank foreheads and twisting a maize cigarette between their fingers. The room in which they were had nothing extremely attractive about it. It was a large chamber with two windows, protected by iron bars, the greasy panes allowing but a doubtful light to pass. The naked and smoky walls were covered with clumsily-painted pictures, representing various holy objects. The furniture only consisted of three or four halting tables, the same number of benches, and a few butacas, the torn and harsh leather of which evinced lengthened use. As for the floor, it was merely of beaten earth, but rendered uneven by the mud incessantly brought in upon the feet of visitors. A door carefully closed led to an inner room, in which the ranchero slept. Another door was opposite to it, and through this Andrés speedily entered after giving the horses their provender.

"I did not expect you yet," he said as he entered; "but you are welcome. Is there anything new?"

"My faith, I know nothing but the affair that brings us. It is rather serious, I fancy, and prevents us attending to anything else," Red Cedar remarked.

"*Caspita*! what vivacity, compadre!" Andrés exclaimed. "But, before talking, I hope you will take some refreshment at any rate. There is nothing like a cup of mezcal or pulque to clear the brain."

"Not to forget," Fray Ambrosio said, "that it is infernally hot, and my tongue is glued to my palate, as I have swallowed so much dust."

"*Cuerpo de Dios*!" Andrés said as he went to look for a bottle among several others arranged on a sort of bar, and placed it before the travellers. "Pay attention to that, señor padre; for it is serious, and you run a risk of death, *caray!*"

"Give me the remedy, then, chatterer," the monk replied as he held out his glass.

The mezcal, liberally poured out, was swallowed at a draught by the three men, who put back their glasses on the table with a "hum" of satisfaction, and that clinking of the tongue peculiar to topers when they are swallowing anything that tickles the throat.

"And now suppose we talk seriously," Red Cedar said.

"At your orders, señores caballeros," Andrés replied. "Still, if you prefer a hand at monte, you know that I have cards at your service."

"Presently, señor Andrés, presently. Everything will have its turn. Let us first settle our little business," Fray Ambrosio judiciously observed.

Andrés Garote bowed his head in resignation, while thrusting back into his pocket the pack of cards he had already half drawn out. The three men made themselves as comfortable as they could, and Red Cedar, after casting a suspicious glance around him, at length took the word.

"You know, caballeros," he said, "how, when we thought we had nothing to do but proceed straight to Apacheria, the sudden desertion of nearly all our gambusinos checked us. The position was most critical for us, and the abduction of Doña Clara compelled us to take the utmost precautions."

"That is true," Andrés Garote observed with an air of conviction.

"Although certain influential persons protect us under the rose," Red Cedar continued, "we are compelled to keep in the shade as far as we can. I therefore sought to remedy the gravest points in the business. In the first place, the girl was hidden in an inaccessible retreat, and then I began looking for comrades to take the place of those who abandoned us so suddenly."

"Well?" the two men interrupted him sharply.

"At this moment," Red Cedar calmly continued, "when the placers of California call away all the men belonging to the profession, it was certainly no easy task to collect one hundred men of the sort we want, the more so as we shall have to fight the Indios Bravos in our expedition. I did not care to enlist novices, who at the sight of the first Apache or Comanche savages, would bolt in terror, and leave us in the lurch on the prairies. What I wanted were resolute men, whom no fatigue would disgust, and who, once attached to our enterprise, would follow it out to the end. I have, therefore, during the past month, been running about to all the frontier presidios; and the devil has come to my help tolerably well, for the evil is now repaired, and the band complete."

"I hope, Red Cedar," Fray Ambrosio asked, "that you have not spoken about the placer to your men?"

"Do you take me for a fool! No, padre," the squatter answered sharply, "no, no. A hundred thousand reasons urge us to be prudent, and keep the expedition secret. In the first place, I do not wish to make the fortune of the Government while making our own. An indiscretion would ruin us now, when the whole world only dreams of mines and placers, and Europe sends us a mob of lean and starving vagabonds, greedy to grow fat at our expense."

"Famously reasoned," said Andrés.

"No, no, trust to me. I have assembled the finest collection of picaros ever brought together for an expedition, all food for the gallows, ruined by monte, who do not care for hard blows, and on whom I can fully count, while being very careful not to drop a word that can enlighten them as to the spot whither we propose leading them; for, in that case, I know as well as you do that they would abandon us without the slightest scruples, or, as is even more probable, assassinate us to gain possession of the immense treasures we covet."

"Nothing can be more just," Fray Ambrosio answered. "I am quite of your opinion, Red Cedar.

Now what have you resolved on?"

"We have not an instant to lose," the squatter continued. "This very evening, or tomorrow at the latest, we must set out. Who knows whether we have not already delayed our start too long? Perhaps one of those European vagabonds may have discovered our placer, for those scoundrels have a peculiar scent for gold."

Fray Ambrosio cast a suspicious glance at his partner.

"Hum!" he muttered, "that would be very unlucky, for hitherto the business has been well managed."

"For that reason," Red Cedar hastened to add, "I only suggest a doubt —nothing more."

"Come, Red Cedar," the monk said, "you have yourself narrated all the embarrassments of our position, and the countless difficulties we shall have to surmount before reaching our object. Why, then, complicate the gravity of our situation still more, and create fresh enemies needlessly?"

"I do not understand you, señor padre. Be good enough to explain yourself more clearly."

"I allude to the young girl you carried off."

"Ah, ah!" Red Cedar said with a grin, "Is that where the shoe pinches you, comrade? I am vexed at it; but I will not answer your question. If I carried off that woman, it was because I had pressing reasons to do so. These reasons still exist; that is all I can tell you. All the better if these explanations are sufficient for you; if not, you must put up with them, for you will get no others."

"Still it appears to me that, regarding the terms on which we stand to each other—"

"What can there be in common between the abduction of Doña Clara and the discovery of a placer in the heart of Apacheria? Come, you are mad, Fray Ambrosio; the mezcal is getting to your head."

"Still—" the monk insisted.

"Enough of that!" Red Cedar shouted as he roughly smote the table with his clenched fist. "I will not hear another word on the subject."

At this moment two smart blows were heard on the carefully-bolted door.

The three men started, and Red Cedar broke off.

"Shall I open?" Andrés asked.

"Yes," Fray Ambrosio answered: "hesitation or refusal might give an alarm. We must foresee everything."

Red Cedar consented with a toss of his head, and the ranchero went with an ill grace toward the door, which was being struck as if about to be beaten in.

CHAPTER II.

THE CUCHILLADA.

So soon as the door was opened two men appeared on the threshold. The first was Curumilla; the other, wrapped up in a large cloak, and with his broad-brimmed hat drawn over his eyes, entered the room, making the Indian chief a sign to follow him. The latter was evidently a Mexican.

"*Santas tardes!*" he said as he raised his hand to his hat, but not removing it.

"*Dios las de a usted buenas!*" the ranchero answered. "What shall I serve to your excellencies?"

"A bottle of mezcal," the stranger said.

The newcomers seated themselves at the end of the room, at a spot which the light reached in such a weakened state that it was almost dark. When they were served each poured out a glass of liquor, which he drank; and leaning his head on his hands, the Mexican appeared plunged in deep thought, not occupying himself the least in the world about the persons near him. Curumilla crossed his arms on his chest, half closed his eyes, and remained motionless.

Still the arrival of these two men, especially the presence of the stranger, had suddenly frozen the eloquence of our three friends. Gloomy and silent, they instinctively felt that the newcomers were enemies, and anxiously waited for what was about to occur. At length Red Cedar, doubtless more impatient than his comrades, and wishful to know at once what he had to expect, rose, filled his glass, and turned toward the strangers.

"Señores caballeros," he said, imitating that exquisite politeness which the Mexicans possess in the highest degree. "I have the honor of drinking to your health."

At this invitation Curumilla remained insensible as a granite statue: his companion slowly raised his head, fixed his eye for a moment on the speaker, and answered in a loud and firm voice,—

"It is needless, señor, for I shall not drink to yours. What I say to you," he added, laying a stress on the words, "your friends can also take for themselves if they think proper."

Fray Ambrosio rose violently.

"What do you say?" he exclaimed in a threatening voice. "Do you mean to insult me?"

"There are people whom a man cannot mean to insult," the stranger continued in a cutting voice. "Remember this, señor padre—I do not wish to have any dealings with you."

"Why so?"

"Because I do not please—that is all. Now, gentlemen, do not trouble yourselves about me, I beg, but continue your conversation: it was most interesting when I arrived. You were speaking, I believe, about an expedition you are preparing: there was a question too, I fancy, when I entered, about a girl your worthy friend, or partner—I do not know which he is—carried off with your assistance. Do not let me disturb you. I should, on the contrary, be delighted to learn what you intend doing with that unhappy creature."

No words could render the feeling of stupor and terror which seized on the three partners at this, crushing revelation of their plans. When they fancied they had completely concealed them by their cunning and skill, to see them thus suddenly unveiled in all their extent by a man whom they did not know, but who knew them, and in consequence could only be an enemy—this terrified them to such a degree that for a moment they fancied they had to do with the spirit of evil. The two Mexicans crossed themselves simultaneously, while the American uttered a hoarse exclamation of rage.

But Red Cedar and Fray Ambrosio were men too hardened in iniquity for any event, however grave in its nature, to crush them for long. The first moment past, they recovered themselves, and amazement gave way to fury. The monk drew from his vaquera boot a knife, and posted himself before the door to prevent egress; while Red Cedar, with frowning brow and a machete in his hand, advanced resolutely toward the table, behind which their bold adversary, standing with folded arms, seemed to defy them by his ironical smile.

"Whoever you may be," Red Cedar said, stopping two paces from his opponent, "chance has made you master of a secret that kills, and you shall die."

"Do you really believe that I owe a knowledge of your secrets to chance?" the other said with a mocking accent.

"Defend yourself," Red Cedar howled furiously, "If you do not wish me to assassinate you; for, *con mil diablos!* I shall not hesitate, I warn you."

"I know it," the stranger replied quietly. "I shall not be the first person to whom that has happened: the Sierra Madre and El Bolsón de Mapimi have often heard the agonising cries of your victims, when Indians were wanting to fill up your number of scalps."

At this allusion to his frightful trade the squatter felt a livid pallor cover his face, a tremor agitated all his limbs, and he yelled in a choking voice,—

"You lie! I am a hunter."

"Of scalps," the stranger immediately retorted, "unless you have given up that lucrative and honourable profession since your last expedition to the village of the Coras."

"Oh!" the squatter shouted with an indescribable burst of fury, "He is a coward who hides his face while uttering such words."

The stranger shrugged his shoulders contemptuously, and let the folds of his mantle fall sharply.

"Do you recognise me, Red Cedar, since your conscience has not yet whispered my name to you?"

"Oh!" the three men exclaimed in horror, and instinctively recoiling "Don Pablo de Zarate!"

"Yes," the young man continued, "Don Pablo, who has come, Red Cedar, to ask of you an account of his sister, whom you carried off."

Red Cedar was in a state of extraordinary agitation: with eyes dilated by terror, and contracted features, he felt the cold perspiration beading on his temples at this unexpected apparition.

"Ah!" he said in a hollow voice, "Do the dead, then, leave the tomb?"

"Yes," the young man shouted loudly, "they leave their tomb to tear your victims from you. Red Cedar, restore me my sister!"

The squatter leaped like a hyena on the young man, brandishing his machete.

"Dog!" he yelled, "I will kill you a second time."

But his wrist was suddenly seized by a hand of iron, and the bandit tottered back to the wall of the rancho, against which he was forced to lean, lest he should roll on the ground. Curumilla, who had hitherto remained an impassive witness of the scene that took place before him, had thought the moment for interference, had arrived, and had sharply hurled him back. The squatter, with eyes injected with blood, and lips clenched by rage, looked around him with glaring worthy of a wild beast. Fray Ambrosio and the ranchero, held in check by the Indian chief, did not dare to interfere. Don Pablo walked with slow and measured step toward the bandit. When he was ten paces from him he stopped, and looked fixedly at him.

"Red Cedar," he repeated in a calm voice, "give me back my sister."

"Never!" the squatter answered in a voice choked by rage.

In the meanwhile the monk and the ranchero had treacherously approached the young man, watching for the propitious moment to fall on him. The five men assembled in this room offered a

strange and sinister scene by the uncertain light that filtered through the windows, as each stood with his hand on his weapon, ready to kill or be killed, and only awaiting the opportunity to rush on his enemy. There was a moment of supreme silence. Assuredly these men were brave. In many circumstances they had seen death under every aspect; and yet their hearts beat as if to burst their breasts, for they knew that the combat about to commence between them was without truce or mercy. At length Don Pablo spoke again.

"Take care, Red Cedar," he said. "I have come to meet you alone and honourably. I have asked you for my sister several times, and you have not answered; so take care."

"I will sell your sister to the Apaches," the squatter howled. "As for you, accursed one, you shall not leave this room alive. May I be eternally condemned if your heart does not serve as a sheath to my knife!"

"The scoundrel is mad!" the young man said contemptuously.

He fell back a pace, and then stopped.

"Listen," he continued. "I will now retire, but we shall meet again; and woe to you then, for I shall be as pitiless to you as you have been to me. Farewell!"

"Oh! you shall not go in that way, my master," replied the squatter, who had regained all his boldness and impudence. "Did I not tell you I would kill you?"

The young man fixed upon him a glance of undefinable expression, and crossed his arms boldly on his chest.

"Try it," he said in a voice rendered harsh by the fury boiling in his heart.

Red Cedar uttered a yell of rage, and bounded on Don Pablo. The latter calmly awaited the attack; but, so soon as the squatter was within reach he suddenly took off his mantle, and threw it over his enemy's head, who, blinded by the folds of the thick garment, rolled about on the ground, unable to free himself from the accursed cloth that held him like a net. With one bound the young man was over the table, and troubling himself no further about Red Cedar, proceeded toward the door.

At this moment Fray Ambrosio rushed upon him, trying to bury his knife in his chest. Feeling not the slightest alarm, Don Pablo seized his assailant's wrist, and with a strength he was far from anticipating, twisted his arm so violently that his fingers opened, and he let the knife fall with a yell of pain. Don Pablo picked it up, and seized the monk by the throat.

"Listen, villain!" he said to him. "I am master of your life. You betrayed my father, who took pity on you, and received you into his house. You dishonour the gown you wear by your connection with criminals, whose ill deeds you share in. I could kill you, and perhaps ought to do so; but it would be robbing the executioner to whom you belong, and cheating the garrote which awaits you. This gown, of which you are unworthy, saves your life; but I will mark you so that you shall never forget me."

And placing the point of the knife on the monk's livid face, he made two gashes in the shape of a cross along the whole length and breadth of his face.

"We shall meet again!" he added in a thundering voice, as he threw the knife away in disgust.

Andrés Garote had not dared to make a move: terror nailed him motionless to the ground beneath the implacable eye of the Indian warrior. Don Pablo and Curumilla then rushed from the room and disappeared, and ere long the hoofs of two horses departing at full speed from the town could be heard clattering over the pavement.

By the aid of the ranchero, Red Cedar presently succeeded in freeing himself from the fold of the cloak that embarrassed him. When the three accomplices found themselves alone again an expression of impotent rage and deadly hatred distorted their faces.

"Oh!" the squatter muttered, grinding his teeth, and raising his fist to heaven, "I will be revenged."

"And I too," said Fray Ambrosio in a hollow voice, as he wiped away the blood that stained his face.

"Hum! I do not care," Andrés Garote said to himself aside. "That family of the Zarates is a fine one; but, *caray*! it must be confessed that Don Pablo is a rough fellow."

The worthy ranchero was the only one chance had favoured in this meeting by letting him escape safe and sound.

CHAPTER III.

THE HUNTERS.

At about two leagues from Santa Fe, in a clearing situated on the banks of the stream which borders that town, and on the evening of the same day, a man was seated before a large fire, which he carefully kept up, while actively engaged in making preparations for supper. A frugal meal, at any rate, this supper! It was composed of a buffalo hump, a few potatoes, and maize tortillas baked on the ashes, the whole washed down with pulque.

The night was gloomy. Heavy black clouds coursed athwart the sky, at times intercepting the sickly rays of the moon, which only shed an uncertain light over the landscape, which was itself buried in one of those dense mists that, in equatorial countries, exhale from the ground after a hot day. The wind blew violently through the trees, whose branches came in contact, with plaintive moans: and in the depths of the woods the miawling of the wild cats was mingled with the snarl of the coyotes and the howls of the pumas and jaguars. All at once the sound of galloping horses could be heard in the forest, and two riders burst into the clearing. On seeing them the hunter uttered an exclamation of joy, and hurried to meet them. They were Don Pablo and Curumilla.

"Heaven be praised!" the hunter said. "Here you are at last. I was beginning to grow alarmed at your long absence."

"You see that nothing has happened to me," the young man answered, affectionately pressing the hunter's hands.

Don Pablo had dismounted, and hobbled his own horse and Curumilla's near Valentine, while the Indian chief busied himself in preparing the supper.

"Come, come," the hunter said gaily, "to table. You must be hungry, and I am dying of inanition. You can tell me all that has occurred while we are eating."

The three men went to the table; that is, they seated themselves on the grass in front of the fire, and vigorously assailed their meagre repast. Desert life has this peculiarity—that in whatever position you may find yourself, as the struggles you go through are generally physical rather than moral, nature never resigns her claims: you feel the need of keeping up your strength, so as to be ready for all eventualities. There is no alarm great enough to prevent you from eating and drinking.

"Now," Valentine asked presently, "what have you done? I fancy you remained much longer than was necessary in that accursed town."

"We did, my friend. Certain reasons forced me to remain longer than I had at first intended."

"Proceed in regular order, if you have no objection. I fancy that is the only way of understanding each other."

"Act as you please, my friend."

"Very good: the chief and I will light our Indian pipes while you make your cigarette. We will sit with our backs to the fire, so as to watch the neighbourhood, and in that way can converse without apprehension. What do you say, Pablo?"

"You are always right, my friend. Your inexhaustible gaiety, your honest carelessness, restore me all my courage, and make me quite a different man."

"Hum!" Valentine said, "I am glad to hear you speak so. The position is serious, it is true; but it is far from being desperate. The chief and I have many times been in situations were our lives only depended on a thread: and yet we always emerged from them honourably—did we not, chief?"

"Yes," the Indian answered laconically, drawing in a mouthful of smoke, which he sent forth again from his mouth and nostrils.

"But that is not the question of the moment. I have sworn to save your father and sister, Pablo, and will do so, or my carcass shall be food for the wild beasts of the prairie; so leave me to act. Have you seen Father Seraphin?"

"Yes, I have. Our poor friend is still very weak and pale, and his wound is scarce cicatrised. Still, paying no heed to his sufferings, and deriving strength from his unbounded devotion to humanity, he has done all we agreed on. For the last week he has only left my father to hasten to his judges. He has seen the general, the governor, the bishop—everybody, in short—and has neglected nothing. Unfortunately all his exertions have hitherto been fruitless."

"Patience!" the hunter said with a smile of singular meaning.

"Father Seraphin believes for certain that my father will be placed in the capilla within two days. The governor wishes to have done with it—that is the expression he employed; and Father Seraphin told me that we have not a moment to lose."

"Two days are a long time, my friend; before they have elapsed many things may have occurred."

"That is true; but my father's life is at stake, and I feel timid."

"Good, Don Pablo; I like to hear you speak so. But reassure yourself; all is going on well, I repeat."

"Still, my friend, I believe it would be wise to take certain precautions. Remember it is a question of life or death, and we must make haste. How many times, under similar circumstances, have the best arranged plans failed! Do you think that your measures are well taken? Do you not fear lest an unhappy accident may derange all your plans at the decisive moment?"

"We are playing at this moment the devil's own game, my friend," Valentine answered coldly. "We have chance on our side; that is to say, the greatest power that exists, and which governs the world."

The young man lowered his head, as if but slightly convinced. The hunter regarded him for a moment with a mixture of interest and tender pity, and then continued in a soothing voice,—

"Listen, Don Pablo de Zarate," he said. "I have said that I will save your father, and mean to do so. Still I wish him to leave the prison in which he now is, like a man of his character ought to leave it, in open day, greeted by the applause of the crowd, and not by escaping furtively during the night, like a vile criminal. Hang it all! Do you think it would have been difficult for me to enter the town, and effect your father's escape by filing the bars or bribing the jailer? I would not do it. Don Miguel would not have accepted that cowardly and shameful flight. Your father shall leave his prison, but begged to do so by the governor himself, and all the authorities of Santa Fe. So regain your courage, and no longer doubt a man whose friendship and experience should, on the contrary, restore your confidence."

The young man had listened to these words with even increasing interest. When Valentine ceased speaking he seized his hand.

"Pardon me, my friend," he answered him. "I know how devoted you are to my family; but I suffer, and grief renders me unjust. Forgive me."

"Child, let us forget it all. Was the town quiet today?"

"I cannot tell you, for I was so absorbed in thought that I saw nothing going on around me. Still I fancy there was a certain agitation, which was not natural, on the Plaza Mayor, near the governor's palace."

Valentine indulged once again in that strange smile that had already played round the corners of his delicate lips.

"Good!" he said. "And did you, as I advised, try to gain any information about Red Cedar?"

"Yes," he answered with a start of joy, "I did; and I have positive news."

"Ah, ah! How so?"

"I will tell you."

And Don Pablo described the scene that had taken place in the rancho. The hunter listened to it with the utmost attention, and when it was finished he tossed his head several times with an air of dissatisfaction.

"All young people are so," he muttered; "they always allow their passion to carry them beyond the bounds of reason. You were wrong, extremely wrong, Don Pablo," he then added. "Red Cedar believed you dead, and that might have been of great use to us presently. You do not know the immense power that demon has at his disposal: all the bandits on the frontier are devoted to him. Your outbreak will be most injurious to your sister's safety."

"Still, my friend—"

"You acted like a madman in arousing the slumbering fury of the tiger. Red Cedar will persist in destroying you. I have known the wretch for a long time. But that is not the worst you have done."

"What is it, then?"

"Why, madman as you are, instead of keeping dark, watching your enemies without saying a word —in short, seeing through their game—by an unpardonable act of bravado you have unmasked all your batteries."

"I do not understand you, my friend."

"Fray Ambrosio is a villain of a different stamp from Red Cedar, it is true; but I consider him even a greater scoundrel than the scalp hunter. At any rate, the latter is purely a rogue, and you know what to expect from him: all about him bears the stamp of his hideous soul. Had you stabbed that wild beast, who perspires blood by every pore, and dreams of naught but murder, I might possibly have pardoned you; but you have completely failed, not only in prudence, but in good sense, by acting as you have done with Fray Ambrosio. That man is a hypocrite. He owes all to your family, and is furious at seeing this treachery discovered. Take care, Don Pablo. You have made at one blow two implacable enemies, the more terrible now because they have nothing to guard against."

"It is true," the young man said; "I acted like a fool. But what would you? At the sight of those two men, when I heard from their very lips the crimes they had committed, and those they still meditate against us, I was no longer master of myself. I entered the rancho, and you know the rest."

"Yes, yes, the cuchillada was a fine one. Certainly the bandit deserved it; but I fear lest the cross you so smartly drew on his face will cost you dearly some day."

"Well, let us leave it in the hand of Heaven. You know the proverb, 'It is better to forget what cannot be remedied.' Provided my father escape the fate that menaces him, I shall be happy. I shall take my precautions to defend myself."

"Did you learn nothing further?"

"Yes; Red Cedar's gambusinos are encamped a short distance from us. I know that their chief intends starting tomorrow at the latest."

"Oh, oh! Already? We must make haste and prepare our ambuscade, if we wish to discover the road they mean to follow."

"When shall we start?"

"At once."

The three men made their preparations; the horses were saddled, the small skins the horseman always carries at his saddle-bow in these dry countries were filled with water, and five minutes later the hunters mounted. At the moment they were leaving the clearing a rustling of leaves was heard, the branches parted, and an Indian appeared. It was Unicorn, the great sachem of the Comanches. On seeing him the three men dismounted and waited. Valentine advanced alone to meet the Indian.

"My brother is welcome," he said. "What does he want of me?"

"To see the face of a friend," the chief answered in a gentle voice.

The two men then bowed after the fashion of the prairie. After this ceremony Valentine went on:

"My father must approach the fire, and smoke from the calumet of his white friends."

"I will do so," Unicorn answered.

And drawing near the fire, he crouched down in Indian fashion, took his pipe from his belt, and smoked in silence. The hunters, seeing the turn this unexpected interview was taking, had fastened up their horses, and seated themselves again round the fire. A few minutes passed thus, no one speaking, each waiting till the Indian chief should explain the motive of his coming. At length Unicorn shook the ashes from his calumet, returned it to his belt, and addressed Valentine.

"Is my brother setting out to hunt buffaloes again?" he said. "There are many this year on the prairies of the Rio Gila."

"Yes," the Frenchman replied, "we are going hunting. Does my brother intend to accompany us?"

"No; my heart is sad.

"What means the chief? Has any misfortune happened to him?"

"Does not my brother understand me, or am I really mistaken? It is that my brother only really loves the buffaloes, whose meat he eats, and whose hides he sells at the *toldería*?"

"Let my brother explain himself more clearly; then I will try to answer him."

There was a moment of silence. The Indian seemed to be reflecting deeply: his nostrils were dilated, and at times his black eye flashed fire. The hunters calmly awaited the issue of this conversation, whose object they had not yet caught. At length Unicorn raised his head, restored all the serenity to his glance, and said in a soft and melodious voice,—

"Why pretend not to understand me, Koutonepi? A warrior must not have a forked tongue. What a man cannot do alone, two can attempt and carry out. Let my brother speak: the ears of a friend are open."

"My brother is right. I will not deceive his expectations. The hunt I wish to make is serious. I am anxious to save a woman of my colour; but what can the will of one man effect?"

"Koutonepi is not alone: I see at his side the best two rifles of the frontier. What does the white hunter tell me? Is he no longer the great warrior I knew? Does he doubt the friendship of his brother Haboutzelze, the great sachem of the Comanches?"

"I never doubted the friendship of my brother. I am an adopted son of his nation. At this very moment is he not seeking to do me a service?"

"That service is only half what I wish to do. Let my brother speak the word, and two hundred Comanche warriors shall join him to deliver the virgin of the palefaces, and take the scalps of her ravishers."

Valentine started with joy at this noble offer.

"Thanks, chief," he said eagerly. "I accept; and I know that your word is sacred."

"Michabou protects us," the Indian said. "My brother can count on me. A chief does not forget a service. I owe obligations to the pale hunter, and will deliver to him the gachupino robbers."

"Here is my hand, chief: my heart has long been yours."

"My brother speaks well. I have done what he requested of me."

And, bowing courteously, the Comanche chief withdrew without adding a word.

"Don Pablo," Valentine exclaimed joyously, "I can now guarantee your father's safety: this night—perhaps tomorrow—he will be free."

The young man fell into the hunter's arms, and hid his head on his honest chest, not having the strength to utter a word. A few minutes later, the hunters left the clearing to go in search of the gambusinos, and prepare their ambuscade.

CHAPTER IV.

SUNBEAM.

We will now go a little way back, in order to clear up certain portions of the conversation between Valentine and Unicorn, whose meaning the reader can not have caught.

Only a few months after their arrival in Apacheria the Frenchman and Curumilla were hunting the buffalo on the banks of the Rio Gila. It was a splendid day in the month of July. The two hunters, fatigued by a long march under the beams of the parching sun, that fell vertically on their heads, had sheltered themselves under a clump of cedar wood trees, and, carelessly stretched out on the ground, were smoking while waiting till the great heat had passed, and the evening breeze rose to enable them to continue their hunt. A quarter of elk was roasting for their dinner.

"Eh, *penni*," Valentine said, addressing his comrade, and rising on his elbow, "the dinner seems to be ready; so suppose we feed? The sun is rapidly sinking behind the virgin forest, and we shall soon have to start again."

"Eat," Curumilla answered, sharply.

The meat was laid on a leaf between the two hunters, who began eating with good appetite, and indulging in cakes of *hautle*. These cakes, which are very good, are certainly curious. They are made of the pounded eggs of a species of water bug, collected by a sort of harvest in the Mexican lakes. They are found on the leaves of the *toule* (bulrush), and the farina is prepared in various ways. It is an Aztec preparation *par excellence*, for so long back as 1625 they were sold on the marketplace of the Mexican capital. They form the chief food of the Indians, who consider them as great a dainty as the Chinese do their swallow nests, with which this article of food has a certain resemblance in taste. Valentine had taken a third bite at his hautle cake when he stopped, with his arm raised and his head bent forward, as if an unusual sound had suddenly smitten his ear. Curumilla imitated his friend, and both listened with that deep attention that only results from a lengthened desert life; for on the prairie every sound is suspicious—every meeting is feared, especially with man.

Some time elapsed ere the noise which startled the hunters was repeated. For a moment they fancied themselves deceived, and Valentine took another bite, when he was again checked. This time he had distinctly heard a sound resembling a stifled sigh, but so weak and hollow that it needed the Trail-hunter's practised ear to catch it. Curumilla himself had perceived nothing. He looked at his friend in amazement, not knowing to what he should attribute his state of agitation. Valentine rose hurriedly, seized his rifle, and rushed in the direction of the river, his friend following him in all haste.

It was from the river, in fact, that the sigh heard by Valentine had come, and fortunately it was but a few paces distant. So soon as the hunters had leaped over the intervening bushes they found themselves on the bank, and a fearful sight presented itself to their startled eyes. A long plank was descending the river, turning on its axis, and borne by the current, which ran rather strongly at this point. On this plank was fastened a woman, who held a child in her clasped arms. Each time the plank revolved the unhappy woman plunged with her child into the stream, and at ten yards at the most from it an enormous cayman was swimming vigorously to snap at its two victims.

Valentine raised his rifle. Curumilla at the same moment glided into the water, holding his knife blade between his teeth, and swam toward the plank. Valentine remained for a few seconds motionless, as if changed into a block of marble. All at once he pulled the trigger, and the discharge was re-echoed by the distant mountains. The cayman leaped out of the water, and plunged down again; but it reappeared a moment later, belly upwards. It was dead. Valentine's bullet had passed through its eye.

In the meanwhile Curumilla, had reached the plank with a few strokes, without loss of time he turned it in the opposite direction from what it was following; and while holding it so that it could not revolve, he pushed it onto the sand. In two strokes he cut the bonds that held the hapless woman, seized her in his arms, and ran off with her to the bivouac fire.

The poor woman gave no signs of life, and the two hunters eagerly sought to restore her. She was an Indian, apparently not more than eighteen, and very beautiful. Valentine found great difficulty in loosening her arms and removing the baby; for the frail creature about a year old, by an incomprehensible miracle, had been preserved—thanks, doubtless to its mother's devotion. It smiled pleasantly at the hunter when he laid it on a bed of dry leaves.

Curumilla opened the woman's mouth slightly with his knife blade, placed in it the mouth of his gourd, and made her swallow a few drops of mezcal. A long time elapsed ere she gave the slightest move that indicated an approaching return to life. The hunters, however, would not be foiled by the ill-success of their attentions, but redoubled their efforts. At length a deep sigh burst painfully from the sufferer's oppressed chest, and she opened her eyes, murmuring in a voice weak as a breath!

"*Xocoyotl* (My child)!"

The cry of the soul—this first and supreme appeal of a mother on the verge of the tomb—affected the two men with their hearts of bronze. Valentine cautiously lifted the child, which had gone to sleep peacefully on the leaves, and presented it to the mother, saying in a soft voice:

"*Nantli joltinemi* (Mother, he lives)!"

At these words, which restored her hope, the woman leaped up as if moved by a spring, seized the child, and covered it with kisses, as she burst into tears. The hunters respected this outpouring of maternal love: they withdrew, leaving food and water by the woman's side. At

sunset the two men returned. The woman was squatting by the fire, nursing her child, and lulling it to sleep by singing an Indian song. The night passed tranquilly, the two hunters watching in turn over the slumbers of the woman they had saved, and who reposed in peace.

At sunrise she awoke; and, with the skill and handiness peculiar to the women of her race, she rekindled the fire and prepared breakfast. The two men looked at her with a smile, then threw their rifles over their shoulders, and set out in search of game. When they returned to the bivouac the meal was ready. After eating, Valentine lit his Indian pipe, seated himself at the foot of a tree, and addressed the young woman.

"What is my sister's name?" he asked.

"Tonameyotl (the Sunbeam)," she replied, with a joyous smile that revealed the double row of pearls that adorned her mouth.

"My sister has a pretty name," Valentine answered. "She doubtless belongs to the great nation of the Apaches."

"The Apaches are dogs," she said in a hollow voice, and with a flash of hatred in her glance. "The Comanche women will weave them petticoats. The Apaches are cowardly as the coyotes: they only fight a hundred against one. The Comanche warriors are like the tempest."

"Is my sister the wife of a cacique?"

"Where is the warrior who does not know Unicorn?" she said proudly.

Valentine bowed. He had already heard the name of this terrible chief pronounced several times. Mexicans and Indians, trappers, hunters, and warriors, all felt for him a respect mingled with terror.

"Sunbeam is Unicorn's wife," the Indian girl continued.

"Good!" Valentine answered. "My sister will tell me where to find the village of her tribe, and I will lead her back to the chief."

The young woman smiled.

"I have in my heart a small bird that sings at every instant of the day," she said in her gentle and melodious voice. "The swallow cannot live without its mate, and the chief is on the trail of Sunbeam."

"We will wait the chief here, then," Valentine said.

The hunter felt great pleasure in conversing with this simple child.

"How was my sister thus fastened to the trunk of tree, and thrown into the current of the Gila, to perish there with her child? It is an atrocious vengeance."

"Yes, it is the vengeance of an Apache dog," she answered. "Aztatl (the Heron), daughter of Stanapat, the great chief of the Apaches, loved Unicorn—her heart bounded at the mere name of the great Comanche warrior; but the chief of my nation has only one heart, and it belongs to Sunbeam. Two days ago the warriors of my tribe set out for a great buffalo hunt, and the squaws alone remained in the village. While I slept in my hut four Apache thieves, taking advantage of my slumber, seized me and my child, and delivered us into the hands of Stanapat's daughter. 'You love your husband,' she said with a grin: 'you doubtless suffer at being separated from him. Be happy: I will send you to him by the shortest road. He is hunting on the prairies down the river, and in two hours you will be in his arms, unless,' she added with a laugh, 'the caymans stop you on the road.'—'The Comanche women despise death,' I answered her. 'For a hair you pluck from me, Unicorn will take the scalps of your whole tribe; so act as you think proper;' and I turned my head away, resolved to answer her no more. She herself fastened me to the log, with my face turned to the sky, in order, as she said, that I might see my road; and then she hurled me into the river, yelling: 'Unicorn is a cowardly rabbit, whom the Apache women despise. This is how I revenge myself.' I have told my brother, the pale hunter, everything as it happened."

"My sister is a brave woman," Valentine replied: "she is worthy to be the wife of a renowned chief."

The young mother smiled as she embraced her child, which she presented, with a movement full of grace, to the hunter, who kissed it on the forehead. At this moment the song of the maukawis was heard at a short distance off. The two hunters raised their heads in surprise, and looked around them.

"The quail sings very late, I fancy," Valentine muttered suspiciously.

The Indian girl smiled as she looked down, but gave no answer. Suddenly a slight cracking of dry branches disturbed the silence. Valentine and Curumilla made a move, as if to spring up and seize their rifles that lay by their side.

"My brothers must not stir," the squaw said quickly: "it is a friend."

The hunters remained motionless, and the girl then imitated with rare perfection the cry of the blue jay. The bushes parted, and an Indian warrior, perfectly painted and armed for war, bounded like a jackal over the grass and herbs that obstructed his passage, and stopped in face of the hunters. This warrior was Unicorn. He saluted the two men with that grace innate in the Indian race; then he crossed his arms on his breast and waited, without taking a glance at his squaw, or even appearing to have seen her. On her side the Indian woman did not stir.

During several moments a painful silence fell on the four persons whom chance had assembled in

so strange a way. At length Valentine, seeing the warrior insisted on being silent, decided he would be the first to speak.

"Unicorn is welcome to our camp," he said. "Let him take a seat by the fire of his brothers, and share with them the provisions they possess."

"I will take a seat by the fire of my paleface brother," he replied; "but he must first answer me a question I wish to ask of him."

"My brother can speak: my ears are open."

"Good!" the chief answered. "How is it the hunters have with them Unicorn's wife?"

"Sunbeam can answer that question best," Valentine said gravely.

The chief turned to his squaw.

"I am waiting," he remarked.

The Indian woman repeated, word for word, to her husband the story she had told a few minutes before. Unicorn listened without evincing either surprise or wrath: his face remained impassive, but his brows were imperceptibly contracted. When the woman had finished speaking, the Comanche chief bowed his head on his chest, and remained for a moment plunged in serious thought. Presently he raised his head.

"Who saved Sunbeam from the river when she was about to perish?" he asked her.

The young woman's face lit up with a charming smile.

"These hunters," she replied.

"Good!" the chief said, laconically, as he bent on the two men glances full of the most unspeakable gratitude.

"Could we leave her to perish?" Valentine said.

"My brothers did well. Unicorn is one of the first sachems of his nation. His tongue is not forked: he gives his heart once, and takes it back no more. Unicorn's heart belongs to the hunters."

These simple words were uttered with the majesty and grandeur the Indians know so well how to assume when they think proper. The two men vowed their gratitude, and the chief continued:—

"Unicorn is returning to his village with his wife: his young men are awaiting him twenty paces from here. He would be happy if the hunters would consent to accompany him there."

"Chief," Valentine answered, "we came into the prairie to hunt the buffalo."

"Well, what matter? My brothers will hunt with me and my young men; but if they wish to prove to me that they accept my friendship, they will follow me to my village."

"The chief is mounted, while we are on foot."

"I have horses."

Any further resistance would have been a breach of politeness, and the hunters accepted the invitation. Valentine, whom accident had brought on to the prairies of the Rio Gila and Del Norte, was in his heart not sorry to make friends there, and have allies on whose support he could reckon in case of need. The squaw had by this time risen: she timidly approached her husband, and held up the child, saying in a soft and frightened voice,—

"Kiss this warrior."

The chief took the frail creature in his muscular arms, and kissed it repeatedly with a display of extraordinary tenderness, and then returned it to the mother. The latter wrapped the babe in a small blanket, then placed it on a plank shaped like a cradle, and covered with dry moss, fastened a hoop over the place where its head rested, to guard it from the burning beams of the sun, and hung the whole on her back by means of a woolen strap passing over her forehead.

"I am ready," she said.

"Let us go," the chief replied.

The hunters followed him, and they were soon on the prairie.

CHAPTER V.

THE ADOPTION.

Some sixty Comanche warriors were lying in the grass awaiting their sachem, while the tethered horses were nibbling the tall prairie grasses and the tree shoots. It could be seen at the first glance that these men were picked warriors, selected for a dangerous expedition. From the heels of all dangled five or six wolf tails—marks of honor which only renowned warriors have the right to wear.

On seeing their chief, they hurriedly rose and leaped into their saddles. All were aware that their sachem's wife had been carried off, and that the object of their expedition was to deliver her. Still, on noticing her, they evidenced no surprise, but saluted her as if she had left them only a

few moments previously. The war party had with it several horses, which the chief ordered to be given to his squaw and his new friends; then, at a signal from him, the whole party started at full speed, for the Indians know no other pace than the gallop.

After about two hours' ride they reached the vicinity of the village, which could be smelt some time before reaching, owing to the habit the Comanches have of placing their dead on scaffoldings outside the villages, where they moulder away: these scaffoldings, composed of four stakes planted in the ground, terminated in a fork, while from poles stuck up near them hung skins and other offerings made by the Indians to the genius of good.

At the entrance of the village a number of horsemen were assembled, awaiting the return of the sachem. So soon as they perceived him they burst into a formidable yell, and rushed forward like a whirlwind, shouting, firing guns, and brandishing their weapons. Unicorn's band followed this example, and there was soon a most extraordinary confusion.

The sachem made his entry into the village in the midst of shouts, barking of dogs, and shots; in short, he was accompanied to the square by an indescribable row. On reaching it the warriors stopped. Unicorn begged the hunters to dismount, and guided them to his cabin, which he made them enter before him.

"Now," he said to them, "brothers, you are at home: rest in peace, eat and drink. This evening I will come and talk with you, and make you a proposal which I sincerely hope you will not reject."

The two hunters, wearied by the long ride they had made, fell back with extreme satisfaction on the beds of dried leaves which awaited them.

"Well," Valentine asked Curumilla, "penni, what do you say about what is happening to us?"

"It may be good."

"Can it not?"

"Yes."

On which Curumilla fell asleep, and Valentine soon followed his example. As he had promised, toward evening Unicorn entered the cabin.

"Have my brothers rested?" he asked.

"Yes," Valentine answered.

"Are they disposed to listen to me?"

"Speak, chief; we are listening."

The Comanche sachem then squatted near the fire, and remained for several minutes, with his head bent forward and his eyes fixed on the ground, in the position of a man who is reflecting. At length he raised his head, stretched forth his arm as if to give greater authority to the words he was about to utter, and began thus:—

"Brother, you and your friend are two brave warriors. The prairies rejoice at your arrival among us; the deer and the buffaloes fly at your approach; for your arm is strong, and your eye unerring. Unicorn is only a poor Indian; but he is a great warrior among the Comanches, and a much feared chief of his tribe. You have saved his wife, Sunbeam, whom the Apache dogs threw into the Gila, and whom the hideous alligators were preparing to devour. Since his wife, the joy of his hearth, and his son, the hope of his old days, have been restored to him, Unicorn has sought in his heart the means to prove to you his gratitude. He asked the Chief of Life what he could do to attach you to him. Unicorn is terrible in combat; he has the heart of the grizzly bear for his enemies—he has the heart of the gazelle for those he loves."

"Chief," Valentine answered, "the words you utter at this moment amply repay us for what we have done. We are happy to have saved the wife and son of a celebrated warrior: our reward is in our hearts, and we wish for no other."

The chief shook his head.

"No," he said; "the two hunters are no longer strangers for the Comanches; they are the brothers of our tribe. During their sleep Unicorn assembled round the council fire the chiefs of his nation, and told them what has passed. The chiefs have ranged themselves on Unicorn's side, and have ordered him to make known to the hunters the resolution they have formed."

"Speak, then, chief," Valentine said, "and believe that the wishes of the council will be commands to us."

A smile of joy played round the chief's lips.

"Good!" he said. "This is what was agreed on among the great chiefs. My brothers the hunters will be adopted by the tribe, and be henceforth sons of the great Comanche nation. What say my brothers?"

A lively feeling of pleasure made Valentine quiver at this unexpected proposition. To be adopted by the Comanche tribe, was obtaining the right of hunting over the whole extent of the immense prairies which that powerful nation holds through its indomitable courage and the number of its warriors. The hunter exchanged a glance with his silent comrade and rose.

"I accept for myself and friend," he said as he held out his hand to the chief, "the honor the Comanches do us in admitting us into the number of the sons of their warlike nation. We shall prove ourselves worthy of this marked favour."

Unicorn smiled.

"Tomorrow," he said as he rose, "my brothers will be adopted by the nation."

After bowing gracefully to the hunters he took leave of them and withdrew. The next daybreak the chiefs entered the cabin. Valentine and Curumilla were ready, and had long been acquainted with the trials they would have to undergo. The neophytes were conducted into the great medicine hut, where a copious meal was prepared. It consisted of dog meat boiled in bear fat, tortillas, maize, and hautle cakes. The chiefs squatted in a circle, while the squaws waited on them.

When the meal was ended all rose. Unicorn placed himself between the hunters, laid his hands on their heads, and struck up the great war song. This song was repeated in chorus by the company to the sound of the war whistles, the drums and the *chikikouis.* The following is the translation of the song:—

"Master of Life, regard us with a favourable eye.
We are receiving two brothers in arms who appear to have sense.
They display vigour in their arms.
They fear not to expose their bodies to the blows of their enemies."

It is impossible for anyone who has not been present at the ceremony to form even a distant idea of the frightful noise produced by their hoarse voices mingled with the shrill and discordant instruments: it was enough to produce a deafness. When the song was ended each took his seat by the council fire.

The hunters were seated on beaver skins, and the great war calumet was presented to them, from which each took several puffs, and it went the round. Unicorn then rose, and fastened round the neck of each a wampum collar, and another made of the claws of the grizzly bear. The Indians, during this time, had built near the medicine lodge a cabin for the sweating, and when it was finished the hunters took off their clothes and entered it. The chiefs then brought two large stones which had been previously made red hot, and after closing the hut carefully, left the neophytes in it.

The latter threw water on the stones, and the steam which arose almost immediately produced a profuse perspiration. When this was at its height the hunters ran out of the hut, passed through the double row of warriors, and leaped into the river, according to the usual fashion. They were immediately drawn from the water, wrapped in blankets, and led to Unicorn's hut, in order to undergo the final trial, which is also the most painful. The hunters were laid on their backs, then Unicorn traced on their chests with a sharp stick dipped in water in which gunpowder had been dissolved, the figure of the animal serving as *totem* (protector) to the tribe. Then with two spikes fastened to a small piece of wood, and dipped in vermillion, he proceeded to prick the design.

Whenever Unicorn came to a place that was too hard he made an incision in the flesh with a gun-flint. The places that were not marked with vermillion were rubbed in with powder, so that the result was a red and blue tattooing. During the course of this operation the war songs and chikikouis were constantly heard, in order to drown the cries which the atrocious pain might draw from the patients; but the latter endured it all without even a contraction of the eyebrows evidencing the pain they must have felt.

When the tattooing was over the wounds were cauterised with rotten wood to prevent suppuration; they were washed with cold water, in which had been infused a herb resembling box, a great deal of which the Indians mix with their tobacco to reduce the strength. The trial we have described is so painful to endure, that nearly always it is only accomplished at intervals, and often lasts a week. This time the hunters endured it bravely during the six hours it lasted, not uttering a cry, or giving a sign of weakness. Hence the Indians, from this moment, regarded them with a species of respect; for with them courage is the first of qualities.

"My brothers are children of the tribe," the chief said, offering each a horse. "The prairie belongs to them. These coursers will bear them to the most remote limits of the desert, chasing the wild beasts, or pursuing the Apache dogs."

"Good!" Valentine answered.

At one bound the two hunters were in their saddles, and made their horses perform the most elegant and graceful curvets. This last and heroic deed, after all they had suffered during the course of the day, raised to their full height the joy and enthusiasm of the Comanches, who applauded with frenzied shouts and yells all they saw their new brothers execute. After remaining nearly an hour on horseback they dismounted, and followed the chiefs into the medicine lodge; and when each had taken his seat round the council fire, and the calumet had again been smoked, Unicorn rose.

"The Master of Life loves His Comanche sons, since He gives them for brothers such warriors as Koutonepi and Curumilla. Who can equal their courage! Who would dare to contend with them! On their approach the grizzly bear hides at the extremity of its den; the jaguar bounds far away on seeing them; the eagle itself, which looks the sun in the face, flies from their unerring bullet. Brothers, we congratulate ourselves on counting you among our warriors. Henceforth we shall be invincible. Brothers, give up the names you have up to this day borne, and assume those we now give you. You, Koutonepi, are henceforth Quauhtli, and bear the name of that eagle, whose courage and strength you possess. You, Curumilla, will be called Vexolotl, and the cock will be proud to see that you have taken possession of its name."

The two hunters warmly thanked their new brothers, and were led back by the chiefs to their

cabin, who wished them a pleasant night after so rude a day. Such was the way in which Valentine and Curumilla, to whom we shall continue to give their old names, formed the acquaintance of Unicorn, and the result of it.

CHAPTER VI.

THE MISSIONARY.

With time the relations existing between the hunters and the Indians were drawn closer, and became more friendly. In the desert physical strength is the quality most highly esteemed. Man, compelled to struggle incessantly against the dangers of every description that rise each moment before him, is bound to look only to himself for the means to surmount them. Hence the Indians profess a profound contempt, for sickly people, and weak and timid nerves.

Valentine easily induced Unicorn to seize, during the hunt of the wild horses, the Mexican magistrates, in order to make hostages of them if the conspiracy were unsuccessful. What the hunter foresaw happened. Red Cedar had opposed stratagem to stratagem; and, as we have seen, Don Miguel was arrested in the midst of his triumph, at the very moment when he fancied himself master of the Paso del Norte.

After Valentine, Curumilla, and Don Pablo had seen, from their hiding place in the bushes, the mournful escort pass that was taking Don Miguel as a prisoner to Santa Fe, they held a council. Moments were precious; for in Mexico conspirators have the sad privilege over every other prisoner of being tried quickly, and not left to pine. The prisoner must be saved. Valentine, with that promptitude of decision which formed the salient point of his character, soon arranged in his head one of those bold schemes which only he could discover.

"Courage!" he said to Don Pablo. "As long as the heart beats in the breast there is hope, thank Heaven! The first hand is lost, I allow; but now for the second game."

Don Pablo had entire faith in Valentine: he had often been in the position to try his friend. If these words did not completely reassure him, they at least almost restored his hope, and gave him back that courage so necessary to him at this supreme moment, and which had abandoned him.

"Speak, my friend," he said. "What is to be done?"

"Let us attend to the most important thing first, and save Father Seraphin, who devoted himself for us."

The three men started. The night was a gloomy one. The moon only appeared at intervals: incessantly veiled by thick clouds which passed over its disc, it seemed to shed its sickly rays regretfully on the earth. The wind whistled through the branches of the trees, which uttered mysterious murmurs as they came into collision. The coyotes howled in the plain, and at times their sinister form shot athwart the skyline. After a march of about an hour the three men approached the spot where the missionary had fallen from the effect of Red Cedar's bullet; but he had disappeared. An alarm mingled with a frightful agony contracted the hunter's hearts. Valentine took a despairing glance around; but the darkness was too dense for him possibly to distinguish anything.

"What is to be done?" Don Pablo asked sadly.

"Seek," Valentine replied sharply: "he cannot be far."

Curumilla had already taken up the trail, and had disappeared in the gloom. The Araucano had never been a great speaker naturally: with age he had grown almost dumb, and never uttered a word save when absolutely necessary. But if the Indian did not talk, he acted; and in critical situations his determination was often worth long harangues. Don Pablo, obedient to Valentine's orders, threw his rifle over his shoulder, and prepared to execute them.

"Where are you going?" the hunter asked him, as he seized his arm.

"To look for Father Seraphin."

"Wait."

The two men stood motionless, listening to the mysterious sounds of the desert, that nameless melody which plunges the soul into a soft reverie. Nearly an hour passed thus, nothing revealing to the hunters that Curumilla's search had proved successful. Valentine, growing impatient at this long delay, was also preparing to go on, at once the weak, snapping cry of the walkon rose in the air.

"What's that?" Don Pablo asked in surprise.

"Silence!" Valentine muttered.

A second time the walkon sang, but this time stronger, and much nearer. Valentine raised his fingers to his lips, and imitated the sharp, shrill yell of the ocelot twice, with such perfection that Don Pablo started involuntarily, and looked round for the wild beast, whose eyes he fancied he could see flashing behind a thicket. Almost immediately the note of the walkon was heard a third time. Valentine rested the butt of his rifle on the ground.

"Good!" he said. "Do not be alarmed, Don Pablo. Curumilla has found Father Seraphin."

The young man looked at him in amazement. The hunter smiled.

"They will both arrive directly," he said.

"How do you know?"

"Child!" Valentine interrupted him, "In the desert the human voice is more injurious than useful. The song of birds, the cry of wild beasts, serve us as a language."

"Yes," the young man answered simply, "that is true. I have often heard it stated; but I was not aware you could understand one another so easily."

"That is nothing," the hunter answered good-humouredly: "you will see much more if you only pass a month in our company."

In a few moments the sound of footsteps became audible, at first faint, then gradually coming nearer, and two shadows were dimly drawn on the night.

"Halloa!" Valentine shouted as he Raised and cocked his rifle, "friend or foe?"

"*Pennis* (brothers)," a voice answered.

"It is Curumilla," said Valentine. "Let us go to meet him."

Don Pablo followed him, and they soon reached the Indian, who walked slowly, obliged as he was to support, almost carry, the missionary.

When Father Seraphin fell off his horse he almost immediately lost his senses. He remained for a long time lying in the ditch, but by degrees the night cold had brought him round again. At the first moment the poor priest, whose ideas were still confused, had cast anxious glances around him, while asking himself how he came there. He tried to rise; but then a poignant pain he felt in his shoulder reminded him of what had occurred. Still he did not despair. Alone, by night in the desert, exposed to a thousand unknown dangers, of which the least was being devoured by wild beasts, without weapons to defend himself, too weak, indeed, to attempt it, even if he had them, he resolved not to remain in this terrible position, but make the greatest efforts to rise, and drag himself as well as he could to the Paso, which was three leagues distant at the most, where he was sure of finding that care his condition demanded.

Father Seraphin, like the majority of the missionaries who generously devote themselves to the welfare of humanity, was a man who, under a Weak and almost feminine appearance, concealed an indomitable energy, and a resolution that would withstand all trials. So soon as he had formed his plan he began carrying it out. With extreme difficulty and atrocious pain he succeeded in fastening his handkerchief round his shoulder, so as to check the hemorrhage. It took more than an hour before he could stand on his legs: often he felt himself fainting, a cold perspiration beaded at the root of his hair, he had a buzzing in his ears, and everything seemed to be turning round him; but he wrestled with the pain, clasped his hands with an effort, raised his tear laden eyes to heaven, and murmured from the bottom of his heart,—

"O God! Deign to support thy servant, for he has set on thee all his hopes and confidence."

Prayer, when made with faith, produces in a man an effect whose consequences are immediate; it consoles him, gives him courage, and almost restores him the strength that has deserted him. This was what happened to Father Seraphin. After uttering these few words he set out boldly, supporting his tottering footsteps with a stick, which a providential chance had placed in his way. He walked thus for nearly half a league stopping at every instant to draw breath; but human endurance has limits beyond which it cannot go. In spite of the efforts he made, the missionary at length felt his legs give way under, him; he understood that he could not go further; and he sank at the foot of a tree, certain that he had attempted impossibilities, and henceforth resigning to Providence the care of saving him.

It was at this moment Curumilla arrived near him. The Indian aided him to rise, and then warned his comrades of the success of his search. Father Seraphin, though the chief offered to carry him, refused, and wished to walk to join his friends; but his strength deserted him a second time, he lost his senses, and fell into the arms of the Indian, who watched him attentively; for he noticed his increasing weakness, and foresaw his fall. Valentine and Curumilla hastily constructed a litter of tree branches, on which they laid the poor wounded man, and raising him on their shoulders, went off rapidly. The night passed away, and the sun was already high on the horizon, and yet the hunters—were marching. At length, at about eleven o'clock, they reached the cavern which served Valentine as a shelter, and to which he had resolved to carry his patient, that he might himself nurse him.

Father Seraphin was in a raging fever; his face was red, his eyes flashing. As nearly always happens with gunshot wounds, a suppurating fever had declared itself. The missionary was laid on a bed of furs, and Valentine immediately prepared to probe the wound. By a singular chance the ball had lodged in the shoulder without fracturing the blade bone. Valentine drew it; and then helped by Curumilla, who had quietly pounded oregano leaves, he formed a cataplasm, which he laid on the wound, after first carefully washing it. Scarcely had this been done ere the missionary fell into a deep sleep, which lasted till nightfall.

Valentine's treatment had effected wonders. The fever had disappeared, the priest's features were calmed, the flush that purpled his cheeks had given place to a pallor caused by the loss of blood; in short, he was as well as could be expected. On opening his eyes he perceived the three hunters watching him anxiously. He smiled, and said in a weak voice,—

"Thanks, my brothers, thanks for the help you have afforded me. Heaven will reward you. I feel much better."

"The Lord be praised!" Valentine answered. "You will escape, my father, more cheaply than I had dared to hope."

"Can it be possible?"

"Yes, your wound, though serious, is not dangerous, and in a few days you can, if you think necessary, resume your avocations."

"I thank you for this new good, my dear Valentine. I no longer count the times I have owed my life to you. Heaven, in its infinite goodness, has placed you near me to support me in my tribulations, and succour me in days of danger."

The hunter blushed.

"Do not speak so, my father," he said; "I have only performed a sacred duty. Do you feel strong enough to talk for a few minutes with me?"

"Yes. Speak, my friend."

"I wished to ask your advice."

"My talents are very slight: still you know how I love you, Valentine. Tell me what vexes you, and perhaps I may be able to be useful to you."

"I believe it, my father."

"Speak, then, in Heaven's name, my friend; for, if you have recourse to me, the affair must be very serious."

"It cannot be more so."

"Go on: I am listening."

And the missionary settled himself on his bed to hear as comfortably as he could the confession the hunter wished to make to him.

CHAPTER VII.

THE INTERVIEW.

At daybreak the next morning Curumilla started for Unicorn's village. At sunset he returned to the cavern, accompanied by the Comanche chief. The sachem entertained the most profound respect for Father Seraphin, whose noble character he could appreciate, and felt pained at the state in which he found him.

"Father," he said to him as he kissed his hand. "Who are the villains who thus wounded you, to whom the Master of Life has imparted the secret to make us happy? Whoever they may be, these men shall die."

"My son," the priest answered gently, "I will not pronounce before you the name of the unhappy man who, in a moment of madness, raised his hand against me. My God is a God of peace; He is merciful, and recommends His creatures to forget injuries, and requite good for evil."

The Indian looked at him in amazement. He did not understand the soft and touching sublimity of these precepts of love. Educated in the sanguinary principles of his race—persuaded, like all redskins, that a warrior's first duty is revenge—he only admitted that atrocious law of the prairies which commands, "Eye for eye, tooth for tooth"—a terrible law, which we do not venture, however, utterly to condemn in these countries, where ambushes are permanent, and implacable death stands at every corner of the road.

"My son," Father Seraphin continued, "you are a great warrior. Many a time you have braved the atrocious tortures of the stake of blood, a thousand fold more terrible than death itself. Often have you, with a pleasure I excuse (for it is in your nature), thrown down your enemy, and planted your knee on his chest. Have you never pardoned anybody in fight?"

"Never!" the Indian answered, his eye sparkling with satisfied pride. "Unicorn has sent many Apache dogs to the happy hunting grounds: their scalps are drying at the door of his cabin."

"Well," the missionary said gently, "try clemency once, only once, and you will know one of the greatest pleasures God has granted to man on earth—that of pardoning."

The chief shook his head.

"No," he said; "a dead enemy is no longer to be feared. Better to kill than leave him means to avenge himself at a later date."

"My son, you love me, I believe?"

"Yes. My father is good; he has behaved well to the Comanches, and they are grateful. Let my father command, and his son will obey."

"I have no right to give you an order, my son. I can only ask a favour of you."

"Good! My father can explain himself. Unicorn will do what he desires."

"Well, then," said the missionary with a lively feeling of joy, "promise me to pardon the first unhappy man, whoever he may be, who falls into; your hands, and you will render me happy."

The chief frowned, and an expression of dissatisfaction appeared on his features. Father Seraphin anxiously followed on the Comanche's intelligent countenance the different shadows reflected on it as in a mirror. At length the Indian regained his stoicism, and his face grew serene again.

"Does my father demand it?" he asked in a gentle voice.

"I desire it."

"Be it so: my father shall be satisfied. I promise him to pardon the first enemy whom the Manitou causes to fall beneath the point of my lance."

"Thanks, chief," the missionary exclaimed joyfully, "thanks! Heaven will reward you for this good idea."

The Indian bowed silently and turned to Valentine, who had been listening to the conversation.

"My brother called me, and I came. What does he want of Unicorn?"

"My brother will take his seat at the council fire, and smoke the calumet with his friend. Chiefs do not speak without reflecting on the words they are about to utter."

"My brother speaks well, and I will take my seat at his fire."

Curumilla had lighted a large fire in the first grotto of the cavern. The four men left Father Seraphin to take a few moments' rest, and seated themselves round the fire, when the calumet passed from hand to hand. The Indians never undertake anything important, or commence a discussion, without first smoking the calumet in council, whatever may be the circumstances in which they are placed. When the calumet had gone the round Valentine rose.

"Every day," he said, bowing to the chief, "I appreciate more and more the honor the Comanches did me in adopting me as a son. My brother's nation is powerful; its hunting grounds cover the whole surface of the earth. The Apaches fly before the Comanche warriors like cowardly coyotes before courageous men. My brother has already several times done me a service with that greatness of soul which distinguishes him, and can only belong to a warrior so celebrated as he is. Today I have again a service to ask of my brother, and will he do it me? I presume so; for I know his heart, and that the Great Spirit of the Master of Life dwells in him."

"Let my brother explain," Unicorn answered. "He is speaking to a chief; he must remove the skin from his heart and let his blood flow red and bright before a friend. The great white hunter is a portion of myself. I should have to be prevented by an arrant impossibility if I refused any request emanating from him."

"Thanks, brother," Valentine said with emotion. "Your words have passed from your lips into my breast, which they have rejoiced. I am not mistaken. I see that I can ever count on your well-tried friendship and honest aid. Acumapicthzin de Zarate, the descendant of the Mexican kings, the friend of the redskins, whom he has ever protected, is a prisoner to the gachupinos. They have carried him to Santa Fe in order to put him to death, and deprive the Indians of the last friend left them."

"And what does my brother want?"

"I wish to save my friend."

"Good!" the chief answered. "My brother claims my help to succeed in that project, I suppose?"

"Yes."

"Good! The descendant of the Tlatoanis shall be saved. My brother can feel reassured."

"I can count, then, on my brother's aid?" Valentine asked quickly.

The chief smiled.

"Unicorn holds in his hands Spaniards who will answer for the life of the prisoner."

"That is true!" Valentine exclaimed as he struck his forehead. "Your idea is a good one, chief."

"My brother will leave me to act. I answer for success on my head."

"*Caramba!* Act as you please, chief. Still, were it only form's sake, I should not be sorry to know what you intend doing."

"My brother has a white skin, but his heart is Indian. Let him trust to the prudence of a chief; Unicorn knows how to treat with the gachupinos."

"Doubtless."

"Unicorn will go to Santa Fe to speak with the chief of the white men."

Valentine looked at him in amazement. The chief smiled.

"Have I not hostages?" he said.

"That is true," Valentine remarked.

The chief went on:—

"The Spaniards are like chattering old women, prodigal of seductive words, but Unicorn knows them. How many times already has he trodden the warpath on their territory at the head of his warriors! They will not dare to deceive him. Ere the sun has twice accomplished its revolution

round the tortoise whose immense shell supports the world, the chief of the Comanches will carry the bloody arrows to the whites, and propose to them peace or war. Is my brother satisfied?"

"I am. My heart is full of gratitude toward my red brother."

"Good! What is that to Unicorn? Less than nothing. Has my brother anything else to ask of me?"

"One thing more."

"Let my brother explain himself as quickly as possible, that no cloud may remain between him and his red brother."

"I will do so. Men without fear of the Great Spirit, urged by some mad desire, have carried off Doña Clara, the daughter of the white chief whom my brother pledged to save."

"Who are these? Does my brother know them?"

"Yes, I know them only too well. They are bandits, at the head of whom is a monster with a human face, called Red Cedar."

At this name the Indian started slightly, his eye flashed fire, and a deep wrinkle hollowed his forehead.

"Red Cedar is a ferocious jaguar," he said with concentrated passion. "He has made himself the scourge of the Indians, whose scalps he desires. This man has no pity either for women or children, but he possesses no courage: he only attacks his enemies in the dark, twenty against one, and when he is sure of meeting with no resistance."

"My brother knows this man, I see."

"And this man has carried off the white gazelle?'

"Yes."

"Good! My brother wishes to know what Red Cedar has done with his prisoner?"

"I do wish it."

The Indian rose.

"Time is slipping away," he said. "Unicorn will return to his friends. My brother the hunter need not feel alarmed: a chief is watching."

After uttering these few words the chief went down into the cavern, mounted his horse, and disappeared in direction of the desert. Valentine had every reason to be satisfied with his interview with the Comanche chief; but Father Seraphin was less pleased than the hunter. The worthy priest, both through his nature and his vocation, was not disposed to employ violent measures, which were repugnant to him: he would have liked, were it possible, to settle everything by gentleness, and without running the risk of bloodshed.

Three weeks elapsed, however, ere Unicorn appeared to be effectually carrying out the plan he had explained to Valentine, who only learnt indirectly that a strong party of Comanche warriors had invaded the Mexican frontiers. Father Seraphin, though not yet completely cured, had insisted on proceeding to Santa Fe to take some steps to save Don Miguel, whose trial had gone on rapidly, who was on the point of being executed. For his part Don Pablo, half mad with uneasiness, also insisted, in spite of Valentine's entreaties and remarks, on entering Santa Fe furtively, and trying to see his father.

The night on which we found Valentine in the clearing Unicorn visited him for the first time in a month: he came to inform him of the success of the measures he had taken. Valentine, used to Indian habits, understood half a word: hence he had not hesitated to announce to Don Pablo as a positive fact that his father would soon be free.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE PRISON.

Don Miguel had been transferred to the prison of Santa Fe. Europeans, accustomed to philanthropic manners, and regarding human life as of some value, cannot imagine what atrocities the word "prison" contains in Mexico. In countries beyond sea the penitentiary system is not even in its infancy; for it is completely ignored, and has not even been suggested yet. With the exception of the United States, prisons are in America what they were at the period of the Spanish dominion; that is to say, filthy dens, where the wretched prisoners suffer a thousand tortures.

Among ourselves, so long as a man is not proved guilty, he is assumed to be innocent; but over there, so soon as a man is arrested, he is considered guilty, and consequently every consideration and all pity vanish, to make room for brutal and barbarous treatment. Thrown on a little straw in fetid holes, often inhabited by serpents and other unclean animals, the prisoners have more than once been found dead at the expiration of twenty-four hours, and half devoured. We have witnessed scores of times atrocious tortures inflicted by coarse and cruel soldiers on poor fellows whose crimes, in our country, would have merited a slight chastisement at the most. Still, in the great centres of populations, the prisons are better managed than in the towns and villages; and

in this land, where money is the most powerful lever, a rich man easily succeeds in obtaining all he wishes, and rendering his position at any rate tolerable.

Don Miguel and General Ibañez had managed to be confined together by the expenditure of many entreaties and a heavy sum of gold. They inhabited two wretched rooms, the entire furniture of which consisted in a halting table, a few leather covered butacas, and two benches which served them as beds. These two men, so powerful by nature, had endured without complaint all the humiliation and insults inflicted on them during their trial, resolved to die as they had lived, with head erect and firm heart, without giving the judges who had condemned them the satisfaction of seeing them turn weak at the last moment.

It was toward evening of the same day on which we saw Valentine in the clearing. Darkness fell rapidly, and the only window, a species of narrow slit that served to light the prison, allowed but a weak and dubious light to penetrate. Don Miguel was walking with long strides up and down his prison, while the general, carelessly reclining on one of the benches, quietly smoking his cigarette, watching with childish pleasure the light clouds of bluish smoke which rose in a spiral to the ceiling, and which he constantly blew asunder.

"Well," Don Miguel said all at once, "it seems it is not for today either."

"Yes," the general said, "unless (though I do not believe it) they wish to do us the honor of a torchlight execution."

"Can you at all account for this delay?"

"On my honor, no. I have ransacked my brains in vain to guess the reason that prevents them shooting us, and I have given it up as a bad job."

"Same with me. At first I fancied they were trying to frighten us by the continued apprehension of death constantly suspended over our heads like another sword of Damocles; but this idea seemed to me too absurd."

"I am entirely of your opinion: still something extraordinary must be occurring."

"What makes you suppose that?"

"Why, for the last two days our worthy jailer, Tio Quesada, has become, not polite to us—for that is impossible—but less brutal. I noticed that he has drawn in his claws, and attempted a grin. It is true that his face is so little accustomed to assume that expression, that the only result he obtains is to make a wretched grimace."

"And you conclude from that?"

"Nothing positive," the general said. "Still I ask myself whence comes this incomprehensible change. It would be as absurd to attribute it to the pity he feels for our position as to suppose the governor will come to ask our pardon for having tried and condemned us."

"Eh?" Don Miguel said with a toss of his head. "All is not over—we are not dead yet."

"That is true; but keep your mind at rest—we shall be so soon."

"Our life is in God's hands. He will dispose of it at His pleasure."

"Amen!" the general said with a laugh, as he rolled a fresh cigarette.

"Do you not consider it extraordinary that, during the whole month we have been here, our friends have not given a sign of life?"

The general shrugged his shoulders carelessly.

"Hum!" he said, "a prisoner is very sick, and our friends doubtless feared to make us worse by the sight of their grief: that is why they have deprived themselves of the pleasure of visiting us."

"Do not jest, general. You accuse them wrongfully, I feel convinced."

"May Heaven grant it! For my part, I heartily forgive them their indifference, and the oblivion in which; they have left us."

"I cannot believe that Don Valentine, that true-hearted and noble-minded man, for whom I ever felt so deep a friendship, has not tried to see me."

"Bah! How, Don Miguel, can you, so near death as you are, still believe in honourable feelings in any man?"

At this moment there was a great clash of iron outside, and the door of the room was opened sufficiently to afford passage to the jailer, who preceded another person. The almost complete obscurity that prevailed in the prison prevented the condemned men from recognising the visitor, who wore a long black gown.

"Eh, eh!" the general muttered in his comrade's ear, "I believe that General Ventura, our amiable governor, has at length made up his mind."

"Why so?" Don Miguel asked in a low voice.

"*Canarios!* he has sent us a priest, which means that we shall be executed tomorrow."

"On my word, all the better," Don Miguel could not refrain from saying.

In the meanwhile the jailer, a short, thick-set man, with a ferret face and cunning eye, had turned to the priest, whom he invited to enter, saying in a hoarse voice,—

"Here it is, señor padre: these are the condemned persons."

"Will you leave us alone, my friend?" the stranger said.

"Will you have my lantern? It is getting dark, and when people are talking they like to see one another."

"Thanks; you can do so. You will open when I call you by tapping at the door."

"All right—I will do so;" and he turned to the condemned, to whom he said savagely, "Well, señores, here is a priest. Take advantage of his services now you have got him. In your position there is no knowing what may happen from one moment to the other."

The prisoners shrugged their shoulder's contemptuously, but made no reply. The jailer went out. When the sound of his footsteps had died away in the distance, the priest, who had till this moment stood with his body bent forward and his ear on the watch, drew himself up, and walked straight to Don Miguel. This manoeuvre on the part of the stranger surprised the two gentlemen, who anxiously awaited what was about to happen. The lantern left by the jailer only spread a faint and flickering light, scarcely sufficient to distinguish objects.

"My father," the hacendero said in a firm voice, "I thank the person who sent you to prepare me for death, for I anxiously wished to fulfil my duties as a Christian before being executed. If you will proceed with me into the adjoining room I will confess my sins to you: they are those which an honest man ordinarily commits; for my heart is pure, and I have nothing to reproach myself with."

The priest took off his hat, seized the lantern, and placed it near his pale face, whose noble and gentle features were suddenly displayed in the light.

"Father Seraphin!" the prisoners exclaimed with a surprise mingled with joy.

"Silence!" the priest ordered quickly. "Do not pronounce my name so loudly, brothers: everyone is ignorant of my being here except the jailer, who is my confidant."

"He!" Don Miguel said with a stupor; "the man who has been insulting and humiliating us during a month!"

"That man is henceforth ours. Lose no time, come. I have secure means to get you out of prison, and to leave the town ere your evasion can be even suspected: the horses are prepared—an escort is awaiting you. Come, gentlemen, for the moments are precious."

The two prisoners interchanged a glance of sublime eloquence; then General Ibañez quietly seated himself on a butaca, while Don Miguel replied,—

"Thanks, my father. You have undertaken the noble task of soothing all sorrow, and you do not wish to fail in your duty. Thanks for the offer you make us, which we cannot, however, accept. Men like us must not give our enemies right by flying like criminals. We fought for a sacred principle, and succumbed. We owe it to our countrymen and to ourselves to endure death bravely. When we conspired we were perfectly well aware of what awaited us if we were conquered. Once again, thanks; but we will only quit this prison as free men, or to walk to punishment."

"I have not the courage, gentlemen, to blame your heroic resolution: in a similar case I should act as you are doing. You have a very slight hope still left, so wait. Perchance, within a few hours, unforeseen events will occur to change the face of matters."

"We hope for nothing more, my father."

"That word is a blasphemy in your mouth, Don Miguel. God can do all He wills. Hope, I tell you."

"I am wrong, father: forgive me."

"Now I am ready to hear your confession."

The prisoners bowed. Father Seraphin shrived them in turn, and gave them absolution.

"Hola!" the jailer shouted through the door. "Make haste; it is getting late. It will soon be impossible to leave the city."

"Open the door," the missionary said in a firm voice.

The jailer appeared.

"Well?" he asked.

"Light me and lead me out of the prison. These caballeros refuse to profit by the chance of safety I came to offer them."

The jailer shook his head and shrugged his shoulders.

"They are mad," he said.

And he went out, followed by the priest, who turned on the threshold and pointed to heaven. The prisoners remained alone.

CHAPTER IX.

THE EMBASSY.

On the selfsame day that Father Seraphin went to the prison to propose an escape to the condemned, a very strange circumstance had aroused the entire population of Santa Fe. At about midday, at the moment when the inhabitants were enjoying their siesta, and the streets, calcined by the beams of a tropical sun, were completely deserted, a formidable whoop, the terrible war yell of the Comanche Indians, burst forth at the entrance of the town.

There was a general alarm, and everybody barricaded himself in his house, believing in a sudden assault of the savages. Presently an immense clamour, and cries of distress and despair uttered by a terrified population, could be heard throughout the town. Several times already the Comanches, in their periodical incursions, had come near Santa Fe, but never so closely as this time; and the remembrance of the cruelties they had practised on the hapless Spaniards who fell into their hands was still present to every mind.

In the meanwhile a few inhabitants, bolder than the rest, or having nothing to lose, proceeded with the greatest precautions toward the spot whence the shouts were heard; and a singular spectacle presented itself. A detachment of dismounted Comanche warriors, about two hundred strong, was marching in close column, flanked on either wing by two troops, each of fifty horses. About twenty paces in front caracoled Unicorn.

All these men had a martial aspect which was really remarkable: all were strangely painted, well adorned, and in their full war costume. The horsemen were loaded with all sorts of arms and ornaments: they had a bow and quiver on their backs, their guns slung and decorated with their medicine bags, and their lances in their hands. They were crowned with magnificent black and white eagle feathers, with a falling tuft. The upper part of the body, otherwise naked, was covered by a coyote skin rolled up and worn across the shoulder; their bucklers were ornamented with feathers, cloth of different colours, and human scalps. They were seated on handsome saddlecloth of panthers' skins, lined with red, which almost covered the horses' backs. According to the prairie fashion, they had no stirrups.

Unicorn brandished in his right hand the long medicine lance, the distinctive mark of the powerful "dance of the prairie dogs." It was a staff in the shape of a crook, covered with an otter skin, and decorated through its entire length with owl feathers. This talisman, which he had inherited, possessed the power of bringing under his orders all the warriors of his nation scattered over the prairies: hence on all grand occasions he never failed to carry it. He wore a shirt made of the skin of the bighorn, embroidered on the sleeves with blue flowers, and adorned on the right arm with long stripes of rolled ermine and red feathers, and on the left arm with long tresses of black hair cut from the scalps he had raised. Over his shoulders he had thrown a cloak of gazelle skin, having at each end an enormous tuft of ermine. On his forehead the chief had fastened two buffalo horns, which with the blue, red, and green paint plastered on his face, gave him a terrible aspect. His magnificent horse, a mustang full of fire, which he managed with inimitable grace and skill, was painted red in different fashions: on its legs were stripes like a zebra, and on either side the backbone were designed arrowhead, lances, beavers, tortoises, &c. The same was the case with the face and the haunches.

There was something at once imposing and striking in the appearance presented by this band of ferocious warriors as they advanced though the deserted streets of the city, brandishing their tremendous weapons, and uttering at intervals their sinister war cry, which they accompanied by the shrill sound of long whistles made of human thigh bones, which they wore suspended by strips of wild beast hide.

By this time the Comanches had penetrated to the heart of the city, driving before them, though without violence, the few inhabitants who had ventured to get in their way. They marched in good order, not turning to the right or left to plunder, and doing no reprehensive action.

The Spaniards, more and more surprised at the haughty and bold attitude of the Indians, and their exemplary conduct, asked themselves with terror what these men wanted, and what reason had led them to invade their frontiers in so sudden and secret a way, that the scouts the Mexican Government pays to watch them had no knowledge of their march. As usually happens in such cases, terror gradually gave way to curiosity. In the first place the leperos and adventurers dared to approach the Indians; then the inhabitants, if not completely tranquilised, still reassured by their peaceful attitude, mingled with the groups; so that when the Comanche war party arrived on the Plaza Mayor; it was followed by a crowd of Spaniards, who regarded them with the restless and stupid curiosity only to be found among the masses.

The Comanches did not appear to notice the excitement they created. As soon as they were on the Plaza Mayor they halted, and remained motionless, as if their feet had suddenly grown to the ground. Unicorn made a sign with his talisman; a warrior quitted the ranks, and rode up to the sentry standing in front of the governor's palace, who regarded the singular scene with a dazed air.

"Wah!" the Indian said sarcastically, as he lightly touched the soldier with the end of his lance. "Is my brother asleep, that he does not hear a warrior addressing him?"

"I am not asleep," the soldier answered, as he fell back a pace. "What do you want?"

"The great sachem of the Comanches, the cacique whom the red children call Haboutzelze, has come to speak to his great white father, the chief of the frontier palefaces."

"What does he want with him?" the soldier asked, not knowing what he said, so much had the unexpected sight of the redskin disturbed him.

"Is my brother a chief?" the Indian asked cunningly.

"No," the soldier answered, greatly confused by this lesson.

"Well, then, let him close his ears as regards those the Great Spirit has set above him, and deliver the message I give him in the sachem's name."

While the Comanche was exchanging these few words with the sentry, several persons, drawn out of the palace by the unusual disturbance they heard, mingled with the crowd. Among them were several officers, one of whom advanced to the Indian horseman.

"What does my brother want?" he asked him.

The warrior saw at the first glance that this time he had to do with a chief. He bowed courteously, and answered.

"A deputation of the great Comanche nation desires to be introduced to my great white father."

"Good! But all the warriors cannot enter the palace," the officer said.

"My brother is right. Their chiefs alone will go in: their young men will await them here."

"Let my brother be patient. I will go and deliver his message in all haste."

"Good! My brother is a chief. The Spider will await him."

The officer disappeared in the interior, while the Spider planted the end of his long lance in the ground, and remained with his eye fixed on the gate of the palace, not evincing the slightest impatience.

The new governor of Santa Fe was a general of the name of Don Benito Ventura. He was ignorant as a fish, stupid and haughty as a heathcock. Like the majority of his colleagues in this eccentric country, he had gained his general's epaulettes by repeated pronunciamentos, managing to gain a step by every revolution, while never having seen more fire than that of the thin husk *pajillo* he constantly had in his mouth. To sum him up, he was very rich, a wonderful coward, and more afraid of blows than aught else in the world. Such he was morally: physically he was a plump little man, round as a barrel, with a rubicund face, lighted up by two small grey eyes.

This worthy officer perspired water and blood when the duties of his station obliged him to put on the uniform, every seam of which was overlaid with gold lace: his chest literally disappeared under the infinity of crosses of every description with which each president had honoured him on attaining power. In a word, General Ventura was a worthy man, as fit to be a soldier as he was to be a cardinal; and he had only one object, that of being President of the Republic in his turn; but this object he ever pursued without Once swerving from his path.

If he accepted the governorship of New Mexico, it was for the simple reason that, as Santa Fe was a long distance from Mexico, he had calculated that it would be easy for him to make a *pronunciamento* in his own favour, and become, *ipso facto*, president. He was not aware, on coming to Santa Fe, that the province he was about to govern was incessantly menaced by Indian forays. Had he known it, however advantageous the post of governor might, be for his schemes, he would have refused point blank so perilous an honour.

He had learned with the utmost terror the entrance of the Comanches into the town, and when the officer intrusted with the Spider's message presented himself before him he had literally lost his head. It took all possible trouble to make him comprehend that the Indians came as friends, that they merely wished to have a palaver with him, and that since their coming their conduct had been most honourable and exemplary. Fortunately for the Spanish honour, other officers entered the apartment in which was the governor, attracted to the palace by the news, which had spread with the speed of a train of powder through Santa Fe, of the appearance of an Indian detachment.

When the general saw himself surrounded and supported by the officers of his staff his terror was slightly toned down, he regained his presence of mind and it was with a calm and almost dignified demeanor that he discussed the question whether it was proper to receive the Indian deputation, and in what manner it should be done. The other officers, who, in the course of their professional career, had had many a skirmish with the redskins, felt no inclination to anger them. They produced in support of their opinions such peremptory reasons, that General Ventura, convinced by their arguments gave the officer who brought the message orders to bring the three principal Indian chiefs into the palace.

CHAPTER X.

THE PRESENTATION.

It needed the thorough knowledge the Comanches possessed of the terror they inspired the Mexicans with to have dared to enter in so small a body a town like Santa Fe, where they might expect to find a considerable garrison.

The general officer sent by General Ventura had performed his duty. Unicorn and two other chiefs dismounted, and followed him into the palace; while the Indian warriors, in spite of the heat of the sunbeams that played on their heads, remained motionless on the spot where their caciques bade them wait.

The general desired, by a certain display of strength, to impose on the redskin deputies; but unfortunately, as is always the case in Mexico, the garrison, which on paper represented eight hundred men, was in reality only composed of sixty at the most—a very small number for a frontier town, especially under the present circumstances. But if soldiers were lacking, to make up for it there was no paucity of officers; for about thirty were assembled at the palace, which allowed one officer to every two privates. This detail, which might appear exaggerated, is, however, strictly correct, and shows in what a state of anarchy this hapless country is plunged. The thirty officers, attired in their splendid uniforms, that glistened with gold and decorations, were arranged round the general, while three posts of ten men each held the doors of the halls of reception.

When the preparations were completed the ambassadors were introduced. The Indian chiefs, accustomed for a long period to Spanish luxury, entered without testifying the slightest surprise. They bowed with dignity to the assembly, and, crossing their arms on their chests, waited till they were addressed. The general regarded them with an astonishment pardonable enough, for this was the first time he had found himself in the presence of these untamable redskins, whose terrible renown had so often made him shudder.

"What reason can have been so powerful as to oblige my sons to come and see me?" he asked in a gracious and conciliating tone. "Let them make their request, and, if I can do so, I shall be most ready to satisfy it."

This opening, which the governor fancied to be very politic, was, on the contrary, most awkward, as it offended the pride of those he addressed, and whom he had the greatest interest in humouring. Unicorn took a step forward. A sarcastic smile played on his lips, and he replied in a voice slightly tinged with irony,—

"I have heard a parrot speak. Are the words addressed to me?"

The general blushed up to the eyes at this insult, which he did not dare retaliate.

"The chief has not understood my words," he said. "My intentions are good, and I only wish to be agreeable to him."

"The Comanches do not come here to ask a favour," Unicorn answered, haughtily. "They know how to avenge themselves when insulted."

"What do my sons want then?"

"To treat with my father for the ransom of the white chiefs who are in their power. Five palefaces inhabit the cabin of the Comanches. The young men of the tribe demand their punishment, for the blood of the palefaces is agreeable to the Master of Life. Tomorrow the prisoners will have ceased to live if my father does not buy them off today."

After these words, uttered in a firm and peremptory tone, there was a moment of supreme silence. The Mexican officers reflected sadly on the fearful fate that threatened their friends. Unicorn continued:—

"What does my father say? Shall we fasten our prisoners to the stake of blood, or restore them to liberty?"

"What ransom do you ask?" the general said.

"Listen, all you chiefs of the palefaces here present, and judge of the clemency and generosity of the Comanches. We only, wish, for the life of these five men, the life of two men."

"That is little, I allow," the general remarked; "and who are the two men whose lives you ask?"

"The palefaces call them, the first, Don Miguel Zarate; the second, General Ibañez."

The general started.

"These two men cannot be delivered to you," he answered; "they are condemned to death, and will die tomorrow."

"Good! My prisoners will be tortured this night," the chief replied stoically.

"Confound it!" the general sharply exclaimed, "Is there no other arrangement possible? Let my brothers ask me a thing I can grant them, and—"

"I want those two men," the chief quickly interrupted. "If not, my warriors will themselves deliver them; and in that case the Comanche chiefs cannot prevent the injury their warriors may commit in the town."

One of the officers present at this interview was aroused by the tone Unicorn had affected since the beginning of the audience. He was a brave old soldier, and the cowardice of his comrades shamed him. He rose at this point.

"Chief," he said in a firm voice, "your words are very haughty and foolish for the mouth of an ambassador. You are here, at the head of scarce two hundred warriors, in the heart of a town peopled by brave men. Despite all my desire to be agreeable to you, if you do not pay greater respect to your audience, prompt and severe justice shall be inflicted on your insolence."

The Indian chief turned toward the new speaker, whose remarks had aroused a sympathetic murmur.

"My words are those of a man who fears nothing, and holds in his hands the life of five men."

"Well," the officer retorted sharply, "what do we care for them? If they were such fools as to let

you capture them, they must suffer the consequences of their madness; we cannot pay for them. Besides, as you have already been told, those you claim must die."

"Good! We will retire," Unicorn said haughtily. "Longer discourse is needless; our deeds shall speak for us."

"A moment!" the general exclaimed. "All may yet be arranged. An affair like the present cannot be settled all in a hurry; we must reflect on the propositions made to us. My son is a chief, and will grant us reasonable time to offer him a reply."

Unicorn bent a suspicious glance on the governor.

"My father has spoken wisely," he presently made answer. "Tomorrow at the twelfth hour, I will come for the final answer of the palefaces. But my father will promise me not to order the punishment of the prisoners till he has told me the decision he has come to."

"Be it so," the general answered. "But what will the Comanches do till, then?"

"They will leave the town as they entered it, and bivouac on the plain."

"Agreed on."

"The Master of Life has heard my father's promise. If he break his word and possess a forked tongue, the blood shed will fall on his head."

The Comanche uttered these words in a significant tone that made the general tremble inwardly; then he bowed to the assembly, and left the hall with his companions. On reaching the square the chiefs remounted their horses and placed themselves at the head of their warriors. An hour later the Comanches had left the town, and camped within two gunshots of the walls, on the banks of the river. It was after this interview that Unicorn had the conversation with Valentine which we recently described.

Still, when the Mexican officers were alone with the general, their courage returned all at once, and they reproached him for the little dignity he had displayed before the Indians, and specially for the promise he had made them. The general listened to them calmly, with a smile on his lips, and contented himself with answering them, in a tone, of indescribable meaning,—

"The promise you allude to pledges me to nothing. Between this and tomorrow certain things will happen to free us from the Comanches, and let us dispense with surrendering the prisoners they demand so insolently."

CHAPTER XI.

PSYCHOLOGICAL.

About half a league to the west of Santa Fe three men and a woman were seated behind a dense clump of trees, which sheltered while rendering them unseen, over a *bois-de-vache* fire, supping with good appetite, and chatting together. The three men were Red Cedar's sons; the female was Ellen. The maiden was pale and sad: her dreamy eye wandered around with a distraught expression. She listened hardly to what her brothers said, and would certainly have been greatly embarrassed to describe the conversation, for her mind was elsewhere.

"Hum!" Sutter said, "what the deuce can keep the old one so long? He told us he should be back by four o'clock at the latest; but the sun is just disappearing on the horizon, and he has not come yet."

"Pshaw!" Nathan said with a shrug of the shoulders. "Are you afraid that something has happened to him? The old chap has beak and nails to defend himself; and since his last turn up with Don Miguel, the fellow who is to be shot tomorrow at Santa Fe, he has kept on his guard."

"I care very little," Sutter replied brusquely, "whether father is here or not; but I believe we should do well not to wait longer, but return to the camp, where our presence is doubtless necessary."

"Nonsense! Our comrades can do without us," Shaw observed. "We are all right here, so suppose we stop the night. Tomorrow it will be day. Well, if father has not returned by sunrise, we will go back to camp. Harry and Dick can keep good order till our return."

"In truth, Shaw is right," Nathan said. "Father is at times so strange, that he might be angry with us for not having waited for him; for he never does anything lightly. If he told us to stay here, he probably had his reasons."

"Let us stay, then," Sutter remarked carelessly. "I ask for nothing better. We shall only have to keep the fire up, and so one of us will watch while the others sleep."

"Agreed on," Nathan replied. "In that way, if the old man comes during our sleep, he will see that we waited for him."

The three brothers rose. Sutter and Nathan collected a pile of dry wood to maintain the fire, while Shaw intertwined a few branches to make his sister a sufficient shelter for the night. The two elder brothers thrust their feet toward the fire, wrapped themselves in their blankets, and went to sleep, after advising Shaw to keep a bright lookout, not only against wild beasts, but to announce the old squatter's approach. Shaw, after stirring up the fire, threw himself at the foot

of a larch tree, and letting his head sink on his chest, plunged into deep and painful meditation.

This poor boy, hardly twenty years of age, was a strange composite of good and evil qualities. Reared in the desert, he had grown up like one of its native trees, thrusting out here and there branches full of powerful sap. Nothing had ever thwarted his instincts, no matter what their nature might be. Possessing no cognizance of justice and injustice, he had never been able to appreciate the squatter's conduct, or see the injury he did society by the life he led. Habituated to regard as belonging to himself all that he wished for, allowing himself to be guided by his impressions and caprices, never having felt any other fetter than his father's despotic will, this young man had at once a nature expansive and reserved, generous and avaricious, gentle and cruel: in a word, he possessed all the qualities of his vices; but he was, before all, a man of sensations. Endowed with a vast intellect, extreme audacity, and lively comprehensions, he would have been indubitably a remarkable man, had he been born in a different position.

His sister Ellen was the only member of his family for whom he experienced sympathy; and yet it was only with extreme reserve that he intrusted his boyish secrets to her—secrets which, during the last few days, had acquired an importance he did not himself suspect, but which his sister, with the innate intelligence of woman, had already divined.

Shaw, as we have said, was thinking. The young savage's indomitable nature revolted against an unknown force which had suddenly sprung up in his heart—mastered and subdued him in spite of all his efforts. He was in love! He loved, ignorant even of the meaning of the word love, which comprises in this nether world all earthly joy and suffering. Vainly he sought to explain his feelings; but no light flashed across his mind, or illumined the darkness of his heart. He loved without desire and without hope, involuntarily obeying that divine law which compels even the roughest man to seek a mate. He was dreaming of Doña Clara. He loved her, as he was capable of loving, with that passionate impetuosity, that violence of feeling, to which his uncultivated mind adapted him. The sight of the maiden caused him a strange trouble, which he did not attempt to account for. He did not try to analyse his feelings, for that would have been impossible; and yet at times he was a prey to cold and terrible fury, when thinking that the haughty maiden, who was even unconscious of his existence, would probably only spurn and despise him if she knew it. He was yielding to these crushing thoughts, when he suddenly felt a hand laid on his shoulder. On turning, Ellen stood before him, upright and motionless, like the white apparitions of the German legends. He raised his head, and bent an inquiring glance on his sister.

"You are not asleep, Ellen?"

"No," she answered in a voice soft as a bird's song. "Brother, my heart is sad."

"What is the matter, Ellen? Why not enjoy a few hours of that repose so necessary for you?"

"My heart is sad, I tell you, brother," she went on. "In vain do I seek sleep—it flies far from me."

"Sister, tell me the cause of your sufferings, and perhaps I can appease the grief that devours you."

"Can you not guess it?"

"I do not understand you."

She looked at him so sternly that he could not let his eyes fall.

"On the contrary, you understand me too well, Shaw," she said with a sigh. "Your heart rejoices at this moment at the misfortune of the woman you should defend."

The young man blushed.

"What can I do?" he murmured faintly.

"Everything, if you have the firm will," she exclaimed energetically.

"No," Shaw went on, shaking his head with discouragement; "the person of whom you speak is the old man's prisoner. I cannot contend against my father."

Ellen smiled contemptuously.

"You seek in vain to hide your thoughts from me," she said harshly. "I read your heart as an open book: your sorrow is feigned, and you really rejoice at the thought that in future you will constantly be by Doña Clara's side."

"I!" he exclaimed with an angry start.

"Yes, you only see in her captivity a means to approach her. Your selfish heart is secretly gladdened by that hope."

"You are harsh to me, sister. Heaven is my witness that, were it possible, I would at once restore her the liberty torn from her."

"You can if you like."

"No, it is impossible. My father watches too closely over his prisoner."

"He will not distrust you, but allow you to approach her freely."

"What you ask of me is impossible."

"Because you will not, Shaw. Remember that women only love men in proportion to the sacrifices they make for them: they despise cowards."

"But how to save her?"

"That is your affair, Shaw."

"At least give me some advice which will help me to escape from the difficult position in which I find myself."

"In such serious circumstances your heart must guide you, and you must only ask counsel of it."

"But the old one?" Shaw said hesitatingly.

"Our father will not know your movements. I take on myself to prevent him noticing them."

"Good!" the young man remarked, half convinced; "but I do not know where the maiden is hidden."

"I will tell you, if you swear to do all in your power to save her."

There was a moment of silence.

"I swear to obey you, Ellen. If I do not succeed in carrying the girl off, I will at any rate employ all my intellect to obtain that result. Speak, then, without fear."

"Doña Clara is confined at the Rancho del Coyote: she was intrusted to Andrés Garote."

"Ah, ah!" the young man said, as if speaking to himself, "I did not fancy her so near us."

"You will save her?"

"At all events I will try to free her from the hands of the man who guards her."

"Good!" the maiden remarked; "I now recognise you. Lose no time: my father's absence alarms me. Perhaps at this moment he is preparing a safer hiding place for his prisoner."

"Your idea is excellent, sister. Who knows whether it is not too late now to tear from the old man the prey he covets?"

"When do you intend to start?"

"At once: I have not a moment to lose. If the old man returned I should be compelled to remain here. But who will keep watch while my brothers sleep?"

"I will," the maiden answered resolutely.

"Whence arises the interest you feel in this woman, sister, as you do not know her?" the young man asked in surprise.

"She is a woman, and unhappy. Are not those reasons sufficient?"

"Perhaps so," Shaw remarked doubtfully.

"Child!" Ellen muttered, "Can you not read in your own heart, the motive of my conduct toward this stranger?"

The young savage started at this remark.

"It is true!" He exclaimed passionately. "Pardon me, sister! I am mad; but I love you, and you know me better than I do myself."

And rising hurriedly, he kissed his sister, threw his rifle over his shoulder, and ran off in the direction of Santa Fe.

When he had disappeared in the gloom, and the sound of his footsteps had died out in the distance, the girl fell on the ground, muttering in a low, sad voice:

"Will he succeed?"

CHAPTER XII.

DIAMOND CUT DIAMOND.

Red Cedar did not remain long under the effect of the startling insult he had received. Pride, wrath, and, before all, the desire to avenge himself restored his strength, and a few minutes after Don Pablo Zarate's departure the squatter had regained all his coolness and audacity.

"You see, señor padre," he said, addressing the monk, "that our little plans are known to our enemies; we must, therefore, make haste if we do not wish to see persons break in here, from whom it is of the utmost importance to conceal ourselves. Tomorrow night at the latest, perhaps before, we shall start. Do not stir from here till my return. Your face is too well known at Santa Fe for you to venture to show it in the streets without imprudence."

"Hum!" the monk muttered, "That demon, whom I fancied dead, is a rude adversary. Fortunately we shall soon have nothing more to fear from his father, for I hardly know how we should get out of it."

"If the son has escaped us," Red Cedar said with an ugly smile, "that is fortunately not the case with the father. Don't be alarmed; Don Miguel will cause us no further embarrassment."

"I wish it most earnestly, *canarios!* for he is a determined man; but I confess to you that I shall

not be entirely at my ease till I have seen him fall beneath the bullets of the soldiers."

"You will not have long to wait. General Ventura has ordered me to go and meet the regiment of dragoons he expects, in order to hurry them on, and bring them into the town this very night, if possible. So soon as the governor has an imposing force at his disposal he will no longer fear a revolt on the part of the troops, and give the order for execution without delay."

"May Heaven grant it! But," he added with a sigh of regret, "what a pity that most of our scamps deserted us! We should have almost arrived at the placer by this time, and been safe from the vengeance of our enemies."

"Patience, señor padre; all is for the best, perhaps, trust to me. Andrés, my horse."

"You will start at once, then?"

"Yes. I recommend you to watch carefully over our prisoner."

The monk shrugged his shoulders.

"Our affairs are tolerably well embarrassed already; then why burden ourselves with a woman?"

The squatter frowned.

"That is my business," he exclaimed in a peremptory tone. "Keep all stupid observations to yourself. A thousand devils! I know what I am about. That woman will possibly prove our safeguard at a later date."

And mounting his horse, Red Cedar galloped out of Santa Fe.

"Hum!" Andrés Garote said as he watched him depart, "what a diabolical eye! Though I have known him several years, I never saw him like that before. How will all this end?"

Without further remarks he arranged matters in the rancho, repairing as well as he could the disorder caused by the previous struggle; then he took a look round him. The monk, with his elbows on the table and a cigarette in his mouth, was drinking the fluid left in the bottle, doubtless to console himself for the *navajada* with which Don Pablo had favoured him.

"Why, señor padre," the ranchero said in an insinuating voice, "do you know that it is hardly five o'clock?"

"Do you think so?" the other answered for the sake of saying something.

"Does not the time seem to you to go very slowly?"

"Extraordinarily so."

"If you liked we could easily shorten it."

"In what way?"

"Oh, for instance, with these."

And Andrés drew from his boot a pack of greasy cards, which he complacently spread out on the table.

"Ah! That is a good idea," the monk exclaimed with sparkling eyes. "Let us have a game of monte."

"At your orders."

"Don Andrés, you are a most worthy gentlemen. What shall we play for?"

"Ah, hang it! That is true; we must play for something," the ranchero said, scratching his head.

"The merest trifle, simply to render the game interesting."

"Yes, but to do that man must possess the trifle."

"Do not let that trouble you. If you permit me I will make you a proposal."

"Do so, señor. You are a remarkable clever man, and can have none but bright ideas."

The monk bowed to his flattering insinuation.

"This is it: we will play, if you like for the share of the gold we shall receive when we reach the placer."

"Done!" the ranchero shouted enthusiastically.

"Well," the monk said, drawing from his pocket a pack of cards no less dirty than the others, "we can at any rate kill time."

"What! You have cards too?" the ranchero remarked.

"Yes, and quite new, as you see." Andrés bowed with an air of conviction.

The game began at once, and soon the two men were completely absorbed in the combinations of the *seis de copas,* the *as de bastos*, the *dos de oro*, and the *cuatro d'espadas*. The monk, who had no necessity to feign at this moment, as he was in the company of a man thoroughly acquainted with him, yielded frenziedly to his ruling passion. In Mexico, and throughout Spanish America, the *angelus* rings at sunset. In those countries, where there is no twilight, night arrives without transition, so that ere the bell has done tinkling the gloom is dense. At the last stroke of the angelus the game ceased, as if by common agreement between the two men, and they threw their cards on the table.

Although Garote was a passed master in trickery, and had displayed all his science, he found in the monk so skilful an adversary that, after more than three hours of an obstinate struggle, they both found themselves as little advanced as at the outset. The monk, however, on coming to the rancho, had an object which Red Cedar was far from suspecting.

Fray Ambrosio rested his arms on the table, bent his body slightly forward, and while carelessly playing with the cards, which he amused himself by sorting, he said to the ranchero, as he fixed a scrutinising glance upon him,—

"Shall we talk a little, Don Andrés?"

"Willingly," the latter replied, who had partly risen, but now fell back on his chair.

By a secret foreboding Andrés Garote had guessed that the monk wished to make some important proposal to him. Hence, thanks to that instinctive intuition which rogues possess for certain things, the two men read each other's thoughts. Fray Ambrosio bit his lips, for the gambusino's intelligence startled him. Still the latter bent upon him a glance so full of stupid meaning, that he continued to make a confidant of him, as it were involuntarily.

"Señor Don Andrés," he said in a soft and insinuating voice, "what a happiness that your poor brother, on dying, revealed to me the secret of the rich placer, which he concealed even from yourself!"

"It is true," Andrés answered, turning slightly pale; "it was very fortunate, señor padre. For my part, I congratulate myself on it daily."

"Is it not so? For without it the immense fortune would have been lost to you and all else."

"It is terrible to think of."

"Well, at this moment I have a horrible fear."

"What is it, señor padre?"

"That we have deferred our departure too long, and that some of those European vagabonds we were speaking of just now may have discovered our placer. Those scoundrels have a peculiar scent for finding gold."

"*Caray*, señor padre!" Andrés said, striking the table with a feigned grief (for he knew very well what the monk was saying was only a clever way of attaining his real point), "that would drive me mad—an affair so well managed hitherto."

"That is true," Fray Ambrosio said in corroboration. "I could never console myself."

"*Demonios*! I have as great an interest in it as yourself, señor padre," the gambusino replied with superb coolness. "You know that an uninterrupted succession of unfortunate speculations robbed me of my fortune, and I hoped thus to regain it at a stroke."

At these words Fray Ambrosio had incredible difficulty in repressing a smile; for it was a matter of public notoriety that señor Don Andrés Garote was a lepero, who, as regarded fortune, had never possessed a farthing of patrimony; that throughout his life he had never been aught but an adventurer; and that the unlucky speculations of which he complained were simply an ill luck at monte, which had recently stripped him of 20,000 piastres, acquired Heaven alone knew how. But señor Don Andrés Garote was a man of unequalled bravery, gifted with a fertile and ready mind, whom the accidents of life had compelled to live for a lengthened period on the *llanos* (prairies), whose paths he knew as thoroughly as he did the tricks of those who dwelt on them. Hence, and for many other reasons, Andrés Garote was an invaluable comrade for Fray Ambrosio, who had also a bitter revenge to take on the monte table, because he pretended to place the most sincere faith in what it pleased his honourable mate to say touching his lost fortune.

"However," he said, after an instant's reflection, "supposing that the placer is intact, and that no one has discovered it, we shall have a long journey to reach it."

"Yes," the gambusino remarked, significantly; "the road is difficult and broadcast with perils innumerable."

"We must march with our chins on our shoulders, and finger on the rifle trigger—"

"Fight nearly constantly with wild beasts or Indians—"

"In a word, do you not believe that the woman Red Cedar has carried off will prove a horrid bore?"

"Dreadfully so," Andrés made answer, with an intelligent glance.

"What is to be done?"

"Hang it! That is difficult to say."

"Still we cannot run the risk, on account of a wretched woman, of having our hair raised by the Indians."

"That's true enough."

"Is she here?"

"Yes," the gambusino said, pointing to a door; "in that room."

"Hum!"

"You remarked—"

"Nothing."

"Could we not—"

"What?"

"It is perhaps difficult," Andrés continued, with feigned hesitation.

"Explain yourself."

The gambusino seemed to make up his mind.

"Suppose we restore her to her family?" he said.

"I have thought of that already."

"That is strange."

"It must be all managed very cleverly."

"And the relations pay a proper ransom."

"That is what I meant to say.".

There was a silence.

Decidedly these two honourable persons were made to understand one another.

"But who is to undertake this delicate mission?" asked the monk.

"I, *con mil demonios!*" the gambusino exclaimed, his eyes sparkling with greed at the thought of the rich ransom he would demand.

"But if Red Cedar were to find out," the monk remarked, "that we surrendered his prisoner?"

"Who will tell him?"

"I am sure I shan't."

"Nor I."

"It is very easy; the girl will have escaped."

"Quite true."

"Do not let us lose time, then. You have a horse?"

"I have two."

"Bravo! You will place Doña Clara on one, and mount the other yourself."

"And go straight to the Hacienda de la Noria."

"That is it. Don Pablo will be delighted to recover his sister, whom he expected never to see again, and will not haggle over the price he pays for her deliverance."

"Famous! In that way we run no risk of not reaching the placer, as our party will only consist of men."

"Excellently reasoned!"

Andrés Garote rose with a smile which would have caused the monk to reflect, had he seen it; but at the same moment the latter was rubbing his hands, saying in a low voice, and with a most satisfied air,—

"Now, my scamp, I've got you."

What secret thought possessed these two men, who were carrying on a mutual deceit, none save themselves could have said. The gambusino approached the door of the room where Doña Clara was confined, and put the key in the lock. At this moment two vigorous blows were dealt on the door of the rancho, which had been carefully bolted after Red Cedar's departure. The two accomplices started.

"Must I open?" Andrés asked.

"Yes," the monk answered; "hesitation or refusal might create alarm. In our position we must foresee everything."

The ranchero went to open the door, which the newcomer threatened to break in. A man walked in, who took a careful glance around, then doffed his hat and bowed. The confederates exchanged a glance of vexation on recognising him, for he was no other than Shaw, Red Cedar's youngest son.

"I am afraid I disturb you, gentlemen," the young man said, with an ironical smile.

"Not at all," Andrés made answer; "on the contrary, we are delighted to see you."

"Thanks!"

And the young man fell back into a butaca.

"You are very late at Santa Fe," the monk remarked.

"It is true," the American said, with some embarrassment; "I am looking for my father, and fancied I should find him here."

"He was so a few hours back, but he was obliged to leave us."

"Ah!"

This exclamation was rather drawn from the young man by the necessity he felt of replying, than through any interest he took in the information afforded him. He was evidently preoccupied; but Fray Ambrosio did not appear to notice it, as he continued,—

"Yes: it appears that his Excellency the Governor ordered your father to go and meet a regiment of dragoons intended to reinforce the garrison, and hasten its march."

"That is true; I forgot it."

The monk and the miner did not at all understand the American's conduct, and lost themselves in conjectures as to the reasons that brought him to the rancho. They guessed instinctively that what he said about his father was only a pretext or means of introduction; and that a powerful motive, he would not or dared not avow, had brought him. For his part, the young man, in coming to the Rancho del Coyote, where he knew that Doña Clara was imprisoned, expected to find Andrés alone, with whom he hoped to come to an understanding in some way or another. The presence of the monk disturbed all his plans. Still, time was slipping away he must make up his mind, and, before all, profit by Red Cedar's providential absence, which offered him an opportunity he could hardly dare to hope again.

CHAPTER XIII.

A STORMY DISCUSSION.

Shaw was not timid, as we have said—he ought rather be accused of the opposite excess; he was not the man, once his resolution was formed, to let anything soever turn him from it. His hesitation was not long; he suddenly rose, and violently stamping his rifle butt on the ground, looked at the two men, while saying in a firm voice,—

"Be frank, my presence here at this hour astonishes you, and you ask yourselves what cause can have brought me."

"Sir," the monk said, with a certain degree of hesitation rendered highly natural by the young man's tone.

"Pardon me," Shaw exclaimed, interrupting him, "the cause you will seek in vain. I will tell you: I have come to deliver Doña Clara."

"Can it be possible?" the two men exclaimed with stupefaction.

"It is so; whether you like it or not, I care little. I am the man to hold my own against both of you, and no one can prevent me restoring the maiden to her father, as I have resolved on doing."

"What do I hear?" said Fray Ambrosio.

"Hum!" the young man continued quickly, "Believe me, do not attempt any useless resistance, for I have resolved, if needs must, to pass over your bodies to success."

"But we have not the slightest wish—"

"Take care," he interrupted him in a voice full of menace and frowning, "I will only leave this house accompanied by her I wish to save."

"Sir," the monk remarked, in an authoritative voice which momentarily quelled the young savage, "two words of explanation."

"Make haste!" he answered, "For I warn you that my patience is exhausted."

"I do not insist on your listening any length of time. You have come here, you say, with the intention of delivering Doña Clara?"

"Yes," he answered impatiently, "and if you attempt to oppose it—"

"Pardon me," the monk interrupted, "such a determination on your part naturally surprises us."

"Why so?" the young man said, raising his head haughtily.

"Because," Fray Ambrosio answered tranquilly, "You are the son of Red Cedar, and it is at least I strange that—"

"Enough talking," Shaw exclaimed violently; "will you or not give me up her I have come to seek?"

"I must know, in the first place, what you intend doing with her.

"How does that concern you?"

"More than you imagine. Since that girl has been a prisoner I constituted myself—if not her guardian, for the dress I wear forbids that—her defender; in that quality I have the right of knowing for what reason you, the son of the man who tore her from her family, have come so audaciously to demand her surrender to you, and what your object is in acting thus?"

The young man had listened to those remarks with an impatience that became momentarily more visible; it could be seen that he made superhuman efforts to restrain himself. When the monk stopped, he looked at him for a moment with a strange expression, then walked up so close as

almost to touch him, drew a pair of pistols from his girdle and pointed them at the monk.

"Surrender Doña Clara to me," he said, in a low and menacing voice.

Fray Ambrosio had attentively followed all the American's movements, and when the latter put the pistol muzzles to his chest, the monk, with an action rapid as lightning, also drew two pistols from his girdle, and placed them, on his adversary's chest. There was a moment of supreme expectation, of indescribable agony; the two men were motionless, face to face panting, each with his fingers on a trigger, pale, and their brows dank with cold perspiration. Andrés Garote, his lips curled by an ironical smile, and his arms crossed, carelessly leaned against a table, watching this scene which had for him all the attractions of a play.

All at once the door of the rancho, which had not been fastened again after the squatter's entry was violently thrown back and a man appeared. It was Father Seraphin. At a glance he judged the position and boldly threw himself between the foemen, hurling them back, but not uttering a word. The two men recoiled, and lowered their weapons, but continued to menace each other with their glances.

"What!" the missionary said in a deep voice, "Have I arrived just in time to prevent a double murder, gentlemen? In Heaven's name, hide those homicidal weapons; do not stand opposite each other like wild beasts preparing for a leap."

"Withdraw, father; you have nothing to do here. Let me treat this man as he deserves," the squatter answered, casting at the missionary a ferocious glance—"his life belongs to me."

"Young man," the priest replied, "the life of a fellow being belongs only to God, who has the right to deprive, him of it; lower your weapons"—and turning to Fray Ambrosio, he said to him in a cutting voice, "and you who dishonour the frock you wear, throw away those pistols which sully your hands—a minister of the altar should not employ other weapons than the Gospel."

The monk bowed, and caused his pistols to disappear, saying in a soft and cautious voice, "My father, I was compelled to defend my life which that maniac assailed. Heaven is my witness that I reprove these violent measures, too frequently employed in this unhappy country; but this man came into the house with threats on his lips; he insisted on our delivering a wretched girl whom this caballero," he said, pointing to the gambusino, "and myself did not think proper to surrender."

Andrés corroborated the monk's words by a nod of the head.

"I wish to save that young girl from your hands," Shaw said, "and restore her to her father."

"Of whom are you speaking, my friend?" the missionary asked with a secret beating of his heart.

"Of whom should I speak, save Doña Clara de Zarate, whom these villains retain here by force?"

"Can it be possible?" Father Seraphin exclaimed in amazement. "Doña Clara here?"

"Ask those men," Shaw answered, roughly, as he angrily struck the butt of his rifle against the ground.

"Is it true?" the priest inquired.

"It is," the gambusino answered.

Father Seraphin frowned, and his pale forehead was covered with febrile ruddiness.

"Sir," he said, in a voice choking with indignation. "I summon you, in the name of that God whom you serve, and whose minister you lay claim to being, to restore at once to liberty the hapless girl whom you have so unworthily imprisoned, in defiance of all laws, human and divine. I engage to deliver her into the hands of those who bewail her loss."

Fray Ambrosio bowed; he let his eyes fall, and said in a hypocritical voice—

"Father, you are mistaken as regards myself. I had nothing to do with the carrying off of that poor child, which on the contrary, I opposed to the utmost of my power; and that is so true, father," he added, "that at the moment when this young madman arrived, the worthy gambusino and myself had resolved, at all risks, on restoring Doña Clara to her family."

"I should wish to believe you, sir; if I am mistaken, as you say, you will forgive me, for appearances were against you; it only depends on yourself to produce a perfect justification by carrying out my wishes."

"You shall be satisfied, father," the monk replied. At a signal from him Garote left the room. During the few words interchanged between the two men, Shaw remained motionless, hesitating, not knowing what he ought to do; but he suddenly made up his mind, threw his rifle over his shoulder, and turned to the missionary.

"Father," he said respectfully, "my presence is now needless here. Farewell; my departure will prove to you the purity of my intentions."

And turning suddenly on his heel, he hurried out of the rancho. A few moments after his departure the gambusino returned, Doña Clara following him.

Doña Clara no longer wore the dress of the whites, for Red Cedar, in order to render her unrecognizable, had compelled her to don the Indian garb, which the maiden wore with an innate grace which heightened its strange elegance. Like all Indian squaws, she was attired in two white chemises of striped calico—the one fastened around the neck, fell to the hips; while the other, drawn in at the waist, descended to her ankles. Her neck was adorned with collars of fine pearls,

mingled with those small shells called wampum, and employed by the Indians as money. Her arms and ankles were surrounded by wide circles of gold, and a small diadem of the same metal relieved the pale tint of her forehead. Moccasins of deer hide, embroidered with wool and beads of every colour imprisoned her small and high-arched feet.

As she entered the room, a shadow of melancholy and sadness spread over her face, adding, were that possible, a further charm to her person. On seeing the missionary, Doña Clara uttered a cry of joy, and rushed toward him, fell into his arms, and murmured in a heart-rending voice:—

"Father! save me! save me!"

"Be calm, my daughter!" the priest said to her, gently. "You have nothing more to fear now that I am near you."

"Come!" she exclaimed, wildly, "Let us fly from this accursed house, in which I have suffered so greatly."

"Yes, my daughter, we will go; set your mind at rest."

"You see, father," Fray Ambrosio said, hypocritically, "that I did not deceive you."

The missionary cast at the monk a glance of undefinable meaning.

"I trust that you spoke truly," he replied; "the God who gauges hearts will judge you according to works. I will rescue this maiden at once."

"Do so, father; I am happy to know her under your protection."

And picking up the cloak which Don Pablo left after blinding Red Cedar, he placed it delicately on the shuddering shoulders of Doña Clara, in order to conceal her Indian garb. Father Seraphin drew her arm through his own, and led her from the rancho. Ere long they disappeared in the darkness. Fray Ambrosio looked after them as long as he could see them, and then re-entered the room, carefully bolting the door after him.

"Well," Andrés Garote asked him, "what do you think, señor Padre, of all that has happened?"

"Perhaps things are better as they are."

"And Red Cedar?"

"I undertake to render ourselves as white in his sight as the snows of the Caffre de Perote."

"Hum! it will be difficult."

"Perhaps so."

CHAPTER XIV.

THE MYSTERY.

On leaving the Rancho del Coyote, Red Cedar dug his spurs into his horse's flanks, and galloped in a south-western direction. So soon as he was out of the town he turned to the left, took a narrow path that ran round the walls, pulled up his horse, and advanced with the utmost caution. Throwing suspicious glances on either side, he went on thus for about three-quarters of an hour, when he reached a house, in one of the windows of which burned three wax tapers.

The lights thus arranged were evidently a signal for the squatter, for so soon as he came to the house he stopped and dismounted, attached his horse to a larch-tree, and prudently concealing himself behind a thicket, imitated thrice at equal intervals the hu-hu of an owl. The lights burning in the window were extinguished, as if by enchantment.

The night was gloomy, only a few stars studded the vault of heaven; a leaden silence brooded over the plain, which appeared quite solitary. At this moment a voice could be heard from the house which Red Cedar was watching so carefully. The squatter listened; the speaker leaned for a second out of the window looked cautiously round, and disappeared muttering loud enough for the American to overhear—

"All is quiet in the neighbourhood."

"Still," the squatter said, without showing himself, "the coyotes prowl about the plain."

"Are you coming or going?" the man at the window continued.

"Both," the squatter answered, still hidden behind his bush.

"You can come on, for you are expected."

"I know it; hence here I am."

While making this answer, the squatter left his hiding place, and placed himself before the door with folded arms, like a man who has nothing to fear.

The door was cautiously opened; a man emerged, carefully wrapped up in, a wide cloak, which only allowed eyes to be seen, that flashed in the gloom like a jackal's. This person walked straight up to Red Cedar.

"Well," he asked, in a low voice, "have you reflected?"

"Yes."

"And what is the result of your reflections?"

"I refuse."

"Still?"

"More than ever."

"Take care."

"I do not care, Don Melchior, for I am not afraid of you."

"No names!" the stranger exclaimed, impatiently.

"We are alone."

"No one is ever alone in the desert."

"That is true," Red Cedar muttered. "Let us return to our business."

"It is simple—give and give."

"Hum! You get to work very fast; unfortunately it cannot be so."

"Why not?"

"Why, because I am growing tired of constantly taking in my nets game by which others profit, and which I ought to keep as a safeguard."

"You call that girl a guarantee?"

"By Heaven! what else do you mean to make of her?"

"Do not compare me with you, scoundrel!"

"Where is the difference between us? I am a scoundrel, I grant; but, by heaven, you are another, my master, however powerful you may be."

"Listen, caballero!" the stranger answered, in a cutting voice. "I will lose no more of my time in discoursing with you. I want that girl, and will have her, whatever you may do to prevent me."

"Good; in that case you declare war against me?" the squatter said, with a certain tinge of alarm, which he tried in vain to conceal.

The stranger shrugged his shoulders.

"We have known one another long enough to be perfectly well acquainted; we can only be friends or foes. Is not that your opinion?"

"Yes."

"Well, then, hand Doña Clara over to me, and I will give you the papers which—"

"Enough!" the squatter said, sharply. "Have you those papers about you?"

The stranger burst into a laugh.

"Do you take me for such a fool?" he said.

"I do not understand you."

"I will not insult you by believing you. No, I have not those papers about me. I am not such an ass as to risk assassination at your hands."

"What would your death profit me?"

"Hang it all! If it were only my scalp you would be sure to receive at least fifty dollars for it."

At this mournful jest the squatter began laughing.

"I did not think of that," he said,

"Listen to me, Red Cedar, and print the words on your memory."

"Speak."

"In a month from today, hour for hour, day for day, wherever you may be, I shall present myself to you."

"For what purpose?' the squatter asked impudently.

"To repeat my demand with reference to the prisoner."

"Then, as now, I shall reply No, my master."

"Perhaps so. Live and learn. Now good-bye, and may the devil, your patron saint, preserve you in good health until our next meeting. You know that I have you tight; so consider yourself warned."

"Good, good! Threats do not frighten me. *Demonios*, since I have been traversing the desert, I have found myself opposed to enemies quite as dangerous as you, and yet I managed to get quit of them."

"That is possible, Red Cedar; but believe me, meditate carefully on my words."

"I repeat that your threats do not frighten me."

"I do not threaten, I warn you."

"Hum! Well, then, listen in your turn. In the desert, every man armed with a good rifle has nothing to fear from whomsoever."

"What next?" the stranger interrupted him, in a sarcastic voice.

"Well, my rifle is excellent, I have a sure aim, and I say no more."

"Nonsense, you are mad! I defy you to kill me!"

"Hang it, though, what can be your motive for wishing to have this girl in your power?"

"That is no affair of yours. I have no explanations due to you. Enough for you to know that I want her."

"You shall not have her."

"We shall see. Good-bye, Red Cedar."

"Good-bye, Don Melchior, or whatever be the name you please to bear."

The stranger made no reply, but turned his head with a gesture of contempt, and whistled. A man emerged from the house, holding a horse by the bridle; at one bound the stranger reached the saddle, and ordered the servant to withdraw.

"Farewell, *Compadre*, remember our appointment."

And loosing his reins, the stranger started at a gallop, not condescending even to turn his head. Red Cedar looked after him with an indescribable expression of rage.

"Oh," he muttered in a low voice, "demon! Shall I never free myself from your clutches?"

And with a motion rapid as thought he shouldered his rifle, and aimed at the departing man. All at once the latter turned his horse, and stood right opposite Red Cedar.

"Mind not to miss me!" he cried, with a burst of laughter that caused a cold perspiration to bead on the bandit's forehead.

The latter let his rifle fall, saying in a hollow voice: "He is right, and I am mad! If I only had the papers!"

The stranger waited for a moment calm and motionless; then he started again and soon disappeared in the darkness. Red Cedar stood with his body bowed forward, and his ears on the watch, so long as the horse's hoofs could be heard; then he returned to his own steed, and bounded into the saddle.

"Now to go and warn the dragoons," he said, and pushed on.

The squatter had scarce departed ere several men appeared from either side; they were Valentine, Curumilla, and Don Pablo on the right; Unicorn and Eagle-wing on the left. Valentine and his friends were astonished at meeting the Comanche chief, whom they believed gone back to his camp; but the sachem explained to them, in a few words, how, at the moment he was crossing the spot where they now were, he had heard Red Cedar's voice, and concealed himself in the shrubs in order to overhear the squatter's colloquy with his strange friend. Valentine had done the same; but, unfortunately, the party had been greatly disappointed, for the squatter's conversation remained to them an enigma, of which they sought the key in vain.

"'Tis strange," Valentine remarked, as he passed his hand several times across his forehead. "I do not know where I have seen the man just now talking here with Red Cedar, but I have a vague reminiscence of having met him before, where and under what circumstance I try, though in vain, to recall."

"What shall we do?" Don Pablo asked.

"Hang it, what we agreed on;" and turning to the chief, he said, "Good luck, brother, I believe we shall save our friend."

"I am sure of it," the Indian replied, laconically.

"May heaven hear you, brother," Valentine continued. "Act! While, on your side, you watch the town for fear of treason. We then will ambush ourselves on the road the gambusinos must take, in order to know positively the direction in which they are proceeding. Till tomorrow, chief!"

"Stop!" a panting voice exclaimed, and a man suddenly appeared in the midst of them.

"Father Seraphin!" Valentine said in a surprise. "What chance brings you this way?"

"I was looking for you."

"What do you want with me?"

"To give you some good news."

"Speak! Speak quickly, father! Has Don Miguel left his prison?"

"Alas! Not yet; but his daughter is free!"

"Doña Clara free!" Valentine shouted joyously. "Heaven be blessed! Where is she?"

"She is temporarily in safety, be assured of that; but let me give you a warning, which may perhaps prove useful to you."

"Speak! Speak!"

"By order of the governor, Red Cedar has gone to meet the regiment of dragoons, coming up to

reinforce the Santa Fe garrison."

"*Caramba*," Valentine said, "are you sure of your statement, father?"

"I am: in my presence, the men who carried off Doña Clara spoke about it."

"All is lost if these soldiers arrive."

"Yes," the missionary said; "but, how to prevent it?"

Curumilla lightly touched the leader's arm.

"What do you want, chief!"

"The Comanches are warriors," Curumilla answered, curtly.

"Ah!" Valentine exclaimed, and tapping his forehead with delight, "that is true, chief; you save us."

Curumilla smiled with pleasure.

"While you go in pursuit of the soldiers," said Don Pablo, "as I can be of no service to you, I will accompany Father Seraphin to my poor sister, whom I have not seen so long, and am eager to embrace."

"Do so," Valentine answered. "At daybreak you will bring Doña Clara to the camp, that I may myself deliver her to her father."

"That is agreed."

Valentine, Curumilla, and Unicorn rushed out in the plain, while Father Seraphin and Don Pablo returned to the town. The two gentlemen, anxious to join the girl, did not perceive that they were closely watched by an individual, who followed their every movement, while careful not to be seen by them. It was Nathan, Red Cedar's eldest son.

How was that man there?

CHAPTER XV.

THE AMBUSCADE.

The nigh breeze had swept the clouds away; the sky, of a deep azure, was studded with an infinity of stars; the night was limpid, the atmosphere so transparent as to allow the slightest varieties of the landscape to be distinguished. About four leagues from Santa Fe, a numerous band of horsemen was following a path scarce traced in the tall grass, which approached the town with countless turns and windings. These horsemen, who marched in rather decent order, were nearly 600 in number, and formed the regiment of dragoons so anxiously expected by General Ventura.

About ten paces ahead rode four or five officers gaily chatting together, among whom was the colonel. The regiment continued its march slowly, advancing cautiously, through fear of losing its way in a perfectly strange country. The colonel and his officers who had always fought in the States bordering the Atlantic, found themselves now for the first time in these savage countries.

"Caballeros," the colonel suddenly remarked, "I confess to you that I am completely ignorant as to our whereabouts. Can any one of you throw a light on the subject? This road is fearful, it seems to lead nowhere, and I am afraid we have lost our way."

"We are all as ignorant as yourself on that head, colonel," an officer answered, "not one of us could say where we are."

"On my word!" the colonel went on, taking a glance of satisfaction around, "We are not in a hurry to reach Santa Fe. I suppose it makes little difference whether we get there today or tomorrow. I believe that the best thing for us to do is to bivouac here for the rest of the night; at sunrise we will start again."

"You are right, colonel," the officer said, whom he seemed to address most particularly, "a few hours' delay is of no consequence, and we run the risk of going out of our course."

"Give the order to halt."

The officer immediately obeyed; the soldiers, wearied with a long night's march, greeted with shouts of joy the order to stop. They dismounted. The horses were unsaddled and picketed, campfires were lighted, in less than an hour the bivouac was arranged.

The colonel, in desiring to camp for the night, had a more serious fear than that of losing his way; it was that of falling in with a party of *Indios bravos.*

The colonel was brave, and had proved it on many occasions; grown gray in harness, he was an old soldier who feared nothing in the world particularly; but accustomed to warfare in the interior of the Republic, had never seen opposed to him any but civilised foes, he professed for the Indians that instinctive fear which all the Mexicans entertain, and he would not risk a fight with an Apache or Comanche war party in the middle of the night, in a country whose resources he did not know, and run the risk of having his regiment cut to pieces by such Protean enemies. On the other hand, he was unaware that the governor of Santa Fe had such pressing need of his

presence, and this authorised him in acting with the utmost precaution. Still, as soon as the bivouac was established, and the sentries posted, the colonel sent off a dozen resolute men under an Alferez, to trot up the country and try to procure a guide.

We will observe, in passing, that in Spanish America, so soon as you leave the capitals, such as Lima, or Mexico, roads, such as we understand them in Europe, no longer exist; you only find paths traced, in nine cases out of ten, by the footprints of wild beasts, and which are so entangled one with the other, that, unless you have been long accustomed to them, it is almost impossible to find your way. The Spaniards, we grant, laid out wide and firm roads, but since the War of Independence, they had been cut up, deteriorated and so abandoned by the neglect of the ephemeral governments that have followed each other in Mexico, that with the exception of the great highways of communication in the interior of the country, the rest had disappeared under the herbage.

The little squad of troopers sent out to beat up the country had started at a gallop, but it soon reduced its pace, and the soldiers and sergeant began laughing and talking, caring little for the important mission with which they were intrusted. The moon rose on the horizon, shedding her fantastic rays over the ground. As we have said, it was one of those lovely nights of the American desert full of strange odours. A majestic silence hovered over the plain, only disturbed at intervals by those sounds, without any known cause, which are heard on the savannahs, and which seem to be the respiration of the sleeping world. Suddenly the mockingbird sung twice, and its plaintive and soft song resounded melodiously through the air.

"Hallo," one of the dragoons said, addressing his comrade, "that's a bird that sings very late."

"An evil omen," the other said with a shake of his head.

"*Canarios*! What omen are you talking about, comrade?"

"I have always heard say," the second, speaker remarked sententiously, "that when you hear a bird sing on your left at night it predicts misfortune."

"The deuce confound you and your prognostics."

At this moment the song, which appeared previously some distance off, could be heard much more close, and seemed to come from some trees on the side of the path the dragoons were following. The Alferez raised his head and stopped, as if mechanically trying to explain the sound that smote his ears; but all became silent again, so he shook his head and continued his conversation. The detachment had been out more than an hour. During this long stroll, the soldiers had discovered nothing suspicious; as for the guide they sought, it is needless to say that they had not found him, for they had not met a living soul. The Alferez was about to give orders to return to camp, when one of the troopers pointed out to him some heavy, black forms, apparently prowling about unsuspiciously.

"What on earth can that be?" the officer asked, after carefully examining what was pointed out to him.

"*Caspita*," one of the dragoons exclaimed, "that is easy to see; they are browsing deer!"

"Deer!" said the Alferez, in whom the hunter's instinct was suddenly aroused, "there are at least thirty; suppose we try to catch some."

"It is difficult."

"Pshaw!" another soldier shouted, "It is light enough for each of us to send them a bullet."

"You must by no means use your carbines," the Alferez interposed sharply; "if our shots, re-echoed through the mountains, caught the ears of the Indians, who are probably ambushed in the thickets, we should be ruined."

"What is to be done, then?"

"Lasso them, *caspita*, as you wish to try and catch them."

"That is true; I did not think of that."

The dragoons, delighted at the opportunity of indulging in their favourite sport, dismounted, fastened their horses to the roadside trees and seized their lassos. They then advanced cautiously toward the deer, which continued grazing tranquilly, without appearing to suspect that enemies were so near them. On arriving at a short distance from the game, the dragoons separated in order to have room for whirling their lassos, and making a covering of each tree, they managed to approach within fifteen paces of the animals. Then they stopped, exchanged glances, carefully calculated the distance, and, at a signal from their leader, sent their lassos whizzing through the air.

A strange thing happened at this moment, however. All the deer hides fell simultaneously to the ground, displaying Valentine, Curumilla, and a dozen Comanche warriors, who, profiting by the stupor of the troopers at their extraordinary metamorphosis, hunted the hunters by throwing lassos over their shoulders and hurled them to the ground. The ten dragoons and their leader were prisoners.

"Well, my friends," Valentine said with a grin, "how do you like that sort of fun?"

The startled dragoons made no reply, but allowed themselves to be bound; one alone muttered between his teeth:—

"I was quite sure that villain of a mockingbird would bring us ill luck; it sang on our left. That

never deceives, *Canarios!*"

Valentine smiled at this sally. He then placed two fingers in his mouth and imitated the cry of the mockingbird with such perfection, that the soldier looked up at the trees. He had scarce ended, when a rustling was heard among the bushes, and a man leaped between the hunters and their prisoners. It was Eagle-wing, the sachem of the Coras.

CHAPTER XVI.

A FRIENDLY DISCUSSION.

After leaving his enemy (for the mysterious man with whom he had so stormy a discussion could be nothing else), Red Cedar set out to join the regiment, and hasten its arrival according to the orders he had received. In spite of himself, the squatter was suffering from extraordinary nervousness, and involuntarily he went over the various points of the conversation with the person who took such precautions in communicating with him. The threats he had proffered recurred to his mind. It appeared as if the bandit, who feared nothing in the world, had good reason, however, for trembling in the presence of the man who, for more than an hour, had crushed him with his irony. What reason could be so powerful as to produce so startling a change in this indomitable being? No one could have said; for the squatter was master of his secret, and would have mercilessly killed anybody he suspected of having read even a portion of it.

The reason was, at any rate, very powerful; for after a few minutes of deep thought, his hand let go the reins and his head fell on his breast: the horse, no longer feeling the curb, stopped and began nibbling the young tree shoots. The squatter did not notice this halt; he was thinking, and hoarse exclamations now and then came from his chest, like the growling of a wild beast. At length he raised his head.

"No," he shouted, as he directed a savage glance at the starlit sky, "any struggle with that demon is impossible. I must fly, so soon as possible, to the prairies of the far west. I will leave this implacable foe; I will fly from him, as the lion does, carrying off my prey in my claws. I have not a moment to lose. What do I care for the Spaniards and their paltry disputes? General Ventura will seek another emissary, for more important matters claim my attention. I must go to the Rancho del Coyote, for there alone I shall find my revenge. Fray Ambrosio and his prisoner can supply me with the weapons I need for the terrible contest I am compelled to wage against that demon who comes straight from hell, and whom I will send back there."

After having uttered these words in a low voice, in the fashion of men wont to live in solitude, Red Cedar appeared to regain all his boldness and energy. He looked savagely around, and, burying his spurs in his horse's flanks, he started with the speed of an arrow in the direction of the rancho, which he had left but a few hours previously, and where his two accomplices still remained.

The monk and the gambusino, delighted at the unforeseen termination of the scene we recently narrated, delighted above all at having got rid of Doña Clara without being immediately mixed up in her escape, tranquilly resumed their game of *monte*, and played with that mental satisfaction produced by the certainty of having nothing to reproach themselves with, disputing with the utmost obstinacy for the few reals they still happened to have in their pockets. In the midst of a most interesting game, they heard the furious gallop of a horse up the paved street. Instinctively they stopped and listened; a secret foreboding seemed to warn them that this horse was coming to the rancho, and that its rider wanted them.

In truth, neither Fray Ambrosio nor Andrés Garote had a quiet conscience, even supposing, which was very doubtful, that either had a conscience at all, for they felt they were responsible to Red Cedar for Doña Clara. Now that the maiden had escaped like, a bird flying from its cage, their position with their terrible ally appeared to them in all its desperate gravity. They did not conceal from themselves that the squatter would demand a severe account of their conduct, and despite their cunning and roguishness, they knew not how they should get out of it. The sharp gallop of the approaching horse heightened their perplexity. They dared not communicate their fears to each other, but they sat with heads bent forward, foreseeing that they would soon have to sustain a very firm attack.

The horse stopped short before the rancho; a man dismounted, and the door shook beneath the tremendous blows of his fists.

"Hum!" the gambusino whispered, as he blew out the solitary candle that illumined the room. "Who the deuce can come at this advanced hour of the night! I have a great mind not to open."

Strange to say, Fray Ambrosio had apparently regained all his serenity. With a smiling face, crossed arms, and back leaned against the wall, he seemed to be a perfect stranger to what perplexed his mate so furiously. At Garote's remark an ironical smile played round his pale lips for a second, and he replied with the most perfect indifference—

"You are at liberty to act as you please, gossip; still I think it my duty to warn you of one thing?"

"What is it?"

"That, if you do not open your door, the man, whoever he may be, now battering it, is very capable of breaking it in, which would be a decided nuisance for you."

"You speak very much at your ease, señor Padre," the gambusino answered, ill-temperedly. "Suppose it be Red Cedar?"

"The greater reason to open the door. If you hesitate, he will begin to suspect you; and then take care, for he is a man capable of killing you like a dog."

"That is possible; but do you think that, in such a case, you will escape with clean hands?"

Fray Ambrosio looked at him, shrugged his shoulders, but made no further answer.

"Will you open, *demonios*?" a rough voice shouted.

"Red Cedar!" both men whispered.

"I am coming," Andrés replied, in a voice which terror caused to tremble.

He rose unwillingly, and walked slowly towards the door, which the squatter threatened to tear from its hinges.

"A little patience, caballero," the gambusino said, in that honeyed voice peculiar to Mexicans when they meditate some roguery. "Coming, coming."

And he began unbarring the door.

"Make haste!" the squatter howled, "For I am in a hurry."

"Hum! It is surely he!" the gambusino thought. "Who are you?" he asked.

"What! Who am I?" Red Cedar exclaimed, bounding with wrath. "Did you not recognise me, or are you having a game with me?"

"I never have a game with anyone," Andrés replied, imperturbably: "but I warn you that, although I fancy I recognise your voice, I shall not open till you mention your name. The night is too far advanced for me to risk receiving a suspicious person into my house."

"I will break the door down."

"Try it," the gambusino shouted boldly, "and by our Lady of Pilar I will send a bullet through your head."

At this threat the squatter rushed against the door in incredible fury, with the evident intention of breaking it in; but, contrary to his expectations, though it creaked and groaned on its hinges, it did not give way. Andrés Garote had indulged in a line of reasoning which was far from being illogical, and revealed a profound knowledge of the human heart. He had said to himself, that, as he must face Red Cedar's anger, it would be better to let it reach its paroxysm at once so as to have only the decreasing period to endure. He smiled at the American's sterile attempts, then, and repeated his request.

"Well, then," the other said, furiously, "I am Red Cedar. Do you recognise me now, you devil's own Gachupino?"

"Of course; I see that I can open without danger to your Excellency."

And the gambusino hurriedly drew back the bolts.

Red Cedar rushed into the room with a yell of fury, but Andrés had put out the light. The squatter stopped, surprised by the gloom which prevented him distinguishing any object.

"Hallo!" he said. "What is the meaning of this darkness? I can see nothing."

"*Caspita*!" Andrés replied, impudently, "Do you think I amuse myself o' nights by watching the moon? I was asleep, compadre, when you came to arouse me with your infernal hammerings."

"That is possible," the squatter remarked; "but that was no reason for keeping me so long at your door."

"Prudence is the mother of security. We must not let every comer enter the rancho."

"Certainly not; I approve of that. Still, you must have recognised my voice."

"True. Still I might be mistaken; it is difficult to know anyone through the thickness of a door; that is why I wished you to give your name."

"Very good, then," Red Cedar said, as if tired of combating arguments which did not convince him. "And where is Fray Ambrosio?"

"Here, I suppose."

"He has not left the rancho?"

"No; unless he took advantage of your arrival to do so."

"Why should he do that?"

"I don't know; you question, and I answer; that's all."

"Why does he not speak, if he is here?"

"He is possibly asleep."

"After the row I made, that is highly improbable."

"Hang it, he may be a hard sleeper."

"Hum!" the squatter snorted, suspiciously; "Light the candle."

Andrés struck a match, and Red Cedar looked eagerly round the room Fray Ambrosio had disappeared.

"Where is the monk?" the American asked.

"I do not know: probably gone."

The squatter shook his head.

"All this is not clear," he muttered; "there is treachery behind it."

"That is possible," the gambusino answered, calmly.

Red Cedar bent on Andrés eyes that flashed with fury, and roughly seized him by the throat.

"Answer, scoundrel?" he shouted. "What has become of Doña Clara?"

The gambusino struggled, though in vain, to escape from the clutch of the squatter, whose fingers entered his flesh, and pressed him as in a vice.

"Let me loose," he panted, "you are choking me!"

"Where is Doña Clara?"

"I do not know."

The squatter squeezed more tightly.

"You do not know!" he yelled.

"Aie!" Andrés whined, "I tell you I do not know."

"Malediction!" Red Cedar went on. "I will kill you, *picaro*, if you are obstinate."

"Let that man go, and I will tell you all you wish to know," was said in a firm voice by a hunter, who at this moment appeared on the threshold.

The two men turned in amazement.

"Nathan!" Red Cedar shouted on recognising his son. "What are you doing here?"

"I will tell you, father," the young man said, as he entered the room.

CHAPTER XVII.

NATHAN.

Nathan was not asleep, as Ellen supposed, when she urged on Shaw to devote himself to liberate Doña Clara, and he had listened attentively to the conversation. Nathan was a man of about thirty years of age, who, both physically and morally, bore a marked resemblance to his father. Hence the old squatter had concentrated in him all the affection which his uncultivated savage nature was capable of feeling. Since the fatal night, when the chief of the Coras had avenged himself for the burning of his village and the murder of its inhabitants, Nathan's character had grown still more gloomy; a dull and deep hatred boiled in his heart against the whole human race; he only dreamed of assassination: he had sworn in his heart to revenge on all those who fell into his hands the injury one man had inflicted on him; in a word, Nathan loved none and hated everything.

When Shaw had disappeared among the bushes, and Ellen, after taking a final glance around to convince herself that all was in order, re-entered the hut that served her as a shelter, Nathan rose cautiously, threw his rifle over his shoulder, and rushed after his brother. Another reason urged him to foil Shaw and Ellen's plans; he had a double grudge against Don Miguel—the first for the stab the Mexican gentlemen had given his father; the second because Don Miguel had compelled him to leave the forest in which his family had so daringly installed itself.

Convinced of the importance of the affair, and knowing the value the squatter attached to carrying off the maiden, who was a most precious hostage for him, Nathan did not lose a moment, but reached Santa Fe by the most direct route, bounding with the agility of a tiger cat over the obstacles that beset his path. Presently he reached an isolated house, not far from which several men were conversing together in a low voice. Nathan stopped and listened; but he was too far off, and could distinguish nothing. The squatter's son, reared in the desert, was thoroughly versed in all its stratagems; with the piercing eye of a man accustomed to night journeys in the prairie, he recognised well-known persons, and his mind was at once made up.

He laid himself on the ground, and following the shadow cast by the moon, lest he might be perceived by the speakers, he advanced, inch by inch, crawling like a serpent, stopping at intervals lest the waving of the grass might reveal his presence, in short, employing all the precautions usual under such circumstances. At length he reached a clump of Peru trees only a few yards distant from the spot where the men he wished to overhear were standing. He then got up, leaned against the largest tree, and prepared to listen. His expectations were not deceived; though a few words escaped him here and there, he was near enough perfectly to catch the sense of the conference. This conversation was, in truth, most interesting to him; a sinister smile lit up his face, and he eagerly clenched the barrel of his rifle.

Presently the party broke into two. Valentine, Curumilla, and Unicorn, took the road leading to

the open country, while Don Pablo and Father Seraphin returned toward the town. Valentine and his two friends almost touched the young man as they passed, and he instinctively carried his hands to his pistols; they even stopped for a moment and cast suspicious glances at the clump that concealed their foe. While conversing in whispers, Unicorn drew a few branches aside and peered in; for some seconds Nathan felt an indescribable agony; a cold perspiration stood at the root of his hair and the blood coursed to his heart; in a word, he was afraid. He knew that if these men, his mortal enemies, discovered him, they would be pitiless to him and kill him like a dog. But this apprehension did not last longer than a lightning flash. Unicorn carelessly let the leafy curtain fall again, saying only one word to his comrades:—

"Nothing."

The latter resumed their march.

"I do not know why," said Valentine, "but I fancy there is someone hidden there."

"No," the chief answered, "there is nobody."

"Well, be it so," the hunter muttered, with a toss of his head.

So soon, as he was alone, Nathan drew two or three deep breaths, and started in pursuit of Don Pablo and the missionary, whom he soon caught up. As they did not suppose they were followed, they were conversing freely together.

In Spanish America, where the days are so warm and the nights so fresh, the inhabitants, shut up at home so long as the sun calcines the ground, go out at nightfall to breathe a little pure air; the streets, deserted in consequence of the heat, are gradually peopled; benches are placed before the doors, on which persons recline to smoke and gossip, drink orangeade, strum the guitar, and sing. Frequently the entire night is passed in these innocent amusements, and folks do not return home till dawn, in order to indulge in the sleep so grateful after this long watch. Hence the Hispano-American towns must be especially visited by night, if you wish to judge truthfully the nature of this people—a strange composite of the most discordant contrasts, who only live for enjoyment, and only accept from existence the most intoxicating pleasures. Still, on the night to which we refer, the town of Santa Fe, usually so laughing and chattering, was plunged into a gloomy sadness, the streets were deserted, the doors closed; no light filtered through the hermetically closed windows; all slept or at least feigned to sleep. The fact was, that Santa Fe was at this moment in a state of mortal agitation, caused by the condemnation of Don Miguel Zarate, the richest land owner in the province—a man who was loved and revered by the whole population. The agitation took its origin in the unexpected apparition of the Comanche war detachment—those ferocious enemies whose cruelties have become proverbial on the Mexican frontier, and whose presence presaged nothing good.

Don Pablo and his companion walked quickly, like persons anxious to reach a place where they knew they are expected, exchanging but a few words at intervals, whose meaning, however, caught up by the man who followed them, urged them still more not to let them out of sight. They thus traversed the greater part of the town, and on reaching the Calle de la Merced, they stopped at their destination—a house of handsome aspect.

A weak light burned at the window of a ground floor room. By an instinctive movement, the two gentlemen turned round at the moment of entering the house but Nathan had slipped into a doorway, and they did not perceive him. Father Seraphin tapped gently; the door was at once opened, and they went in. Nathan stationed himself in the middle of the street, with his eye ardently fixed on the only window of the house lit up. Ere long, shadows crossed the curtains.

"Good!" the young man muttered; "But how to warn the old one that the dove is in her nest?"

All at once, a heavy hand was laid on his shoulder, and Nathan turned, fiercely clutching a bowie knife. A man was before him, gloomy, silent and wrapped in the thick folds of his cloak. The American started.

"Go your way," he said in a menacing voice.

"What are you doing here?" the stranger asked.

"How does that concern you? The street is free to all."

"No."

This word was pronounced with a sharp accent. Nathan tried in vain to scan the features of the man with whom he had to deal.

"Give way," he said, "or blood will surely be shed between us."

As sole reply, the stranger took a pistol in his right hand, a knife in his left.

"Ah!" Nathan said, mockingly, "You mean fighting."

"For the last time, withdraw."

"Nonsense, you are mad, señor Caballero; the road belongs to all, I tell you. This place suits me, and I shall remain."

"I wish to be alone here."

"You mean to kill me, then?"

"If I must, yes, without hesitation."

The two speakers had exchanged these words in a low and hurried voice, in less time than we

have employed to write them. They stood but a few paces apart with flashing eyes, ready to rush on each other. Nathan returned his pistol to his belt.

"No noise," he said; "the knife will do; besides, we are in a country where that is the only weapon in use."

"Be it so," the stranger replied; "then, you will not give way to me?"

"You would laugh at me if I did," the American said with a grin.

"Then your blood will be on your own head."

"Or on yours."

The two foemen each fell back a pace, and stood on guard, with their cloaks rolled round their left arms. The moon, veiled by clouds, shed no light; the darkness was perfect; midnight struck from the cathedral; the voice of the *serenos* chanting the hour could be heard in the distance, announcing that all was quiet. There was a moment's hesitation, which the enemies employed in scrutinising each other. Suddenly Nathan uttered a hoarse yell rushed on his enemy, and threw his cloak in his face, to put him on his guard. The stranger parried the stroke dealt him, and replied by another, guarded off with equal dexterity. The two men then seized each other round the waist, and wrestled for some minutes, without uttering a word; at length the stranger rolled on the ground with a heavy sigh; Nathan's knife was buried in his chest. The American rose with a yell of triumph—his enemy was motionless.

"Can I have killed him?" Nathan muttered.

He returned his knife to his vaquera boot, and bent over the wounded man. All at once he started back, for he had recognised his brother Shaw.

"What is to be done now?" he said; but then added carelessly, "Pshaw! all the worse for him. Why did he come across my path?"

And, leaving there the body of the young man, who gave no sign of life—

"Well, Heaven knows, I ought not, and could not have hesitated," he said.

Shaw lay to all appearance dead, with pale and drawn cheeks, in the centre of the street.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE WOUNDED MAN.

Nathan proceeded straight to the Rancho del Coyote, where his unexpected arrival was a blessing for Andrés Garote, whom the old squatter was treating very roughly. On hearing his son's words, Red Cedar let go of the gambusino, who tottered back against the wall.

"Well," he asked, "where is Doña Clara?"

"Come with me, father," the young man answered; "I will lead you to her."

"You know her hiding place, then?"

"Yes."

"And so do I," Fray Ambrosio shouted, as he rushed into the room with discomfited features; "I felt sure I should discover her."

Red Cedar looked at him in amazement, but the monk did not wince.

"What has happened to her?" the squatter said presently, as he looked suspiciously from the monk to the gambusino.

"A very simple matter," Fray Ambrosio answered, with an inimitably truthful accent; "about two hours back your son Shaw came here."

"Shaw!" the squatter exclaimed.

"Yes, the youngest of your sons; he is called so, I think?"

"Yes; go on."

"Very good. He presented himself to us as coming from you to remove our prisoner."

"And what did you do?" the squatter asked, impatiently.

"What could we do?"

"Why, oppose the girl's departure."

"*Caspita*! Do you fancy we let her go so?" the monk asked, imperturbably.

The squatter looked at him in surprise—he no longer understood anything. Like all men of action, discussion was to him almost a matter of impossibility; especially with an adversary so crafty as the one he had before him. Deceived by the monk's coolness and the apparent frankness of his answers, he wished to make an end of it.

"Come," he said, "how did all this finish?"

"Thanks to an ally who came to your son's help, and to whom we were obliged to bow—"

"An ally! What man can be so bold as to dare—"

"Eh!" the monk sharply interrupted Red Cedar, "that man is a priest, to whom you have already bowed many a time."

"You are jesting, señor Padre," the squatter exclaimed, savagely.

"Not the least in the world. Had it been anyone else, I should have resisted; but I, too, belong to the Church; and, as Father Seraphin is my superior, I was forced to obey him."

"What!" the squatter said, with a groan, "Is he not dead?"

"It appears," the monk remarked, ironically, "as if those you kill are all in good state of health, Red Cedar."

At this allusion to Don Pablo's death, the squatter stifled a cry of anger, and clenched his fists.

"Good!" he said; "If I do not always kill, I know how to take my revenge. Where is Doña Clara, at this moment?"

"In a house no great distance from here," Nathan answered.

"Have you seen her?" the squatter asked.

"No; but I followed Don Pablo and the missionary to that house, which they entered, and as they were ignorant that I was close to them, their conversation left me no doubt as to the whereabouts of the girl."

An ill-omened smile momentarily lit up the old bandit's features.

"Good!" he said; "as the dove is in her nest, we shall be able to find her. What o'clock is it?"

"Three in the morning," Andrés interjected. "Day will soon break."

"We must make haste, then. Follow me, all of you." Then he added, "But what has become of Shaw? Does anyone of you know?"

"You will probably find him at the door of Doña Clara's house," Nathan said, in a hollow voice.

"How so? Has my son entered into a compact with my enemies?"

"Yes; as he arranged with them to carry off your prisoner."

"Oh! I will kill him if he prove a traitor!" the squatter shouted with an accent that made the blood run cold in the veins of his hearers.

Nathan fell back two steps, drew his knife from his boot, and showed it to his father.

"That is done," he said, harshly. "Shaw tried to stab me, so I killed him."

After these mournful words, there was a moment of silence in the rancho. All these men, though their hearts were steeled by crime, shuddered involuntarily. Without, the night was gloomy; the wind whistled sadly; the flickering light of the candle threw a weird light over the scene, which contained a certain degree of terrible poetry. The squatter passed his hard hand over his dank brow. A sigh, like a howl, painfully forced its way from his oppressed chest.

"He was my last born," he said, in a voice broken by an emotion he could not control. "He deserved death, but he ought not to have received it at his brother's hands."

"Father!" Nathan muttered.

"Silence!" Red Cedar shouted, in a hollow voice, as he stamped his foot passionately on the ground; "What is done cannot be undone; but woe to my enemies' family! Oh! I feel now that I can take such vengeance on them as will make all shudder who hear it spoken of!"

After uttering these words, which were listened to in silence, the squatter walked a few steps up the rancho. He approached a table, seized a bottle half full of mezcal that stood on it, and emptied it at a draught. When he had finished drinking, he threw down the bottle, which broke with a crash, and said to his mates in a hollow voice—

"Let us be off! We have wasted too much time here already!"

And he rushed out of the rancho, the others following close at his heels.

In the meanwhile, Don Pablo and Father Seraphin were in the house. The priest had taken the maiden to the house of an honest family which owed him great obligations, and was too happy to receive the poor sufferer. The missionary did not intend, however, to let her be long a burthen to these worthy people. At daybreak he intended to deliver her to certain relations of her father, who inhabited a hacienda a few leagues from Santa Fe.

Doña Clara had been placed in a comfortable room by her hosts. Their first care had been to make her doff the Indian robes for others more suitable to her birth and position. The maiden worn out by poignant emotions of the scene she had witnessed, was on the point of retiring to bed, when Father Seraphin and Don Pablo tapped at the door of her room. She hastily opened it, and the sight of her brother, whom she had not hoped to see so speedily, overwhelmed her with joy.

An hour soon slipped away in pleasant chat. Don Pablo was careful not to tell his sister of the misfortune that had befallen her father; for he did not wish to dull by that confession the joy the poor girl promised herself for the morrow. Then, as the night was advancing, the two men

withdrew, so as to allow her to enjoy that rest so needed to strengthen her for the long journey to the hacienda, promising to come and fetch her in a few hours. Father Seraphin generously offered Don Pablo to pass the night with him by sharing the small lodging he had not far from the Plaza de la Merced, and the young man eagerly accepted. It was too late to seek a lodging at a locanda, and in this way he would be all the sooner with his sister next morning. After a lengthened leave-taking, they, therefore, left the house, and, so soon as they were gone, Doña Clara threw herself, ready dressed, into a hammock hanging at one end of the room, when she speedily fell asleep.

On reaching the street, Don Pablo saw a body lying motionless in front of the house.

"What's this?" he asked, in surprise.

"A poor wretch whom the ladrones killed in order to plunder him," the missionary answered.

"That is possible."

"Perhaps he is not quite dead," the missionary went on; "it is our duty to succour him."

"For what good?" Don Pablo said, with an air of indifference; "if a sereno were to pass he might accuse us of having killed the man."

"Nay, sir," the missionary observed, "the ways of the Lord are impenetrable. If He allowed us to come across this unhappy man, it was because He judged in His wisdom that we might prove of use to him."

"Be it so," the young man said; "let us look at him, as you wish it. But you know that in this country good actions of such a nature generally entail annoyance."

"That is true, my son. Well, we will run the risk," said the missionary, who had already bent over the wounded man.

"As you please," Don Pablo said, as he followed him.

Shaw, for it was he, gave no signs of life. The missionary examined him, then rose hastily, seized Don Pablo's arm, and drew him to him, as he whispered—

"Look!"

"Shaw!" the Mexican exclaimed, in surprise; "What could that man be doing here?"

"Help me, and we shall learn. The poor fellow has only fainted; and the loss of blood has produced this semblance to death."

Don Pablo, greatly perplexed by this singular meeting, obeyed the missionary without further remark. The two men raised the wounded lad, and carried him gently to Father Seraphin's lodging, where they proposed to give him all the help his condition required.

They had scarce turned the corner of the street, when several men appeared at the other extremity. They were Red Cedar and his confederates. On arriving in front of the house they stopped: all the windows were in the deepest obscurity.

"Which is the girl's room?" the squatter asked in a whisper.

"This one," Nathan said, as he pointed to it.

Red Cedar crawled up to the house, drove his dagger into the wall, raised himself to the window, and placed his face against a pane.

"All is well! She sleeps!" he said, when he came down. "You, Fray Ambrosio, to one corner of the street; you, Garote, to the other, and do not let me be surprised."

The monk and the gambusino went to their allotted posts. When Red Cedar was alone with his son he bent and whispered in his ear—

"What did you do with your brother after stabbing him?"

"I left him on the spot where he fell."

"Where was that?"

"Just where we now stand."

The squatter stooped down to the ground, and walked a few steps, carefully examining the bloody traces left on the pebbles.

"He has been carried off," he said, when he rose again. "Perhaps he is not dead."

"Perhaps so," the young man observed, with a shake of his head.

His father gave him a most significant look.

"To work," he said coldly.

And they prepared to escalade the window.

CHAPTER XIX.

INDIAN DIPLOMACY.

We will return, for the present, to Valentine and his comrades.

The sudden apparition of the sachem of the Coras had produced a certain degree of emotion among the hunters and the Comanches. Valentine, the first to recover from his surprise, addressed Eagle-wing.

"My brother is welcome," he said, as he held out his hand, which the Indian warmly pressed, "What news does the chief bring us?"

"Good," the Coras answered laconically.

"All the better," the hunter said gaily; "for some time past all we have received has been so bad that my brother's will create a diversion."

The Indian smiled at this sally, but made no remark.

"My brother can speak," Valentine continued; "he is surrounded by none but friends."

"I know it," the chief answered, as he bowed gracefully to the company. "Since I left my brother two months have passed away: I have worn out many moccasins amid the thorns and brambles of the desert; I have been beyond the Great Lakes to the villages of my nation."

"Good; my brother is a chief; he was doubtless well received by the sachems of the Coras of the Great Lakes."

"Mookapec is a renowned warrior among his people," the Indian answered proudly; "his place by the council fire of the nation is pointed out. The chiefs saw him with joy: on his road he had taken the scalps of seven gachupinos: they are now drying before the great medicine lodge."

"It was your right to do so, chief, and I cannot blame you. The Spaniards have done you harm enough for you to requite them."

"My brother speaks well; his skin is white, but his heart is red."

"Hum," observed Valentine; "I am a friend to justice; vengeance is permissible against treachery. Go on, chief."

The hunter's comrades had drawn nearer, and now formed a circle round the two speakers. Curumilla was occupied silently, as was his wont, in completely stripping each Spanish prisoner, whom he then bound in such a way that the slightest movement was impossible.

Valentine, although time pressed, knew too well the Redskin character to try and hurry Eagle-wing on. He felt certain that the chief had important news to communicate to him; but it would have been no use trying to draw it from him; hence he allowed him to act as he pleased. Unicorn, leaning on his rifle, listened attentively, without evincing the slightest impatience.

"Did my brother remain long with his tribe," Valentine continued.

"Two suns. Eagle-wing had left behind him friends to whom his heart drew him."

"Thanks, chief, for the pleasant recollections of us."

"The chiefs assembled in council to hear the words of Eagle-wing," the Coras continued. "They shuddered with fury on hearing of the massacre of their children; but Mookapec had formed his plan, and two hundred warriors are assembled beneath his *totem*."

"Good!" said Valentine, "the chief will avenge himself."

The Indian smiled.

"Yes," he said, "my young men have their orders, they know what I mean to do."

"Very good; in that case they are near here?"

"No," the chief replied, with a shake of his head. "Eagle-wing does not march with them; he has hidden himself under the skin of an Apache dog."

"What does my brother say?" Valentine asked with amazement.

"My white brother is quick," Unicorn said, sententiously; "he will let Mookapec speak. He is a great sachem, and wisdom dwells in him."

Valentine shook his head, however, and said—

"Hum! Answering one act of treachery by another, that is not the way in which the warriors of my nation behave."

"The nation of my brother is great, and strong as the grizzly bear," Unicorn said; "it does not need to march along hidden paths. The poor Indians are weak as the beaver, but like him they are very cunning."

"That is true," Valentine replied, "cunning must be allowed you in dealing with the implacable enemies who surround you. I was wrong; so go on, chief; tell us what deviltry you have invented, and if it is ingenious. Well, I will be the first to applaud it."

"Wah, my brother shall judge. Red Cedar is about to enter the desert, as my brother doubtless knows?"

"Yes."

"Does my brother know the *Gringo* has asked the Apaches for a guide?"

"No, I did not."

"Good. Stanapat, the great chief of the Apaches, sent a Navajo warrior to act as guide to Red Cedar."

"Well?"

"The Navajo was scalped by Eagle-wing."

"Ah, ah! Then Red Cedar cannot set out?"

"Yes, he can do so when he likes."

"How so?"

"Because Eagle-wing takes the place of the guide."

Unicorn smiled.

"My brother has a deal of wisdom," he said.

"Hum!" Valentine remarked, with some show of ill-humour. "It is possible, but you play for a heavy stake, chief. That old villain is as crafty as ten monkeys and ten opossums united. I warn you that he will recognise you."

"No."

"I wish it; for if he does, you are a lost man."

"Good, my brother can be easy. Eagle-wing is a warrior; he will see the white hunter again in the desert."

"I wish so, chief; but I doubt. However, act as you please. When will you join Red Cedar?"

"This night."

"You are going to leave us?"

"At once. Eagle-wing has nothing more to confide to his brother."

And, after bowing courteously to the company, the Coras chief glided into the thicket, in which he disappeared almost instantaneously. Valentine looked after him for some time.

"Yes," he said at last, with a thoughtful air, "his project is a daring one, such as might be expected from so great a warrior. May heaven protect him, and allow him to succeed! Well, we shall see; perhaps all is for the best so."

And he turned to Curumilla.

"The clothes?" he said.

"Here they are," the Aucas answered, laconically, as he pointed to an enormous heap of clothing.

"What does my brother mean to do with them?" Unicorn asked.

"My brother will see," Valentine said, with a smile, "each of us is going to put on one of those uniforms."

The Comanche drew himself up hastily.

"No," he said, "Unicorn does not put off the dress of his people. What need have we of this disguise?"

"In order to enter the camp of the Spaniards without being discovered."

"Wah! For what good? Unicorn will summon his young men to cut a passage through the corpses of the gachupinos."

But Valentine shook his head mournfully.

"It is true," he remarked, "we could do so. But why shed blood needlessly? No; let my brother put confidence in me."

"The hunter will act rightly. Unicorn knows it, and he leaves him free; but Unicorn is a chief, he cannot put on the clothes of the palefaces."

Valentine no longer insisted, as it would have been unavailing; so he agreed to modify his plan. He made each of his comrades put on a dragoon uniform, and himself donned the clothes stripped from the Alferez. When all this metamorphosis was as complete as possible, he turned to Unicorn.

"The chief will remain here," he said, "to guard the prisoners."

"Good," the Comanche answered. "Is Unicorn, then, a chattering old woman, that warriors place him on one side?"

"My brother does not understand me. I do not wish to insult him, but he cannot enter the camp with us."

The chief shrugged his shoulders disdainfully.

"The Comanche warriors can crawl as well as serpents. Unicorn will enter."

"Let my brother come, then, since he wishes it."

"Good; my brother is vexed; a cloud has passed over his face. He is wrong; his friend loves him."

"I know it, chief, I know it. I am not vexed, but my heart is sad to see a warrior thus run the risk of being killed without any necessity."

"Unicorn is a sachem; he must give an example to his young men on the warpath."

Valentine gave a nod of assent.

"Here are the horses of the palefaces," Curumilla said; "my brother will need them."

"That is true," the hunter answered, with a smile; "my brother is a great chief—he thinks of everything."

Everyone mounted, Unicorn alone remaining a-foot. Valentine placed the Alferez by his side.

"Caballero," he said to him, "you will act as our guide to the camp. We do not wish to take the lives of your countrymen; our intention is simply to prevent them following us at present. Pay attention to my words: if you attempt to deceive us, I blow out your brains. You are warned."

The Spaniard bowed, but made no reply. As for the prisoners, they had been so conscientiously tied by Curumilla that there was no chance of their escaping. The little band then set out, Unicorn disappearing among the trees. When they came a short distance from the bivouac, a sentry challenged, "Who goes there?"

"Answer," Valentine whispered the Alferez.

He did so. They passed, and the sentry, suddenly seized by Curumilla, was bound and gagged in the twinkling of an eye, all the other sentinels sharing the same fate. The Mexicans keep up a very bad watch in the field, even in the presence of an enemy; the greater reason, then, for them to neglect all precaution when they fancy themselves in safety. Everybody was asleep, and Valentine and his friends were masters of the camp. The regiment of dragoons had been surprised without striking a blow.

Valentine's comrades dismounted; they knew exactly how to act, and did not deviate from the instructions given by their leader. They proceeded from picket to picket, removing the horses, which were led out of camp. Within twenty minutes all had been carried off. Valentine had anxiously followed the movements of his men. When they had finished, he raised the curtain of the colonel's tent, and found himself face to face with Unicorn, from whose waist-belt hung a reeking scalp. Valentine could not repress a movement of horror.

"What have you done, chief?" he asked, reproachfully.

"Unicorn has killed his enemy," the Comanche replied, peremptorily. "When the leader of the antelopes is killed, his flock disperses; the gachupinos will do the same."

Valentine drew near the colonel. The unhappy man, fearfully mutilated, with his brain laid bare, and his heart pierced by the knife of the implacable Indian, lay stark dead, in a pool of blood, in the middle of the tent. The hunter vented a sigh at this sorry sight.

"Poor devil!" he said, with an air of compassion.

After this short funeral oration, he took away his sabre and epaulettes, left the tent, followed by the Indian chief, and rejoined his comrades. The horses were led to the Comanche camp, after which Valentine and his party wrapped themselves in their blankets, and slept calmly till daybreak. The dragoons were no longer to be feared.

CHAPTER XX.

THE STRANGER.

Father Seraphin and Don Pablo we left bearing the wounded man to the missionary's lodging. Although the house to which they were proceeding was but a short distance off, yet the two gentlemen, compelled to take every precaution, employed considerable time on the journey. Nearly every step they were compelled to halt, so as not to fatigue too greatly the wounded man, whose inert limbs swayed in every direction.

"The man is dead," Don Pablo remarked, during a halt they made on the Plaza de la Merced.

"I fear so," the missionary answered, sadly; "still, as we are not certain of it, our conscience bids us to bestow our care on him, until we acquire the painful conviction that it avails him nought."

"Father, the love of one's neighbour often carries you too far; better were it, perhaps, if this wretch did not come back to life."

"You are severe, my friend. This man is still young—almost a boy. Trained amid a family of bandits, never having aught but evil examples before him, he has hitherto only done evil, in a spirit of imitation. Who knows whether this fearful wound may not offer him the means to enter the society of honest people, which he has till now been ignorant of? I repeat to you, my friend, the ways of the Lord are inscrutable."

"I will do what you wish, father. You have entire power over me. Still, I fear that all our care will be thrown away."

"God, whose humble instruments we are, will prove you wrong, I hope. Come, a little courage, a few paces further, and we shall have arrived."

"Come on then," Don Pablo said with resignation.

Father Seraphin lodged at a house of modest appearance, built of adobes and reeds, in a small room he hired from a poor widow, for the small sum of nine reals a month. This room, very small, and which only received air from a window opening on an inner yard, was a perfect conventual cell, as far as furniture was concerned, for the latter consisted of a wooden frame, over which a bull hide was stretched, and served as the missionary's bed; a butaca and a prie-dieu, above which a copper crucifix was fastened to the whitewashed wall. But, like all cells, this room was marvellously clean. From a few nails hung the well-worn clothes of the poor priest, and a shelf supported vials and flasks which doubtless contained medicaments; for, like all the missionaries, Father Seraphin had a rudimentary knowledge of medicine, and took in charge both the souls and bodies of his neophytes.

The father lit a candle of yellow tallow standing in an iron candlestick, and, aided by Don Pablo, laid the wounded man on his own bed; after which the young man fell back into the butaca to regain his breath. Father Seraphin, on whom, spite of his fragile appearance, the fatigue had produced no apparent effect, then went downstairs to lock the street door, which he had left open. As he pushed it to, he felt an opposition outside, and a man soon entered the yard.

"Pardon, my reverend father," the stranger said; "but be kind enough not to leave me outside."

"Do you live in this house?"

"No," the stranger coolly replied, "I do not live in Santa Fe, where I am quite unknown."

"Do you ask hospitality of me, then?" Father Seraphin continued, much surprised at this answer.

"Not at all, reverend father."

"Then what do you want?" the missionary said, still more surprised.

"I wish to follow you to the room where you have laid the wounded man, to whose aid you came so generously a short time back."

"This request, sir—" the priest said, hesitating.

"Has nothing that need surprise you. I have the greatest interest in seeing with my own eyes in what state that man is, for certain reasons which in no way concern you."

"Do you know who he is?"

"I do."

"Are you a relation or friend of his?"'

"Neither one nor the other. Still, I repeat to you, very weighty reasons compel me to see him and speak with him, if that be possible."

Father Seraphin took a searching glance at the speaker.

He was a man of great height, apparently in the fullest vigour of life. His features, so far as it was possible to distinguish them by the pale and tremulous moonbeams, were handsome, though an expression of unbending will was the marked thing about them. He wore the dress of rich Mexican hacenderos, and had in his right hand a magnificently inlaid American rifle. Still the missionary hesitated.

"Well," the stranger continued, "have you made up your mind, father?"

"Sir," Father Seraphin answered with firmness, "do not take in ill part what I am going to say to you."

The stranger bowed.

"I do not know who you are; you present yourself to me in the depths of the night, under singular circumstances. You insist, with strange tenacity, on seeing the poor man whom Christian charity compelled me to pick up. Prudence demands that I should refuse to let you see him."

A certain annoyance was depicted on the stranger's features.

"You are right, father," he answered; "appearances are against me. Unfortunately, the explanation you demand from me justly would make us lose too much precious time, hence I cannot give them to you at this moment. All I can do is to swear, in the face of Heaven, on that crucifix you wear round your neck, and which is the symbol of our redemption, that I only wish well to the man you have housed, and that I am this moment seeking to punish a great criminal."

The stranger uttered these words with such frankness, and such an air of conviction, his face glistened with so much honesty, that the missionary felt convinced: he took up the crucifix and offered it to this extraordinary man.

"Swear," he said.

"I swear it," he replied in a firm voice.

"Good," the priest went on, "now you can enter, sir; you are one of ourselves; I will not even insult you by asking your name."

"My name would teach you nothing, father," the stranger said sadly.

"Follow me, sir."

The missionary locked the gate and led the stranger to his room, on entering which the newcomer took off his hat reverently, took up a post in a corner of the room, and did not stir.

"Do not trouble yourself about me, father," he said in a whisper, "and put implicit faith in the oath

I took."

The missionary only replied by a nod, and as the wounded man gave no sign of life, but still lay much in the position he was first placed in, Father Seraphin walked up to him. For a long time, however, the attention he lavished on him proved sterile, and seemed to produce no effect on the squatter's son. Still, the father did not despair, although Don Pablo shook his head. An hour thus passed, and no ostensible change had taken place in the young man's condition; the missionary had exhausted all his stock of knowledge, and began to fear the worst. At this moment the stranger walked up to him.

"My father," he said, touching him gently on the arm, "you have done all that was humanly possible, but have not succeeded."

"Alas! No!" the missionary said sadly.

"Will you permit me to try in my turn?"

"Do you fancy you will prove, more successful than I?" the priest asked in surprise.

"I hope so," the stranger said softly.

"Still, you see I have tried everything that the medical art prescribes in such a case."

"That is true, father; but the Indians possess certain secrets known only to themselves, and which are of great efficacy."

"I have heard so. But do you know those secrets?"

"Some of them have been revealed to me; if you will permit me, I will try their effects on this young man, who, as far as I can judge, is in a desperate condition."

"I fear he is, poor fellow."

"We shall, therefore, run no risk in trying the efficacy of my superior remedy upon him."

"Certainly not."

The stranger bent over the young man, and regarded him for a moment with fixed attention; then he drew from his pocket a flask of carved crystal, filled with a fluid as green as emerald. With the point of his dagger he slightly opened the wounded man's closed teeth, and poured into his mouth four or five drops of the fluid contained in the flask. A strange thing then occurred; the young man gave vent to a deep sigh, opened his eyes several times, and suddenly, as if moved by supernatural force, he sat up and looked around him with amazement. Don Pablo and the missionary were almost inclined to believe in a miracle so extraordinary did the fact appear to them. The stranger returned to his dark corner. Suddenly the young man passed his hand over his dank forehead, and muttered in a hollow voice:—

"Ellen, my sister, it is too late. I cannot save her. See, see, they are carrying her off; she is lost!"

And he fell back on the bed, as the three men rushed towards him.

"He sleeps!" the missionary said in amazement.

"He is saved?" the stranger answered.

"What did he want to say, though?" Don Pablo inquired anxiously.

"Did you not understand it?" the stranger asked of him.

"No."

"Well, then, I will tell you."

"You!"

"Yes, I; listen! That lad wished to deliver your sister!"

"How do you know?"

"Is it true?"

"It is; go on."

"He was stabbed at the door of the house when she sought shelter."

"What next?"

"Those who stabbed him wished to get him out of the way, in order to carry her off a second time."

"Oh, that is impossible!"

"It is the fact."

"How do you know it?"

"I do not know it, but I can read it plainly."

"Ah!" Don Pablo exclaimed in despair, "my father—let us fly to my sister's aid!"

The two gentlemen rushed from the house with a presentiment of misfortune. When the stranger found himself alone with the wounded man, he walked up to him, wrapped him in his cloak, threw him over his shoulders as easy as if he were only a child, and went out in his turn. On reaching the street, he carefully closed the door, and went off at a great rate, soon disappearing in the darkness. At the same instant the melancholy voice of the sereno could be heard chanting—

"Ave Maria purísima! Los cuatro han dado! Viva Méjico! Todo es quieto!"[1]

What irony on the part of accident was this cry after the terrible events of the night!

[1] Hail, most pure Mary! It has struck four. Long live Mexico! All is quiet.

CHAPTER XXI.

GENERAL VENTURA.

It was about six in the morning. A dazzling sun poured down its transparent rays on the streets of the Presidio of Santa Fe, which were already full of noise and movement at that early hour of the morning. General Ventura was still plunged in a deep sleep, probably lulled by agreeable dreams, judging from the air of beatitude spread over his features. The general, reassured by the speedy arrival of the dragoons promised him, fancied he had nothing more to fear from mutineers who had hitherto inspired him with lively apprehensions. He thought, too, that by the aid of the reinforcements, he could easily get rid of the Comanche, who, on the previous day, had so audaciously bearded him in the very heart of his palace.

He slept, then, that pleasant morning sleep, in which the body, entirely rested from its fatigue, leaves the mind the entire liberty of its faculties. Suddenly the door of the sleeping room in which the worthy governor reposed, was torn violently open, and an officer entered. General Ventura, aroused with a start, sat up in his bed, fixing on the importunate visitor a glance, at first stern, but which at once became uneasy on seeing the alarm depicted on the officer's features.

"What is the matter, señor Captain Don Lopez?" he asked, trying in vain to give firmness to his voice, which trembled involuntarily from a foreboding of evil.

Captain Lopez was a soldier of fortune, who had grown grey in harness, and contracted a species of rough frankness, that prevented him toning the truth down under any circumstances, which fact made him appear, in the General's eyes, a bird of very evil omen. The captain's arrival, therefore, doubly disquieted the governor. In the first place, through his alarmed face; and secondly, the reputation he enjoyed. To the general's query the captain only replied the following three storm laden words—

"Nothing that's good."

"What do you mean? Have the people rebelled??"

"On my word, no! I do not fancy they even dream of such a thing."

"Very well, then," the general went on, quite cheered by the good news, "what the deuce have you to tell me, captain?"

"I have not come to tell you anything," the other said, roughly. "There is a soldier outside who has just come from I don't know where, and who insists on speaking with you. Shall I bring him, or send him about his business."

"One moment," exclaimed the general, whose features had suddenly become gloomy; "who is the soldier?"

"A dragoon, I fancy."

"A dragoon! Let him come in at once. May heaven bless you, with all your circumlocution! The man, doubtless, brings me news of the arrival of the regiment I am expecting, and which should have been here before."

The captain shrugged his shoulders with an air of doubt.

"What is it now?" the general said, whom this expressive pantomime eminently alarmed; "What are you going to say?"

"Nothing, except that the soldier looks very sad to be the bearer of such good news."

"We shall soon know what we have to depend on. Let him come in."

"That is true," said the captain, as he went off.

During this conversation the general had leaped from his bed, and dressed himself with the promptness peculiar to soldiers. He now anxiously awaited the appearance of the trooper whom Don Lopez had announced to him. In vain he tried to persuade himself that the captain was mistaken, and that the soldier had been sent to tell him of the arrival of the regiment. In spite of himself, he felt in his heart a species of alarm which he could not account for, and yet nothing could dissipate.

A few minutes were thus passed in febrile restlessness. All at once a great noise was heard in the Plaza Major. The general went to a window, pulled aside a curtain, and looked out. A tumultuous and dense crowd was thronging every street leading to the square and uttering sharp cries. This crowd, momentarily increasing, seemed urged on by something terrible, which the general could not perceive.

"What is this?" the general exclaimed; "And what can be the meaning of this disturbance?"

At this moment the shouts grew louder, and the detachment of Comanche warriors appeared debouching by the Calle de la Merced, and marching in good order, and at quick step, upon the palace. On seeing them the general could not restrain a start of surprise.

"The Indians again!" he said; "How can they dare to present themselves here? They must be ignorant of the arrival of the dragoons. Such boldness is incomprehensible."

He let the curtain fall, and turned away. The soldier whom the captain had announced to him stood before him, waiting the general's pleasure to question him. The general started on perceiving him. He was pale; his uniform was torn and stained with mud, as if he had made a long journey on foot through brambles. The general wished to clear up his doubts; but, just as he was opening his mouth to ask the man a question, the door flew back, and several officers, among whom was Captain Don Lopez, entered the room.

"General," the captain said, "make haste! You are expected in the council hall. The Indians have come for the answer you promised to give them this morning."

"Well! Why this startled look, gentlemen?" the general said, severely. "I fancy the town has not yet been set on fire. I am not at the orders of those savages, so tell them that I have no time to grant them an audience."

The officers gazed at the general with a surprise they did not attempt to conceal, on hearing these strange and incomprehensible words.

"Good, good," Captain Lopez said, roughly, "the town is not yet fired, 'tis true; but it might be so, erelong, if you went on in this way."

"What do you mean?" the general asked, as he turned pale. "Are matters so serious?"

"They are most serious. We have not a moment to lose, if we wish to avoid heavy disasters."

The general started.

"Gentlemen," he then said, in an ill-assured voice, "it is our duty to watch over the safety of the population. I follow you."

And taking no further heed of the soldier he had ordered to be sent in, he proceeded towards the council hall.

The disorder that prevailed without had at length gained the interior of the palace. Nothing was to be heard but shrieks or exclamations of anger and terror. The Mexican officers assembled in the hall were tumultuously discussing the measures to be adopted in order to save a contest and the town. The entrance of the governor produced a healthy effect upon them, in so far that the discussion, which was degenerating into personalities and reproaches, dictated by individual fear, suddenly ceased, and calmness was restored.

General Ventura regretted in his heart having counted on imaginary help, and not having listened to the sensible advice of some of his officers, who urged him the previous day to satisfy the Indians by giving them what they asked. In spite of the terror he felt, however, his pride revolted at being compelled to treat on equal terms with barbarians, and accept harsh conditions which they would doubtless impose on him, in the consciousness of having the upper hand.

The governor, in entering the hall, looked around the assembly anxiously. All had taken their places, and, externally at least, had assumed that grace and stern appearance belonging to men who are penetrated with the grandeur of the duties they have to perform, and are resolved to carry them out at all hazards. But this appearance was very deceptive. If the faces were impassive the hearts were timorous. All these men, habituated to a slothful and effeminate life, did not feel capable of waging a contest with the rude enemies who menaced them so audaciously, even at the doors of the governor's palace.

Under present circumstances, however, resistance was impossible. The Indians, by the fact of their presence on the square, were masters of the town. There were no troops to oppose to them; hence, the only hope was to make the easiest terms possible with the Comanches. Still, as all these men wished to save appearances at any rate, the discussion began anew. When everyone had given his opinion, the governor rose, and said in a trembling voice—

"Caballeros, all of us here present: are men of courage, and have displayed that quality in many difficult circumstances. Certainly, if the only thing, was to sacrifice our lives to save the hapless townsmen, we would not hesitate to do so, for we are too well imbued with the soundness of our duties tot hesitate; but, unhappily, that sacrifice would not avail to save those whom we wish before all to protect. Let us treat, then, with the barbarians, as we cannot conquer them. Perhaps in this way we shall succeed in protecting our wives; and children from the danger that menaces them. In acting thus, under the grave circumstances in which we find ourselves, we shall at least have the consolation of having done our duty, even if we do not obtain all we desire."

Hearty applause greeted this harangue, and the governor, turning to the porter, who stood motionless at the door, gave orders to introduce the principal Indian chiefs.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE COMANCHES.

Valentine and his friends awoke at daybreak. The Comanches were already prepared to start; and Unicorn, dressed in his great war costume, presented himself to the hunter.

"Is my brother going?" Valentine asked him.

"Yes," the sachem answered. "I am returning to the Presidio to receive the answer of the chief of the palefaces."

"What is my brother's intention, should his demand be rejected?"

Unicorn smiled.

"The Comanches have long lances," he said; "the palefaces will not refuse."

"My anxiety will be extreme till you return, chief; the Spaniards are perfidious; take care they have not planned some treachery."

"They would not dare," Unicorn said, haughtily. "If the chief, whom my brother loves, is not delivered to me safe and sound, the Spanish prisoners shall be tortured on the plaza of Santa Fe, the town burned and sacked. I have spoken; my brother's mind may be at rest."

"Good! Unicorn is a wise chief; he will do what is necessary."

In the meantime the Comanche warriors had formed their ranks, and only awaited the signal of the sachem to start. The Spanish prisoners taken during the night were placed in the centre bound and half naked. Suddenly a disturbance was heard in the camp, and two men rushed panting toward the spot where stood Valentine, the sachem and Curumilla. They were Don Pablo and Father Seraphin, their clothes in disorder, their features haggard, and their faces glistening with perspiration. On reaching their friends, they fell, almost in a fainting state, on the ground. The proper attentions were at once paid them, and the missionary was the first to recover. Don Pablo seemed stupefied; the tears poured incessantly down his cheeks, and he could not utter a word. Valentine felt strangely alarmed.

"Good heavens!" he exclaimed, "What has happened? Don Miguel—?"

The missionary shook his head.

"No," he said, "nothing has happened to him, as far as I know."

"Heaven be praised! But what is the matter, father? What misfortune have you to announce to me?"

"A frightful one, indeed, my son," the missionary replied, as he buried his face in his hands.

"Speak, in Heaven's name! Your delay is killing me."

"Doña Clara—"

"Well!" he hunter said, sharply.

"Was captured again last night by Red Cedar, and torn from the refuge where I placed her."

"Oh!" Valentine exclaimed, with concentrated fury, as he stamped his foot, "Always that demon—that accursed Red Cedar. My curses on him! But take courage, father; let us first save Don Miguel, and then I swear to you that I will restore his daughter to him."

Unicorn advanced.

"Master of prayer," he said to Father Seraphin, in a soft and impressive voice, "your heart is good. The Comanches love you. Unicorn will help you. Pray to your God. He will protect us in our researches, since He is, as you say, so powerful."

Then the chief turned to Don Pablo, and laid his hand firmly on his shoulder.

"Women weep," he said; "men avenge themselves. Has not my brother his rifle?"

On feeling the Comanche's hand laid on him—on hearing these words—the young man quivered as if he had received an electric shock. He drew himself up, and fixed on the chief his eyes burning with the fever of sorrow.

"Yes," he said, in a broken voice, "you are right, chief, and," passing his hand over his eyes, with a gesture of rage, "let us leave tears to women, who have no other weapons to protect their weakness. I am a man, and will avenge myself."

"Good. My brother speaks well: he is a warrior; Unicorn esteems him; he will become great on the war path."

Don Pablo, crushed for a moment, had regained all his energy; he was no longer the same man; he looked around him.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"To Santa Fe, to deliver your father."

"I will go with you."

"Come," said Unicorn.

"No," Valentine interposed, authoritatively. "Your place is not there, Don Pablo; leave the Comanche warriors to act as they please; they do not need your help to carry out their plans properly. Remain with me."

"Command me, my friend," the young man said with resignation; "I have perfect confidence in your experience."

"Good. You are reasonable. Brother," he added, turning to the chief, "you can start. The sun is

already high in the horizon; may Heaven grant that you may succeed!"

Unicorn gave the signal for departure. The Comanches uttered their war yell, while brandishing their arms, and started at a quick amble, the only pace they know. Curumilla then rose, and wrapped himself in his buffalo robe; Valentine watching him, inquiringly.

"Does my brother leave us?" he said.

"Yes," the Araucano answered, laconically.

"For long?"

"For a few hours?"

"Where is my brother going?"

"To look for the camp of Red Cedar's gambusinos," the Indian replied with a cunning smile.

"Good," Valentine said, gleefully. "My brother is a wise chief; he forgets nothing."

"Curumilla loves his brother; he thinks for him," the chief answered, simply.

After uttering these words, the Unicorn bowed gracefully, and proceeded in the direction of the Paso del Norte, soon disappearing in the windings of the road. Valentine looked after him for a long while. When he no longer saw him, he let his head fall pensively on his chest, murmuring in a low voice—

"Good, intelligent fellow! Heart of gold! The only friend left me! The only one remaining of my old and faithful comrades! Louis, my poor Louis, where are you now?" A deep sigh burst from his bosom, and he remained absorbed in a gloomy reverie.

At length Valentine raised his head, passed his hand over his brow, as if to dispel these sad thoughts, and turned to his friends.

"Pardon me," he said, "but I, at times, give way to my thoughts in that fashion. Alas! I, too, have suffered; but let us leave that," he added, gaily. "Bygones must be bygones. Let us attend to your affairs."

He made them a sign to sit down by his side on the grass, rummaged his alforjas and produced some slight food, which he laid before them.

"Eat," he said to them; "we do not know what awaits us within the next few hours, and we must recruit our strength. When you have satisfied your appetite, you will tell me all about Doña Clara being carried off again, for I must have the fullest details."

We will leave the three now conversing, and join the Comanches and Unicorn again.

When the Comanches reached the Plaza Mayor, opposite the Cabildo, they halted. At an order from Unicorn, the prisoners were completely stripped of their clothing and placed some distance in front of the first rank of Indians, each of them having at his side a fully armed Indian ready to massacre him mercilessly at the slightest sign from Unicorn. When the preparations were completed, and the Comanches had stationed sentinels at each corner of the streets, opening in the square, in order not to be taken in reverse, and surrounded by the Spaniards, if they felt any inclination for fighting, the Spider, the chief who had already performed the duty of flag of truce, pranced up to the gate of the palace, and demanded speech with the governor.

The officer of the guard, who was no other than Don Lopez, politely requested the Indian warrior to wait a few moments, and then proceeded in all haste to General Ventura. We have seen what took place, and, after a delay of nearly half an hour, Captain Don Lopez returned. It was time, for the Comanches were beginning to grow tired of waiting, and were preparing to force the passage which was not voluntarily granted them. After some preliminary explanations, Captain Lopez informed the Spider that the general, surrounded by his staff, was awaiting, in the hall of audience, the sachem of the nation and his three principal warriors.

The Spider communicated this answer to Unicorn, who gave a nod of assent, dismounted, and entered the Cabildo.

CHAPTER XXIII.

NEGOTIATIONS.

When Unicorn entered the council chamber, preceded by Captain Lopez, and followed by the three Indian chiefs, the deepest silence prevailed among the Spanish officers assembled to meet him. The governor, seated in a chair placed in the centre of the hall, was looking nervously round him, while tapping on the arm of the chair with the fingers of his right hand. Still, his countenance was tolerably composed; nothing externally revealed the terror that devoured him. He answered by a nod the ceremonious bow of the Comanches, and drew himself up as if intending to address them; but if such were his desire, Unicorn did not grant him time to do so. The sachem draped himself in his buffalo robe with that majestic grace possessed by all those untamed sons of the desert, drew his head up proudly, and walked toward General Ventura, who watched him approach with an anxious eye. On coming within four paces of the governor, Unicorn stopped, crossed his arms on his chest, and took the word.

"I salute my father!" he said, in a loud and fierce voice. "I have come, as was agreed on yesterday, to fetch the answer he owes me."

The general hesitated for an instant.

"I am waiting!" the Indian went on, with a frown that augured ill.

The general, forced almost into his last entrenchments, saw that the hour for surrender had at length arrived, and that no way of escape was left him.

"Chief," he answered, in anything but a firm voice, "your behavior naturally surprises me. To my knowledge the Spaniards are not at war with your nation; the whites have not done anything of which you have a right to complain. For what reason do you come, then, against the sworn faith, and when nothing authorises you, to invade a defenceless town, and interfere in matters that only concern ourselves?"

The sachem understood that the Spaniard was trying to shift the question on to other ground; he saw the snare offered him, and was not to be caught.

"My father does not answer my request," he said. "Still, in order to have finished at once with the recriminations he brings up, I will answer his questions peremptorily, separating them one from the other. In the first place, my father knows very well that the palefaces and redskins have been in a constant state of warfare since the arrival of white men in America. This war may have slightly relaxed at intervals, but has never really ceased. Our two races are hostile; the struggle will not end between them until one of the two families, whether white or red, has given place to the other by its general extinction. Secondly, my father said that nothing has been done of which we had a right to complain. My father is mistaken, we have a cause, the imprisonment of Don Miguel Zarate, who, himself an Indian, has never belied his origin. Hence my father must no longer ask by what right I am here, for that is perfectly established; it is that which every honest man possesses of defending an innocent person who is oppressed. Now that fact is cleared up, let us pass to another. When I came here yesterday, my father gave me to understand that my propositions would be accepted, and the exchange of prisoners carried out."

"It is possible, chief," the general replied; "but things are so in this world, no one knows today what he will do tomorrow. With night reflection has come, and, in short, your propositions have appeared to me unacceptable."

"Wah!" the Indian said, though not testifying his surprise otherwise.

"Yes," the general continued, growing animated, "I should be ashamed to grant them, for I should have the appearance of only yielding to threats. No, it cannot be. The two gentlemen you claim are guilty, and shall die; and if you venture to oppose the execution of the just sentence of the court, we will defend ourselves, and God will protect the good cause."

The Mexican officers warmly applauded this haughty response, which they were far from expecting. They felt their courage rekindled, and did not despair of obtaining better conditions. A smile of disdain played round the chiefs haughty lips.

"Good," he said; "my father speaks very loudly. The coyotes are bold when they hunt the buffalo in packs. My father has carefully reflected, and is determined to accept the consequences of his answer. He wishes for war, then?"

"No," the general quickly interposed, "heaven forbid! I should be glad to settle this matter amicably with you, chief, but honor forbids me subscribing those disgraceful proposals which you did not fear to lay before me."

"Is it really honour that has dictated my father's answer?" the Indian asked, ironically. "He will permit me to doubt it. In short, whatever be the reason that guides him, I can but withdraw; but, before doing so, I will give him news of a friend whom he doubtless impatiently expects."

"What means that word, doubtless?"

"This," the Indian said, sharply. "The warriors whom my father expected to arrive to his aid this day have been dispersed by my young men, as the autumn breeze sweeps away the leaves. They will not come."

A murmur of surprise, almost of terror, ran through the assembly. The sachem let the long folds of his buffalo robe fall back, tore from his girdle the bleeding scalp that hung there, and threw it at the general's feet.

"That," he said, gloomily, "is the scalp of the man who commanded my father's warriors! Does the chief of the palefaces recognise it? This scalp was raised by me from the head of the man who was to arrive, and who, at this hour, has set out for the happy hunting grounds of his nation."

A shudder of terror ran round the room at the sight of the scalp; the general felt the small dose of courage that had still animated him oozing out.

"Chief," he exclaimed, in a trembling voice "is it possible you have done that?"

"I have done it," the sachem answered, coldly. "Now, farewell. I am about to join my young men, who are impatient at my long absence."

With these words the Comanche haughtily turned his back on the governor, and walked toward the door.

"A few moments longer, chief," the general said; "perhaps we are nearer an understanding than you suppose."

The Comanche gave the speaker a glance which made him quiver.

"Here is my last word," he said. "I insist on the two prisoners being handed over to me."

"They shall be."

"Good; but no perfidity, no treachery."

"We will act honourably," the general replied, not dreaming, of resenting the insult conveyed in the Indian's words.

"We shall see. My warriors and myself will remain on the square till my father has performed his promise. If, within an hour, the palefaces are not free, the prisoners I hold will be pitilessly massacred, and the *altepetl* plundered. I have spoken."

A gloomy silence greeted these terrible threats. The pride of the Mexicans was quelled, and they at length recognised that nothing could save them from the vengeance of the Comanche chief. The general bowed in assent, not having strength to answer otherwise. The sight of the scalp had paralyzed in him all desire to contend longer. Unicorn left the hall, mounted his horse again, and calmly awaited the fulfilment of the promise made to him.

When the Indians had left the council chamber, the Mexicans rose tumultuously, for each feared the execution of the chief's threats. General Ventura was pressed on all sides to make haste, and run no risk of breaking his word. When the governor saw that his officers were as terrified as himself, he re-assumed his coolness, and cleverly profited by this state of mind, in order to throw the responsibility off himself, and appear only to act under the impulse of others.

"Caballeros," he said, "you have heard this man. You understood as well as I did the menaces he dared to offer us. Shall such an insult be left unpunished? Will you allow yourselves to be thus braved in the heart of the town by a handful of scoundrels, and not attempt to inflict on them the chastisement they deserve? To arms, caballeros, and let us die bravely, if it must be so, sooner than suffer this stain on the old Spanish honor our fathers transmitted to us!"

This warm address produced the effect the general anticipated from it; that is to say, it redoubled, were that possible, the terror of the hearers, who had long been acquainted with their chiefs cowardice, and knew how little he could be depended on. This sudden warlike order seemed to them so unusual, and before all so inopportune, that they pressed him to accept without delay the proposals dictated by the sachem.

This was all the governor wanted. He had the minutes of the council at once drawn up, when it was signed by all present, he put it in his pocket.

"As you insist," he said, "and nothing can induce you to offer an honourable resistance, I will myself proceed to the prison, in order to avoid any misunderstanding, and have the doors opened for Don Miguel Zarate and General Ibañez."

"Make haste, pray?" the officers answered.

The general, glad in his heart at having got out of the scrape so well, left the Cabildo, and walked across the square to the prison, which stood on the opposite side. The Comanches were motionless as statues of Florentine bronze, leaning on their weapons, with their eyes fixed on the chief, ready to carry out his orders.

CHAPTER XXIV.

FREE.

Don Miguel and General Ibañez were completely ignorant of what was going on outside, and the rumours of the town did not reach their ears. Had they deigned to question their jailer, the latter, who was beginning to fear for himself the effects of the ill-treatment he had made the two gentlemen undergo, would doubtless not have hesitated to give them all possible information, for the sake of regaining their favour; but each time this man presented himself before them, and opened his mouth to speak, they turned their backs contemptuously, giving him a sign to withdraw at once, and be silent.

On this day, according to their wont, the two prisoners had risen at sunrise, and then, with incredible coolness, began conversing on indifferent topics. Suddenly a great noise was heard in the prison; a clang of arms reached the prisoners' ears, and hurried footsteps approached the rooms in which they were confined. They listened.

"Oh, oh!" said Ibañez, "I fancy it is for today at last."

"Heaven be praised!" Don Miguel answered; "I am glad they have made up their minds to bring matters to a conclusion."

"On my honour, and so am I," the general said, gaily; "time was beginning to hang heavy in this prison, where a man has not the slightest relaxation. We are going to see again that splendid sun which seems afraid of showing itself in this den. *Viva Cristo*! I feel delighted at the mere thought, and gladly pardon my judges."

Still the noise drew nearer and nearer, and confused voices were mingled with the echoing steps in the passage, and the rattling of sabres.

"Here they are," said Don Miguel; "we shall see them in a minute."

"They are welcome if they bring us death, that supreme solace of the afflicted."

At this moment a key creaked in the lock, and the door opened. The two prisoners fell back in surprise on seeing the general, who rushed into the cell followed by two or three officers. Assuredly, if the prisoners expected to see anybody, it was not the worthy General Ventura. Ibañez' surprise was so great at this unexpected apparition, that he could not refrain from exclaiming, with that accent of caustic gaiety which formed the basis of his character—

"What the deuce do you want here, Señor Governor? Have you, too, suddenly become a frightful conspirator, such as we are accused of being?"

Before answering, the general fell back into a chair, wiping away the perspiration that trickled down his forehead, such speed had he displayed in coming to the prison. Three or four officers stood motionless on the threshold of the widely open door. The condemned men could not at all understand the affair.

"Have you by any chance, my dear governor," General Ibañez said, gaily, though not believing a word of it, "come to restore us to liberty? That would be a most gallant action, and I should feel deeply indebted to you for it."

General Ventura raised his head, fixed on the prisoners eyes sparkling with joy, and said, in a panting voice—

"Yes, my friends, yes; I *would* come myself to tell you that you are free; I would not yield to anyone else the pleasure of announcing the good news."

The prisoners fell back in amazement.

"What!" General Ibañez exclaimed, "You are speaking seriously?"

Don Miguel attentively looked at the governor, trying to read in his face the reasons of his conduct.

"Come, come," General Ventura cried, "this hole is frightful; do not remain any longer in it."

"Ah!" Don Miguel remarked, bitterly, "You find it frightful; you have been a long time in discovering the fact; for we have lived in it nearly a month, and the thought never once occurred to you of disturbing our repose."

"Do not be angry with me, Don Miguel," the governor answered eagerly, "it was greatly against my will you were detained so long; had it only depended on me you would have been free; but, thanks to Heaven, all is settled now, and I have succeeded in having justice done you. Come away; do not remain a moment longer in this pestilential den."

"Pardon me, Caballero," Don Miguel said coldly, "but, with your permission, we will remain a few moments longer in it."

"Why so?" General Ventura asked, opening his eyes to their fullest extent.

"I will tell you."

Don Miguel pointed to a chair, and sat down himself. Ibañez following his example. There was a moment of deep silence between these three men as they strove to read each other's real secret thoughts.

"I am waiting your pleasure to explain yourself," the governor at last said, as he was anxious to get away, and time pressed.

"I am about doing so," Don Miguel answered; "you have come to tell us we are free, sir; but you do not say on what conditions."

"What do you mean by conditions?" the general asked, not understanding him.

"Of course," Ibañez went on, supporting his friend; "and these conditions, too, must suit us; you must see, my dear sir, we cannot leave this delightful place without knowing the why or wherefore. *Viva Cristo*! We are not vagabonds to be got rid of in that way; we must know if we are justified in accepting the proposals you have just made."

"The general is right, sir," the hacendero said in his turn; "the care of our honor does not permit us to accept a liberation which might stain it; hence, we shall not leave this prison until you have given us an explanation."

The governor hardly knew whether he was on his head or his heels; he had never before had to deal with such obstinate prisoners. He racked his brains in vain to discover why it was that men condemned to death could so peremptorily decline their liberty. His ideas were too narrow, his heart was too cowardly for him to comprehend the grandeur and nobility in this determination on the part of two men, who preferred an honourable death to a branded life which they only owed to the pity of their judges. Still, he must induce them to quit the prison, for time was fast slipping away, and their obstinacy might ruin everything. Hence, General Ventura made up his mind like a man.

"Gentlemen," he said, with feigned admiration, "I understand what nobleness there is in your scruples, and am happy to see that I was not mistaken in the greatness of your character. You can leave this prison in full security, and take once more the station that belongs to you in the world. I will lay no conditions on you; you are free, purely and simply. Here are the documents connected with your trial, the proofs produced against you; take them and destroy them, and

accept my sincere, apologies for all that has passed."

While saying this, the governor drew from his breast an enormous bundle of papers, which he offered Don Miguel. The latter declined them with an air of disgust; but General Ibañez, less scrupulous or wiser in his generation, eagerly clutched them, looked through them to see that the governor was not deceiving him, and then threw them into the *brasero*, standing in the middle of the room. In less than four minutes, all this undigested mass was consumed. General Ibañez watched them burning with a certain degree of pleasure, for he began to feel himself really free.

"I am waiting for you, gentlemen," said the governor.

"One word more, by your leave," the hacendero remarked.

"Speak, sir."

"On leaving this prison, where are we to go?"

"Wherever you please, gentlemen. I repeat to you that you are perfectly free, and can act as you think proper. I do not even ask your word of honor to enter into no further conspiracy."

"Good sir," Don Miguel said, holding out his hand to General Ventura, "your conduct affects me—thanks."

The governor blushed.

"Come, come," he said, to hide his embarrassment on receiving this so ill-deserved praise.

The prisoners no longer hesitated to follow him.

In the meanwhile, the news of Don Miguel's deliverance had spread through the town with the rapidity of a train of gunpowder. The inhabitants, reassured by the continence of the Comanches, and knowing that they had only come to save a man, in whose fate the entire population felt interested, had ventured to leave their houses, and at length thronged the streets and squares; the windows and roofs were filled with men, women, and children, whose eyes, fixed on the prison, awaited the moment of Don Miguel's appearance. When he did so, tremendous shouts greeted him.

Unicorn walked up to the governor.

"My father has kept his promise," he said, gravely, "I will keep mine; the white prisoners are free; I now depart."

The governor listened to these words with a blush; the sachem returned to the head of his war party, which rapidly retired, followed by the shouts of a mob intoxicated with joy. Don Miguel, perplexed by the scene which had taken place in his presence, and who began to suspect a mystery in the governor's conduct, turned to him to ask an explanation of the Indian chief's words—an explanation the governor luckily escaped, owing to the eagerness of the people who flocked up to congratulate the prisoners on their release.

On reaching the gate of the Cabildo, General Ventura bowed courteously to the two gentlemen, and hurried into his palace, happy at having escaped so cheaply, and not tearing with his own hands the cloak of generosity which he had paraded in the sight of his prisoners.

"What do you think of all that?" the hacendero asked his friend.

"Hum!" General Ibañez muttered, "The governor's conduct seems to me rather queer; but, no matter, we are free. I confess to you, my friend, that I should have no objection to go a little distance from this place, the air of which, despite General Ventura's protestations, appears to me remarkably unhealthy for us."

At this moment, and ere Don Miguel could answer, the general felt a slight touch on his shoulders; he turned and saw Curumilla before him, with a smiling face. Don Miguel and the general suppressed a cry of joy at the sight of the grave and excellent Indian.

"Come!" he said to them, laconically.

They followed him, with some difficulty, through the crowd that accompanied them with shouts, and whom they were obliged to stop and thank. On reaching a small street near the square, and which was nearly deserted, Curumilla led them to a house before which he stopped.

"It is here," he said, as he tapped twice.

The door opened, and they entered a courtyard, in which were three ready saddled horses, held by a groom, which they at once mounted.

"Thanks, brother," the hacendero said, warmly, as he pressed the chiefs hand; "but how did you learn our deliverance?"

The Araucano smiled pleasantly. "Let us go," he said, making no other answer.

"Where to?" Don Miguel asked.

"To join Koutonepi."

The three men started at full speed. Ten minutes later they were out of the town, and galloping across the plain.

"Oh!" General Ibañez said, gaily, "How pleasant the fresh air is! How good it is to inhale it after remaining for two months stifled between the walls of a prison!"

"Shall we soon arrive? Don Miguel asked.

"In an hour," the chief answered.

And they went on with renewed speed.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE MEETING.

On reaching a spot where the trail they were following formed a species of fork, Curumilla stopped, and the two gentlemen imitated him.

"That is your road," the Araucano chief said. "At the end of that path you will see Koutonepi's bivouac fire. I must leave you here."

After uttering these words, Curumilla turned his horse and started, after giving them a parting wave of the hand. The Unicorn was not much of a talker naturally; generally, he did more than he said. His friends, convinced that urgent necessity could alone have forced him thus to break through his habits, made no observation, but let him go. When they were alone, they gently relaxed the pace of their horses, and proceeded at a canter.

General Ibañez was radiant. He inhaled the fresh air Of the desert, which dilated his wide chest, revelling in his liberty. He thought of nothing but enjoying the present, regardless of the past, which, with his careless character, he had already forgotten, only to dream of the future, which he gazed on through a prism of brilliant hues. Don Miguel, on the contrary, felt, during the last few moments, a sad melancholy invade his mind. Not able to account for the emotion he experienced, he had a species of secret presentiment that a misfortune was suspended over his head. In vain did he try to dispel these ideas, but they constantly returned more obstinately than ever and it was with a sort of dread that he advanced in the direction where he was to meet Valentine, although he was his best friend, so much did he fear that he would greet his arrival with evil tidings.

The two gentlemen went on thus for nearly half an hour without exchanging a syllable; but, just as they turned a corner in the path, they saw a horseman about thirty paces in front of them, barring the road, and apparently waiting for them. The Mexicans examined him attentively. He was a tall man, well armed, and wearing the garb of the rich hacenderos; but, singularly enough, a black velvet mask prevented them distinguishing his features. By an instinctive movement Don Miguel and his friend moved a hand to their holsters, but they were empty.

"What is to be done?" the hacendero asked the general.

"Go on, of course. We have just escaped too great a peril for us to fear this. Even in the event of the mysterious being planted there before us, like an equestrian statue, trying to play us a trick, which is not impossible."

"Let us trust to Heaven," Don Miguel muttered, and pushed on.

The distance separating them from the stranger was soon cleared. On coming within five yards of him, they stopped.

"*Santas tardes*, caballeros," said the stranger, in a friendly voice.

"*Santas tardes*!" the gentlemen answered, in accord.

"I salute you, Don Miguel Zarate, and you, General Ibañez," the stranger then said. "I am happy to see you at length safe and sound out of the claws of that worthy General Ventura, who, if he could, would certainly have played you a trick."

"Caballero," Don Miguel made answer, "I thank you for the kind words you address to me, and which can only come from a friend's lips. I should be pleased if you would take off the mask that conceals your features, so that I may recognise you."

"Gentlemen, if I removed my mask you would be disappointed, for my features are unfamiliar to you. Do not be angry with me for keeping it on; but, be assured that you are not mistaken with regard to me, and I am really your friend."

The two Mexicans bowed courteously to each other, and the stranger went on.

"I knew that so soon as you were free you would hasten to join that worthy hunter Valentine, whom the trappers and gambusinos along the frontier have christened the 'Trail-hunter.' I placed myself here, where you must infallibly pass, in order to make you a communication of the utmost importance, which interests you extremely."

"I am listening, sir," Don Miguel responded with secret alarm; "and I beg you to accept, beforehand, my sincere thanks for the step you have taken on my behalf."

"You will thank me when the proper time comes, Don Miguel. Today I only warn you: at a later date I hope to aid you, and my help will not prove useless."

"Speak, sir! You excite my curiosity to the highest pitch, and I am anxious to learn the news of which you have condescended to be the bearer."

The stranger shook his head sadly, and there was a moment's silence. This meeting of three horsemen, one of whom was masked, in this deserted place, where no sound troubled the

imposing silence of solitude, had something strange about it. At length the mask spoke again.

"Two months have elapsed, Don Miguel, since, through the treachery of Red Cedar, you were arrested and made prisoner at the Paso del Norte. Many events of which you are ignorant have occurred since then; but there is one I must inform you of at once. On the very night of your arrest, at the moment you laid down your arms, your daughter was carried off by Red Cedar."

"My daughter!" the hacendero exclaimed; "And Valentine to whom I confided her, and who was responsible for her safety?"

"Valentine attempted impossibilities to save her; but what can one man effect against twenty?"

Don Miguel shook his head mournfully.

"After researches, long, sterile, and extraordinary efforts, a man providentially aided by Father Seraphin, at length succeeded last night in taking Doña Clara from her ravishers; but Red Cedar, advised by some extraordinary chance, entered the house where the maiden had sought shelter, and carried her off again."

"Oh! I will avenge myself on that man!" the hacendero shouted, passionately.

The stranger's eyes flashed with a lurid light though the holes in his mask.

"You will find your son and Father Seraphin with Valentine. Red Cedar intends to start this evening at the head of a band of gambusinos, to go into the deserts of the Rio Gila in search of a placer, which his accomplice, Fray Ambrosio, had indicated to him."

"Fray Ambrosio!" the hacendero repeated, in stupor.

"Yes. Your former chaplain, who served as spy to the squatter, revealed your plans to him, and provided him the means to enter the hacienda and carry off your daughter."

"Good," Don Miguel said, in a hollow voice. "I will remember."

"Red Cedar, I know not with what design, is taking your daughter with him into the desert."

"I will follow him, were it for a thousand leagues," Don Miguel said, resolutely. "Thanks to you for having instructed me so fully. But whence comes the interest you take in me so gratuitously, since, as you say, I do not know you?"

"You shall learn at a later date, Don Miguel. Now, before I leave you, one last word—an earnest warning."

"I listen attentively, caballero."

"Do not tell anyone—not even the French hunter, not even your son—of our meeting. Let this secret be buried in your breast. When you reach the far west, if you see before you, at one of your bivouacs, a piece of mahogany bearing the impress of a horse's shoe, rise at midnight, and leave the camp, not letting anyone see you. When you have gone one hundred paces in the tall grass, whistle thrice; a similar whistle will answer you, and then you will learn many things important for you to know, but which I cannot tell you today."

"Good. Thanks. I will do what you tell me."

"You promised it?"

"I swear it on my word as a gentleman," Don Miguel said, as he took off his hat.

"I accept your oath. Farewell."

"Farewell."

The stranger dug his spurs into his horse's sides and the animal started off as if impelled by a tornado.

The two gentlemen looked after him for a long time, admiring the grace and ease of his movements; at length, when horse and rider had disappeared in the distance, Don Miguel went on again pensively, while saying to the general—

"Who can that man be?"

"I know no more than you do. *Viva Cristo*!" his friend answered, "but I assure you I will know, even if to do so I have to search all the thickets and caverns in the desert."

"What," Don Miguel exclaimed, "do you intend to come with me?"

"Did you ever doubt it, Don Miguel? If so, you insulted me. You will need all your friends to go in search of your daughter, and inflict on that demon of a gringo squatter the chastisement he deserves. No, no; I will not leave you under such circumstances, for that would be committing a bad action; besides, I shall not be sorry," he added with a smile, "to get out of the sight of the government for a time."

"My friend, I thank you," the hacendero said, as he took his hand. "I have long known that you were entirely devoted to me; I am pleased to receive this new proof of your friendship."

"And you accept it?" the general asked gaily.

"Most heartily; the help of an iron arm like yours must be most useful to me under the painful circumstances in which I am placed."

"That is settled, then; we will start together, *Mil rayas!* and I swear we will deliver Doña Clara."

"May Heaven grant it," the hacendero said, sadly.

The conversation then dropped, and the two friends proceeded in silence. A quarter of an hour later they reached the Trail-hunter's bivouac.

CHAPTER XXVI.

DOÑA CLARA.

Valentine had been warned, nearly an hour previously, by Unicorn of the result of the negotiations with the governor of Santa Fe, and the immediate liberation of the prisoners; he was, therefore, expecting them. Though they were ignorant where to find him, Valentine presumed that the chief would leave some Indian to direct them, and, therefore, did not feel at all surprised at seeing them. So soon as he noticed their approach he walked to meet them, followed by Don Pablo and the missionary, while the hacendero and his comrade on their side pricked on to join them sooner.

A few hours were spent, after the first greetings were over, in a conference, of which the poor child so audaciously carried off was the sole subject. Valentine drew up with his friends the plan of the campaign against Red Cedar, which was so daring that it would have made a European nervous; but the free adventurers who were about to carry it out in no way feared the mysterious dangers of the desert which they were going to confront. We say, free, because Father Seraphin had taken leave of his friends and found Unicorn, with whom he wished to go to the Comanche villages, in the hope of spreading the light of the Gospel there. Still, he did not despair about, meeting his friends in the prairies, whither he was himself proceeding. Toward evening, Curumilla arrived. The Araucano was covered with dust, and his face damp with perspiration; Not uttering a word, he sat down by the fire, took his calumet from his girdle, and began smoking. Valentine let him do so without asking a question, but so soon as he saw him absorbed in his pipe, he laid his hand on his shoulder.

"Well?" he said to him.

"Curumilla has seen them."

"Good; are they numerous?"

"Ten times the number of fingers on my two hands, and one more."

"*Caramba!*" Valentine exclaimed, "Are they so many as that? We shall have a tough job in that case."

"They are bold hunters," the chief added.

"Hum! Do you know when they will start?"

"This evening, when the new moon rises."

"Ah, ah! I read their plan," the hunter said. "They intend crossing the ford of the Toro before day."

Curumilla bowed his head in affirmation.

"That is true," Valentine remarked; "once the ford is passed they will be in the desert, and have comparatively nothing to fear, or at least they suppose so. I must confess," he added, addressing his friends, "that Red Cedar is a remarkably clever scoundrel; nothing, escapes him, but this time he has a' tough adversary. I have my revenge to take on him, and, with the help of Heaven, it shall be exemplary."

"What shall we do?" Don Miguel asked.

"Sleep," Valentine answered, "we have still several hours before us, so let us profit by them; in the new life we are beginning, we must neglect nothing, the body and mind must repose, so that we may act vigorously."

Curumilla had slipped away but now returned, bringing with him two rifles, pistols, and knives.

"My brothers had no weapons," he said, as he laid his load before the Mexicans.

The latter thanked him heartily; for, owing to the foresight of Curumilla, who thought of everything, they could now enter the desert boldly. Two minutes later the five men were fast asleep, and we will take advantage of their slumber to return to Red Cedar, whom we left on the point of climbing through Doña Clara's window, while Fray Ambrosio and Andrés Garote were watching at either end of the street.

At one bound the bandit was in the room, after breaking open the window with a blow of his fist. Doña Clara, suddenly aroused, leaped from the bed, uttering fearful cries at the sight of the terrible apparition before her.

"Silence," Red Cedar said to her, in a threatening voice, as he placed the point of his knife on her chest, "one cry more, and I kill you like a dog."

The maiden, trembling with fright, looked pitifully at the bandit; but Red Cedar's face wore such an expression of cruelty, that she understood how little she had to hope from this man. She addressed a silent prayer to Heaven, and resigned herself to her fate. The bandit gagged the poor child with the rebozo that lay on the bed, threw her over his shoulder, and clambered out of the

window again. So soon as he put foot on the ground, he whistled lightly for his comrades to rejoin him, which they did immediately, and, still carrying his burthen, he proceeded with them in the direction of the Rancho del Coyote.

During the walk, which was not a long one, the bandits did not meet a soul. Andrés opened the door and lit a candle; the ruffians entered, and the door was carefully bolted again. Thus, after only a few hours of liberty, the wretched girl had fallen once more into the hands of her ravishers, and placed again by them in the wretched room where she had spent so many days in prayer and weeping. Red Cedar carried Doña Clara, who was in a half-fainting state, to her room, removed the rebozo, and then returned to the bar.

"There;" he said, with satisfaction, "that is all right; the sheep has returned to the fold. What do you say, reverend father? This time let us hope she will not escape us."

The monk smiled.

"We shall do well in not remaining here long," he said.

"Why so?"

"Because this hiding place is known and will soon be visited."

The squatter shrugged his shoulders.

"Listen! Fray Ambrosio," he said, with a sinister grimace, which he intended for a smile. "I predict that, rogue as you are, you run a great chance of dying in a fool's skin, if you are not flayed beforehand, which may easily be the case."

The monk shuddered. Red Cedar's gaiety had the peculiarity of being even more fearful than his anger. The squatter sat down on a bench, and turned to the gambusino.

"Drink!" he said roughly.

Garote fetched a jar of mezcal, which he placed before his terrible accomplice. The latter, not taking the trouble to pour the liquor into a glass, raised the jar to his lips, and drank till breath failed him.

"Hum!" he said, with a click of his tongue, "That's pleasant tipple when you're thirsty. Listen to my orders, my dear children, and try to carry them out to the letter; or, if not, your roguish hides will bear the blame."

The three men bowed silently.

"You, Nathan," he went on, "will come with me, for you are not wanted here, but your presence is necessary at. Cerro Prieto, where our comrades are encamped."

"I will follow you," the young man replied, laconically.

"Good! Now, you others, bear this carefully in mind:—Our enemies will never suppose that I have made such a mistake as to bring my prisoner back here; for that is so absurd, that the idea will never enter their heads; so you can be at ease, and no one will trouble your peace of mind. Tomorrow, so soon as the moon rises, you will make the girl put on an Indian dress, mount her, and come to me at Cerro Prieto. Immediately after your arrival we shall start."

"Good!" Fray Ambrosio answered. "We will take care."

"I expect so; for, if you do not, I wouldn't give a *cuartillo* for your accursed hide, my reverend friend."

After uttering these friendly words, the squatter seized the jar of mezcal, emptied it at a draught, and sent it flying across the room, where it broke to pieces.

"Good bye till tomorrow," he then said, "come, Nathan."

"Till tomorrow," they answered.

The squatter and his son left the rancho, and walked on silently side by side, plunged in gloomy reflections produced by the events of the night. They soon left the town. The night was gloomy, but darkness did not exist for squatters accustomed to find their way anywhere, and never dreaming of going astray. They walked thus for a long time, with slung rifle, not exchanging a word, but listening to the slightest noise and sounding, the darkness with their tiger-cat eyes. All at once they heard the firm footfall of a man coming towards them. They cocked their rifles, ready for any emergency. A voice was then heard, though the person to whom it belonged was invisible.

"My brothers must not fire; they would kill a friend."

The words were Apache—a language well known to the squatters.

"Tis an Indian," said Nathan.

"Do you think I did not recognise him?" Red Cedar replied, brutally; "then," he added, in the same dialect, "there are no friends in the shadow of the desert. My brother must get out of my path, or I will kill him like a coyote."

"Is it thus," the Indian continued, "that the 'maneater' receives the guide whom Stanapat, the Great Chief of the Apaches, sends him? In that case, good-bye. I will retire."

"One moment," the squatter said, sharply, as he lowered his rifle, and made his son a sign to follow his example. "I could not guess who you were. Advance without fear and be welcome, brother, for I was anxiously expecting you."

The Indian stepped forward. He wore the costume and characteristic paint of the Apache warriors; in a word, he was so well disguised, that Valentine himself could not, have recognised in him his friend, Eagle-wing the Chief of the Coras, though it was he.

Red Cedar, delighted at the arrival of his guide, received him in the most affable manner. He had long been acquainted with Stanapat, the most ferocious warrior of all the Indian nations that traverse the immense regions of the Rio Gila, and whom we shall presently visit. After several questions, which Eagle-wing answered without hesitation or once tripping, Red Cedar, convinced that he was really the man the Apache chief had promised to send him, dismissed all doubt, and conversed with him in the most friendly spirit, inquiring after certain warriors he had formerly known.

"What is my brother's name?" he asked, in conclusion.

"The Heart of Stone!" Eagle-wing replied.

"Good!" the squatter said, "My brother has a grand name. He must be a renowned warrior in his tribe."

A short time after, the three men reached the camp of the gambusinos, established in a formidable position on the top of a rock called the Cerro Prieto (Black Mountain). The miners greeted Red Cedar's arrival with the most lively joy, for his presence announced a speedy departure; and all these semi-savages, the greater part of whose life had been spent in the prairies, were anxious to quit civilization to re-assume their adventurous career, which was so full of charms and strange incidents.

CHAPTER XXVII.

EL VADO DEL TORO.

Red Cedar reasoned correctly when he told Fray Ambrosio and Garote that Doña Clara was in safety at the rancho, and no one would dream of seeking her there. In truth, Valentine knew the squatter's cunning too well to suppose that he would commit the impudence of bringing his prisoner back to the very spot where she was discovered.

The squatter's two accomplices passed the day quietly in playing, on credit, at monte; each cheating with a dexterity which did honor to their knowledge of that noble game. No one came to disturb them, or cast an indiscreet glance into this famous den, which, in the bright sunshine, had an air of respectability pleasant to look on, and amply sufficient to dispel all suspicions. About nine in the evening, the moon, though new, rose magnificently on a deep blue sky, studded with brilliant stars.

"I fancy it is time to get ready, gossip," Fray Ambrosio said, "the moon is peering through the trees in your neighbour's garden."

"You are right, señor Padre, we will be off; but let me, I implore you, first finish this deal; it is one of the most magnificent I ever witnessed. *Caspita!* I will bet a nugget as big as my thumb on the seven of clubs."

"I'll back the two of spades. Something tells me it will turn up first, especially if you pull up the sleeves of your jacket, which must be horribly in the way when dealing."

"Oh dear, no, I assure you; but stay, what did I tell you? There is the seven of clubs."

"That is really extraordinary," Fray Ambrosio replied, with feigned surprise, for he was not duped by the gambusino's trickery; "but I fancy we had better make haste."

"Decidedly," said Andrés, as he hid his greasy cards in his vaquera boots, and proceeded to the room in which Doña Clara was confined. She followed him out, weeping bitterly.

"Come, come," the gambusino said to her, "dry your tears, señorita; we do not mean you any harm. Hang it all! Who knows but this may end perhaps better than you expect; ask that holy monk what he thinks."

Fray Ambrosio bowed an assent, but the maiden made no response to the gambusino's consolation; she allowed herself to be disguised unresistingly, but still continued to weep.

"In truth, it is absurd," the worthy Andrés muttered, in an aside to himself, while attiring his prisoner and looking covetously at the pearls with which she was adorned, "to waste gold and pearls in this fashion; would it not be much better to use them in buying something serviceable? What she has on her is worth at least three thousand piastres—what a splendid game of monte a fellow could have with that sum—and if that demon of a Red Cedar had only been willing—well, we shall see presently."

While making these judicious reflections, the gambusino had completed the maiden's Indian toilet. He perfected the disguise by throwing a zarapé over her shoulders; then giving a parting glance round his domicile, he put in his pocket a pack of cards accidentally left on the table, drank a large glass of spirits, and left the room, followed by Doña Clara and the monk, who, in spite of the varying incidents of the last few days had regained all his good humour, doubtless owing to the good company in which he was, and the game of monte—that inveterate passion in every Mexican.

Doña Clara was placed on a horse; Andrés and the monk also mounted, and leaving the house to the problemical care of Providence, the gambusino gave the signal for departure. He made a wide circuit, to avoid passing through the Presidio, and then started at a gallop in the direction of the Cerro Prieto.

Red Cedar had lost no time, and all was ready for departure. The newcomers did not even dismount, but so soon as they were sighted, the caravan, composed, as we have stated of some hundred and twenty resolute men, after forming in Indian file, started in the direction of the prairies, having first prudently detached two scouts to watch the neighbourhood.

Nothing is so mournful as a night march in an unknown country, covered with snares of every description, when you fear least the ever-watchful enemy may pounce on you from every bush. Thus, the gambusinos, restless, and starting at the slightest rustling of the leaves, advanced silently and gloomily, with their eyes fixed on the clumps that grew along the wayside, rifle in hand, ready to fire at the slightest suspicious movement. They marched, however, for upwards of three hours, and nothing happened to justify their fears; a solemn calmness continued to prevail around them. Gradually these apprehensions were dissipated; they began talking in a suppressed voice, and laughing at their past terrors, when they reached, on the banks of the Del Norte, the *vado*, or Ford del Toro.

In the interior of Southern America, and specially in New Mexico, a country still almost entirely unknown, the means of communication are *nil*, and consequently bridges may be looked for in vain. There are only two methods of crossing even the widest rivers—looking for a ford, or, if you are in a great hurry, forcing your horse into the oft-times rapid current, and trying to reach the other bank by swimming.

The squatter had selected the first method, and in a few minutes the whole party was in the water. Although the ground of the ford was uneven, and at times the horses were up to their chests, and compelled to swim, the gambusinos managed to get across safely. The only persons left on the bank were Red Cedar, Eagle-wing, the guide, Doña Clara, and Andrés Garote.

"It is our turn now, Heart of Stone," the squatter said, addressing Eagle-wing; "you see that our men are in safety, and only await us to set out again."

"The squaw first," the Indian replied, laconically.

"That is true, chief," the squatter said, and, turning to the prisoner, "Go across," he said to her, coarsely.

The maiden, not deigning to answer, boldly made her horse enter the river, and the three men followed. The night was dark, the sky covered with clouds, and the moon, constantly veiled, only shone forth at lengthened intervals, which rendered the passage difficult and even dangerous, as it did not allow objects to be distinguished, even at a distance. Still, after a few seconds, Red Cedar fancied he saw that Doña Clara's horse was not following the line traced by the ford, but was turning to the left, as if carried away by the current. He pushed his horse forward, to assure himself of the reality of the fact; but suddenly a vigorous hand seized his right leg, and before he could even think of resisting, he was hurled back into the water, and his throat seized by an Indian. Andrés Garote hurried to his assistance.

During this time, Doña Clara's horse, probably obeying a hidden impulse, was proceeding still further from the spot where the gambusinos had landed. Some of them, at the head of whom were Dick, Harry, and the squatter's three sons, perceiving what was going on, returned to the water, to proceed to their chiefs help, while the others, guided by Fray Ambrosio, galloped down the river bank, in order to cut off retreat, when Doña Clara's horse landed.

Andrés Garote, after several fruitless efforts, succeeded in catching Red Cedar's horse, which he brought to him at the moment when the latter had scalped his enemy. The American got into his saddle again, reached the bank, and tried to restore some order among his band, while actually watching the incidents of the silent drama being played in the river between Eagle-wing and the young Spanish girl.

The Coras sachem had urged his steed in pursuit of Doña Clara's, and both were following almost the same line down the stream, the former striving to catch up the latter, who, for her part, was doing her utmost to widen the distance between them. Suddenly the Coras horse gave a leap, while uttering a snort of pain, and began madly beating the water with its forelegs, while the river was tinged with blood around it. The chief, perceiving that his horse was mortally wounded, leaped from the saddle, and leant over the side, ready to leap off. At this moment, a hideous face appeared flush with water, and a hand was stretched out to grasp him. With that imperturbable coolness that never deserts the Indians, even under the most critical circumstances, the Coras seized his tomahawk, split his enemy's skull open, and glided into the river.

A formidable war yell was, at this moment, heard from the forest, and some fifty shots were fired from both banks at once, illumining the scene with their fugitive flashes. A multitude of redskins rushed on the gambusinos, and a terrible fight commenced. The Mexicans, taken unawares, defended themselves at first poorly, giving ground and seeking shelter behind trees; but, obeying the thundering voice of the squatter, who performed prodigies of valor while exciting his comrades to sell their lives dearly, they regained courage, formed in close column, and charged the Indians furiously, beating them down with the butts of their muskets, or slashing them with their machetes.

The combat was short; the redskins, who were only a party of marauding Pawnees, seeing the ill-result of their surprise, grew discouraged, and disappeared as rapidly as they had come. Two

minutes later calmness and silence were so perfectly re-established, that had it not been for a few wounded gambusinos, and several Indians stretched dead on the battlefield, the strange scene would have appeared as a dream.

So soon as the Indians were routed, Red Cedar bent an eager glance up the river; on that side the struggle was also over, and Eagle-wing, mounted behind the young lady, was guiding her horse to the bank, which it soon reached.

"Well?" the squatter asked.

"The Pawnees are cowardly coyotes," the Coras answered, pointing to two human scalps that hung all bloody from his girdle; "they fly like old women, so soon as they see the war plume of a warrior of my nation."

"Good!" the squatter said, gleefully, "My brother is a great warrior; he has a friend."

The Coras bowed with a smile of indescribable meaning. His object was gained; he had acquired the confidence of the man he meant to destroy. Doña Clara, Ellen, and the squatter's wife were placed in the centre of the caravan, and the band started again.

An hour later, a second party of horsemen also crossed the Vado del Toro. It was much less numerous than the first, as it consisted of only five men, but they were Valentine, Curumilla, Don Miguel, his son, and General Ibañez. The real struggle was about to commence: behind them they left the civilised world, to find themselves face to face on the desert with their enemies.

(Those of our readers who take an interest in the Trail-hunter, we must ask to follow his adventures through a second volume, to be called—THE PIRATES OF THE PRAIRIES.)

THE END

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